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MODERN MUSIC

ON THE ART OF BELA BARTOK

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BELA BARTOK is generally ranked as one of the most striking and original contemporary composers, but although he is so recognized throughout the musical world, his art fails to achieve proper appreciation and understanding. Its racial character has been the principal barrier to this desirable end. "Hungarian music" popularly refers to Liszt's rhapsodies and Brahms' dances. The enormous success of these hybrid works some sixty or seventy years ago, in the era of the discovery of national music, first presented to the musical world the idea of a specifically Hungarian art. The musical imperialism of Germany, Italy and France received its initial shock in the nineteenth century when Chopin re-created Polish music. Represented by Liszt and Brahms, Hungarian music followed; then came Smetana and Dvorak *with the Bohemian; Gade and Grieg with the Scan*dinavian; Borodin, Moussorgsky and Tchaikovsky with the Russian, and Sibelius with the Finnish.

The music of Hungary has passed through several stages since its introduction to the world. Liszt and Brahms, of course, presented us with the airs of the gypsies, members of a foreign race living in Hungary. It remained for the twentieth century to reveal that, besides the gypsy melodies, Hungary had a national, purely Magyar, peasant art quite different from the first and remarkable enough to excite interest in other countries.

The leader of the national Hungarian movement, Bela Bartok, has made it his life-work to uncover this truly primitive, aboriginal, Magyar music, to present it to the musical world and to the science of folk-lore. For two decades he has penetrated into the most remote corners of Hungary and also of its neighboring countries, Serbia, Croatia and Roumania, and collected thousands of characteristic songs and dance melodies, untouched by modern influence, never before transcribed, kept alive by the people for centuries. Even today the peasants of the Hungarian Puszta, the Tatra Mountains, the Carpathians and the Danube plains still maintain their primitive customs.

Bartok has made two uses of this peculiar and precious material. He has scientifically studied it from the viewpoint of the folklorist, and he has based his own personal art on this old idiom, deriving therefrom a melody and a rhythm, often something of its primitive harmony and quaint instrumental coloring.

To better understand Bartok's work, we must realize that it is his purpose to revivify the already exhausted, over-refined music of Europe with a transfusion of new blood from the peasant music of Hungary, which is still to be found in remote places. This amalgamative tendency has liberated him from the customary major and minor scales and from harmony. In their place he freely uses the medieval church modes and a pentatonic scale system, elements which predominate in the old Magyar music. Bartok is only "atonal" to the superficial ear. His mind is logical and severe, intent on order and on system, and the definite logic and tonality of his harmony are also obvious once its basis is clearly understood.

He employs novel melodic, rhythmic and harmonic materials not in the simple idiom of the modern folk-song, as Brahms did in his splendid arrangements of German melodies, but in a style which utilizes the most advanced forms of European musical art as developed by Debussy, Richard Strauss, Mahler and Schönberg. Although he adheres, on the whole, to a modern technique, he pursues a path which he feels is the only one that holds a promise for the future. Retaining many complex, modern technical devices, he is nevertheless impelled to depart from the artificial and over-refined methods of contemporary European

music. For pale and lifeless melodic material he substitutes something robust and youthful.

One cannot conceive a more vigorous reaction from Debussy's cultivated taste and refinement, the refinement of the luxurious city of Paris, than one finds in Bartok's "barbaric music." The *Allegro Barbaro** for piano is typical of his predilection for the primitive as opposed to aristocratic intellectualism and to esthetic super-refinement. It is this harsh and cruel sound, this savage fury in Bartok's music which most offends the average listener. In some of his latest works, the *Second Violin Sonata* and the *Piano Concerto,* for example, he seems to have gone too far in this direction for even his most sympathetic audiences.

