

BARTOK AND THE HUNGARIAN FOLK-SONG

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THE Hungarian master, Bela Bartok, for several decades has explored the popular rural music of his country and of the adjacent nations—the Slovakian, Roumanian, Servian, Croatian, Greek, etc.—with such penetration, thoroughness and enthusiasm, that he has become the leading authority on all questions pertaining to their folk-songs. His own art as a composer in the course of time has drawn more and more exclusively on this inexhaustible, fascinating source of native melodic material. Some critics even consider his original work, masterly and valuable as it is, secondary to his admirable art in arranging and accompanying the popular tunes of the Hungarian peasant.

To his prolific output in this field he has recently added a collection of twenty Hungarian folk-songs* for solo-voice and piano. These songs have so many charming, expressive, fantastic and novel traits, that they deserve the attention of progressive musicians. And their strangeness and complexity invite some sort of commentary to explain their structure and also the characteristic methods employed in the piano accompaniment.

Among the numerous collections of folk-songs so arranged, this one of Bartok's occupies a unique position. Its aim is not to find the simplest and the most direct solution of the problem, but, on the contrary, the most unexpected, interesting and complex manner of accompanying the popular tune. Many of these songs certainly fail to establish a true proportion between the primitive melodies and the highly evolved piano-part. The classical solution of the problem of folk-song accompaniment in an art style was established by Johannes Brahms in his extensive collection of fifty-five German folk songs, where the melody and piano part, in perfect equilibrium, form a harmonious unit.

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In Bartok's arrangement the piano preponderates to such a degree that some of the accompaniments by their virtuosity and brilliance of treatment may claim the rank of concert-études. Even the simplest of these pieces is full of oddities and harmonic complexities. Not one in the least resembles what the average musician considers a "natural," straightforward harmonization of the melody in question. The ultra-modern harmonic devices in the piano-part contrast so sharply with the antique character of the song melodies that it is doubtful whether Bartok's version will help make these very beautiful and characteristic peasant songs popular in the musical world; only a singer who is a thorough musician can maintain the vocal line against piano chords frequently quite disharmonic.

Yet despite these drawbacks there is a strange fascination in Bartok's arrangements, and the complete effect compensates for the difficulties imposed. The Hungarian melodies themselves are transcribed by Bartok in the usual notation with utmost fidelity. These genuine peasant songs of course must not be confounded with the gypsy melodies made popular through the works of Liszt and Brahms; they differ in tonality, scale, rhythm and expression. Almost all are what the Germans call "strophenglieder," i.e. the same melody is repeated to every stanza of the text. The Hungarian melodies, however, are distinguished from the neat, evenly cut German folk-songs by their lack of order and their rhapsodic nature. The same melody may recur four or five times, but every time in a different rhythmical garb; notes long the first time, are short afterwards, or a melodic phrase in 4:4 time is changed into 3:4 or 5:4 at the repetition. This change of rhythm and time is often obviously influenced by the words; its purpose is to express the emotional content most vividly; often however it seems merely the indication of a habit of unexpected, fitful variation or improvisation. Hungarian peasant songs, as a rule, are not written in a definite, regular time from start to finish. As regards their extension, they conform only occasionally to the familiar eight-bar pattern of regular melody, delighting rather in unsymmetrical construction, lengthening or shortening of the eight-bar phrase, three, five, or seven-bar construction. The ancient church-modes either

in pure or modified form are manifest in most of them, and signify the old age of the songs, or at least of the musical tradition.

Number 1. *In Prison.*

The melody is repeated five times, occupying the space of eight, nine, seven, four, seven measures respectively. Its scale is Doric transposed, i.e. a minor scale with major sixth and minor seventh: E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D, E.

Bartok employs a new formula of accompaniment for every one of the five stanzas, thus writing a set of five variations accompanying essentially the same melody. A pentatonic figure, (B, D, E, G, A, B) sounding successively and simultaneously, at once forms the motive of accompaniment in the first and second verses, in the manner of an ostinato phrase, constantly repeated.



