

## A Context for Béla Bartók on the Eve of World War II: The Violin Concerto (1938)

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Except for the Sixth String Quartet, with its *Mesto* spreading ever more cancerously with every recurrence and finally engulfing the whole last movement, Bartók's last European works (the *Divertimento*, *Contrasts*, and the Violin Concerto) are notoriously difficult to relate to the political tensions in Hungary at the time of their composition. Of these works, the Violin Concerto is especially perplexing, for its lush lyricism seems to clash most oddly with its forebodingly late date of completion on 31 December 1938. In his discussion of the work, György Kroó includes a description of the increasing unease in Hungary preceding the Second World War and Bartók's agitation in the face of Nazi expansion. Finding no direct connection between the mood of the Violin Concerto and the tenor of the time, Kroó resorts to dispensing with the disjunction by simply attributing it to "unknown laws between life and art, man and artist."<sup>1</sup>

Halsey Stevens, addressing interpretation on a far more local level, comes to nearly the opposite conclusion. Hearing caustic sarcasm in the orchestral outbursts following the "twelve-tone" phrases of the second theme area of the first movement (mm. 92-95) he reads this theme as direct criticism of Schoenberg's dodecaphonic style.<sup>2</sup>

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1. György Kroó, *A Guide to Bartók*, trans. Ruth Pataki and Maria Steiner (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1974), 204.

2. Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 248.

Like most opposites, Kroó's and Stevens's interpretations share a common assumption: for there to be a connection between a composition and a given context, the work must address that context specifically and directly. Kroó, taking the significant context to be Nazi Germany's increasing influence and focusing on what he takes to be the spirit of the work as a whole, perceives no such connection; Stevens, taking advanced compositional techniques of the 1930s as the significant context and focusing on a few startling moments, finds one. Neither position can be disproved; neither is convincing. Although Hungary in the late 1930s was undeniably a place of extreme tension and Bartók was well aware of Schoenberg's compositional practices, neither critic allows for a multivalent, flexible, or indirect manifestation of his chosen context in Bartók's work. Furthermore, though Bartók's letters from this time reveal him to be highly disturbed by the rise of National Socialism, we must not forget that these documents were private, written to confidantes, whereas the Violin Concerto is a large-scale, commissioned work in one of the most public genres. To argue persuasively for a connection between aspects of the musical style of the Violin Concerto and the relevant political and musical contexts of its time without trivializing either work or context requires a delicate balancing of general mood and specific circumstance, public and private. Most of all it demands a good hard look at Bartók's position in Hungary in the years 1937 and 1938 and a sufficiently historicized notion of what might constitute his artistic response to it.

To put events surrounding the composition of the Violin Concerto in perspective, our account begins after the work's completion at a time of political tension in Hungary that Bartók anticipated, but never personally experienced. We then turn back to the early 1930s to work toward an un-

derstanding of Bartók's relationship to the conditions in the later part of the decade before relating these contexts to musical details of the composition.

### Getting Out

In the spring of 1941, Hungarian prime minister Count Pál Teleki faced a difficult decision: he could either offer aid to the Germans in their planned invasion of Yugoslavia, or withhold it and risk almost certain German invasion of Hungary. Teleki was no liberal. Having been the leading champion of the infamous *numerus clausus*, the 1920 legislation that limited Jewish admission to the Universities, and an instrumental supporter of other anti-Jewish regulations, Teleki had robust anti-Semitic credentials.<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite a domestic policy congenial to the Germans, Teleki was known as an "anglophile," the unofficial designation for politicians in favor of official neutrality for Hungary.<sup>4</sup> The profundity of Teleki's dilemma, his helplessness in the face of the contradiction between his hopes for a non-aligned Hungary and the realities that now confronted him, is best conveyed by his reaction: he escaped responsibility for the decision by putting a bullet through his head.

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3. In addition to the *numerus clausus*, in 1939 Teleki introduced the "second Jewish law" [*második zsidótörvény*], which cut Jewish occupational quotas from twenty to six percent in the professions and to twelve percent of the payroll of salaried employees in business. See Andrew János, *The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary: 1825-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 302; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1960), 511-13; and Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 118-24.