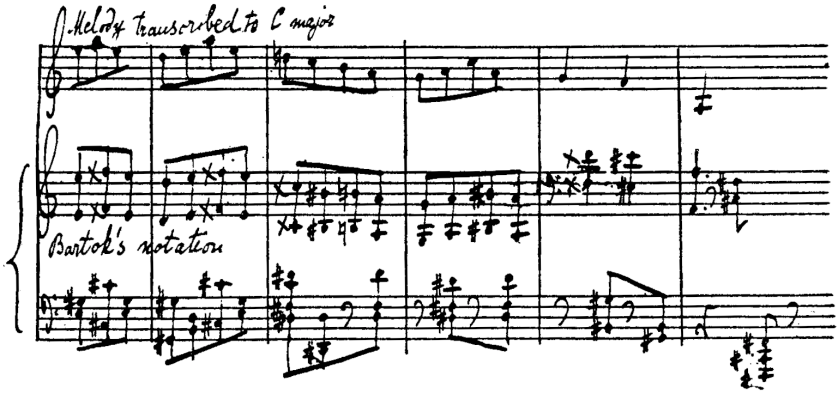
Limitations of space prevent an extended consideration of all the strange and interesting features of Bartok's art. However, a few details may be selected to elucidate his peculiar and, to most listeners, unintelligible practices. The *Allegro Barbaro* for piano will furnish material for my first illustration. This work, simple by comparison with Schönberg's piano pieces, is nevertheless a puzzle to the performer who wants to grasp what he is playing, not through its simple melody and primitive rhythm but through its strange harmony. For the left-hand accompaniment, with its clearly defined F♯ minor, C♯, G♯ etc., is in apparent contradiction to the right-hand melody in entirely different and not easily identified keys. "Polytonality" offers no satisfactory explanation and leaves unanswered the question of what law rules the combination of these different and partly unintelligible scales.

An added complication arises because Bartok, like Schönberg, completely alters the aspect of a quite simple tonal melody through the frequent use of enharmonic changes, apparently inexplicable except as the survival of the habit of constructing a coherence between the right and left hands, even if it is apparent only to the eye. This is a vestigial respect for the old unit of tonality, which in reality no longer exists here.

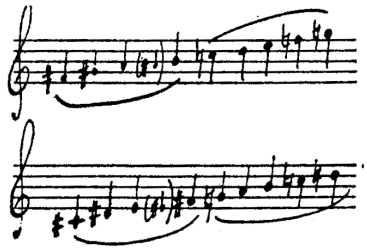
Thus, instead of writing the melody of the first two pages in C major, without any accidentals, Bartok distorts the appearance of this simple air by strange sharps and double-sharps which serve

*Published, like all of Bartok's works, by the Universal Edition, Vienna.

as an excuse, a *rapprochement* with the left-hand harmony and its numerous sharps.



To find a solution for all the harmonic difficulties of this work, we must discover its real tonality, its scale, which is a compound of C major and F♯ minor-major, plus the same scale a fifth higher, G major and C♯ minor-major. This strange gamut, so far without a name, is as follows: F♯, C♯, A or A♯, B, C, D, E, F, G; and its transposition a fifth higher, C♯, D♯, E or E♯, F♯ and G, A, B, C, D.



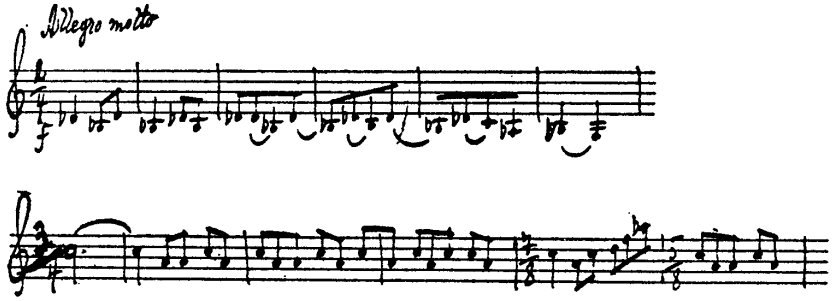
It has the following peculiarities: there are nine, sometimes even ten different tones instead of seven; the last two tones are chromatic lowerings of the first two, F♯ and G♯ at the beginning, F♮ and G♮ at the close; C♯ and D♯ at the beginning, C♮ and D♮ at the close.