A new ostinato formula makes its appearance at the third repetition of the melody, striking in its cross-relations (A and D# in the vocal part, A# and D# in the piano-part) and in the rhythmical juxtaposition of 3:2 time in the melody against 4:4 time in the accompaniment:



Toward the end of the fourth verse the piano reaches the climax of the entire piece in an effective crescendo before returning to the pentatonic cluster of the very beginning, now in pianissimo and transposed a tone lower; an effect like the blended chiming of distant bells.

Number 2. *Song of Sadness.*

A melancholy melody in a scale approaching the Dorian, though not entirely identical with it, comprising only a hexachord, B $\natural$ in ascending, being changed into B $\flat$ descending: F, G, A $\flat$, B $\natural$, C, B $\flat$, G, F. The accompaniment of the first verse is extremely primitive, consisting merely of a sustained chord, into which its neighbouring tones are sounded, producing a queer dissonant effect, like a sigh.



The second half of the song is accompanied in a different manner, opposing to the melody in the scale cited above a counter-melody in a totally different tonality. This phrase with its C $\sharp$, D $\sharp$, E, F $\sharp$, though continually contradicting the C $\natural$, D $\natural$, F $\natural$, of the melody, manages to create an interesting and pleasing effect; it is an instructive and masterly example of polytonality.

Number 3. *The Fugitive.*

The melody, in the mixolydian scale (E $\flat$, F, G, A $\flat$, B $\flat$, C, D $\flat$, E $\flat$), is varied in the last verse by the alteration of G into G $\flat$, thus introducing the Phrygian scale. The piano-part contains three entirely different sections, accompanying the three verses of the song. In the last verse a fine climax is brought about by a few full, heavy and strangely sounding chords, and the descent from this climax in a long diminuendo and an expressive melodic line is very beautiful. The whole idea of the accompaniment is entirely unconventional. Instead of pursuing the shortest and most convenient path, it chooses a round-about way, offering some unexpectedly fine vistas.

Number 4. *Shepherd Song.*

Written in what may be called a plagal Lydian scale, transposed a half-tone upwards, F to E; an E major scale starting with A and finishing on E, running as follows: A, B, C $\sharp$, D $\sharp$, E, D $\sharp$, C $\sharp$, B, A, G $\sharp$, E. The effect is something like a super-major, an intensified major, as in the Lydian scale with its major

third, augmented fourth. The tone $F\sharp$ is entirely lacking in the melody; it does not occur even once. Bartok's accompaniment is like an ingenious study in the symphonic development of a motive. The little triplet-figure indicated in the following quotation, constantly dominates:



In the first stanza it returns every second bar in the bass, starting a tone higher each time. In the second stanza it is employed in a more vivid dialogue between top voice and lower voice, in the upper voice in inversion, ascending. A most effective climax is reached at the end of the second stanza. The triplet-figure with its rough, rural, savage sound is evocative of the wide plains of Hungary and the mooing of cattle. The third stanza is accompanied in a simpler manner, by a chain of long, held chords of powerful effect. It is interesting to note that these chords do not at all coincide with the notes of the melody quoted above, but rather contradict them by emphasizing those tones which the melody does not contain,— $F\sharp$, $B\flat$, $G\sharp$, $D\sharp$. Nevertheless the piano-part and the voice fit together admirably. This is one of Bartok's most masterful achievements, all the more effective by its comparative simplicity.

Numbers 5 to 8 are dance-songs. All four are extremely troublesome and complicated in the piano-part. For those patient enough and able to grapple successfully with the difficulties presented here, the clever and ingenious ideas of the virtuoso Bartok will be a source of pleasure.

Number 5. *Lassù*.

This slow dance (from the vicinity of the town of Székely) has a grave, stately melody in the Phrygian mode: F , $G\flat$, $A\flat$, $B\flat$, C , $D\flat$, $E\flat$, F . There is a fourteen bar melody, six plus eight bars. The piano-part is rich in harmony, full of surprising, though strictly logical chord-connections. The grandiose swing and pompous sound of these interesting and exquisite harmonies seem however a little incongruous with the plain words of the text, the soliloquy of a young peasant in love.

