

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Béla Bartók's place in musical history is unique since he represents no one school of music. At a time when the German traditions of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms were giving way to the Second Viennese School led by Arnold Schoenberg, Bartók stood alone. While his early music was fed by the Romantic traditions of Brahms and Wagner, it is his own unique exploration of folk music, dissonance, rhythmic vigor and color, and a sense of the spiritual that most govern his important work. In a 1905 letter to his mother, he said knowingly, "I prophesy, I have foreknowledge that this spiritual loneliness is to be my destiny." Despite that loneliness, he breathed new life into an old system without joining the Serialists who would themselves ultimately suffer a kind of isolation.

With his friend Zoltán Kodály, he compiled a collection of Hungarian folk songs, a project that absorbed him from 1905 to 1921. This exploration was to influence his music greatly, but a word must be said about that. While he ardently espoused Hungarian nationalism, he is also quoted in József Ujfalussy's 1971 biography as having said, "The composer does not use genuine peasant melodies, but devises instead something imitating a peasant melody." For Bartók the art lay in complex devising, not simple imitation.

Bartók's life was not a happy one. Usually outside the mainstream of the European avant-garde of his time, he emigrated to New York in 1940 to become a research fellow at Columbia University working on Serbo-Croatian music. For his last five years, precarious finances, a sense of alienation, and poor health plagued him. Serge Koussevitzky, one of his few champions, went to Bartók's hospital room to offer a much-needed check for \$500, which represented half the commission for the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Harvard, where he was to deliver a series of lectures but was too ill to do so, and later the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) sponsored medical examinations for Bartók after his weight sank to 87 pounds. He rallied enough to write the *Concerto for Orchestra* but, less than a year later, died of leukemia in New York's West Side Hospital.

Today Bartók's six string quartets are monuments of the 20th century repertoire. How terrific of the Artaria String Quartet to take them on!

The String Quartets

The string quartet spanned Bartók's works from the first one in 1908 to the sixth and last written in 1939. The second came in 1917, the third in 1927, the fourth in 1928, and the fifth in 1934. As Beethoven's quartets mark his so-called "periods," so do Bartók's quartets divide his compositional life into three periods, the first ending with the first quartet, the second with the fourth quartet, and the fifth and sixth quartets belonging to the third period. While the first period contained few references to folk music, the second was rich in them as well as in harmonic and rhythmic experimentation. The third period is a culmination of what came before but in sparer terms, not unlike the late works of Beethoven.

Like other composers, Bartók made his most intimate statements in the string quartet form as well as his most serious, inventive, and powerful. Today Bartók's string quartets are ranked with no less than those of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In the 20th century, only those of Schoenberg, Berg, Shostakovich and Carter approach Bartók's.

String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7

Lento

Allegretto

Allegro vivace

Bartók's String Quartet No. 1 is not only a herald of important things to come but also stands on its own as a monumental piece of music. From its poignant opening to the rhythmic power of its conclusion, the work bears marks of greatness. Its cohesiveness, inventiveness, and emotional impact are no less than astonishing.

The sadness of the opening statement, with its downward leaps, pervades the entire work. It is this pervasive sadness that caused Bartók to call the movement his "funeral dirge," a remark made to violinist Stefi Geyer at the end of their love affair that coincided with its composition. Bartók's friend Zoltán Kodály referred to the first quartet as "the return to life of a man who has reached the shores of nothingness." Certainly, this refers to the sense of struggle and hope that also marks the movement. The mounting tension that begins in this movement will persist to the end of the work.

Without interruption we are led into the second movement with a simple but effective four-note motto, again in downward leaps. A frantic intensity finds some relief in a poignant song, perhaps more of a

crying out than a singing. Were it not for its elegant compositional method—true sonata form—the movement could almost be called barbaric, a kind of civilized barbarism, if you will.

The *Allegro vivace* of the last movement slows for a moment to allow for a dramatic solo by the cello, but the movement continues with a sense of perpetual motion. The later Minimalists would learn much from this third movement of Bartók's first quartet. The repeated note reigns in the powerful conclusion with its Hungarian dance that is no simple folk tune. Subtle harmonic changes occur as the upper strings move from unison playing to astringent seconds. Astonishing dissonances occur before the work ends on three powerful chords.

The Waldbauer Quartet-Kerpely gave the first performance on March 19, 1910, in Budapest.

