

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

BARTOK'S HISTORIC CONTRIBUTION

HENRY PLEASANTS AND TIBOR SERLY

BELA BARTOK returns to the United States this season for his first visit in some twelve years. Since his last American tour he has written the *String Quartets, Numbers 3, 4 and 5*; the *Suite for Celesta, Percussion and Strings*; the *Piano Concerto Number 2*; a *Divertimento for String Orchestra*; a *Violin Concerto*; a recent work for two pianos and percussion instruments and *Mikrokosmos*, a collection of one hundred and fifty-three piano studies, not to mention the little piece for clarinet and violin which earned some passing notoriety last year as the means of bringing Benny Goodman and Joseph Szigeti together on the stage of Carnegie Hall.

All but the most recent of these works have been heard in this country. None has found its way into the general repertory, and it is hardly likely that any one of them has been generally understood. Nor has there been any organized effort to understand them. Bartok has been, with Arnold Schönberg and Igor Stravinsky, one of the three most influential composers of the century, but very few musicians could say with any degree of certainty just what the nature of his influence has been.

To the larger musical public, he is still known chiefly as a folklorist, and even among more experienced musicians the influence of the folksong upon his original music is often overestimated. The misconception is not hard to understand. Bartok's folksong arrangements are probably the finest any composer ever made, and his book, *The Hungarian Folksong*, is the work of a serious and enlightened musicologist and scholar. In the various arrangements which occupied him off and on between 1908 and 1915 he also accounted for the part of his creative output which is most readily understood and easily played. His contribution to our understand-

ing of the folksong as a phenomenon of creative humankind, and of the Hungarian folksong in particular, is an achievement alone sufficient to make him a famous man with an assured place in musical history. It has, however, tended to obscure his more important accomplishments as an original composer. His interest in the folksong was undoubtedly significant in the development of an indigenous style, but there were other contributing elements. The scholarly, careful editions he has made of the music of the classic masters should not be overlooked, nor can his earlier experiences in the composition of music more or less in the style of Liszt and Strauss be ignored. Bartok has been an active man. He has learned from a great variety of musical experience, and he has made use of everything he learned.

III

In attempting to determine his place in musical history one thinks inevitably of Gluck, who has been not inaccurately described as Janus-headed in the sense that his operas seem to look backward to Monteverdi and Peri and forward to Wagner and Strauss. Bartok began, as Gluck did, by writing music in the style fashionable at the time; then extended his orbit forward and backward as he gained assurance and conviction in his own idiom. His first works of any stylistic significance seem to have their roots in Beethoven. As he moved further forward, the base moved further backward – to Mozart and Haydn. In his latest compositions the bedrock appears to be Bach or pre-Bach. Always there is contact with the ancient folksong. It is too early yet to say with complete assurance what it is that Bartok is moving forward to; that will be determined in the music of future composers. But certainly he has already advanced beyond any other composer of his time.

The details of this development in its earlier stages need not be exhaustive. A performance of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* is supposed to have prompted the composition of a symphonic poem *Kossuth*, which earned Bartok a premature and easy prominence in Budapest and later in England (where it was played in Manchester under Richter) about 1903. His first piano pieces, the *Quatre Morceaux*, appeared about the same time and showed the influence of Wagner, Strauss, Brahms and Liszt. The rhapsodies of the latter served as a model for the *Rhapsodie for Piano and Orchestra* which followed in 1904. The influence of Debussy, along with a new consciousness of the folksong, was acknowledged in the *Deux Portraits* and the *Suite for Orchestra*, both of which came shortly after-

wards. The composer was in his early twenties and obviously working out his destiny by a preliminary exploration of the music of late romanticism.