Number 6. *Friss*, a fast dance from Székely.

A melody of three times eight bars and a coda of five bars. The third stanza is transposed a minor third higher, thus obtaining for the accompaniment new harmonic possibilities in a new tonality. The tonality is modified Dorian, with raised fourth: D, E, F, G $\sharp$, A, B, C, D. Bartok's piano-part with its reiterated open-fifth bass, its clashing discords in the right hand, its sforzato accents irregularly mixed in, the little gliding chromatic phrase in sixteenth notes answering a similar phrase of the vocal part whenever it occurs: all these combine to enhance the song by something fierce, savage and rustic.



The melody of the first two stanzas remains unchanged; the harmony however is cleverly varied, the first stanza being founded on the fifth D - A, the second stanza on G - D. The last stanza, transposed a third higher, is accompanied very effectively with more display of harmonic art than in the primitive manner of the first part.

Number 7. *Swineherd's Dance*.

This primitive song, of the type of the carillon melodies, is based on only four notes, a tetrachord: C, D, F, G, immediately repeated a fifth lower: F, G, B $\flat$, C. Every stanza is also transposed to a different key. The accompaniment with its trills, appoggiaturas, quick leaps, sudden runs, requires a virtuoso, especially as, according to Bartok's prescription, the six pages of music are to be whirled through in one minute and thirty-seven seconds.

Number 8. *Six-Gulden-Dance*.

This brilliant piece is likewise possible only to the virtuoso. The piano-part, suggestive of the tinkling of silver coins, with

its tricky appoggiaturas, its rolling, quick passages, its complicated symphonic interludes, its tempestuous swing and speed of tempo, its abundance of fine pianistic effects might well serve as a concert étude. Accompanying, however, a very plain, rural melody, four times three bars, in the Dorian mood: D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D, it, too, seems rather arbitrary in character.

Number 9. *The Shepherd.*

To a very simple G minor melody the great art of symphonic working-out and variation is applied. A rousing climax is obtained by making the melody enter a tone higher every time it returns. Thus the five stanzas of the melody are written in the keys of G minor, A $\flat$ minor, B $\flat$ minor, C $\sharp$ minor, with a return to G minor at the close. With each of these variations there is a progressive increase in speed, agitation, power and intensity, until at the close of the fourth stanza a highly impressive fortissimo is reached. After a long pause the tempo primo is brought back suddenly in the original key of G minor, in a very impressive, touching little coda. Bartok's accompaniment does not once agree with the well defined varying tonalities of the melody. With amazing skill he has avoided just those notes characteristic of the melody in his piano-part. Thus, in the G minor melody of the coda, the piano does not strike the G minor chord a single time, but rests on the double organ-point of the seventh, C $\sharp$ - B $\flat$ (contradicting the C $\sharp$ and B $\flat$ of the melody) all the time. In the fourth stanza the melody in C $\sharp$ minor is accompanied by a piano-part tending towards F $\sharp$ minor, and the A $\flat$ minor of the second stanza is accompanied by anything but A $\flat$ minor in the piano.

Number 10. *Humorous Song.*

In plan and treatment this is quite similar to Number 9, though it is simpler in style, easier to comprehend and to perform. A plain theme (in the transposed Dorian scale starting in B $\flat$) followed by five variations in changing keys: F $\sharp$, D, A, E $\flat$, B $\flat$. A charming song, less puzzling than most of the other numbers.

Number 11. *Nuptial Serenade.*

This song has a pleasing popular melody, and, what is rare,

is in plain major. The piano-part is a series of variations, corresponding in color to the words of the text. The little prelude paints the tinkling of the bells on the harness of the running horse. This piece also has its peculiar pianistic difficulties. The last stanza is reproduced here, as a sample of Bartok's characteristic methods. The A major melody is accompanied by a symphonic intertwining of four parts, whose tonality it is impossible to define, so constantly does it shift. It may however be said that the piano-part is certainly *not* in A major. It is constructed very logically, making effective use of the old harmonic device of a chain of successive dominant-seventh chords, passing through the keys E, A, D, G, C, F, B $\flat$, E $\flat$ in the circle of fifths. Note the chromatically descending top and middle voice and the harsh dissonances in the fifth measure: E $\flat$ in the vocal part, E $\flat$ in the piano-part.



