

Bartók's Hungarian Musical Avant-Gardism

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Abstract: According to Lajos Kassák's recollections in 1961, Bartók found elements in his poetry that lay close to his own experiments in music. In a 1926 interview, however, in which he emphasized the closeness of his art to that of poet Endre Ady, Bartók unambiguously stated that the idea of Kassák and his circle to link his music with their journal was founded on a mistake. Was Bartók then really close to those few representatives of Hungarian avant-garde in the later 1910s when his art was enthusiastically propagated in the periodical *MA* [Today]? Bartók's changing attitude to musical modernism and the meaning of a "Rembrandtian concept," almost casually mentioned in the same 1926 interview and obviously meant to refer to an idea markedly different from that of the so-called "activists," are discussed in the essay with reference to the composer's public and private writings as well as the stylistic development of his music especially between 1908 and 1926.

On 20 April 1926 Bartók had a piano recital in the Czechoslovak town, Košice, the former Hungarian Kassa (now in Slovakia), playing Beethoven, Scarlatti, Chopin, Debussy and his own music composed between 1908 and 1918.¹ An interview made after the concert was published in the Hungarian language *Kassai Napló* [Kassa Journal] on 23

¹ See DEMÉNY János, „Bartók Béla megjelenése az európai zeneéletben (1914–1926)” [Béla Bartók's Appearance in European Musical Life (1914–1926)], in *Zenatudományi Tanulmányok 7*, szerk. SZABOLCSI Bence és BARTHA Dénes, 5–426 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1959), 394.

April.² Following a discussion of his classification of Hungarian folk songs, his general interest in peasant music also manifested in his trip to Biskra, Algeria, and jazz, Bartók mentioned his most important contemporaries, Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

Modern music is not following the road of folk music. Two of its outstanding figures, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, are taking divergent paths. Of the two, Stravinsky stands closer to me. I barely know the younger generation [...] Stravinsky's recent works, which he calls neoclassical and which indeed resemble the music of Bach's time, seemed dry to me at first reading, though after his concert in Budapest I found a lot more in them. Stravinsky's switch to neoclassicism is intimately bound to current developments in other arts. Although Stravinsky stands under the influence of Picasso, I do not believe things can be explained so simply; the arts have been developing concurrently ever since romanticism.³

The reference to contemporary art and especially Picasso is surprising in Bartók's ar-

² See *ibid.* 395; for a more recent edition of the interview, see *Beszélgetések Bartókkal: Interjúk, nyilatkozatok 1911–1945* [Bartók in Conversation: Interviews, Statements 1911–1945], szerk. WILHEIM András (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2000), 73–74.

³ “A Conversation with Béla Bartók”, trans. David E. SCHNEIDER and Klára MÓRICZ, in *Bartók and His World*, ed. Peter LAKI (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 237.

gument, as he generally avoided such casual remarks about the history of art. It is also unusual among the known interviews, that the composer mentions his own connection to Lajos Kassák's journal, *MA* [Today]. Another unexpected reference to the visual arts plays a role here, again.

As to me, I think that I strongly belong to [Endre] Ady's generation. The opinion of Kassák and his circle that they put my music into the service of their journal was based on a misunderstanding; for the guiding principle in my art is after all a "Rembrandtian" concept.⁴

According to the late Ferenc Csaplár, former director of the Kassák Museum and author of two important studies on Bartók and Kassák, "All in all, Bartók was significantly more sympathetic an observer of the activities of *MA* than the interview [...] would suggest."⁵ The interview was reprinted in the voluminous collection of reviews from Bartók's life by János Demény, editor of the composer's correspondence. Csaplár quotes Demény's comment on the interview in which the latter warns that "there are some passages and phrases that we should not take at face val-

⁴ "Magamról is azt hiszem, hogy erősen hozzátartozom az Ady generációjához. Kassákéknak az a vélekedése, hogy zenémet lapjuk szolgálatába állították, tévedésen alapul; hiszen művészetemben végeredményben egy rembrandti elgondolás vezet." My translation. A slightly different translation appears in LAKI, *Bartók and His World*: "I believe that I belong to the generation of Ady. Kassák and his circle, however, are mistaken when they consider my music to be in the spirit of their journal, since the driving force behind my work is a Rembrantesque conception."

