

“Webern depicts the soul, but there is still something physical about Bartók”

Wolfgang Schaufler

What characterises Béla Bartók as a person?

Eötvös: Bartók is a yardstick, not just as an artist, but in his moral stance as well. He was a citizen of the world, comparable to a world tree that is rooted in its native land but spreads its branches out over the whole earth. Bartók may be taken as a role model for anything connected with fraternity, openness or clean thinking.

He was a modern man of his times. I have a photo from 1927 showing Bartók with Walter Gropius and Paul Klee in Dessau, probably in the garden of the Bauhaus Building. In those days, the Hungarian peasant furniture in his apartment was considered modern. The natural connection and unity of his native land with the big, wide world is characteristic of Bartók.

What characterises Béla Bartók as a composer?

Eötvös: He was not avant-garde in his day in the sense of the term favoured throughout Western Europe in the 20th century. After the Second World War, the West gradually discovered that there was a different, Eastern European avant-garde with representatives such as Bartók and Janáček, or the Russians who remained in their home country: Shostakovich and Prokofiev.

Bartók's range of expression is very broad, extending from extremely sensitive to wild, energetic and boisterous. Take, for example, the perfection displayed in the first movement of his Music for String Instruments, Percussion and Celesta, which is as vivid as Bach, or the riotous dance scenes in *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

What aspects of Bartók are specifically Hungarian?

Eötvös: I see him as more of an exception to the rule. In those days, Hungary was unaccustomed to anyone like him. He was a one-off phenomenon and has

remained unique to this day.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can now also see that he never made any mistakes, being able to identify situations both calmly and clearly. As a young man, he protested against the Habsburg monarchy on a political, but not a cultural level. His music originated in the Western European tradition, but his political stance against the monarchy caused him to turn towards folk art. This was the decisive turning point.

Throughout his life, he endeavoured to integrate his experiences from folk art into European art music. This folk art originated not only in the former Hungarian state territory but also more generally from areas that he had visited towards the South as far as North Africa and towards the East across to Bulgaria and Turkey via Romania.

I have always found it interesting to observe how he notated his collections of folk music with academic precision, in a way that cannot be used in traditional interpretation because it is too precise.

Our Western system of notation leaves many criteria open to interpretation. It is reduced to practical communication that can only be realised if you are familiar with the European musical tradition. Bartók intentionally kept these two different notational systems apart, the folk music system and the art music system.

His folk music notation was designed for academic study, and we must be very grateful to him for that. The traditional notation was designed for his everyday writing.

Bartók demands the courage to pursue the grotesque.

Peter Eötvös



Walter Gropius, Béla Bartók and Paul Klee (1927)

What does a conductor need to bear in mind with regard to Bartók's music?

Eötvös: I performed *Bluebeard's Castle* in Salzburg with the Vienna Philharmonic. After the first rehearsal the orchestra expressed their satisfaction with me. They said that it was very rare for a conductor to risk playing with so much rubato. Rubato, which means being flexible with the tempo, is difficult to coordinate in ensemble playing. However, if this flexibility comes naturally, then it is possible to keep the orchestra together safely and the musicians appreciate it as well.

You still have to be careful with rubato though. If you listen to the recordings of Bartók playing the piano, you can hear that he used rubato very sparingly and that when he does use it, then not in the same way as in the Western European tradition.

There are two different kinds of folk music, music that is danced to and music that is sung to. The music that is danced to must have a very precise and regular tempo. The music that is sung to, on the other hand, needs to have a narrative character, as if being intoned, with fewer constraints. A blend of text and feeling. Bartók had a very precise knowledge of these kinds of rubato.

The expressive phrasing produced by rubato is usually closely connected with the Hungarian language and so non-native conductors find it difficult to decide what is correct. Nowadays, *Bluebeard's Castle* is always sung in Hungarian, so it is important to think about this rubato "problem".

Apart from that, conductors must achieve very precise articulation. As Bartók

himself was a very precise pianist, you find articulation markings in his scores as well. This precise articulation makes it easier to understand the music, as it would in language. If somebody fails to articulate clearly when speaking, you immediately say that you haven't understood them. It is exactly the same in music. There are two typical articulation marks in Bartók's music that one should be aware of. For example, when two notes are played legato, and with a short second note, the question is whether this short note should be given a renewed attack, or whether it should be slurred. Bartók uses two different markings: if there is a staccato dot above the legato slur, then the note should be slurred and short. If the dot is below the legato slur, however, then the note is given an extra attack.

And there is another small but important detail: in Bartók's music you should always begin glissandi immediately and distribute the notes evenly over the entire length.

With Bartók, conductors always need the courage to pursue the grotesque. In those days, grotesque elements were prevalent in art, and so the music should express the way in which Bartók made use of them. It was quite rare and very characteristic of Bartók.

For example, I am thinking of the old man in the *Mandarin* or the fugato in the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Although this fugato is a parody, the majority of conductors give it a deadly serious or "Baroque" interpretation. Bartók displays this grotesque character in the woodwind instruments, which sound like so many clucking chickens.

The fairy-tale, narrational atmosphere at the beginning of *Bluebeard* and in the *Concerto for Orchestra* needs a pure sound, as if sung by a choir. This sound should not be thought of as rising out of a romantic mist, however, but rather as something that is very simple and unadorned.

What has the composer Eötvös learned from Bartók?

Eötvös: More than anything else, his economy – but in a different way to Webern. Webern depicts the soul, but there is still something physical about Bartók.

I had just reached the age of 12 when I met Ernő Lendvai for the first time at our music school and experienced his Bartók analyses. The way in which he thought about Bartók, his formal and harmonic analysis, still remains with me today. Not all musicologists accept his ideas, but for me they are

fundamentally important because they arise directly from a compositional point of view.

The Golden Ratio, the Fibonacci sequence and the circle of fifths tonality are also important, if subconscious, factors for me when composing. I often sense that my part-writing of intervals is very similar to Bartók's, although the average listener is unable to recognise this (I wouldn't write it if you could hear it; it will remain my secret).

What do you admire most about Bartók?

Eötvös: His need for independence and how he managed to integrate (!) his traditional education into his music as a young man, instead of rejecting it. The way in which he created something of his own, something new, while still incorporating tradition.