This apparently fantastic scale, presenting the same notes sometimes natural, sometimes sharpened, appears less fantastic when we remember that Asiatic music employs similar scales. The Magyars came to Europe from Asia as late as 1000 A. D. Armenian music and certain Arab maqams have exactly the same characteristics. Combining the two scales, starting with F♯ and C♯, we see that they actually contain all the twelve chromatic half-tones of our European system. One of them alone contains no fewer than ten different tones, only two less than our chromatic scale and three more than our diatonic. The harmonic possibilities of this ten-tone gamut, with its sharp and natural often coinciding in the right and left hand, are demonstrated in the *Allegro*

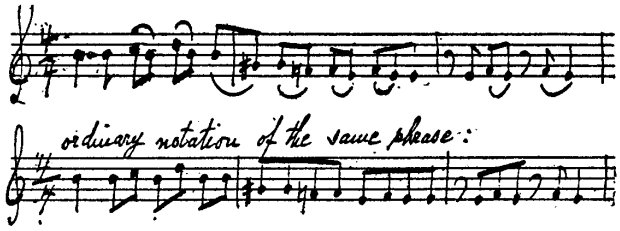
Barbaro of Bartok. This work is built on the ten-tone scale, starting with C♯ and F♯, the right hand containing what we call C major, the left hand the sharpened tones of either one or the other scale—C♯ minor, according to our terminology. The simultaneous playing of C major and C♯ minor is thus logical and legitimate.

■

Rhythm is important in Bartok's music to an extent far more basic than the rhythmical effects achieved by most composers. Bartok's procedure has hardly any relation to jazz. His variety is derived from the surprisingly rich rhythmical practices of Eastern folk-music. Ostinato rhythms, familiar enough in Russian music, abound in Bartok's. They remind us how primitive his musical system is; yet how clever is his invention, how delightful the absence of monotony. The *Dance Suite* for orchestra, which had an international success two years ago, is especially rich in subtle and effective rhythms, as for example, in the following variations of ostinato figures taken from Number Two:

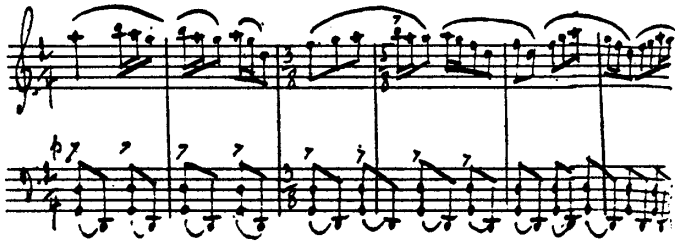


Irregular subdivisions of the bar produce the capricious and charming variation of 4/4 time given below; compare the ordinary notation of the same phrase:



The following quotation from the *Dance Suite* shows the peculiar effect of frequent changes in time in the right hand, with the left

hand in persistent 2/4 time. The extraordinary and fascinating feature of this example is to be found in the irregular play of accents.