⁵ CSAPLÁR Ferenc, *Kassák Lajos Bartók-verse* [Lajos Kassák's Bartók Poem] (Békéscsaba: Magyar Helikon, 1981), 52.

ue."⁶ The authenticity of or skepticism about this interview seems to me crucial in understanding Bartók's position. One clue could be the journalist, whose identity remained unknown for a long time as the interview was simply signed with the interviewer's initials. It was Csaplár who revealed the full name: Ödön Mihályi.⁷ Mihályi was a young Hungarian writer from Kassa/Košice who himself had been connected to Kassák's circle. It may have been he who directed the conversation to that particular subject, and Bartók's probably spontaneous reaction seems to me perfectly credible. What he says does not mean that he had not been interested in Kassák's artistic movement and publications. But it certainly suggests his lack of conviction in fully identifying himself with them. If so, this could reliably represent his views of 1926, views that were necessarily different from those of a decade before. Indeed, Bartók was on the threshold of a very significant stylistic change at the time, his individual absorption and reinterpretation of the neoclassicist aesthetics. Furthermore, the growing distance from their overlapping shared hopes and disappointments in social change in Hungary after the First World War could also have played a part in the urge to distance himself from the artistic movement with which he had become associated.

Kassák and his circle actually did propagate Bartók's music enthusiastically. A special issue was devoted to his art in 1918 (see Fig. 1).⁸ It included three facsimile pages of Bartók's compositions, a poem by Kassák dedicated to the composer, and significantly,

⁶ Cf. DEMÉNY, „Bartók Béla megjelenése...”, 396.

⁷ CSAPLÁR, *Kassák Lajos Bartók-verse*, 51.

⁸ *MA* 3, 2. sz. (1918). The complete set of issues is available on the internet cite of the Österreichisches Nationalbibliothek, see <http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno-plus?aid=maa>.

Róbert Berény's still famous portrait of the composer. As a contemporary review by Aladár Bálint clearly shows, by 1913 when the portrait was painted and exhibited in Budapest, the composer himself had already become an iconic figure of modern Hungarian art.⁹ The painting by a member of the artistic group "the Eight" was thus understandably included in the special Bartók issue of *MA* five years later.¹⁰

This singular attention devoted to Bartók was, however, far from occasional or exceptional on Kassák's part. Bartók had already been the dedicatee of a folklore-inspired expressionist poem by Mátyás György, "Legény gajdol" [Young man's humming] published in the predecessor of *MA* called *Tett* [Action] in early 1916.¹¹ And an earlier issue of *MA* in 1917 also included a complete facsimile of one of Bartók's compositions, perhaps not as a mere coincidence, one of his *Five Songs* based on Endre Ady's poems.¹²

Furthermore, in 1921 and now an *émigré* in Vienna, Kassák approached Bartók once again to obtain a facsimile of a composition and Bartók appeared forthcoming.¹³ Bartók did not only enumerate what he could offer but also advised Kassák to turn to Emil Hertzka, director of his new publisher, Universal Edition in Vienna, with whom he had an exclusive publication contract for his musical compositions. He even alerted Hertzka in an unpublished letter of 26 May 1921 about Kassák's enquiry:

A Hungarian writer, who is just working on an anthology of modern art (litera-

ture, music, painting, etc.), asked me to offer him something that he would be allowed to publish in it. I have no objections to it but the last decision falls on you. [...] Possible would be: movement III of my 2nd string quartet, or one of my studies for piano, perhaps No. 3 or 4 of the *Ady Songs*.¹⁴

What Bartók's music represented for Kassák's circle might be gleaned from the long and detailed article by Miklós Náray, published in the special issue of *MA*.¹⁵ Despite its highly mannered modernist literary style, Náray's article shows intimate knowledge and sound judgement of Bartók's published or performed oeuvre up to *The Wooden Prince*, which had premiered quite recently in May 1917. The author repeatedly refers to M.D. Calvocoressi's Paris lecture on Bartók that seems to be an important source for his discussion, even though he occasionally contradicts his source (as in the case of the significance of Schoenberg, which Náray considers less relevant and rather occasional). Náray emphasizes the "monumentality" in Bartók's art and works as well as the significance of the "primitive," originating in Bartók's exceptional and idiosyncratic use of folk music in his modernist works. The decisive caesura of the oeuvre is correctly set after the First Suite for Orchestra. The significance of the books of piano music such as the *Fourteen Bagatelles*, the *Two Elegies*, the *Four Dirges* and the *Esquisses (Seven Sketches)* is rightly defined. Náray mentions the First String Quartet as probably the most important work of European significance. And despite the greatness of the ballet *The Wooden Prince* and the excellence of its orchestration, he also correctly points out the

⁹ BALINT Aladár, „Három kiállítás”, *Nyugat* 6 (1913): 1:786–787.