String Quartet No. 2, Op. 17

Moderato

Allegro molto capriccioso

Lento

Zoltán Kodály called the movements of Bartók's String Quartet No. 2 "A Quiet Life," "Joy," and "Sorrow." If assigning identifiable qualities helps in understanding the work's complexities, then presumably there is no harm done.

The title "Quiet Life" of the first movement *Moderato* might come from the fact that the work was written between 1915 and 1917 during a period when Bartók lived with his first wife Márta in virtual seclusion in a village outside of Budapest. The movement opens with the dissonance that would intrigue Bartók for the rest of compositional life. With Bartók, however, dissonance would not preclude lyricism as evidenced in this movement with its elusive song. Use of the musical motto is another Bartók imprint heard early in the movement. Mounting tension leads to a dramatic silence followed by a strong unison statement that evolves into a canon before the movement fades away. All this happens within a sonata form that one might associate with Mozart.

Despite its Kodály subtitle, "Joy," the second movement *Allegro molto capriccioso* is imposing in its ferociousness. The sense of perpetual motion caused by the unremitting use of repeated notes gives way to dramatic silences and even the suggestion of a strange waltz. The Hungarian folk music that Bartók so championed is imaginatively restated in a barbaric folk dance. Even a certain playfulness intervenes in this whirling movement that races to a conclusion, joyful or not.

"Sorrow" seems valid for the third movement *Lento*, but surely it is a universal sorrow motivated by the horrors of World War I that so affected Bartók. Once again, the three-note motto of the first movement is employed in a dirge-like funeral march. Despite the sparseness of the movement, rising tension and lyricism remain until the bleak plucking of the final notes.

The work was premiered on March 3, 1918 in Budapest by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet.

String Quartet No. 3

Prima parte

Seconda parte

Ricapitolazione della prima parte

Coda

Although Bartók suffered a certain rejection of his work during his lifetime, this String Quartet No. 3 was awarded first prize in 1928 in a competition for new chamber music sponsored by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia. By the time of its composition in 1927, Bartók had achieved a considerable worldwide status as both composer and pianist.

A surprisingly brief fifteen minutes in length and condensed into one continuous movement, the String Quartet No. 3 is still the most far-reaching of the six quartets in terms of forthright dissonance and harsh string sounds. To produce the strong and varied colors of the work, Bartók employed a myriad of special string techniques such as *col legno* (a striking of the string with the wood of the bow) and *sul ponticello* (bowing near the bridge). This is to say nothing of the multiple double stops (playing on two strings at once) that challenge the players.

With all this, the String Quartet No. 3 maintains a strict form related to Bartók's admiration for early Baroque music. Much has been said of his affinity for folk music, but we must always be reminded that his employment of it is done with the highest art. Along with his genius for form, we are left with his astonishing ability, particularly in this Quartet, to accomplish a singular and powerful emotional effect. As Theodor

Adorno said in his 1929 essay on the Third Quartet, “Hungarian types and German sonata are fused together in the white heat of impatient compositional effort; from them truly contemporary form is created.”

The Third Quartet’s first performances were by the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet in London on February 19, 1929 and two days later in Frankfurt by the Kolisch Quartet (né Vienna Quartet).

String Quartet No. 4

Allegro

Prestissimo, con sordino

Non troppo lento

Allegretto pizzicato

Allegro molto

Bartók thoroughly explores melody in the first movement of his String Quartet No. 4. His love of Hungarian folk tunes—thus his love of melody—pervades his music. It is treated in a complex modern musical language fully employed in the second movement with its dazzling display of tonal effects. Folk melody, however, returns in the central movement with its cello solo reflective of a Hungarian folk instrument related to the oboe or clarinet. Bird songs enter the middle section of the movement in what Bartók referred to as “night music.” The fourth and fifth movements are melodically related to the first and second and give to the whole Quartet the strict form that Bartók honored in his work.

The exquisite arc of the Quartet, with its fast outer movements clustered around the central slow movement, is a monumental achievement in cyclical writing in contemporary music. Transcending melody and form, however, is a spirituality that rivets us to the work. But it may have also caused Bartók to question his own Modernism.

“Mr. Nielsen, do you think my music is modern enough?” Béla Bartók is said to have asked Carl Nielsen in 1920. Whatever insecurities Bartók might have had on that score were probably based on his awareness of the traditional aspects of his music, namely melody and form, which we tend to forget because of the still challenging Modernism of its overall effect.

Dedicated to the Pro Arte Quartet, the String Quartet No. 4 was premiered by the Waldbauer Quartet on March 20, 1929, in Budapest.

