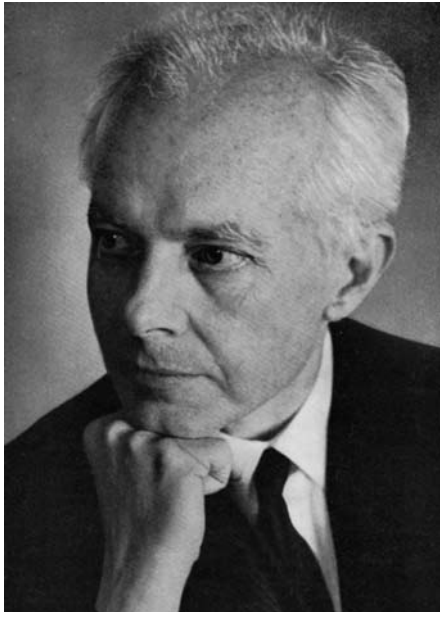
A PORTRAIT

Béla Bartók



1881–1945

Preface

Béla Bartók created one of the most distinctive and challenging sound-worlds in twentieth-century music: landscapes of the mind in which the very nature of sound is re-examined and in the process revitalised. While Bartók the man remains an enigma (there have been suggestions that he was in some way autistic), the works he created have achieved a popularity in the concert hall denied to most of his modernist contemporaries – in itself a testimony to the lucidity and vitality of his music. Today Bartók continues to influence young composers (not only in the classical fields) and to fascinate a rising generation of performers. Clearly for many there is something enduringly 'contemporary' about his music, yet it is presented in a way that makes it accessible and exhilarating to those with no musical schooling. How did he achieve this? Bartók would probably have said – if he could have been persuaded to drop his natural modesty for a moment – that he did it by going back to nature, to the essentials of music in 'uncultivated' folksong and to the numbers and patterns revealed in the petals of flowers and the drones of insects. With the aid of the CDs accompanying this portrait it is possible to follow him closely on his path to create a language that was both new and rooted in the old, and in the process to understand and enjoy that music all the more deeply.

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	Jenő Jandó, piano	8.557821–22

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, BB 114

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	Belgian Radio and Television Philharmonic Orchestra / Alexander Rahbari	8.550261

Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs, BB 79

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5	No. 2: Andante	1:27
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György Pauk, violin / Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra / Antoni Wit 8.554321

TT 77:03

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Jenő Jandó, piano / Budapest Symphony Orchestra / András Ligeti — 8.550771

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György Pauk, violin / Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra / Antoni Wit — 8.554321

9 **Allegro barbaro, BB 63** — 2:49

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Belgian Radio and Television Philharmonic Orchestra / Alexander Rahbari — 8.550261

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Jenő Jandó, piano / Budapest Symphony Orchestra / András Ligeti — 8.550771

TT 77:18

Béla Bartók: A Portrait

by

Stephen Johnson

Introduction

Both as man and artist, Béla Bartók is a fascinating yet deeply paradoxical figure. He was revered as a great teacher, and was later celebrated in his native Hungary as a pioneering collector and cataloguer of his country's folk music. A man of strong, uncompromising principles, he loathed injustice and snobbery, and appears to have had a very modern abhorrence of racism and sexism. In all of this he was an inspiration to many. Yet he also clearly had little patience with human frailty, and was wary of any overt display of warmth or tenderness – on his own part as much as anyone else's. Absorbed as he was in the music and culture of eastern Europe's rural communities, and concerned as he was by their fate in the modern mechanised world, he remained curiously detached in his relations with the folk musicians he met and immortalised through his work. As an adult he had no close friends and, aside from his mother and, briefly, a young violinist he was in love with in his twenties, he opened his heart to no one. Only in the music do we find the truth of the man – his feelings as well as his artistic ideals – and even there he can be guarded, so that it is sometimes unclear whether what we are hearing is the 'real' Bartók or an ingeniously wrought mask. However powerful the emotions expressed, there continues to be something enigmatic about the personality behind them. Alongside the harrowing intensity manifest in such masterpieces as *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936) and the String Quartet No. 6 (1939),

there is at the same time a sense of objective, even clinical, intellectual control that hardly ever wavers.