¹⁰ *MA* 3, 2. sz. (1918): 21.

¹¹ CSAPLÁR Ferenc, *Bartók Béla, Kassák Lajos* (Budapest: Kassák Múzeum, 2006), 2.

¹² *MA* 2, 8. sz. (1917): 119–21.

¹³ See Bartók's letter to Kassák, 24 May 1921, quoted and reproduced in facsimile in CSAPLÁR, *Bartók Béla, Kassák...*, 17–19.

¹⁴ Unpublished letter, Bartók to Emil Hertzka, original in German, photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives.

¹⁵ NÁRAY Miklós, „Bartók Béla”, *MA* 3, 2. sz. (1918): 19–25.

problematic relationship between the more German and more backward-looking literary libretto (by Béla Balázs) and the original and modernist music in it. Bartók is called “naturally a ‘revolutionary’” (p. 25), a term the composer himself later decisively contrasted with what he considered clearly more valuable, “evolutionary.”¹⁶ In the article, most of Bartók’s musical “innovations” are touched upon: in rhythm, instrumentation or harmony. He is compared only to the most outstanding innovators of the period (e.g., Scriabin, Schoenberg and Stravinsky [p. 25]), but at the same time his work is contrasted to “romanticism” and, what appears a surprisingly early use of the term, “neo-classicism” (p. 20). Instead of further discussing Náray’s essay, however, it seems even more important to see what Bartók actually offered to include in *Ma* and what these compositions meant to him.

As mentioned before, it was one of Bartók’s five Ady Songs that was reproduced in the first facsimile in 1917, “Nem mehetek hozzád” [I Cannot Come to You], with its refrain form inculcating the desperate phrase “And I shall die.”¹⁷ In his setting, the refrain is immediately recognizable but at the same time it is continuously varied. The song was one of those “death songs” the composer mentioned in a letter of 26 February 1916 to an acquaintance to whom most of his surviving letters are addressed in this period.¹⁸ “I

have found 3 Ady-songs, which almost surely I’ll be able to set to music. [...] Az őszi lárma [Autumn Echoes], Három őszi könnycsepp [Autumn Tears]. These, too, are autumn death songs.”¹⁹

What Bartók probably composed last, “Az ágyam hívogat” [My Bed Calls Me] obviously represented for him the essence of that desperate mood, now in the centre of his thinking. On 4 March he intimates his idea to set this particular poem to music as well.

The order is significant with Ady because his poems are an actual autobiography or at least diary-like pieces of writing in verse. It seems that this “Szeretném ha szeretnének” [I’d Love to be Loved] and the subsequent Poems of All Secrets stem from the period of a great crisis [...] I have marked in the two volumes the stanzas that lie especially close to me – which almost seem to emerge from me. But there is one I could not even mark: “Az ágyam hívogat” [My Bed Calls Me]. [...] I should so much love to set it to music. [...] The simplest and yet so deathly sombre words. “Oh my bed, my coffin [...] I’ll lie down.” He ends with what he began. Only the greatest poet of all times can write such a thing. We

¹⁶ See Bartók’s late Harvard Lectures (1943), in Béla BARTÓK, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin SUCHOFF, 354–355 and 360–361 (London: Faber & Faber, 1976).

¹⁷ Cf. Péter LAKI, “Les mélodies op. 15 et 16 de Bartók”, *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* Neue Folge 27 (2007): 105–120, 108.

¹⁸ See my article, László VIKÁRIUS, “Intimations through Words and Music: Unique Sources to Béla Bartók’s Life and Thought in the Fonds Denijs Dille (B-Br)”, *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 67 (2013): 179–217. The article

includes selected passages from letters to Klára Gombossy related to his *Five Songs* op. 15, four of whose texts set poems by her. The important quotations related to Ady are not quoted there.