He quickly had his fill, for soon – in 1908 – appeared the *Fourteen Bagatelles for Piano*, Opus 6. These gave a rather pointed hint of the direction Bartok's ultimate harmonic and melodic style was to take, although some of the experiments contained in the *Bagatelles* were not exploited until many years later. They also created a sensation, usually unpleasant, at every public or private performance. Their rhythmic impetuosity and forcefulness, their abundance of unresolved dissonances, were not well liked, nor did the sympathetic attitude of Busoni and Kodaly make influential persons like them any better. The following years seem to have provided a period of exhaustive study, research and technical consolidation. Between 1910 and 1920 Bartok worked out most of the folksong arrangements, a large number of other piano works, an opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, a ballet, *The Woodcut Prince*, and the *String Quartet Number 2*. His harmonic and melodic style, as developed to its logical ends in the *Suite for Celesta*, *Percussion and Strings* and in the *String Quartets Numbers 4 and 5*, appeared for the first time in a relatively mature and definitive form in the *Violin Sonata Number 2*, in 1923.

III

The striking technical feature of this sonata is the confident and purposeful employment of what are possibly best called unresolved passing notes. They are not an entirely new thing in this piece. Bartok had experimented with them in the *Bagatelles* and in other works, but in the *Violin Sonata Number 2* their future significance in the composer's stylistic and technical scheme of things is for the first time firmly established. An understanding of their function is essential to any understanding of the composer's later music, for the unresolved passing note leads to the unresolved passing chord and hence to the unresolved neighboring tonality. To this must be added the harmonic and melodic possibilities originating from the unresolved passing note when the harmony note happens to be the third degree of the scale. The simultaneous appearance of an E \flat and an E in conjunction with a C and a G inevitably suggests a new conception of the relationship between major and minor tonalities.

These unresolved passing notes are, of course, dissonant; and particularly so when struck with the tone towards which they should conventionally proceed. Discord has, to be sure, always been an essential element in music, just as distortion has been a part of the technic of paint-

ing, but various generations of composers have approached the matter in different and contrasting ways. A discordant passing note on the accented beat of the measure was a not uncommon device in the eighteenth century. It served then a double purpose, keeping the melody from losing itself in the chord and adding emotional and rhythmic intensity to a given passage. It seldom had harmonic significance and was commonly resolved up or down to its neighboring tone in the chord concerned.



In the nineteenth century, as music tended to become more harmonic than melodic, discord was consequently treated harmonically. From the appoggiatura and the suspension came the superstructure of major and minor thirds over the fundamental triad, which contributed to emotional intensity and to color. But as the seventh led to the ninth and the ninth to the eleventh and the eleventh to the thirteenth, familiarity dulled the exciting effect of each successive third, and harmonic borders were extended to allow a more liberal and more varied treatment of progression and resolution. The result was, of course, the chromatic harmony of Wagner in which the dominance of harmony over melody is nicely illustrated by the opening bars of the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* where the melodic movement is simply a product of chromatic chord progression and dependent on the harmonic color for its effectiveness.

III

Apparently concluding that this approach either was wrong or had run its course, Bartok went back to the folksong and to the eighteenth century masters for a kind of spiritual and technical refreshment and for a re-examination of the essential musical elements present in these sources. Technically speaking, the result established in the *Violin Sonata Number 2* is a harmonic pattern strictly diatonic and strictly tonal, with every harmonic device subordinate to melodic line. Starting from Bach, Haydn and Mozart, Bartok plots a course completely divergent from that of the nineteenth century composers who took the same point of departure. Dissonance is again treated melodically, and its purpose, whether in chords or in the melody itself, is to give character, emphasis and clarity to the melodic contour. The harmonic scheme is simple, serving principally to provide

rhythmic impetus and variety and to reinforce the feeling of tonality. In the later works chords are almost entirely avoided. The melodic procedure tends to grow more and more contrapuntal and polyphonic. This probably accounts for the composer's renewed preoccupation with the string quartet. In the third, fourth and fifth quartets he gradually achieved a complete assurance in contrapuntal technic. The *Suite for Celesta, Percussion and Strings* shows a perfect mastery of contrapuntal articulation. Esthetically the style is as free from romantic characteristics as it is from the dominance of chromatic harmony. The new conception of dissonance, and the bold abandonment of resolution give to the melodic line a remarkable vigor and vitality, a sharper, more clearly defined profile, and an infinite flexibility. The melody has no chance to go to rest or to sleep in a comfortable chord. It moves with a characteristically twentieth century incisiveness and directness, and it has a contemporary sharpness and simplicity of expression.

