

BELA BARTOK

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Bela Bartok is a unique composer. Historically and musically he is one of the most important composers of all time.

In addition he is, without doubt, a very great composer.

Firstly, because his music is, in the main, highly original. He was a solitary figure in many ways and his music is highly individual. While we may find influences in his work such as Liszt, Debussy and Hungarian music, his own work stands apart. His music is, in the main, entirely new and personal. This amazing newness has only one other comparable innovator, Arnold Schoenberg.

One of the essentials of being a great composer is being totally original.

Secondly, he was exceptionally skilful. He was a master of contrapuntal music and his free use of dissonance make his harmonies fascinating.

His rhythmic effects are both outstanding and stunning and, sometimes, his music is violent. He was the first composer to accept the piano for what it was, a percussion instrument. He had respect for composers of a previous age. Like every great composer and true music lover, he adored Beethoven. In his own String Quartet no. 1 of 1907, he writes a fugato which is modelled on the first movement of Beethoven's Quartet in C sharp minor.

There is another fugato in the sensational Sonata for two pianos and percussion of 1932 where each entry is a fifth above the previous one and it is written as a strict four part canon and there is another canon in the finale of the Concerto for orchestra of 1943.

Thirdly, his music is durable but, perhaps, in a different way. There is always something new to find in his work. He has a very unusual handling of tonal relationships even in his early works. This marks him out as a composer who wanted to be original. He did not want to copy or emulate anyone else.

Or did he?

And, finally, he is one of those composers who never composed an off-colour piece. You will not find mistakes in his music or his instrumentation or orchestration, as you will in many other composers even so revered ones.

Bartok has a wonderful sense of chromatic counterpoint as seen in his early piano works such as the Esquisses, Bagatelles, Elegies and Dirges. The Elegies, in particular, have a wonderful sense of quiet and moving drama with false-relationships with the juxtaposition of the major and minor. He uses all twelve notes of the scale but it is not serial music but the free use of chromaticism. He did not want to be predictable. He avoided diatonic elements although his music often expresses tonality. His music is often in many implied keys at once although it is not written in a strictly polytonal way as is the music of Milhaud.

Although original, he had respect for older methods. He was not musically a rebel or censorious. For example, in the finale of his magnificent String Quartet no. 5, from bar 202 onwards, he begins a passage with a two-part canon and he cleverly brings it to a unison conclusion.

There is no doubt that his Music for strings, percussion and celesta, written for Paul Sacher, is the very finest work ever written for string orchestra. The opening movement is built up of entries each on a different note making up all the notes of the chromatic scale. There is an amazing central climax around the tonality of E flat and, afterwards, the theme appears in inversion. But this is not a device as in an academic Bach fugue. It is not mathematics since the theme is always varied and there are changing linking episodes. The music is truly inspirational and profoundly moving.



In the slow movement of the Violin Concerto no. 2 of 1937 Bartok uses a canon at close distance. Here is a four-part canon for pizzicato strings with a counter-melody from the soloist which four tonalities are exactly the same as the scherzo from Szymanowski's String Quartet no. 1 written twenty years earlier namely F sharp, D sharp, C and A. In the finale of the Violin Concerto there is a canon at a crotchet's distance. The first entry is on G sharp; the second entry, a crotchet later is on G and the third entry, another crotchet later, is on F sharp. This dissonance makes for a tremendous tension.

The great quality that I find in Bartok's music is that it is stripped of all those annoying ingredients that beset lesser composers. There is no pomp or ostentation; no unvaried repetition; nothing maudlin or cloying and no boring convention. Yet there is a unifying whole. For example, the last movement of the String Quartet no. 6 of 1939 has a clear obvious comparison with the first movement of the String Quartet no. 1 of 1937 almost as if Bartok knew this would be his last quartet. The later work is more concentrated and masterly as opposed to the young experimentalist of the first. But the same life pulse is there. It is the eschewing of all non-essentials that endears this genius to me.

