

BERG AND BARTOK

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THESE is an irrepressible tendency in the intellectual world to put on record, as early as possible, the basic origins of contemporary works, and to trace the allegiances of their creators. But even while theories are being expounded and books written, the living objects of these studies are, as a rule, in process of evolution, often refreshingly aloof, and sometimes they develop in odd contradiction to expressed opinion.

In our time the tendency to classify and pigeonhole has become a disease. It is nourished by national vanities, by political interferences, and last but not least by the human yet unsound desire to gain substantial information on phenomena which are quite imponderable.

In art there are, without doubt, schools and national characteristics. But after three or four decades, such factors in the development of a whole century become unimportant, and one thing only emerges, which is quality. In the final summing up there are only two schools and they are in existence all the time: the good and the bad, or at some periods, the good and the better.

As we approach the middle of this century, we can assume that by now we have formed a correct estimate concerning certain major composers of our time, without resorting to the Encyclopedia.

I should like to call attention to the many affinities existing between two such figures who have been superstitiously placed in very different categories by the editors of who's who's and such. To my way of thinking they diverge in other directions and for reasons other than those generally attributed. The two composers are Alban Berg and Bela Bartok, and the accepted classifications are roughly as follows: Berg – Schönberg disciple, twelve-tone system, expressionist, extreme constructivism, Viennese School; Bartok – magician of folklore, Hungarian to the bone, complicated rhythms, not really *Mittleuropa*, the Balkans, possibly even Asia.

These descriptions are of course partly true, and their existence is perhaps necessary if for no other reason than to guide those enlightened

few whose profession it is to sit in judgment over works they have never seen or heard before. But between Berg and Bartok there exists a close relationship, as close as any between such masters as Beethoven and Schubert, or Wagner and Liszt – and I propose to indicate it here. Assuming the reader's familiarity with the works of Berg and Bartok, I shall make the comparison on the broadest lines. I do not wish to emphasize detail, which would only lead to the superficial examination of intervals and rhythms. Nor do I think it necessary to decide whether mastery has been achieved with or without the application of the twelve-tone technic. We know that Berg made ample use of it, and never became its slave, and we know that Bartok reached similar conclusions, working along his own line.

Thus traveling unencumbered, let us establish the first links, the earliest tie between the two. For that purpose I invoke the *Harmonielehre* of Schönberg, a book of wisdom which every young composer should read (*before* writing his ninth symphony, however). The *Harmonielehre* was published in 1911. On page 504 there are three examples of contemporary harmonies, new and very daring. They are taken from Franz Schreker's opera, *Der ferne Klang*, from piano pieces by Bela Bartok and from a composition by Alban Berg. The fact that Schönberg should quote from Bartok at this time has its own significance. His is the only *foreign* name in these Austro-Germanic surroundings. By quoting him, Schönberg suggests similarity of perception and hearing, as far back as 1911, in the years of striving and searching, some time before the new laws and theories had been set down. But the appearance of Bartok's name here is no mere coincidence. Throughout the history of music, by almost uncanny instinct, the unusually gifted have achieved their own rapprochement. Though frequently misunderstanding and even distrusting each other, they have often sensed a kinship. Traces of mutual admiration, brave salutes, can be found in that most authentic of musicological records – their letters. Was it not the lot of Schumann to discover the symphonic work of Schubert? Did not Ravel, in a magnificent outburst against chauvinism, uphold Schönberg, Bartok and Kodaly in 1917 when the academicians of Paris had declared war on German and Central European art? In 1911, with notable works already to their credit, Alban Berg and Bela Bartok were moving forward in a manifest though unconcerted unanimity of purpose. Time and maturity have gradually revealed musical expressions, both powerful and new, which by the application of different methods, are yet very similar in many ways.

