

## The Great Béla Bartók: An International and Interdisciplinary Perspective

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**Abstract:** A 21st century review of Béla Bartók's cultural position in the early twentieth century from an interdisciplinary point of view, first beginning with Bartók's early musical training, then his theatre works, which involved the collaborations of such figures as Béla Balázs and Melchior Lengyel. Bartók's familiarity with their thinking documents the impact of international Symbolist and Art Nouveau culture in his own formation, as well as the common interest in the folkloric elements incorporated by Bartók and others in this era. Also, Bartók's achievement will be considered in relation to other significant composers on the international scene in the first half of the twentieth century, including figures such as Igor Stravinsky, Charles Ives, and Arnold Schoenberg. With special mention of Mihály Szegedy-Maszák's writings on Béla Bartók, including his "Bartók's Place in Cultural History."

### *I. Where did Bartók Come From?*

Béla Bartók (1881–1945) descends from minor Hungarian nobility, but his musical line goes back, via his piano teacher, to the great Franz Liszt, the most fantastic of all the romantic pianists and one of the most innovative musical minds of all time. In truth he was an absolute musical noble.

His teacher was István Thomán (1862–1940), who knew Liszt extremely well, even touring with him. Thomán was a pallbearer at Liszt's funeral. Later Thomán also taught Ernő Dohnányi, George Cziffra, and Fritz Reiner, along with Bartók. Taken together, these Hungarian musical giants push Thomán and Liszt's impact on music, from a

pedagogical point of view, well into the twentieth century.

Bartók's connection to the greatest of the nineteenth century virtuoso pianists runs deep, and yet he is arguably the greatest pianist/composer of the twentieth century. This is obvious to any experienced musician who has studied the piano repertoire seriously. It is not just in the musical scores. It is in the movement of the human hands needed for a full realization of his remarkably original piano works.

### *II. Bartók and his Culture*

It is hard to relate music, the most abstract of the arts, to the cultural world at large. It can always be done, but it is a bit tricky. So let us begin with the most difficult and consider the cultural forces outside the purely musical. Here is where we discover Bartók's interconnections with such Hungarian figures as playwright and literary gadfly Béla Balázs, architect Ödön Lechner, poets Endre Ady and Mihály Babits, and larger clusters of internationally related artists who are gathered under the rubrics of Symbolism, Impressionism, Romantic Nationalism, two terms I increasingly link together. Bartók was touched by all these. The great Germanic composers still dominated music in the late nineteenth century, but the fresh scent in the air was French culture in every sense. Bartók's most important precursor may have been Debussy, who was not just an Impressionist, but an important intellect who invented everything modern in music. But also, Debussy was in touch with intellectual trends, including the innovations of the Symbolist poets and phi-

losophers, the great painters of the era, the allure of Orientalism in the arts, and more. Debussy knew well the great poets Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, setting them to music in his innovative songs. and more writers up through one of the most famous playwrights of the period, the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck, who gave Debussy his text for his one major opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*.<sup>1</sup>

Ady and Balázs imported the French intellectualism that came out of the Symbolist Movement. in their work. We find Art Nouveau and native folklore in Lechner's architecture, placing him, from an international perspective, somewhere in the family of Louis Sullivan and Antoni Gaudi. Bartók and his friends received all this. You can see that Ady and Balázs and Lechner and others were attracted to things that also interested Bartók and therefore both directly and indirectly Bartók was in an international cultural flow of ideas that had considerable impact on all of the most brilliant European artists and intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Balázs may have first noticed the Bluebeard tale because he was interested in a play by Maeterlinck, *Ariane et Barbe-bleu*, which plants him firmly within the hothouse context of the late Symbolist movement, and which always displayed a fascination with myth, both in poetry and visual art. The libretto he produces for Bartók has qualities of stillness and mystery we find in similar short plays by Hofmannsthal, Rilke, Yeats and others. It is of the period. (Maeterlinck's play about Bluebeard was also the basis for an opera by Paul Dumas.) Very little happens in a symbolist play. Action is less important

<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive examination of Debussy's connections to the Symbolists, see my book *The Tuning of the Word*. David Michael HERTZ, *The Tuning of Word: The Musicoliterary Poetics of the Symbolist Movement* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

than atmosphere, but what does occur is important and suggestive, and Bartók makes an intense psychodrama out of the material in his musical score.