Number 12 is a humorous song, with a droll melody, whose accompaniment is merry; well sung and played, this piece has an irresistibly comic effect, especially in the rustic interludes. In its peculiar rough humor it is reminiscent of certain Moussorgsky songs.

Number 13. *Dialogue Song*.

A slow song, adagio. The dialogue of an aged couple, the old man imploring his wife not to leave him in sickness and distress, the old woman assuring him of her devotion. The piano-part with its extremely modern harmony, its fine part-writing, its characteristic color, its profound emotion, is a splendid example of modern writing at its best. The elaboration however is excessive and in contrast to the touching and very plain melody. The two widely differing components do not seem reconciled finally and fail to form a unit.

Number 14. *Lament.*

This is much simpler, much more in the style of a folk-song. The mixolydian scale, with its major third, major sixth and minor seventh (F#, G#, A#, B, C#, D#, E, F#), though decidedly suggestive of a major tonality, is tinged with melancholy through the lowered seventh (E♭ instead of E#), and this plainness is emphasized by the second half of the melody, written in F# minor pure (A♭ instead of A#), and by the beautiful accompaniment, with its softly wailing tone. The piano-part is shaped here by a master's hand; nothing superfluous disturbs its quiet flow, its impressive contours; every single note stands in its place precisely, has its full expressive value. The second stanza of the melody is accompanied by entirely new music, but written with great skill so that it seems a fitting continuation of the first stanza.

Number 15. *Drinking Song.*

The melody, with its mixolydian scale, its construction of four times three bars, its strong accents at the close of every three-bar phrase, its tempo rubato has the genuine Magyar ring:



The accompaniment opens in grave and stately fashion; the second stanza however expresses the growing hilarity of the drinker in a dramatic monologue, leading to a powerful climax that almost exceeds the limits of folk-song, transgressing into opera. Nevertheless, the technic of composition displayed here is admirable, and no less masterly is the coda with its free change of tempo, its thematic dialogue between voice and piano, its second climax. Here also one is reminded of Moussorgsky.

Number 16 to 20. *Songs of Youth.*

These form a continuous whole in five separate sections. In general they are treated more simply than the rest of the collection.

Number 16, with its melody in the Dorian mode, is the song of a young man ordered to join his regiment, who is at the point of taking leave. The simple but very effective piano-part suggests military drum signals by the tremolo accompaniment. Certain energetic rhythmical figures of the melody are continued in the piano, thus giving a unit to the vocal and instrumental parts. The second half rises to a powerful climax through a combination of tremoli in the right hand and a broad chain of syncopated bass tones in octaves.

Number 17, also in the Dorian mode, is treated in a very dense contrapuntal style, reminiscent of old Dutch motets. The piano takes its motive from the melody, inverting it and continuing in close imitation: strict part-writing.

Number 18, in the Aeolian mode, the so-called pure minor, has the piano-part distinguished by a severe architectural construction, with more primitive harmonic traits and chord-repetition. The rhythm of the melody also dominates the piano-part. In the second half an interesting counter-melody considerably enhances the effect.

Number 19, in the Mixolydian mode, is the shortest song in the entire collection. It can hardly stand alone, but makes its pretty effect within the series, as a little intermezzo between Numbers 18 and 20.

Number 20. Also in the Mixolydian mode. The piano-accompaniment is at the same time severe and primitive. The first half of the song is accompanied merely by an ascending chromatic scale in whole notes, in the middle between a double organ-point in octaves in the discant and bass. The scale-motive in various forms also seems to dominate the rest of the piano-part. A fine climax is reached shortly before the end, and an effective diminuendo brings it to a fitting close.