His music is never overblown as in Schubert (for example, his Symphony no. 9 and some of the Piano Sonatas), Mahler, Bruckner (although his music has an amazing spiritual depth) and Elgar. Bartok was not into padding or, as one composer said, "He did not wear five overcoats on a hot, summer's day!" He was not arrogant or showy. He regards music as a craft where every detail counted and where no note that did not naturally evolve was discarded.

He did not use devices which only serve as time-spinning. He would have agreed with Stravinsky that ostinati were ineffective in contrapuntal writing. He did not use sequences. A sequence is the same phrase or idea that is repeated and builds up to a climax or resolution. The theme in the first movement of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 7 is an obvious example and I suppose Ravel's Bolero is another, but it is a very poor piece. As my friend, the composer, John Veale, has often pointed out Elgar was hopeless at sequences. His sequences never got anywhere and it was just a device to lengthen his already overlong music. It is just laziness.

The writing of variations can also be a lazy way of writing music. Once you have the theme you have all the building blocks. You do not have to stretch the mind any more. As far as I am aware, Bartok did not write any sets of variations. Although it has to be said that writing variations in the serial method takes great skill and ingenuity.

Bartok had an amazing ear. This meant that he knew exactly how the music would sound before he played it. He had a command of texture that is to say how everything blended. He knew what he was doing and how to do it.

By comparison, Edmund Rubbra often said that when he had an idea and began to compose he did not know how the piece would develop or turn out. Bartok knew all these things beforehand. And yet his music is not mechanical as is Milhaud's or as some of the procedures of Stravinsky.

The influence of Bartok is tremendous. How many composers have copied him and mere copying must indicate the shortcomings of those who copy. How Hollywood has cashed in on the music of Bartok. For example, the eeriness of the Music for strings percussion and celesta has appeared in so many films to denote something sinister. His aggressive music has also influenced Hollywood.

There is a mystery. Bax's Symphony no. 3 was written some seven years before the Bartok. The similarity of the opening movements is so striking even in its form, design and tonality. Bax did go to Hungary where this symphony was performed. Did Bartok copy Bax?

Bartok wanted to keep the traditional music of his native Hungary and of Romania alive hence his collecting folk songs with his friend, Zoltan Kodaly from 1905 onwards. Had they not written these songs down some may now have been lost. Yet Bartok also wanted children to know their national heritage but not be exclusive to one type of music. He composed a vast piano work For Children in 1908 -9 and it was so important to him that he revised in 1945, the year of his death. Perhaps he remembered his childhood at Nagyszentmiklos. He

adored children and his interest in them would be frowned upon today in our suspicious world.

Music goes through fashion. Even today some composers are unfashionable which may mean that there is no outstanding champion of their music. Mendelssohn is respected rather than admired. In the last twenty years music or so, long out of fashion music has benefited from recordings including, for example, music by Raff, Rheinberger and Gade, to name but three.

Bartok had his wilderness years as a composer and one could quote the phrase that no prophet is accepted in his own country. From about 1908 for a decade he was not well received until the performance of his ballet *The Wooden Prince* of 1917 produced in Budapest which led to the staging of the opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in 1918. As a composer he became disillusioned and took up his career as a concert pianist again. During this time he wrote his first two piano concertos of 1926 and 1930-1.

The Piano Concerto no. 2 is a towering masterpiece, the first movement having a wind accompaniment only. Here are all the essentials for a truly great work. It is original in conception, virtuosic in design, powerful in communication and rewarding in response. There is no concerto like it. A good performance reveals how exciting this work is.

But to return to his first period of disillusionment. He had fallen in love with the violinist Stefi Geyer and wrote his Violin Concerto no. 1 for her during 1907-8. It did not have the desired effect upon the young woman and the work languished in oblivion for years. Yet he thought that the power of music was irresistible. In 1902 he had heard Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* which had stimulated him to be a composer. How could anyone not love great music and respond to it? Had Stefi no heart?

It is a very beautiful work. Bartok used one movement of the two movement concerto as one of his *Two Portraits* for orchestra. He could not let this lovely music go and he had a difficult time letting Stefi go.