¹⁹ Bartók’s letter to Klára Gombossy, 26 February 1916, original in Hungarian, photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives: “találtam 3 Ady-dalt, amelyet majdnem biztos, hogy meg tudok zenésíteni. Vér és aranyból: Az őszi lárma, Három őszi könnycsepp. Ezek is őszi haláldalok.”

should be glad that we can read such masterpieces in our mother tongue.²⁰

It is here that the generally reticent Bartók recalls, in an astonishingly vivid manner, his encounter with Ady's poetry.

What a sensational event in my life the first volume of Ady [...] was! It happened in the spring of 1908. The friend of mine (my only friend) brought it [...] to me, "Read this!" And I read feverishly till late after midnight – it was almost impossible for me to part with it. I had not been particularly interested in poetry before, though. But these appeared to have emerged from me – yes, had I not been born for music but for writing poetry, I should have written them – this was what I felt.²¹

²⁰ Bartók's letter to Klára Gombossy, 26 February 1916, original in Hungarian, photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives: "Adynál fontos a sorrend, mert költeményei valóságos életrajz vagy legalább is naplószerű írások versben. Ugy látszik ez a 'Szeretném ha szeretnének,' meg az utána következő minden titkok versei nagy krízis idejéből származik [...] Megjelöltem ebben a két tetben a különösen hozzám – szinte belőlem szóló – strófákat. De egyet – már megjelölni sem lehetett: 'Az ágyam hívogat.' [...] A legsimplább és mégis olyan halálosan szomorú szavak. „Óh ágyam, koporsóm... lefekszem.” Végzi, a mivel kezdte. Minden idők legnagyobb költője tud csak ilyet írni. Boldogok lehetünk hogy anyanyelvünkön olvashatunk ilyen remekműveket." Cf. Judit FRIGYESI, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 211–215, quoting from the same letter within an extended discussion of Bartók's setting of this poem.

²¹ Bartók's letter to Klára Gombossy, 26 February 1916: "Mekkora szenzációja volt életemnek az első Ady-kötet [...]! 1908 tavaszán

The eventual completion of "My Bed Calls Me," announced in a letter of 14 April, effectively rounded off the set, although at the time Bartók seems to have been undecided about an occasional extension of the cycle with more songs. He suggested the following in a later letter: "I had succeeded in making 'Ó ágyam' [Oh, my bed]. It's a great joy – for the time being only for me. I have 5 Ady songs so far. They are strange and good."²²

Following a "fallow" period in the wake of the repeated refusals of his 1911 opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, Bartók produced a significant number of works during the First World War.²³ Most conspicuous among them is *The Wooden Prince*, Bartók's ballet that was staged in Budapest's Royal Opera House in 1917 effectively paving the way to the stage for the opera as well, finally premièred the following year in May 1918. An interesting pattern can be observed in the list of war-year works: within this pattern, different types of works follow one another with a varying degree of creativity and significance. The period as a whole and each of the newly emerging genres were introduced by works based on folk material, first Hungarian then Romanian and, finally, reflecting his most recent collections, Slovak. The composition of

volt. A barátom (az egyetlen emberem) hozta [...], 'ezt olvasd!' És én olvastam, lázban, késő éjfelutánig – alig tudtam megválni tőle. Pedig nem igen érdekelték mindaddig versek. De ezek mintha belőlem kerültek volna ki – igen ha nem zenére termettem volna, hanem versírásra, én irtam volna meg ezeket – ezt éreztem."

²² Bartók to Klára Gombossy, 14 April 1916: "sikerült az »Ó ágyam«-at elkészíteni. Nagy öröm, – egyelőre csak számomra) Eddig már 5 Ady dalom van. Furcsák és jók."

²³ See László VIKÁRIUS, "Inter arma moderna non silent musae: Bartók during the Great War", *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 71 (2017): 209–225.

the Second String Quartet also belonged to the war years. In contrast to the string quartet genre, which spanned his whole career, the composition of the two cycles of songs proved to be as exceptional as the choice of contemporary poetry for setting, as opposed to his later vocal works in which he would always use texts of folk origin.