String Quartet No. 5

Allegro

Adagio molto

Scherzo: Alla bulgarese

Andante

Finale: Allegro vivace

The String Quartet No. 5 of 1934 comes from the third and last period of Bartók’s work when he had accomplished the thorough exploration of his own personal style and had turned to a unique lyricism and an extension of Classical form. This is not to say that Bartók had relinquished his interest in dissonance, complex rhythms, and color. Folk music, too, remained one of his inspirations but as an integral part of his style, not mere quotation. In fact, it is the integration of all musical materials that is a distinguishing characteristic of Bartók’s string quartets and, in particular, the fifth quartet. For example, special string techniques—*sul ponticello* (near the bridge), *sulla tastiera* (by the fingerboard), *a punta d’arco* (at the point of the bow), *au talon* (at the end of the bow), and even *col legno* (with the back of bow) abound in the quartets but in a highly integrated way, not as “special effects.” As in the fourth Quartet, Bartók employs five movements.

The dramatic unison chords of the opening *Allegro* shatter like glass into complicated harmonic and rhythmic patterns, at times even suggesting jazz. Tension grows with the rising lines of a Hungarian dance à la Bartók. The whirling dance is interrupted by a return of the unison chords, creating almost a war between the vertical and the horizontal. The movement ends in unexpected consonance, and we find ourselves shocked by the traditional. Beneath all this lies sonata form with three main themes.

The resolution into unexpected assonance continues in the curious second movement with its odd trills over sustained notes by the cello. In a middle section of this movement we have another example of Bartók’s “night music” suggesting evening sounds of nature, fragmented though they are.

In the third movement *Scherzo*, Bartók is almost playful, though admittedly it is a playfulness steeped in counterpoint, propulsion, and unusual string techniques including the famous “Bartók pizzicato” where the string is plucked so hard that it snaps against the fingerboard causing a sharp wooden sound. Here, too, are

the imprints of folk music, almost Dvořák-like in their impact. If this is a happy Bartók, it is also a complex Bartók.

The fourth movement *Andante* again employs the special string techniques that lend such color to Bartók's music. They are many of the same techniques used in the third movement but infused with a fresh genius. As Bartók said, "I do not like to repeat a musical thought without changes." This movement also displays Bartók's use of the musical motto, here a five-note one. In this arena he is matched only by Beethoven. The movement concludes with sad lyricism where we hear the heart of Bartók before the music fades away.

Bartók further reveals his genius in the final movement with its breathtaking speed and propulsion. Here we have it all: a demanding fugue, dramatic unison playing juxtaposed to complex layers of sound, pitches that seem to stretch the player and the instrument, and a race to the end in downward loops. There is a bow to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and a folk tune gone awry in a breathless conclusion.

The fifth Quartet was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation and premiered in Washington, D.C. on April 8, 1934 by the Kolisch Quartet.

String Quartet No. 6

Mesto; Vivace

Mesto; Marcia

Mesto; Burletta

Mesto

All four movements of the String Quartet No. 6 include the marking *Mesto* (pensive, sad, melancholy) with the final movement bearing only that marking. The pervasive sadness of the work is both personal and universal, if one can make such separations in the case of Bartók. The tangible events that surround the composition of the Quartet No. 6 were the death of his mother in December of 1939, the imminent threat of World War II, and his departure from his native Hungary in 1940.

The String Quartet No. 6 employs four movements, the only one of the six to bear that Classical imprint. In addition to this honoring of form, the sixth Quartet is deeply personal and emotionally expressive in a most extraordinary way.

We will hear the sad viola song that opens the first movement again in the opening of the second movement. Here it is soon interrupted by powerful unison playing that evolves subtly into complicated harmonic and rhythmic patterns. Two themes are developed before Bartók offers a classic but unique recapitulation as the movement slips away.

After its sad and chilling opening, the second movement turns to what might be interpreted programmatically as a tortuous march to war in which the troops begin heroically but are soon threatened and wearied by its demands.

What may hint of the macabre in the second movement becomes a strident burlesque in the third movement. The grotesque humor turns to sad lyricism. We hear dark dissonance with Bartók's direction that the two violins play the same notes but with one a quarter tone flat.

Each *mesto* opening has its own special form of sadness, but the initial violin song of the last movement moves to tragedy. Striking chords seem like shouts of terror before the movement ends in what seems quiet despair.

The first performance was given by the Kolisch Quartet on January 20, 1941, in New York.

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