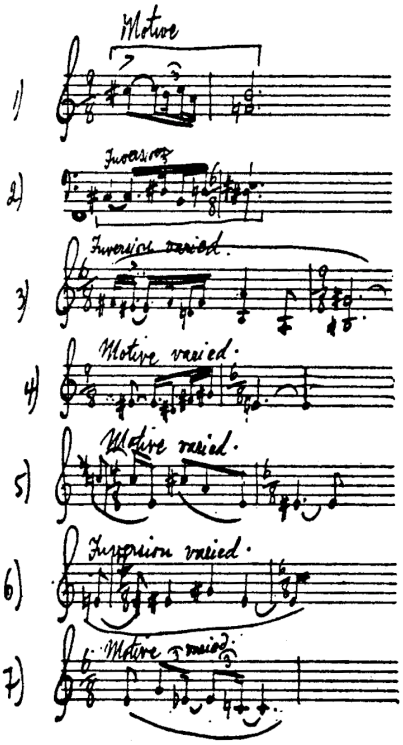
Another difficulty in Bartok's music is the character of his melody. In his later instrumental works he employs a type entirely unfamiliar to most listeners. Melody, as generally understood, is derived from singing or is more or less related to song. While Bartok makes use of such vocal melody in his numerous transcriptions of folk music, his instrumental compositions are often derived from the fantastic improvisations on flute or fiddle of Hungarian and Roumanian shepherds and village musicians. The *Hirtenweise* of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is a universally known prototype of this sort of instrumental melody. However the *Hirtenweise* is simple and primitive compared with the fantastic effusions of rustic musicians in Eastern Europe, whose art is more Asiatic than European. Characteristic traits are the ornamental arabesques, rapid passage work, trills, leaps into strange intervals, unsymmetric construction, irregular bar-formation, frequent changes of time and tempo, quick and slow motion suddenly juxtaposed.

The proper way to play these rhapsodic fantasies can hardly be transmitted by the printed notes. In fact, only musicians of Eastern descent know how to make these florid figures live.

On this variety of melody is based the *Second Violin Sonata.* Its unfamiliar beauty eludes most listeners; they do not comprehend its characteristic, expressive and telling accents, do not perceive its delicate contours, its finely wrought form. The ear as well as the eye must be sharp to grasp these details, which combine to give effect to the whole structure. The first page of the sonata puzzles even those musicians who are well versed in the peculiarities of modern music. The traditional type of sonata-theme is absent. The violin plays a fantastic arabesque, of the kind de-

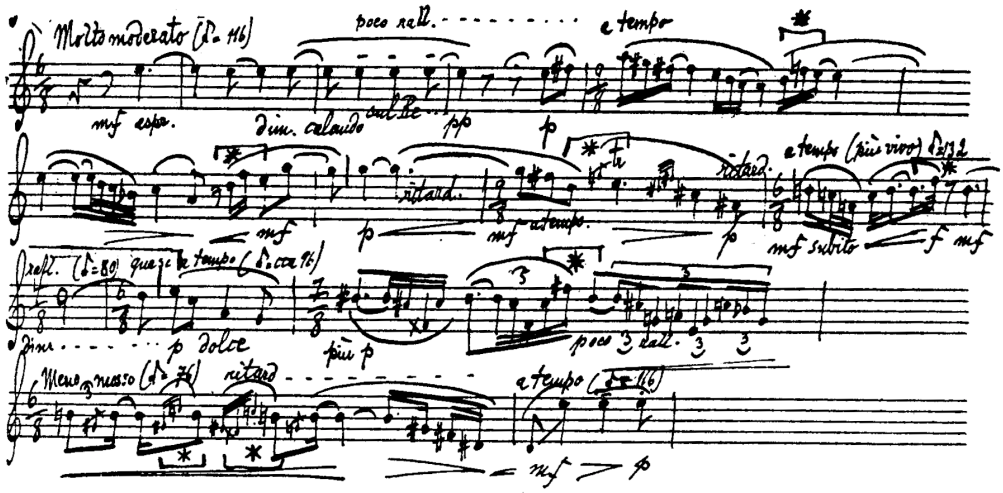
scribed above, the piano accompanies in a curious style, hardly coherent at the first hearing and apparently not in harmony with the violin part. Yet close inspection, patient analysis and frequent repetition of the phrases will reward the observer with the secret of the art and beauty in this work.

The piano part is a set of seven variations on a motive of four, sometimes five notes. The following quotation shows these seven variations, occupying nine measures in their melodic lines, apart from the harmonization. That they are variations of the same motive can be demonstrated by playing them slowly and expressively.