When is the similarity most apparent and in what particular form can it best be perceived? As to the period, I should say that the most apparent parallelisms occur roughly from 1920 on, that is, after *Wozzeck* (1919), in the years of Bartok's two *Violin Sonatas* (1923) and Berg's *Lyrical Suite* (1926). From then on there is a developing relationship which continues, as I perceive it, to the present day. This impression was re-affirmed for me recently while listening to Bartok's *Violin Concerto*. Here is the same aristocratic aloofness, so mysteriously stirring, the same surging continuity of melodic line and unceasing invention, the wealth and refinement of thought and the absence of apparent artifice in music most ingeniously devised and organized, which we recognize too in the work of Berg.

I have mentioned Bartok's *Violin Sonatas* and the *Concerto*, Berg's *Wozzeck* and the *Lyrical Suite*, works with a strong predominance of lyrical qualities. This brings us close to the question of form. Before venturing to take up that point however, it might be useful to remember that there are really two composers in every composer, one devising the faster, the other the slower movements of a work. In many a composer the one or the other is predominant. Cases of absolute balance are rare. Bartok has this balance, Alban Berg to some extent lacked it, and the texture of his music is rather favorable to slower motion. The specific works I have mentioned here were not chosen at random. The Bartok pieces include some of his most lyrical and melodious passages and it is in these that the likeness to Berg's music becomes most apparent.

Those who believe in slogans will say that of course works written in the twenties bear a great likeness one to the other, they are all examples of expressionism, they are children of post-war-chaos, and so on. Actually this much maligned period was neither chaotic nor pernicious in an artistic sense. Bad music was written then as freely as at any other time. Like many other periods these years also yielded their masterworks. They were in no sense an expression of post-war chaos, but marked the logical evolution of an era that had produced those earlier masterpieces, Strauss' *Electra* (1909), Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* (1913), the *Cello Sonata* of Claude Debussy (1917) and Berg's *Wozzeck* (1914-1919). These are just a few and I have deliberately included the Debussy because it so very distinctly shows the trend which finally led to works like Bartok's *Violin Sonatas* and Berg's *Lyrical Suite*. The link between Bartok and Berg does not lie on the surface only.

Tracing the further development of Berg to his death in 1935 and of Bartok to his most recent works, one finds the affinities between them to be on no technical or idiomatic level. The world of Berg's *Lulu* (1932) and of his last work, the *Violin Concerto* (1935) seems far removed from the realm of Bartok's *Music for String Instruments*, for example, or the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*. Yet there are points in common so far as inner evolution is concerned. When the Schönberg group in Vienna listened to the *Berg Concerto* for the first time, a mystified whisper was soon heard. Why, this is not *our* music! It was interesting to observe the consternation caused by the introduction of diatonic elements into the chromatic twelve-tone surroundings. The circle was being exposed to a new development. How far it would have carried Berg remains a rhetorical question. One thing however is certain. Bartok's idiom underwent a similar change too, then and thereafter. Again, while hearing the *Berg Violin Concerto* or following the score for Bartok's *Music for String Instruments* one is somehow haunted by their mutual presence. This curious reminder, one of the other, inspires no wish to compare the works, yet the curious affinity is there, a tie, a communion of almost psychophysical nature. The listener to both works experiences similar visions and emotive reactions: there is in each case that startling novelty of message – a message always, never just an anecdote – and the always surprising novelty of sound, one might almost be tempted to say, of a new vibration.

To sum up the impression of likeness, of kinship between them, I should say one finds, from the very start, an analogy of musical perception and similarity of purpose. Achievement of this purpose has resulted, for both, in individual expression that is both new and convincing. Their works have attained an almost equal stature and importance in the modern world.

Last but not least, what makes the figures of these two men stand out *together* in broader terms, has been a complete indifference to public favor and a profound conscience, a respect felt for their own mission in particular and for music in general.

There is no doubt in my mind that the work of Bartok and Berg will form part of the basic repertory for many a generation to come. Works of art so very unfashionable are certain to have the compensation of a prolonged existence.