Leon Botstein, college president and conductor, has an impressive essay on Bartók in *Bartók and his World*, his Bard Festival book edited and published by Peter Laki in 1995, laying out the cultural context of the composer's milieu in rich detail.<sup>2</sup> But English language readers would do well to compare and contrast Botstein's writing on Bartók with leading Hungarian literary critics and cultural historians such as the late Mihály Szegedy-Maszák (1943–2016), who had a great interest in the music of Béla Bartók and who wrote quite extensively about the composer's literary and cultural context.<sup>3</sup> With Botstein and Szegedy-Maszák in mind, I want to take a brief look at Bartók's music that used extrinsic theatrical or literary elements. Most of it was composed relatively early in Bartók's career, written between 1910 and 1924.

First, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, written with a libretto prepared by Balázs, was composed in 1911, but completed and performed in 1918, just after the great Stravinsky ballets and shortly before the end of the First World War. It was premiered at the Hungarian Royal Opera on May 24, 1918.<sup>4</sup>

The Balázs version was a symbolist play with two actors: Duke Bluebeard, owner of the castle, and Judith, the latest of his many wives. The woman, Judith, opens the doors in the castle of her new husband, Bluebeard,

<sup>2</sup> Peter LAKI, ed., *Bartók and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Mihály SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, "Bartók's Place in Cultural History", *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 41, no. 4 (2000): 457–465.

<sup>4</sup> This was a few months before the armistice was signed between Germany and the allies on Nov 11, 1918. The Treaty of Versailles was about a year later.

one by one. Every time she opens one she sees something terrifying. Bartók provides richly imaginative music for each door. Eventually the last one opens and she knows she is doomed. With this last door opened, a newly bejeweled Judith ominously follows all of Bluebeard's zombie wives off the stage and the opera ends. Some of the scariest music ever written was composed by Bartók for this. Balázs and Bartók made the ultimate opera about the woman who has picked the wrong husband.

While, as Professor Szegedy-Maszák has mentioned, some scholars have posited that Bartók may have been attracted to the story because of problems relating to his own first marriage, the original plot of *Bluebeard's Castle* goes back to French folklore, long before Maeterlinck, and it had been stylized into literary form by Charles Perrault (1628–1703) in the 17th century. So, while Bartók prepared something like a symbolist play for Bartók, the original story is folkloric in origin, but it is from French folklore, not Hungarian, and, most significantly, not Teutonic in origin. Szegedy-Maszák sums this important cultural change most eloquently when he writes: "In many respects the music of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is the expression of a desire to distance Hungarian from German culture, a desire that was shared by the poets Babits and Ady, as well as they the composers Bartók and Kodály."<sup>5</sup> The swerve toward the modernistic innovations of Debussy and the French is also connected to the choice of dramatic material for the libretto.

Following *Bluebeard*, Bartók composed the ballet/pantomime *The Wooden Prince* (1916–17), also with material from Balázs. It concerns a princess who falls for a wooden

prince, but then finally is allowed to have a real one.