The violinist in the meantime must rely on himself, as he does not get the least support from the piano accompaniment other than opposition from the just mentioned melodic series of seven phrases.

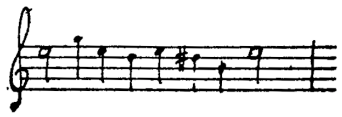
To show the subtlety and the complexity of the violin melody in this passage, it is reproduced here, with all its changes of time and of tempo, and with Bartok's minute expression marks:



The motive of the piano accompaniment is heard for the first time in the fifth measure of the violin melody, which may be

called a most unconventional and original "sonata-theme." To feel the beauty of this rhapsodic fantasy is easier than to recognize the law governing its construction. There is no song-like symmetry in it, no dance-like rhythm. Unsymmetrical construction and irregular rhythms characterize the melodic line.

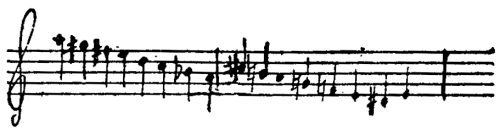
The fourteen measures are composed of 4+2+4+4 measures. The first section, of four bars, is an introduction, dwelling on the constantly repeated tone E, relieving its monotony by dynamic changes, *espressivo, diminuendo* from *mezzoforte* to *pianissimo,* by *rallentando.* In the three succeeding sections, the principle of melodic construction consists of encircling the important central tone by a coloratura of auxiliary tones, above and below. Thus in bars four to six, the central tone is E; in bars six to eight, G; in bars nine and ten, D. In bar twelve it is D♯ and in the last two bars, B. The two solid pillars of the melody are:



The rest is ornamentation, wreaths of flowers and foliage swinging from one pillar to the other.

These ornamental notes are finely balanced: rising figures correspond to descending; chromatically altered notes answer unaltered diatonic notes; certain motives, in slightly varied forms, recur again and again. Thus the group of three notes, D, F, E, is a fixed point, acting somewhat like the tonic or dominant in our modern scales, giving coherence and firmness to the otherwise vagrant figures. In the second example on page 9, this group occurs four times, in bars five, six, eight, and nine to eleven; the places are marked by an asterisk. In transpositions, however, it is also found three times: in bar twelve as C♯, F♯, D♯ and twice in bar thirteen as G♯, C, B.

For the tonality of this mood our musical terminology has no name. It is clearly defined however and may be made perceptible to the eye and ear by a combination of the two following descending scales:



The result is a mixed tonality embracing all twelve different chromatic tones, which explains the peculiarities of this puzzling

passage. Only A and E are common to both scales; they may therefore be considered the two principal tones, the tonic and dominant of each one taken separately as well as of the combined scale. As to the other tones of the scale, the natural and the chromatically sharpened or flattened ones consistently parallel each other thus:

G♯ F♯ D♮ C♮ B♭ in the first scale
G♮ F♮ D♯ C♯ B♮ in the second scale.

This construction of the mixed scale explains why the chromatically altered tones answer the corresponding natural, unaltered tones in Bartok's melody. It also clarifies the tonal construction of the piano part and the combined harmony of the violin and piano parts with the strange simultaneous sounding of B♭ and B♮ (bars six and thirteen); D♯ and D♮ (bar nine), etc.

In the second illustration on page 10, the two common principal tones are not used alike in both scales. In the first, A occurs twice and E only once; in the second, E twice and A once. We may therefore conclude that in the first scale A is the principal tone, and in the second, B. Both scales belong to the complex of A tonalities which may be very numerous. In their mutual relation they produce a result similar to what are known as the authentic and plagal scales of old Greek and medieval church music.

It is interesting to meet these ancient usages in the rustic Hungarian music of the twentieth century. They bear witness to the antiquity of this art, and as applied by Bartok, they also point to the future, giving us a striking example of the indestructibility of certain musical facts, especially tonality, serving indeed as one more strong argument against the concept of atonality.