On the other hand, the fundamental differences between them seem to me to be of a tangible and technical nature. Let us first make a point

of external and minor importance, by referring to backgrounds and national influence. I am among those who love and admire the music of great musicians though I may feel indifferent and even hostile toward the particular towns or hamlets of their birth. Composers whose countries have a wealth of original folklore are apt to turn to that magnificent source. But what matters is the use they put it to. (Red Cavalry can march in more ways than one.) Bartok's mastery of folklore need not be discussed. The Austrian and German composers, on the other hand, have practically no folklore at their disposal; the so called *Volkslied* can to a very great extent be traced to some trained composer or other. Berg, whose lineage and leanings were Viennese, had no particular reason to hamper his efforts by imposing on himself an uninterrupted flow of three-quarter beats. It may be pointed out however, that he did on occasion turn to popular tunes and rhythms. There is an authentic Ländler in the *Violin Concerto* and in *Wozzeck* there is a fair leaning towards the popular. (An example is the hunting song in the second scene of the first act.) However, as I said before, these divergences are not finally significant. Let me point to Chopin who wrote mazurkas and polonaises, while Robert Schumann didn't; and yet, how deep are the roots of their relationship.

No, the element separating Berg and Bartok more than any other is of a different nature. It is in reality simply a mechanical device, that Pandora's box among musical instruments – the pianoforte.

Alban Berg *could* play the piano, yet he was no pianist. Bela Bartok was and still is today a brilliant and resourceful performer. Berg's Opus 1, the *Sonata for Piano*, his only published work written for that instrument, placed in juxtaposition to Bartok's Opus 1, a *Rhapsodie for Piano and Orchestra*, illustrates my meaning. The *Sonata* is a very lovely and quite mature work, so far as conception, unity and novel invention are concerned. It is well written for the piano, though perhaps not pianistic in the traditional sense and for the time of its composition (1908). The work is sometimes referred to as derivative, a silly word when applied to so great a talent. I have often played and performed the *Sonata* and to me it appears as Bergian as any early Berg can be expected to be. It has a symphonic quality though, that points away from the piano and toward the orchestra which was soon to become the medium most appropriate to Berg's development. Whereas Bartok's *Rhapsodie*, Opus 1, makes one realize almost at once that the creator is an inspired, inventive composer-pianist, a virtuoso in the finest sense of that wretched word. Every note that Bartok has written

since, for the piano alone or in combination with other instruments, is of the greatest significance. These notes have been strung together to make an impressive line of works. Original from the earliest to the latest, they represent a unique contribution to musical literature. It always strikes me as piquant that Bartok's official position at the Music Academy of Budapest should have been as the head of a piano class.

The fact remains that the pianoforte seems to stand as the demarcation between Berg and Bartok, very much as it does between Wagner and Liszt. However, I do not wish to carry these dangerous parallels any further and I shall leave it to the reader's imagination to examine the possibilities of this suggestion.

The parts of those works in which Berg included the piano are all well written, and often quite remarkable so far as sound-combinations are concerned. They are well written also because of Berg's unbelievable efficiency in dealing with any kind of sonorous problem. But he was no performer, though keenly, almost naively interested in any kind of unusual writing. I recall playing for him an early set of piano variations written in my student days. A glissando run in fourths on the white keys, with something else happening on the black in the other hand, seemed to fascinate him. Why, this was quite a new combination, he thought. I assured him humbly that it was not. But *I* have never thought of it, he remarked, whereupon I ventured to say that these were things a pianist did not *think* about, but somehow just *did*. The piano was never the real center of his interest, which is quite understandable in the light of later developments.

His tragic end, and the absence of practically any compositions in the minor forms, especially of piano music, explain the comparatively small legacy. This is, however, only a matter of relative quantity. The conception and composition of the operas, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, had taken up many years of a short life.

The work of Bartok, even up to the time of Berg's death, was far more considerable in quantity and diversity. And since then, what a harvest!

But now having approached the fateful stage of statistics, I must draw this survey to a close. May I do so by quoting some lines of Charles Baudelaire: *Ce monde a acquis une épaisseur de vulgarité qui donne au mépris de l'homme spirituel la violence d'une passion*. These words, I believe, convey something of the spirit that smolders in the scores of both Alban Berg and Bela Bartok.