Perhaps the most intriguing paradox of all bears directly on Bartók's long-term significance in musical history. He is rightly held up as one of the great innovators of the twentieth century. After Bartók, attitudes to rhythm, instrumental colour, and even such basic music materials as the scales a musician uses were changed irrevocably. Every medium Bartók touched – solo piano, orchestra, string quartet – was transformed into something fresh, capable of new kinds of expression and poetry. His discoveries and inventions were a major stimulus not only for later classical modernists – his fellow Hungarian György Ligeti, for example – but for the jazz pianist Dave Brubeck and the rock guitarist and composer Frank Zappa, both of whom used the kind of complex 'multiple' rhythms that Bartók developed in his works (see the chapter called 'Dancing Rhythms', below). Through musicians like Brubeck and Zappa, Bartók's influence extends into musical fields he could scarcely have contemplated, and touches performers, many of whom probably do not even know his name. And yet this great moderniser was not a typical 'modernist'. Unlike his fellow radicals Arnold Schoenberg and Edgard Varèse, Bartók was no believer in the necessity or inherent rightness of historical progress. In his folk music research he was looking not so much for a way forward as for a way back – a means of rediscovering life's original, primal purity, and thus reuniting human beings with the natural world from which he felt they were becoming increasingly alienated.

Bartók looked upon this vital consciousness of nature as being drowned out by the noise of the city and the threat of advancing technology – the very facets of twentieth-century life that many other modernists found so exciting and inspiring. The violinist Yehudi Menuhin knew Bartók during the composer's final, painful years of exile in the United States. Menuhin remembered – as many others did – that Bartók often seemed happier with children and animals than he did with sophisticated adults:

> Animals would come to him with extraordinary confidence in his sympathy, and this sympathy was one and the same as his feeling for human beings who were rooted in their land. The longing he felt for such natural societies is demonstrated, I believe, in the greater simplicity of his last works, written in his race with death in the unfriendly urban environment of New York.

This may sound like nostalgia – the heart-sickness of a man who feels left behind by the unstoppable progress of civilisation, quixotically hoping that somehow the clock of history can be made to count backwards. Yet it was in nature – in, for instance, the undeveloped tranquillity of Saranac Lake, which became an important creative retreat during his American years – that Bartók found the inspiration for some of his most scintillatingly original, forward-looking ideas. In our age the word 'natural' is often used to convey images of unsullied harmony:

going back to nature is frequently represented as a means of escaping from the dissonance of modern existence. Bartók's nature-inspired music, however, is rich in bracing, acerbic discord, and filled with sounds and textures that can remind the listener of the weirdness and wanton violence of the natural world. It is hard to imagine anything less like the idyllic, truly nostalgic pastoralism of his contemporary and fellow folksong enthusiast Frederick Delius, with whom Bartók was for a while in close correspondence. Even so, once the initial shock is overcome, the Bartókian sound-world can also be a surprisingly beautiful place: refreshing, intensely stimulating, as often delicate as harshly emphatic, and at times offering something close to a religious sense of awe at nature's fecundity and capacity for self-renewal. Alongside the radical experimenter we also find a composer who wants to bring us back to an awareness of the first principles of both music and life. The Bartók who created some of the most arrestingly new harmonies of twentieth-century music also came to believe that rejection of tonality – the path followed by his slightly older contemporary Schoenberg – was a step too far. 'We created through nature,' he wrote. 'An atonal folk music, in my opinion, is unthinkable.'

Nor was there any question of his formulating or following an all-embracing rational system, as Schoenberg had done in his twelve-note works, and scores of composers were to do in the decades after the Second World War. 'I never created new theories in advance,' said Bartók towards the end of his life.

> I hated such ideas. I had, of course, a very definite feeling about certain directions to take, but at the time of the work I did not care about the designations which would apply to those directions or to their sources. This did not mean that I composed without set plans and without sufficient control. The plans were concerned with the spirit of the new work and with technical problems (for instance, formal structure involved by the spirit of the work), *all more or less instinctively felt* [author's italics].

For all his formidable analytical intelligence, Bartók ultimately placed his trust in nature. It is this, perhaps more than any other feature, that makes his music so alive today, and that may make him the most lastingly influential of the twentieth-century modernists for generations of musicians to come.

This is the introductory chapter of Béla Bartók: A Portrait.
The full biographical essay, illustrated with photographs, is available to buy.
For more details, please visit www.naxos.com.