To determine the full significance of Bartok's harmonic style as it concerns the future of musical grammar and technic, one must examine more closely the nature of the unresolved passing notes. The absence of resolution would not in itself be of vast importance, but even as early as the *Violin Sonata No. 2* it becomes plain that the unresolved passing note has a tendency to become interchangeable with the note to which it might be expected to resolve. Thus the sonata actually begins with an F# in the bass which must in the light of later developments in the movement be regarded harmonically as a G in a C major four-six chord.

B. Bartók

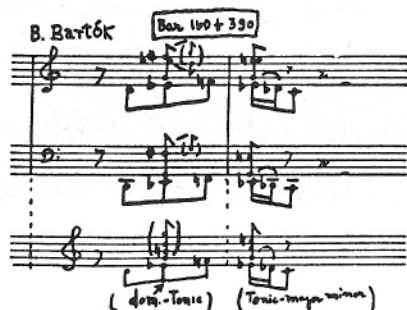
This interchangeability of harmony notes and neighboring tones affects the whole future course of Bartok's harmonic procedure, for when more than one unresolved passing note is used a chordal function is achieved. When such a combination contains, for instance, a D and an A coincident with an E \flat and a B \flat , two tonalities are immediately suggested because of the presence of two fundamentals and two fifths. One is tempted to jump

intervals. These may be considered imitations in octave or unisons, and represent just about the farthest point to which he has carried the procedure.



It is hardly surprising that he has gone no further, for the implications involved in the conjunction of major and minor scales within a single tonality are alone sufficient to give an entirely new face to the structure of harmony. Such a simple experiment as striking the chord of C-E-E \flat -G and progressing from there to any one of half a dozen other related major and minor chords will give some idea of the modulatory flexibility not to mention the tremendous dynamic impulses latent in such harmonic telescoping.

This element is elaborately exploited in the fourth and fifth quartets where the composer's inclination toward polyphonic and contrapuntal writing becomes increasingly dominant, and where the four voices gain a contrapuntal independence hardly achieved by any composer since Bach. Bartok speaks now with utter simplicity and without technical self-consciousness. Imitations, canons and fugal devices are projected through a new language released from the old harmonic boundaries, yet rigidly grounded in the primitive triad. In these works it is no longer possible to designate tonality as major or minor. In the fourth quartet all the new forms of interval relationships are used strictly polyphonically. Imitations are introduced on the intervals of semi-tone, whole tone, major and minor seventh, octave, fifth, augmented and diminished fifth and sixth, and so forth. As would seem inevitable from this new conception of interval relationship, even the nature of cadence undergoes a change, as reflected



in the closing measures of the fourth quartet where the movement ac-

tually closes without a definite determination of major, minor or modal character.

Bartok has obviously made no effort to determine mathematically the extent of his new harmonic horizons. One is not dealing here with an invention, and it can hardly be claimed for Bartok that any of the devices he employs are strictly new with him. It has been common knowledge among composers and other thinking musicians that the structure of harmony reached at about the end of the last century a point of expansion where further progress meant either a fresh start from older tonal bases or a complete break-down of tonal relationships. Bartok was one of many who faced the problem, and certainly he was not the only one who looked to antiquity for unexploited resources. Nor was he the only one who found fertile soil in the eighteenth century conception of dissonance, or, for that matter, in the eighteenth century conception of melody.

His distinction lies rather in what he has created from the new material. He has gone further than any other composer in the development of technic and style. His insight led him to those vital elements in the older music from which the new materials have evolved, and his keen artistic and creative intelligence has enabled him to resolve a novel harmonic grammar into an articulate musical language. Bartok uses this language in his own way, but its grammar is not necessarily personal. It lends itself to various sorts of treatment, and may very possibly become the basic technic of later twentieth century composition.