Bartok was a real man. He was not effeminate. As with many other composers his early music has an eroticism. This is displayed in the Violin Concerto no. 1, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and the ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* of 1918-9. The seductive music is so vividly real. One cannot miss or doubt its content and objective. The most obvious comparison is the two first operas of Paul Hindemith, *Murder, the Hope of Women* of 1919, the same year as *Mandarin*, and *Das Nusch-Nuschi* of 1920 complete with its Burmese marionettes.

Bartok did not have a happy life. The political upheavals in his own country of Hungary, particularly of the 1930s, distressed him deeply. He was both a nationalist and a traditionalist in many ways. From 1894 to 1899 he had studied with Erkel at Bratislava which was then known as Pozsony and then went up to Budapest Royal Academy of Music. His nationalism was always with him and he composed *Kossuth* in 1903 which work is sometimes called a symphony, sometimes a symphonic poem. He became professor of piano at Budapest RAM in 1907 and in 1934 had a salaried post at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences to prepare and publish his folk song collection.

But politics can destroy. It has no interest in aesthetics or culture. What Stalin did to the musical developments in Russia is well known. The State and religion do not and must not mix. The State and music must also be kept entirely separate.

In the Autumn of 1940 Bartok and his second wife, Ditta, emigrated to the USA, a country still believed to be the land of the free. His health had collapsed; his services as a pianist were not required even in America and his music was not heard. It was Serge Koussevitzky who commissioned the Concerto for Orchestra from him which encouraged him. Yehudi Menuhin had a sonata for solo violin written for him but, always being a very inadequate musician, could never play it well, since it was beyond him. William Primrose was interested in Bartok who composed the Viola Concerto for him which was left unfinished at the composer's death. Tibor Serly added the final pages.

But let's look at his life in more depth

He was born on 25 March 1881 in what is now called Sannicolaul, Romania but was then Nagyszentmiklos (Great St Nicholas). He had his first piano lesson at the age of five from his mother, Paula. He suffered a severe reaction to an inoculation for smallpox resulting in a hideous rash that persisted past his fifth birthday. This may explain why all his life he was somewhat aloof. His father, a keen amateur musician, was a director of an agricultural college but died when Bartok was eight. Mother had to take up teaching again and the Bartoks moved around a great deal to accommodate the teaching posts offered by the authorities to Mrs Bartok. The travelling instilled a love of the countryside and its culture in Bela.

His first public concert was at Nagyszollos, now part of Russia, where he played Beethoven and a composition of his own called The Danube which was inspired by geography lessons at school.

They settled in Bratislava in 1894 where Bela studied with Laszlo Erkel and followed Erno Dohnanyi to the Budapest Royal Academy of Music. Bela studied piano with Istvan Thoman and composition with Janos Koessler. But his first year was beset with serious health problems and he was sent to several sanatoriums (some outside of Hungary) to recover. He settled down and in 1891 won the Liszt scholarship. He had been a great admirer of Brahms but now turned his attention to Liszt and Wagner. Bela was a brilliant virtuoso pianist.

In Budapest on 12 May 1902 he heard Also Sprach Zarathustra. As a result, he studied as much of Richard Strauss as he could. He adored Ein Heldenleben (who doesn't?) and played it as a piano solo in Budapest in December 1902 and took it to Vienna the next month.

In 1902 he composed a symphony which is now lost.

The premiere of Kossuth in Budapest on 13 January 1904 created a scandal. In the orchestra were German and Austrians and Kossuth caricatures a German hymn. Bartok has no sympathy for Christianity in any form after discovering the serious flaws in Roman Catholicism. Lajos Kossuth was the hero of the Hungarian revolution of 1848.

His first acknowledged work is the Rhapsody for piano and orchestra, Opus 1, of 1904.

That year he heard a woman, Lidi Dosa, sing the traditional song, The Red Apple. She was a Szekely Hungarian and he interviewed her and this began his lifelong interest in folk and traditional music. He began to study folk music of Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Turkey and North Africa. He visited Algeria in 1906. With Kodaly he began collecting songs using an Edison cylinder.