4. Following the Munich agreement of September 1938, Germany returned portions of the territory that Hungary had lost in the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Like the majority of Hungarians, Teleki supported the Munich agreement.

Bartók's political sympathies were far more liberal than Teleki's; his departure for the United States on 12 October 1940 was a more timely and infinitely less violent exit than the prime minister's suicide several months later. Yet, that even a man of Teleki's quasi-fascist convictions would share Bartók's sense that abdication was the only moral response to Hungary's increasing attraction to the magnet of radical National Socialism illustrates the tension of the political atmosphere. It was becoming increasingly clear that there was near zero tolerance of neutrality.

Teleki's and Bartók's respective departures were tacit admissions that the gap between the various positions they embodied and the current political reality was, at least for the foreseeable future, unbridgeable. However, to acknowledge that Bartók's decision to leave Hungary represented a cul-de-sac on the road of negotiation is to imply that Bartók had been negotiating until that time. In other words, until Bartók left Hungary for good, he must have been finding a way to negotiate between his ideals and official policies. For, as Hitler's radical brand of fascism swept Germany and began to hold sway in Hungary, compromise was not optional, it was a fact of life, a matter of survival; it need not imply moral or artistic prostitution.<sup>5</sup> Lucky were those who, like Bartók, found a way to produce valuable art through the end of the decade. Luckier still was the fact that Bartók was well enough connected outside of Hungary to be able to leave when the time came, and, unlike Prime

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5. René Leibowitz's infamous attack on Bartók as a compromiser of Schoenbergian ideals of modern music ["Béla Bartók ou la possibilité de compromis dans la musique contemporaine," *Les temps modernes* 25 (October 1947): 706-34] has obvious political overtones despite its ostensibly "purely artistic" charge. I would like to thank Danielle Fosler-Lussier for pointing out the political implications of Leibowitz's article. The subject will be treated in depth in her forthcoming dissertation on the postwar reception of Bartók's music.

Minister Teleki, politically unimportant enough to arrange for a peaceful exit.

### *Negotiating with Germany*

One of the best examples of how Bartók was put in a position of negotiation in the 1930s, and how that position has often been simplified, can be seen in Bartók's professional relationship to Germany. Because he performed in that country for the last time exactly one week before Hitler assumed the chancellorship on 30 January 1933, Bartók has often been characterized as having "boycotted" Hitler's Germany.<sup>6</sup> But, as recent research by János Breuer has helped clarify, describing Bartók's absence from the concert stages of the Third Reich as a boycott ascribes to Bartók an intentionality he may not have possessed.<sup>7</sup>

Although the fact that Bartók did not perform in Germany after 23 January 1933 can be ascertained by anyone willing to wade through the appropriate documents, Bartók himself advertised it in a program note he supplied to Switzerland's *La Radio* in Lausanne (17 February 1939):<sup>8</sup>

The first performance of the [Second Piano Concerto] took place in Frankfurt on 23 January 1933; the radio orchestra was conducted by

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6. For example, János Demény claims that "after his concert in Germany at the beginning of 1933, Bartók severed all connections to that 'pestilent' country." János Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén—teremtő évek—világhódító alkotások (1927-1940)" (Béla Bartók at the height of his career—creative years—world-conquering works [1927-1940]), in *Zenatudományi tanulmányok* 10, ed. Bence Szabolcsi and Dénes Bartha (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1962), 451.

7. Breuer has published his finding in "Bartók a Harmadik Birodalomban" (Bartók in the Third Reich), *Muzsika* 10 (1995): 9-12. Further page references to this article will be made in the text.

8. A complete record of Bartók's concert appearances is housed at the Budapest Bartók Archives.

Hans Rosbaud and I played the piano solo. (This was my last appearance in Germany.)<sup>9</sup>

The parenthesis accentuates like a stage whisper—calling attention to the phrase while acknowledging its peripheral relationship to the subject of the program note proper. But, while by 1939 Bartók's absence from the roll call of artists performing in Germany was a source of pride, for several years between 1933 and 1938 it had been a source of recurrent frustration. Indeed, Bartók may have publicized his avoidance of Germany in a program note to the Second Piano Concerto not only because this was the last work he played in that country, but because it was the one he had most wanted to play there again.