Finally, and not least, there is *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–24), another ballet / pantomime, with a story by Melchior Lengyel. It is a truly scandalous story, even today. It is about a band of robbers who prey on lonely men, using a beautiful woman to entrap them: she is a prostitute, or, worse, really a woman posing as a prostitute, her thieving collaborators posing as pimps, and the male victims they trick into their trap. First, they ensnare a lecherous old dandy, then a young student. Finally, they tempt the miraculous mandarin, a customer who literally lights up in living color with desire. As they beat and stab him, he simply won't die, but continues to chase his temptress. He only bleeds and then expires after he is able to satisfy his longing for the prostitute! The plot is somewhat reminiscent of Stravinsky's puppet hero *Petrushka*, but even more shocking. *Petrushka* longs for a puppet ballerina that he cannot have. He too is murdered. It also is reminiscent of *Le Sacre du printemps*, which, based on a myth shaped by Nicholas Roerich, concerns the sacrifice of a young virgin. I like the explanation provided by Bartók's son, Peter, for this wild story: "the basic theme [...] centers on the enormous physical force possible between man and woman. When the Mandarin is lured into the robbers' den by the captive girl used as a decoy, soon a force becomes established that defies extinction. Attempts to kill him are futile until he can possess the object of his longing; only after his desire is quenched do his wounds start to bleed enabling him to find peace in death. Passion alone sustains life against overwhelming odds; the force of nature triumphed."<sup>6</sup>

Bartók composed fantastic music, filled with rich harmonic and rhythmic innovation, for this provocative theatrical material.

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<sup>5</sup> Mihály SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, "Bartók and Literature", *Hungarian Studies: A Journal Of The International Association For Hungarian Studies And Balassi Institute* 15 (2001): 245–254, 246.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter BARTÓK, *My Father* (Homosassa, Florida: Bartók Records, 2002), 244.

What is the take-away from all this? This was dangerous literary subject matter to use, and even still somewhat disturbing, but very much in the spirit of the adventurous topics taken up by Diaghilev and his Ballet Russes and to some extent reminiscent of Alban Berg and his *Wozzeck* (1926) and *Lulu* (1937), in gestation at around the same time and afterward (*Lulu* even features a prostitute who brings home Jack the Ripper). Like Stravinsky, Bartók was aware of the daring impulses of modern art, particularly the tendency to explore un-sentimentalized aspects of the human being in an anti-humanistic and anti-romanticist context, even using sordid and offensive settings. His willingness to use material created by writers such as Balázs and Lengyel, both Hungarian writers of Jewish descent who were willing to take a modern approach to symbol and myth, is an indication that he wanted to push into the future, not the past. This is indicated as well by Bartók's alliance with the intellectuals of the arts magazine *MA*, something also noted by Professor Szegedy-Maszák.<sup>7</sup>

Also, Bartók evolved into a composer chiefly for instruments and instrumentalists, not for opera or theater. In this he was more like Beethoven, say, than Wagner or Stravinsky. Beethoven was not a committed writer of opera and song, but we will always go to *Fidelio* or *An die Ferne Geliebte* to find out more about him. Similar to Beethoven, Bartók's fertilization from the literary fields of endeavor is not to be underestimated, even though, according to Szegedy-Maszák, Bartók did not have a systematic education on the level, say, of his colleague, Zoltán Kodály.<sup>8</sup> If you take these three theater works together, you see that Bartók composed a huge amount of richly rewarding and beauti-

fully crafted music for them, but most important, the literary choices he made link him in both obvious and subtle ways to the culture of his time. Also, I prefer Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* to its model, *Pelléas and Mélisande*. I simply think it is a more successful piece, though it is shorter. *Pelléas*, because of Debussy's determination to explore the musicality of language, is simply too thin in terms of harmonic and melodic inventiveness. Bartók's musical texture in *Bluebeard*, filled with Debussyan devices such as whole tone scales, and peppered with Hungarian types of pentatonic melodic motives has a more fully rounded texture.

### *III. Bartók and the Great Modernist Composers from an International Perspective*

Bartók (1881–1945) *did not sound like* Dvořak or Tchaikovsky or Strauss or Rachmaninoff (1873–1943). He sounded completely *new*. Also, like all great composers who do something new, he still sounds completely fresh even today. Bartók did not choose to sound like a nationalist romantic. This is what makes him modern. But he is also closely related to the elemental sounds of Hungary. This the miracle.

Bartók gave us the best way out of the crisis of musical modernism. This crisis might best be described as an attack on the audience by the composers who felt increasingly that they had to challenge it with more and more innovative and anti-Romanticist music.