While visiting Transylvania in 1907 he became acquainted with the Unitarian Church.

The beginning of his first depression was that he was runner up for the Rubinstein prize of 1905 and he also failed in the piano competition coming second to Wilhelm Backhaus. Bartok threw himself into a study of genuine peasant music with his lifelong friend, Zoltan Kodaly.

I had the pleasure of meeting Kodaly who was a gentle and very likeable man. I cannot understand why Walton disliked him so.

Things changed for Bela. He was appointed professor of piano in 1907 to succeed his teacher Thoman.

And then there was Stefi Geyer.

Bartok was brought up as a Roman Catholic but when he was 22, he declared himself an atheist and a follower of Nietzsche espousing the view that man created God and that God was dead. He said that if he crossed himself it was in the name of nature, art and science. He poured out his heart and beliefs in two long letters to Stefi. His rejection of the Trinity led him to Unitarianism but he did say that you cannot blame

Jesus, the greatest moralist of all time, for all the false teachings in Roman Catholicism.

In 1909 he married a pupil, Marta Ziegler, and was invited by Busoni to go to Berlin to conduct one of his own pieces. This was unsuccessful. Bartok never conducted again.

In 1910 his son Bela was born.

With Kodaly and a few others he formed the New Hungarian Musical Society in 1911 to form an independent orchestra but the money was not forthcoming.

He was discouraged.

He went to Biskra to study Arab folk music but the First World War halted this venture.

War and internal politics and Hungarian foreign policy made life difficult in Hungary and no one more keenly felt this than Bela Bartok.

On 25 July 1916 he declared his conversion to Unitarianism and joined the Mission House Congregation of the Unitarian Church in Budapest in 1917. This was done for two reasons. He believed that members of the church could obtain further employment for him and he did not want his son to be exposed to Catholicism. At one time he tried to start a music committee in the church and he had strict views himself. Only the organ should be used in church services.

Bartok was a nature lover. He collected all sorts of specimens: plants, minerals and especially insects. He was fascinated by insect life particularly at night.

Another turn in fortunes came but was soon to be crushed. The Wooden Prince was premiered in Budapest on 12 May 1917 and had fourteen subsequent performances that season. On 24 May 1918 Duke Bluebeard's Castle was premiered and ran for a season. Both works were conducted by the Italian Egisto Tango who pleased Bartok immensely. But the libretto was written by Bela Balasz, a communist and during the brief communist rule in Hungary during 1919 Bartok was protected because he was a friend of Comrade Balasz.

The communist regime fell. Bartok was under censure. He played his works in London, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam and Vienna but not at home. He was angry and wrote his Five Songs, Opus 16 and dedicated them to Bela Reinitz an infamous communist, known as the assassin of the Hungarian nation.

Of course, Bartok was very unwise to do this. If it was a punitive measure by him against the right wing government it is dissent and shows a flawed character. If it was a personal statement of communist belief it was also unwise. But what a man is, is reflected in his music. His anger and violence is clearly an expression of his circumstances and political thinking.

In fact, there is no evidence that Bartok was sympathetic to communism. He hated all political dominance and when he makes a clever parody of the main theme of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 7 (The Leningrad) in his own Concerto for Orchestra. He is not ridiculing Shostakovich or the communists in particular but tilting at the Russians for their vile regime inaugurated by Lenin, whose name appears in Leningrad, and carried on by that evil tyrant Stalin.

Both Bartok and Kodaly were temporarily suspended from their posts in 1919 for political reasons. They both hated the fascist regime of the inter-war years.

In 1923, after the success of his two sonatas for violin and piano, and along with Kodaly and Dohnanyi, Bartok was commissioned to write an orchestral work to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the unification of Buda and Pest. He wrote his engaging Dance Suite. He was closely associated with ISCM from this time onwards.

In 1923 he divorced Marta and immediately married a piano student, Ditta Pasztory. Their son, Peter, was born in 1924.

Piano music now occupied him. In 1926 he composed his sensational Sonata for his second wife, Ditta.