Between April 1935 and July 1938 Bartók was invited to play in Germany no less than ten times. Eight of these invitations involved a perpetually postponed tour, which, among a number of other appearances, was always to have included performances of the Second Piano Concerto with the Berlin Philharmonic (Breuer, 9). That Bartók was initially neither a passive recipient of German overtures nor ignorant of the intrusion of new German politics into artistic affairs is suggested by a 4 February 1935 draft of the letter Bartók wrote to officials of the *Reichsmusikkammer*. In response to their inquiry about his availability and repertoire for playing with the Berlin Philharmonic in spring 1935, the draft shows that Bartók had originally recommended his Second Piano Concerto because he had "already played the Rhapsody op. 1 under Bruno Walter and the First Piano Concerto under Erich Kleiber in Berlin."<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Bartók was savvy enough later to cross out the

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9. Translation taken from *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 423.

10. Budapest Bartók Archives #BH II/67.

names of these men, both of whom were by that time much-publicized refugees from Hitler's Germany.

Furthermore, having played the Second Piano Concerto with Otto Klemperer in Vienna shortly after Klemperer's dismissal from the Opera in Berlin in 1933, Bartók must have known of the circumstances forcing Jews out of Germany. Still, Germany, with its abundance of orchestras and modern music festivals, had provided by far the largest market for Bartók's music from the record-breaking 1925-26 season, with its fifty performances of *Dance Suite*, through the season 1932-33. Additionally, Germany would have been a convenient stopover on the way to many of Bartók's other concert destinations, especially the Netherlands, Belgium, and England. Although the number of performances of Bartók's music in Germany dropped significantly after Hitler came to power, there were at least forty-seven performances of Bartók's music between 1933 and 1942 (including thirteen performances of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*); Germany therefore remained a significant forum for Bartók's music (Breuer, 10).

Still, it should be stressed that if Bartók remained interested in performing and having his works performed in Germany through the time of the Anschluss, these were hardly goals he wanted to attain at any price. As early as 4 April 1934, Universal Edition, Bartók's publisher and concert manager for his German concerts, requested proof of Bartók's non-Jewish origin. The letter includes a transcription of a communication from Universal Edition's representative in Berlin:

The department of race has stated that Bartók is not Aryan. This claim must be examined. It is of greatest importance that this be clarified here. I ask you therefore to make all the necessary arrangements for Bartók's papers to be obtained and for me to be provided with copies of them. Bartók is again a subject of interest to conductors and every false rumor must be decisively opposed.<sup>11</sup>

A member of Universal Edition's Vienna office continued in more conciliatory, but no less chilling terms:

We know your position in these matters and it is far from our intention to ask you on purely business grounds to take a position that you might absolutely not accept. The new German terminology is not concerned with whether one is Aryan (which is not at all to be found in Hungary), but above all, whether or not he is of Jewish origin. Several of our composers were inclined, in order to facilitate further performances in Germany, to provide this type of proof in which they supplied copies of their baptismal certificates and the marriage certificates of their parents and grandparents. We give these facts to you without any commentary and consider ourselves to be obliged only to notify you and we must leave it to your own judgement whether or not you will provide us with the necessary papers for forwarding to Berlin.<sup>12</sup>

As the tone of the letter from Universal's Vienna office anticipates, Bartók had no intention of complying with their request. In his words: "I would not dream of sending certificates of baptism to Germany even if I had them at hand."<sup>13</sup> Bartók's refusal to cooperate with his publisher in the face of German pressure, a stance he would take again in 1938, shows that when Bartók clearly saw himself being asked to make a moral compromise, he was indeed willing to take a stand.<sup>14</sup>

In many of Bartók's dealings with German organizations in the some half-dozen years before the Anschluss, however, the choices between moral rights and wrongs were not so clearly articulated. As a non-Jewish citizen of a country officially friendly to Germany, Bartók's lack of

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11. *Documenta Bartókiana* 3, ed. Denijs Dille (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968), 170. Original in German, all translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Quoted in Kroó, *A Guide to Bartók*, 174.

