

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born: March 25, 1881, Sönnicolau Mare, Hungary

Died: September 26, 1945, New York

Excerpt from a paper (about Bartók's piano music) written by Jono Kornfeld:

As the 1800's came to a close, musicians and artists alike in Europe had had enough of the cultural status quo and a renaissance was at hand. To the forward-looking minds of the Avant-Garde (especially in Paris), striking out against the Academy as well as taking an interest in things non-Western European was a fashionable pastime. The grandiose, overly-emotional styles of the preceding Romantic era had, for many, boiled-over and the pot was left empty. For the very influential Societe des Artists Independents (of Paris), a new kind of subdued and introspective approach to the sensibilities of all artistic disciplines ranging from the stage to the canvas, was the new vogue.

Even keyboard music in particular was ripe for a change and face-lift. By that point in time, it had been pushed to the back-burner and, for example, the once-popular piano sonata of the Classical era did not pack enough punch by Romantic standards. The contemporary music of Bruckner, Mahler, Strauss and Wagner needed to be big and expressive in a way that only a large orchestra could handle. And similarly, the music needed to be immediately effective, which also, in the minds of these composers trained in the Viennese-German tradition, demanded a large orchestra in order to fulfill such a purpose.

Béla Bartók, guided by a certain extra-musical motivation, once wrote: "My real idea is the brotherhood of nations...I try to serve this in my music...and that is why I do not shut myself from any influence." And, like the emerging "Russian" sound, Bartók wanted to find a way to include his own nation of Hungary within this brotherhood by defining or stylizing a "Hungarian" (and therefore, non-Germanic) sound. In the very early 1900's, he took study trips through South-Eastern Europe, Turkey and North Africa where he collected and eventually cataloged hundreds of folk songs. His obsession with and subsequent organization of Hungarian and Eastern-European folk music (with its modal melodies and harmonies as well as its strong, but irregular meters) was easily his most important compositional influence. And, as we will see, he incorporated these non-Western European influences deeply into practically all his piano works.

If we were to put together a folk-derived Bartók pianistic language, prominent elements would include a pronounced sense of dance-like rhythms (but often with irregular meter changes), modal melodies and harmonies, rapid percussive effects, an economy of material, tone clusters, a blend of tonal, bitonal and somewhat atonal harmonies, contrapuntal techniques, and traditional forms.

Virtually all of Bartók's piano works (many whose titles or sub-titles include the words "folk-tune" or "dance-tune" along with the tune's country of origin) are direct derivations of folk song melodies, with either their original harmonies or carefully developed reharmonizations.

Also pregnant with folk tune derivations is Bartók's pedagogical work *Microcosmos* (1926-37), a collection of 153 short pieces in six volumes arranged in a graduated order of difficulty for the young piano student. Throughout the works are prime examples of all of Bartók's idiomatic signatures: harmonized folk melodies; contrapuntal concepts; modal and polytonal exercises; presentations of form and motivic development; unusual rhythmic problems. Although primarily a teaching tool, plenty of the works in the last two volumes are fit for concert performance, such as "Boating," "Merry Andrew," "From the Diary of a Fly," and "Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm."

In simplistic, but not inaccurate terms, one might describe Bartók as "hot", with a seemingly innate urge and ability to pick a philosophical bone with the mainstream music of his times. In other basic terms, Bartók looked within (respectfully and appreciatively) pre-existing forms and styles and drastically reinterpreted them.