

Bèla Bartók

Bela Bartók: Cantata Profana (1930)

“Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist and pianist. Although he earned his living mainly from teaching and playing the piano and was a relentless collector and analyst of folk music, Bartók is recognized today principally as a composer. His mature works were, however, highly influenced by his ethnomusicological studies, particularly those of Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak peasant musics. Throughout his life he was also receptive to a wide variety of Western musical influences, both contemporary (notably Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg) and historic; he acknowledged a change from a more Beethovenian to a more Bachian aesthetic stance in his works from 1926 onwards. He is now considered, along with Liszt, to be his country’s greatest composer, and, with Kodály and Dohnányi, a founding figure of 20th-century Hungarian musical culture.” (Grove)

BIOGRAPHY

1881: Bartók is born in Nagyszentmiklós, at the time part of the southern Hungarian province of Torontál. Both parents are amateur musicians and nurture his musical learning, although Bèla is shy and quite isolated from other children his age. Loses his father at age seven, and this event results in a highly transient childhood as Bartók’s mother moves him and his sister frequently in order to find work.

1890-94: Composition of his first collection of piano works, which includes waltzes, landlers, polkas and mazurkas, as well as programmatic works and experiments in sonatina and theme-and-variation forms.

1894: Begins work at the Catholic Gymnasium, where he is appointed chapel organist, and becomes increasingly involved in chamber music. According to Grove, his compositional style and harmonic vocabulary “broadened from Classical to early Romantic models”.

1898: Two chamber works by Bartók exhibit influence of Brahms and Schumann (Grove).

1899: Despite health problems, begins courses at the Vienna Conservatory, then transfers to the Academy of Music in Budapest.

1902: Hears a performance of Strauss’ tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, which brings Bartók out of a period of relative compositional inactivity and provides inspiration for his own chamber works and piano transcriptions. Hanslick remarks that... “So, he must be a genius of a musician at any rate, but it is a pity that he goes in for Strauss....”
Aside from Strauss, the works and performances from this period display an influence of Liszt.

1903: The composition of *Kossuth*, a nationalistic work on the theme of the failed Hungarian revolution of 1848-49.

1904: While staying at a resort in northern Hungary, Bartók hears a servant named Lidi Dosa singing a Transylvanian peasant melody and develops a keen interest in music of its type. In 1905, he meets Zoltan Kodaly for the first time and the following year, they begin work on

collection of Slovak, Romanian and, to a smaller extent, Serbian, Bulgarian and Ruthenian folk melodies.

1907-08: Bartók has an ill-fated love affair with the violinist Stefi Geyer, for whom he writes his Violin Concerto BB48a, which features a “Stefi Motive” in various permutations within a two-movement “fantasy-like” structure. After this violin concerto, all of his works are strongly influenced by folk idioms.

1909: Bartók marries Marta Ziegler and their son, Bela, is born shortly thereafter.

1911: Completion of the two-character opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, a “masterful Hungarian emulation of the realism of Debussy’s *Pelleas et Melisande*” (Grove). This work exhibits strong influence of Wagner in its use of motif and to Strauss in its orchestration.

1913: Discovery of an ancient Romanian folk model, the *cântec lung*, which leads him to conduct ethnomusicological research in northern Africa.

1914-1918: World War I delays publication of his north African and Maramaros materials. Although he is able to intermittently continue collecting folk materials, the war periodically inhibits his ability to travel and narrows the range of possible research locations.

1910-1920: Period of increased political and geographical unrest, with food and fuel in short supply. **By 1920, the Austro-Hungarian empire has collapsed, and the Treaty of Trianon results in Hungary’s loss of the areas of Transylvania and the northern Slovak territories where much of Bartók’s most fruitful folk-material collection had occurred. With the exception of a brief trip to Turkey in 1936, Bartók ceases new collection for the duration of his lifetime.**

Also in 1920, Bartók is accused for the first, but far from the last, time of being a traitor to Hungary through his folk-music research and supposed sympathy to the Romanian cause. (Later, he will be accused by Romanian authorities of being a Hungarian revolutionary, also based on his field research.)

