

# *“Every phrase is imbued with a vivid shape”*

Zoltán Kodály

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Bartók’s music is no longer a closed book for audiences and critics alike, as it was just ten years ago, but few people are capable of following him on his journey of self-discovery, which began with using old methods and styles and ended in an entirely new, unique form of music. Even his former opponents are forced to recognise the richness of his inventiveness, the individual colour of his orchestra, the primordial connection between his colours and thoughts and the strictly organic coherence of his intellectual world. He could not be confined to any particular branch of “modern music”, neither in the colourful mixed style of old and new, nor in the chaotic anarchy of semi- and pseudo-talents.

With its entirely individual manner of uniting the extremely primitive with a highly developed culture, Bartók’s musical personality becomes unique. His music is a uniform, self-contained organism whose substance is almost completely free of mimicry or imitations. It has antecedents, of course, but the relationship with them does not manifest itself externally: the spirit of the sublime music of the past lives on within him, in everything that stands the test of time, that is of lasting value. This notwithstanding, in everyday musical education, the developments resulting from Bartók’s connection with folk music form the most challenging component of his compositions.

Recently, folk art has often been presented as an incomplete remnant of a former stage of art. Although there are indeed many remnants of older music in folk music, we need to dig deeper than that. Its true value lies in everything that it has retained from the original music and in everything for which it is a stimulating role model: the expression of emotion that is devoid of all formulas, unrestricted by any schema and therefore immensely intense; the free, uninhibited language of the soul. Those who are unfamiliar with this folk music (and how few people really are familiar with it!) are unable to recognise it in Bartók’s music as well and only sense something very foreign for which there are no analogies, neither in universal art music nor in the Hungarian music experienced to date.

The pioneers of Hungarian music in the 1840s followed and developed the traditions of their immediate antecedents, which were the bloodless song

literature from the beginning of the century and gypsy dance music. Their development was influenced here and there from the bottom up by elements from this older layer, which infiltrated the music like scattered rocks in the fens and led to a rekindling of Hungarian music, which then returned to the abruptly abandoned thread of tradition from an older, more primitive point in time.

It is understandable that those who consider the style of several hundred songs composed around 1850 to be the sole Hungarian style do not feel that this new music is Hungarian. These songs are semi-amateurish literature and, while not completely worthless as such, the Hungarian elements in them are so superficial and tainted with such an atmosphere of gypsy music and wine, not to mention the reek of taverns, that the door to higher art must remain closed to them.

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This new Hungarian music gave birth to a new Hungarian feeling, the pure virgin atmosphere of a more profoundly rooted, fresh sense of being Hungarian – comparable to the smell of the spruce forests in Székely Land, which had preserved some elements of the hugely powerful stream of life which used to flow through the whole country. Bartók's music also grew out of this stream of life, and as a result of the volcanic work of an extraordinarily creative force it unfolded into an endlessly expressive and yet solidly designed language of emotions which is unrivalled in our times. This was no longer the “comrades-in-drink” sentiment that prevailed among the Hungarian gentry at the time of the oppression, nor was it Kossuth's alarm call, nor the nostalgic complaints of the kurucs, nor was it merely a part of being Hungarian. It was everything together, a complex, profoundly tragic feeling of being Hungarian but bathed in the light of the world, with the self-confidence of the former conquerors and a wild, vital energy that defied the present-day misery. Such music is in its true element when combined with drama. The music itself was ready for this, but a path that was as yet untrodden had to be pursued in order to shape the vocal sounds.

The operatic tradition in Hungary had given rise to a peculiar form of musical declamation because the programme consisted primarily of translated works, and even the writers of original operas were unable to rid themselves of this fact. It was almost seen as a rule that linguistic accents and musical accents should continually battle against one other. The music was usually the winner, and the listeners – primarily aristocrats and wealthy, German-speaking citizens – tolerated the mangling of the Hungarian language for two generations as their intuitive feeling for the language did not rebel against it. In recent years, new artistic translations have brought about a considerable improvement, but even the best translation remains a translation, and it is forced to remain incomplete if it follows a melodic line that has been written for a different language. It is possible that even today's opera audiences do not yet really appreciate the moments in which the Hungarian language really achieves independence, when it stands on its own two feet, moving about without any help at all – or even attempting to fly!

This path towards the liberation of the language, towards the heightening of its natural inflection to become part of the music, was trodden by Bartók and the development of the Hungarian recitative style thus took a huge step forward. *Bluebeard's Castle* is the first work for the Hungarian opera stage in which the voice part speaks to us from the beginning to the end in consistently fluent Hungarian.

This setting, in which every word and every phrase is imbued with a vivid shape, illuminates even the tiniest linguistic imperfection. The fact that these even exist in Balázs' text could be a source of serious dissent, but it is not mentioned by his exacting critics. Their unreasoned and yet almost unanimously disparaging verdict creates the impression that very high standards are expected of opera texts in our country. Yet our writers do not consider the libretto to be a serious artistic genre. They forget that in the heyday of the opera, the text was also a separate commission. It is therefore all the more noticeable when an opera text is written by a poet or even a playwright. Béla Balázs therefore deserves particular credit for believing that one of his most beautiful, most poetic conceptions was not too good for an opera text, thereby contributing towards the creation of a magnificent work. Although his "uneventful" text lacks any kind of customary operatic pattern, the way in which he breaks open the husk of the old fairy tale and reveals the eternal insolvability of the frictions between men and women fills the listener with tragic tension and is captivating from start to finish. The superficial way in which he leaves it up to the music to fill the contours with life enables the text to merge organically with the music to the highest possible degree. Neither the drama nor the music are forced to deny their separate existence, but they combine to form a unit on a higher level. This unit is not only

undisturbed by the symphonic structure of the music, it is elevated even further. The curve of the drama and the parallel curve of the music strengthen and shape each other to form a huge double rainbow.

The constructive power of this music is shown to even greater advantage in The Wooden Prince. The playful, flexible Allegro contrast in the ballet balances out the dismal Adagio of the opera and the two works fit together like two movements of a huge symphony. Those who maintain that atonality is Bartók's main characteristic should take note once and for all that both works have recurring tonics, just as one would find in any of Mozart's operas.

The performance was one of the best of the entire year. Conductor Tango had already proven in the previous year that you do not necessarily have to be twenty years old and Hungarian in order to understand new Hungarian music. There are keys to every new art. These are talent, an unhesitating capacity to absorb new things and technical ability. At the ballet's performance last year it was perhaps the first time that an honest artist approached an honest work without the "shoulder-patting" attitude that is customary among conductors, and Bartók's music might have sounded for the first time as it was intended to sound. Now this "miracle" has been repeated, and every time this happens an increasing number of people are sure to discover that this music is not actually all that difficult to understand after all.



## BÉLA BARTÓK – WAY AND WORK

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