I would like to briefly contextualize Bartók in relation to other great modernists from around the world, figures such as the French Claude Debussy, the Russian Igor Stravinsky, the American Charles Ives, the German-Jewish Arnold Schoenberg, and even Paul Hindemith (the teacher of Bernhard Heiden, my teacher). Bartók, Stravinsky and Ives each used folkloric elements. Stravinsky did not advertise his borrowings for Russian folk music, but today they are documented by

<sup>7</sup> Mihály SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, "From Text to Music: Bartók's Approach to Literary Works", *Hungarian Heritage* 7 (2006): 30–34.

<sup>8</sup> SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, "Bartók and Literature", 252.

scholars such as Richard Taruskin.<sup>9</sup> Schoenberg opted out of all traditional tonal expression, including folkloric elements, and went for atonal expressionism and serialism. This made his music the most cerebral and appropriate for professorial study in the academy. (In this way, he is similar to his American student, John Cage, whom he discouraged). Charles Ives was inspired, but, though a composer of real genius, he was an artist who worked in isolation apart from the professional world of music. Bartók, who made enormous contributions to the modern discipline of ethnomusicology (many would say he even invented it), was the most scholarly in the way he employed folk music as a point of departure for the modernist composer. After all, he actually went out into the Hungarian countryside and wrote down what he heard, an early user of Thomas Edison's then recently invented recording device with its unwieldy wax cylinders. But as a practicing composer, Bartók was unsurpassed in the 20th century. Also, he may have been the greatest craftsman of the three important modernists who incorporated folk elements in fragmented forms (again, the first being himself of course, but also Stravinsky and Ives). There is a remarkable and historic photograph of Hindemith and Bartók in Turkey in the 1930s. Both had been invited there to improve the musical culture. Hindemith kept away from folk music, even though he did create a kind of free-floating tonal language that might be profitably compared to Bartók. But his music is not performed as much now as it once was. The only other composer pianist who could touch Bartók was Rachmaninoff, who became a highly successful virtuoso and perhaps the greatest pianist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Rachmaninoff's music, while wonderful in

<sup>9</sup> Richard TARUSKIN, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, Vol 1. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

many ways, was much more linked to the Romantic past and, in its weaker moments, borders on kitsch.

Of the great modernist composers, Bartók's music is the most played by actual performing musicians, who in the end decide what they will play. The ballots are in. Musicians have decided to play Bartók. Bartók's sonatas, concertos, and chamber music are very present in the world's concert halls. While they are still challenging to people who want easy listening, they are standard. Charles Rosen has pointed out that Beethoven has always had his critics, but musicians always insist on playing him, despite periodic objections from the audience. The same with Bartók. His music is difficult and adventurous, but great musicians insist on performing him and the audiences are brought along.

#### IV. Bartók's Changing Reputation Over Time

Many years ago, the famous Frankfurt school sociologist and music critic, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno wrote an influential book, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, which featured a Manichean view of modern music, with just two main characters, Stravinsky and Schoenberg.<sup>10</sup> Today this book, while still fascinating to read, seems more and more dated as we move farther and farther away from the 20th century. Schoenberg was not the savior Adorno made him out to be, Stravinsky not the devil. Adorno was correct in realizing the importance of these two, but they are only two in a much longer list of significant contributors of a much more diverse sort. To be fair, Adorno has some positive and insightful things to say about Bartók, yet I find his remarks on Bartók as a re-

<sup>10</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund ADORNO, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne MITCHELL and Wesley BLOMSTER (New York: Continuum, 1973).

cycler of folklore to be supercilious. Today, in 2017, I would put Bartók high up on the list of challengers to the primacy of this duo, but I would also add such figures as Duke Ellington (1899–1974) and many of the great Russians, such as Scriabin (1871–1915), Prokofiev (1891–1953), and Shostakovich (1906–1975). I would keep Schoenberg and Stravinsky, but add a lot of diverse characters to the mix. Their prominence may have been less unchallenged than we thought.