1918-1922: Bartók’s Expressionist period, illustrated by his aspiration toward pantonalism. In an essay dated 1920, he refers several times to Schoenberg and to the “need for the equality of rights of the individual 12 tones”. This period is exemplified in his work “The Miraculous Mandarin”, completed in 1919 but not orchestrated until 1924.

1925-1926: Bartók travels to Italy, where his interest in Baroque composers, particularly Bach, is renewed; he also is exposed to Stravinsky’s works for piano at this time.

1930: Completion of the *Cantata Profana*. According to Grove, “particularly in its aspects of generational conflict, the cantata has been seen as emblematic of Bartók’s response to the rising fascism of its time.”

1931: In a letter, Bartók refers as his three main influences to Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak music, but states that:

“The brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. I try – to the best of my ability – to serve this idea in my music; therefore I don’t reject any influence, be it Slovak, Romanian, Arabic, or from any other source. The source must only be clean, fresh and healthy!”

1934: Completion of his *Mikrokosmos*.

1940: Bartók and his wife move to the USA, where they remain until his death in 1945.

SELECTED OUTPUT

3 stage works (1 opera; 1 ballet; 1 pantomime)

37 orchestral works

4 vocal/orchestral works (2 for solo voice, 2 choral)

Choral settings of Hungarian, Romanian, Szekely and Slovak folksongs

Chamber and piano works

Songs for solo voice

SALIENT STYLE FEATURES

- FOLK AND NATIONALISTIC INFLUENCE
 - After the Violin Concerto of 1908, all of Bartók's works were significantly influenced by the folk traditions he had gleaned through his field research. This influence is manifested in the *Cantata Profana*:
 - The use of "Bulgarian folk" meters such as 5/8, as seen beginning in bar 22
 - The melodic basis of the *Cantata* is a nondiatonic folk scale, first seen in its prime form in the opening moments of the work and then transformed at nine distinct points, each transformation meant as a metaphor for one of the stags.
 - According to Bartók biographer Serge Moreux, the message of freedom in the *Cantata* represents a protest against the increasingly restrictive atmosphere of Hungary under Regent Miklós Horthy.
 - The text of the *Cantata* is based on a Romanian *colindă*, or Christmas carol; however, it is important to remember that many *colinduri*, this one included, are based on pre-Christian legends. This is the case here, and it is also interesting to note the intense connection to nature (perhaps owing to the Central German fascination with nature?)
- CONNECTIONS TO BACH
 - Several significant connections to Bach's *Matthäus-Passion* can be seen:
 - The use of double chorus
 - Chromatic "filling-in" of the harmonic scheme
 - The use of a compound triple meter to begin (Bartók's work begins in 6/8; Bach's begins in 12/8)
 - Also in terms of rhythm, the opening choruses of both works feature a rhythmic pattern of a dotted quarter note tied to an eighth note, followed by two more eighths. However, Bartók's use of that rhythmic figure occurs on a reversed melodic contour.
 - Philosophy of Freedom

- The *Matthäus-Passion*'s message of man's freedom from sin is reflected in the *Cantata*'s message of the nine sons' freedom from human strictures.
- TONALITY
 - While Bartók does not shy away from dissonance (both melodic and harmonic), this work is not pantonal. Rather, it is centrist, revolving around D. In fact, the *Cantata* represents a shift after his Expressionist period of 1918-1922 away from the pantonalism, or atonality, of that period.
 - However, the work's "tonal" clarity is sometimes compromised by the consistent use of nondiatonic folk modes and the persistent chromaticism that is either consequent with, or a direct result, of this folk-mode use.
- TEXTURE
 - The textures tend to be thick, with alternation of several different textural schemes:
 - Imitation, seen in the fugal sections as well as in a simpler form
 - Solo and duet material, especially in Part II
 - Homophony within choruses, although often 2-4 voices are grouped together in intra- or inter-choral polyphony
 - Selective use of homophony, often with rhythmic displacement of one voice (bar 164)
- FORM
 - Three larger sections (Part I; Part II and Part III), each of which is made up of several smaller, self-contained sections: fugues, through-composed duets, and narrative homophonic sections. The chart at the end of this presentation outlines the large-scale and smaller-scale form, as well as the overriding compositional technique for each, as Bartók uses a separate textural and/or orchestration technique for differing ideas and to demarcate narration versus direct action.
- MELODY
 - Chromatic Alterations
 - Bartók often alters a scale by reverting a sharp or flat note to its natural form, or sharpening/flatting a natural note, on the way back down or up, as shown in bars 12-13 in the top flute part.
 - Characters are dramatized by the use of more lyrical melodic lines (in the case of the father) contrasted with disjunct lines (in the case of the oldest son).
 - Scale Formations
 - One of the most interesting aspects of the *Cantata* is its basis in several different forms of diatonic and nondiatonic scales, outlined below.
 - Bartók manipulates these scale formations, most notably in bar 178 to the end of Part I.
 - Nondiatonic Folk-Mode Scale
This scale is based on one discovered by Bartók during his field research in Romania and forms the structural basis of the work. It is introduced immediately in the strings in its prime form of D-E-F-G-Ab-Bb-C, and is then rotated at nine distinct points throughout the *Cantata*, each rotation symbolizing one of the nine sons.

