BARTÓK THE PIONEER

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Musicians have always been interested in the music of other cultures. However, the field dedicated to the study of folk music, from where it came, and how it influenced culture is a more recent conception. Ethnomusicology is now a well-established field, with scholarly musicians traveling the world to hear and document folk music. They note the structures and styles of folk music that come from varying cultures and find out how those cultures have been impacted by the indigenous music. Some are also composers who arrange the folk songs for different ensembles, and are inevitably influenced by the music in which they are immersed. The father of this organized study of folk music was a Hungarian by the name of Béla Bartók. In the 20th century, he became insatiably interested in folk music. Bartók pioneered the field of study, now known as ethnomusicology, and his compositional style was directly influenced by his work.

Bartók felt a strong patriotism for Hungary, and the flame of his nationalistic spirit was easily lit. This was particularly true in 1903, when patriotic movements again resurfaced in Hungary. Bartók began to wear national dress and speak Hungarian rather than German. He also composed during this time period. One composition that particularly shows off his nationalistic spirit is Kossuth, a symphonic poem that he named after the revolutionary hero.¹

Though Bartók had been interested in nationalism all his life, he stumbled across the study of folk music quite accidentally. His first encounter with authentic Hungarian folk music was in 1904. While on vacation at a Slovakian resort, he

happened to overhear a peasant girl from Transylvania singing a popular folk tune:
“A red apple fell down into the mud / Whoever picks it up won’t do so in vain.”\(^2\) The maid’s name was Lidi Dósa.\(^3\) The song she sang had modal inflection and stanzaic structure, but differed from the café versions that he had previously considered authentic folk music. This encounter opened Bartók’s eyes to the vast possibilities of the folk song.\(^4\) Bartók spent more time with Dósa, transcribing the folk songs she knew by heart. Years later, at an interview in 1970, Dósa recalled:

[Bartók] liked the tune...[and] he wanted to note it down. After he noted it down, he went to the piano and played it, then he asked me whether he played it correctly. Well, it was exactly as I sang it... I had to sing continually, however, he only wanted to hear the ancient village tunes! He only liked those I had learned from my grandmother.\(^5\)

In the wake of Bartók’s encounter with Dósa came what is now known as ethnomusicology.\(^6\) He began his pioneering work hastily. By 1906, only two years after he had heard young Dósa singing, Bartók had already teamed up with another young musician named Zoltan Kodály.\(^7\) They traveled separately and systematically over the European countryside, carrying an Edison phonograph to record any folk music they could find. Progress was impeded during World Wars I and II, but Kodály continued to study the historical background of Hungarian folk music while Bartók collected as many recordings of folk music as he could find.\(^8\)

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Once Bartók had collected the folk melodies, the musical magic began. He would mix elements of the folk music with his own Western-influenced style in different ratios, or levels of complexity:

1. Genuine folk tunes are featured in a composition, and the invented material is of secondary importance. In other words, the folk tune is the “jewel” and the added parts function as its “mounting.”
2. In this level of construction, the folk tune and the invented material are treated equally.
3. The folk tune is presented as a king of musical “motto,” and the invented material is of greater significance.
4. The melody is composed in imitation of a genuine folk tune.
5. The highest level is that in which neither folk tune nor its imitation is used, but the work is pervaded by the atmosphere of folk music. Thus, for example, the music might have Hungarian pentatonic turns, Romanian bagpipe motif structure, Slovak modal features, and so on.9

Intrinsic to the folk music was a variety of influences, ranging from ancient Asian pentatonic scales to ecclesiastical Greek modes. Bartók said that these tonal systems “freed [him] from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys [and] eventually led to a new conception of the chromatic scale.”10 Because of this, many of his works are written in modes, which give Bartók’s music its distinctively Eastern sound.

Bartók’s musical output was extensive, including thirty-seven works for solo piano, seventeen chamber ensemble works, eleven concertos, seventeen orchestra pieces, sixteen songs for solo voice and piano, ten choruses, a vocal concerto, and three stage works. A majority of these works were sets, with as many as 153 sections, such as in Mikrokosmos.11 Only seven compositions were completed before his work with true folk music, and all the time spent writing this kind of

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music directly influenced Bartók’s style. In his autobiography, Bartók wrote that the elements of the “collected treasure,” or the recorded folk music, were of “decisive influence upon my work.”\textsuperscript{12}

The selection I will play today, \textit{Romanian Folk Dances, Sz. 56}, is a set of six Romanian folk dances. Bartók composed these dances in 1918, which was fairly early in his ethnomusicology career. In the dances, an original melody is composed as an imitation of a genuine folk tune, which puts them in the fourth category of “ratio” mentioned above.\textsuperscript{13} Bartók was incredibly specific regarding the time of the performance, with notes such as, “performance time is approximately 57 seconds.” Other performance notes about stylistic and interpretation are listed as well. I have observed these as closely as possible.

The first dance, \textit{Joc cu Bâta}, is translated as a Stick Dance. It is a consummation of manhood and consists of kicking the room’s ceiling. The key is distinctly modal, centering around A and using both the Dorian and Aeolian modes used.\textsuperscript{14}

The second dance is titled \textit{Brâul}, or Waistband Dance, and was originally a flute solo. Girls would perform it at gatherings, where they would clasp their arms around each other’s waists and form a circle. The piece is in D Dorian, and some Slavic rubato has been incorporated upon the repeat.\textsuperscript{15}

The title of the third dance is \textit{Pe loc}, or On the Spot. Though it sounds improvisatory, Bartók was purposeful in crafting the almost oriental feeling it gives.

It was originally for flute, with a tonal center of B. The raised fourth, E#, puts it in Lydian mode.\(^{16}\)

*Buciumeana*, or Dance of Butschum, is the fourth dance. Butschum is located in Transylvania, and the lofty melody above unexpected harmonies portrays it as an intriguing, ethnic place. This dance has Mixolydian and Arabic influences and was originally for violin solo. Bartók singled this section out as an example of category 1, in which a “used folk melody is the more important part of the work. The added accompaniment and eventual preludes and postludes may only be considered as the mounting of a jewel.”\(^ {17}\)

The fifth dance is titled *Poarga Româneasca*, or Romanian Polka. The dance centers around D with a raised fourth, making it in the Lydian mode. The editor notes that the acciaccaturas should be played almost simultaneously, which give it a raw, energetic sound.\(^ {18}\)

The final dance is called *Marunteul*, or Lively Dance. Like the Romanian Polka, the Lively Dance centers on D and contains G#, a hint of the Lydian mode. It was performed by couples and was similar to a courting dance. It is the most pianistically gymnastic of the six, and includes a tempo quickening at m. 17.

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Bibliography