Today, Stravinsky (1882–1971), while still a giant looming over twentieth century composers, seems to have been on a downward trend after his great ballets, which were all written before WWI. His music became a bit arid later. He tried neoclassicism. He tried to emulate Schoenberg's serialism. He did this, he did that... But none of these later works had the originality and residual influence of his Diaghilev-era ballets: *Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*, the greatest of them all and which provoked a riot (some say, maybe more because of the choreography than the music) when it was premiered in Paris on May 29, 1913. Whereas Stravinsky treaded water, or even declined, Bartók simply got better and better until he died, one of the signs of the truly greatest of the great composers (of course, poor Bartók never figured out how to make money, while Stravinsky did).

Was Bartók a kind of country bumpkin modernist when compared to the Second Viennese School? Certain disciples of Adorno and Schoenberg would have said yes in the last century. I would say not. Absolutely.

For example, in the Botstein article, I find some discussion of Schoenberg and Adorno's views on the difference between music in a peripheral or central nation, such as Germany, say, which was central, and Hungary and Poland, for example, as peripheral. This was important for the "universalist" claims of the new serialism developed by Schoenberg and his followers. These claims of universalism seem unrealistic as musicians

currently pick and choose their repertoire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bartók now looms as just as important or central to repertoire as Schoenberg. Both remain highly significant figures, but I think Bartók will penetrate farther into the future. That is how it seems in 2017, looking back at some of the arguments advanced in the late 20th century by Adorno and others.

#### V. Bartók's Lyricism

I would like to close by mentioning what I hear as Bartók's lyrical voice. When I hear Bartók's greatest moments I am reminded of what his American contemporary Charles Ives said: "dissonances are becoming beautiful." What is dissonant and disturbing and what is consonant and pleasing is a matter of culture and taste and both Ives and Bartók expanded our ability to understand this.

Today we don't need the percussive and abrasive Bartók only. We can reinterpret him to hear his softer, gentler side as well. An obvious example of Bartók's subtler side is to be heard in the hypnotic and mysterious "Az éjszaka zenéje" (The Night's Music) with its unusual polytonality. This is the softer penultimate piece in the *Szabadban* (Out of Doors) suite of 1926. It is touchingly mentioned in Peter Bartók's book about his father and Peter specifically mentions the specifically Hungarian frog sounds (the frogs of the *Szöllös*) in the score, singing out, but also occasionally jumping into the water, and which become more and more haunting as the piece develops over time.<sup>11</sup> Here Bartók expands musical vocabulary, taking us closer to natural sound in the world around us than even Debussy managed to do, and incorporates echoes of the characteristic Hungarian peasant culture that fascinated him. His use of polytonality and modal scales is much less crude than what we find, say in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, in which the Petrushka puppet is

<sup>11</sup> BARTÓK, *My Father*, 163.

evoked by white and black notes, C and F-sharp chords, played simultaneously. And the sounds of human-made music, heard from a distance, as if by a listener absorbed in a natural setting amidst the woods and ponds, music played back in the village, mixes in with the natural sounds of the frog ponds in the most haunting way. Human music and natural music are in completely different keys, but, after sounding out separately, toward the end of this remarkable piece, they combine fluently together all at once. Here we have, not merely bitonality, but rather, one of the loveliest examples of tritonicity in music. Frogs (repeatedly in the same ostinato pattern) and bird sounds, supporting “nature” chords, and human village music all exist in three separate but equally important musical spheres of activity, each with a distinctly different tonal center.

It is a great technical achievement and completely charming. Only a great master could have put this all together. It is not driving and percussive, attributes commonly attributed to Bartók at the expense of many other qualities in his music. Instead it is ethereal, delicate, extremely atmospheric, and yet at the same time far more radical than anything Debussy or Stravinsky invented. Also, Bartók the master pianist, here creates a unique new expansion of explicitly pianistic vocabulary. Going beyond the innovations of Stravinsky, Debussy, and Darius Milhaud, Bartók’s multi-layered composition for “The Night’s Music” is much more complex, and it creates a haunting and lovely effect never heard before in the piano repertoire. Sublimely modern, sublimely beautiful, sublimely new.

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