- The final rotation, that on Bb, is presented in a literal inversion and transposed to the tonic of D at the conclusion of the work, while the chorus is singing the words “From cooling mountain springs”.

- Octatonic Scale

This scale can be derived from the prime-form nondiatonic folk scale explained above by the addition of a B and a C#:

D-E-F-G-Ab-Bb-**B-C#**-(D)

- Whole-Tone Scale

A six-note whole-tone scale can be derived by adding an F# to the prime-form nondiatonic folk mode and rotating it to F:

F-G- Ab-Bb-C-D-E-F# **Ab-Bb-C-D-E-F#**

- F Aeolian and F Dorian Modal Extensions

A rotation to the F and the addition of Db and Eb creates an F-Aeolian scale, while the addition of D and Eb creates an F-Dorian scale:

F Aeolian
F-G-Ab-Bb-C-**Db-Eb**

F Dorian
F-G-Ab-Bb-C-**D-Eb**

MVMT.	BARS	ORCHESTRATION/VOICING	TEXTURE	METER(S)	DRAMATIC CONTEXT
I (PI)	1-58	Fl/Cl/Bs/Tpt/Timp/Vl/Vla/Vc/Cb; 2 SATB choirs	Instrumental intro recalls St. Matthew Passion; choral texture is imitative (sometimes with tone clusters) or groups 2-4 voices together; one solo-quartet line at the end	6/8; 9/8; 5/8 (frequent meter change)	Background of the legend
I (PII)	59-163	Same as above, with addition of <i>tambolo piccolo</i> ; trombone; oboe; tuba; <i>piatti</i> ; piccolo; 1 SATB chorus	“Hunting Fugue”	Almost all in 2/2; 1-bar forays into 1/2 and 3/2	Narration of the hunt; chorus is taking part in the action with their cries of “hei!”
I (PIII)	164-198	Same as above, with addition of harp, tam-tam; 1 SATB chorus	Homophonic, mostly syllabic text setting with rhythmic displacement of the tenor, then in bar 180, imitative treatment	3/2; 6/4; 9/4; 5/4; 6/4	Narration of the transformation of the nine sons in the haunted forest
II (PI)	1-37	Full orchestration of Part I	Imitative entrances in pairs, then at bar 27, separate PoI leading into strict homophony (set syllabically).	Same as above	Chorus narrates the father’s search for his sons
II (PII)	38-215	Same as above, but with <i>grossa cassa</i> ; SATB chorus w/ TB soloists	Alternating chorus as narrator or direct participant with tenor (oldest son)/bass (father) solos	Same as above; more frequent meter change during tenor solo material than bass (stag is more wild and free?)	Chorus narrates and participates in the action while tenor/bass soloists portray the father-son conversation
III (PI)	1-34	Same as above, but with bass clarinet	Imitative recap of Part I, in rhythmic augmentation (Bach similarities greatly diminished here!)	3/4; 2/4; far less meter change than in Part I	Chorus reflects on the legend and recapitulates text from Part I
III (PII)	35-93	Same as above	Speech-like w/ tonic accent; each choral part has a different line of text	Same as above	Chorus summarizes the dramatic resolution of Part II