That year saw the first performance in Germany, Cologne in fact, of *The Miraculous Mandarin* which was immediately banned because of its immorality. But the fact remains that there are women who seduce and betray men for monetary advantages and there are women who enjoy working in brothels where composers, like syphilitic Schubert, frequented regularly for sexual favours. *Mandarin* had a similar fate in Prague in 1927 and it did not reach the stage in Budapest until 1945. Whatever one thinks of the subject matter, it is an evocative and truly remarkable score.

The following year Bartok embarked on his first concert tour of America taking with him his *Rhapsody* and the *Piano Concerto no.1*. His *String Quartet no. 3* won the Philadelphia Chamber Prize.

His *Cantata Profana* was completed in 1930 and is scored for tenor, baritone, double choir and orchestra. It is based on a Romanian folk story adapted and elaborated by the composer.

In 1930 he attended the French Embassy to receive the Legion d'honneur but when he was awarded the Corvin Medal he refused to go to the ceremony because he would have to receive it from the hand of Admiral Horthy, Hungary's dictator. In the 1930s he refused to have his music played in socialist Germany or in fascist Italy.

The rise to power of Hitler troubled Bartok. That Hungary aligned itself with this evil man distressed him further. But his playing of some of the pieces from his piano work *Mikrokosmos*, written over a period of years with his son, Peter, in mind, in 1937 brought a warm response. This is collection of six volumes of grade piano pieces numbering 153 pieces. Earlier in his career he had written 85 pieces entitled *For Children*.

Erno Dohnanyi held sway in the musical life of Budapest. Bartok had no position or authority and the official policy in Hungary was very conservative.

The socialism of the Nazis and their persecution of the Jews led Bartok to compose *Contrasts* for clarinet, violin and piano for the clarinetist, Benny Goodman. Goodman was a Hungarian Jew whose name was originally Guttman. It is a super piece and it is widely reported that this work introduced Goodman to serious music. Hindemith wrote a concerto for him in 1947 and Copland did likewise in 1948. He was later to play the Mozart concerto with Barbirolli and he recorded it. It is a good performance even though it is a little dry.

Bartok began to collect all his manuscripts together planning to remove them from Hungary, which he did. He left for the USA in the autumn of 1940 arriving there on 30 October. He embarked on a concert tour and introducing his *Sonata for two pianos and percussion* in which the second pianist was his wife, Ditta. If he had called the work *Sonata for percussion* that would have been correct. It is a work of unequalled conviction with a vitality and rhythmic drive that so many envy. What a contrast it was to the slow-moving works of so many other composers who produced slabs of uneventful music.

He was made a honorary doctor of music with Columbia University. He was also given a grant to pursue his research into folk music.

But the strain was telling on him. Ill health prevented him giving lectures at Harvard in 1943 but he did complete the *Concerto for Orchestra* commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation at the kind suggestion of the great Fritz Reiner, whose recording of it is still the best by far, and written in memory of Natalie Koussevitzky. He composed his forty four *Duos for two violins*, the *Sonata for Menuhin* and began the glorious *Viola Concerto*.

He also wrote his lovely *Piano Concerto no. 3* in America which is a nostalgic look back at his hobbies with

nocturnal music and bird calls.

But poverty added to his burdens. It is said that over Christmas 1944 he literally had no money. His publishers have been blamed for this neglect but, eventually, ASCAP came to his aid.

He died at the West Side Hospital, New York on 26 September 1945. He had been suffering from leukaemia. Ditta and Peter were by his side.

The funeral was conducted by Rev Laurence I. Neale, minister of All Souls Unitarian Church. The internment was at New York's Woodlawn Cemetery but with the iron curtain being lifted, Peter Bartok, the lay president of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, had his father's remains transferred to Budapest in 1988. A statue of Bartok stands outside the Second Unitarian Church in Budapest.

There are so many others studies we could pursue about this composer. His six quartets are, without doubt, the finest string quartets ever written. They have never been equalled let alone surpassed and they never will be.

But that is a vast subject in itself.

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