Bartók's selection of an enigmatic passage, eleven bars of what appears to be instrumental music for the title page of the 1918 Bartók special issue of *MA* deserves a commentary of its own. The passage concludes the first of ten songs composed in 1916. "Tavaszi" (Spring) is based on a poem by Klára Gombossy, recipient of the letters in which Bartók so profusely discusses Ady's poetry. This young but precocious girl from Kisgaram, Upper Hungary (now Hronec in Slovakia), who accompanied Bartók to help to collect folk songs in Slovak villages, showed her adolescent poetry to him, which interested the composer and effectively instigated the whole "period of songs." In his first known letter of 6 January 1916 to her, in which he mentions the composition of "Spring," Bartók explains the passage before the conclusion, in which he focuses on the word "mámor" (i.e., ecstasy, from the phrase "mámora a vérnek" [the ecstasy of blood] as "truly descriptive": "It conveys the surreal, unearthly, inexpressible experience of ecstasy." And, referring to this, he observes about the piano epilogue which concludes the song and is reproduced on the title page of *MA*: "Something similar is expressed, while the ecstasy would be withering away, by what is basically the final chord, a vague trembling."²⁴ This graphic passage reappears in a slightly recomposed form in the chef-d'oeuvre of the period, the ballet, just before the final return of the opening "nature" mu-

²⁴ Cf. VIKÁRIUS, *Intimations through Words and Music...*, 191–94.

sic.²⁵ The choice of this passage for a facsimile, thus, might have had more than one reason. Finally, the last facsimile in *MA* represented yet another "death song," this time for piano and without words: the unexpected slow last movement of the Suite op. 14.²⁶

The most puzzling detail in the text of the 1926 interview is the "Rembrandian concept." Apart from a general knowledge of the painter from school and museums, Bartók might have had an added source which may explain why he was thinking of Rembrandt when speaking about Endre Ady's art on the occasion of a chance interview. His friend, Zoltán Kodály, Bartók's *only* friend, who famously discovered Debussy as a suitable model for modern Hungarian music in Paris in 1907, had previously studied a semester at the University in Berlin. He was also a pupil of Heinrich Wölfflin, a particularly important theorist of baroque art.²⁷ On the one hand, Ady's poetry and Rembrandt's art could indeed be somehow linked due to Kodály's mediation. On the other hand, Bartók's mention of Rembrandt obviously emphasized his reserve towards some tendencies in contemporary art. Discussing avant-garde compositions of extremely reduced means in one of his late Harvard lectures, for instance, he voiced his doubts about some of

²⁵ The relationship between the facsimile and the ballet was first identified by András WILHEIM, see "Zu einem Handschriften-Faksimile aus dem Jahre 1917", in *Documenta Bartókiana 6*, ed. László SOMFAI (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1981), 233–234.

²⁶ *MA* 3, 2. sz. (1918): 22–23.

²⁷ See Kodály mentioning his experience of Wölfflin's lectures as late as a 1956 speech, entitled „Ki az igazi zeneértő?” [Who is the True Expert in Music], in KODÁLY Zoltán, *Visszatekintés: Összegyűjtött írások, beszédek, nyilatkozatok* [Looking Back: Collected Papers, Speeches, and Statements], szerk. BÓNIS Ferenc, 3 köt. 1:299–301 (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2007), 299.

Piet Mondrian's works as "less than satisfactory artistic communication."²⁸ While Rembrandt's realism, intensity of expression and, probably, depth of feeling represented more than just "satisfactory artistic communications," the almost obsessive artist of self-portraits might have appeared in Bartók's mind naturally comparable to Ady's "diary-like" poetry. As it seems from his 1926 interview, he undoubtedly considered himself and his art essentially related to this tradition.

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²⁸ BARTÓK, *Essays*, 358.

PLATE XX

MA

IRODALMI ÉS KÉPZŐMŰVÉSZETI FOLYÓIRAT

Szerkesztőség és kiadóhivatal: Bpest, V. Visegrádi-u. 15.	Szerkesztők: KASSÁK LAJOS és UITS BÉLA	Előfizetési ár Magyarországon: Egy évre 10 K, félévre 5 K.
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TARTALOM: Bartók Béla: Kottarészlet. / Kassák Lajos: Naprakészítés (vers Bartók Bélának). / Némeg Miklós: Bartók Béla (tanulmány). / Barla Sándor: Épülő ház (vers). / Barényi Róbert: Bartók Béla portréja (olajfestmény). / Bartók Béla: Zongorakompozíció (kottarészlet). / Szépláki Árpád: Tünetelés (vers). / Kádár Erzsébet: Versek. / Barla Sándor: Tócsa (vers). / Uitz Béla: † Rodinról.

(Andante)

III 2

BARTÓK BÉLA: Kottarészlet

Bartók szám ára: 80 fillér.