14. For documentation of Bartók's 1938 refusal, see his letter to Mrs. Müller-Widmann, 13 April 1938, in *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. János Demény, trans. Péter Balabán and István Farkas (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 267.

cooperation in the documentation of his racial background was apparently overlooked in favor of his nationality. Thus, Bartók could at once occupy a moral high ground *vis-à-vis* Germany while he continued to be approached about performing and his works continued to be played there.

Ambiguity as to Bartók's proper status in Germany appears to be the most likely explanation for the constant on-again/off-again that resulted in the ultimate cancellation or indefinite postponement of all ten of his invitations to Germany beginning in 1935. In light of the evidence we have demonstrating that Bartók was willing to accept all the invitations except the last, which arrived after the Anschluss (Breuer, 11), there seems to have been an ambivalence toward him on the part of some German administrators. This would explain Bartók's report on 3 February 1937 that:

I was to travel to Berlin in April.... But now—after two years of negotiations and lots of delays—those Nazis have again postponed the concert, [this time] to the beginning of June (if not *ad graecas calendas*): there must be a lot of confusion there, they themselves don't even know what they want.<sup>15</sup>

But if "those Nazi" concert organizers in Berlin were sending mixed signals to Bartók, Bartók was also making himself hard to pin down by defending his moral high ground with strict attention to financial detail. While he had taken care not to include offending names in his letter to the *Reichsmusikkammer* in 1935, in the same letter Bartók had potentially complicated matters by asking for payment in Swiss francs.

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15. Letter to Sándor Albrecht, 3 February 1937, in *Bartók Béla levelei* (Béla Bartók's letters), ed. János Demény (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó 1976), 545-46.

## The Radio Affair

A clearer example of mixing money and politics is the infamous Radio affair. In early October 1937, Bartók, in a private communication to officials of the Hungarian Radio, forbade them from sharing his broadcasts with the German or Italian Radios. This information was leaked to the Hungarian press, and in a clumsy attempt at political damage control, Endre Hlatky, artistic director of the Radio, tried to deny the obvious:

Do not think even for a minute that Bartók was led to take this step for political reasons. Everyone who knows the world-famous composer and pianist knows that it has always been his principle that art and politics cannot be combined.<sup>16</sup>

Bartók's own response to the news coverage was considerably more sophisticated in its careful, detached wording that appears to focus entirely on fact:

I see with sorrow that this matter has become public, because I consider this matter to be a private one concerning only me and the Radio company. But if it has already become public then I am forced to explain why I asked the Hungarian Radio not to offer my performances to the German and Italian Radios. The reason for this is simply that I never appeared as a performer on either the Italian Radio or that of the Third Reich, indeed these two radio companies never asked me to perform. I do not consider it to be fair that these two radio companies would simply receive my performances for the Hungarian Radio for free. I must emphasize specifically that I am talking only about giving my performances, this does not apply to my works, because I naturally cannot get involved in that, that is an entirely different matter.<sup>17</sup>

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16. "Bartók Béla nem engedi meg, hogy előadói szerepléseit a Rádió Német és Olaszországnak közvetítse" (Bartók does not allow his performances to be broadcast on German and Italian Radio), *Pesti Napló*, 10 October 1937; reprinted in János Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 627-28.

17. *Ibid.*

In fact, Bartók had been scheduled to give a recital for the Radio in Berlin in April 1937, and the cancellation of this engagement may have accounted for a portion of Bartók's lack of generosity toward the German Radio.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Bartók was furious over Germany's decision to stop paying rental fees for orchestral parts obtained from Universal Edition, a fact Bartók became aware of when he received a semiannual financial statement early in 1937 (Breuer, 11).

Despite Bartók's growing hostility to German policies, he repeatedly tried to avoid having his opinions publicized. This is shown again in late March 1938 when, in the heated political atmosphere directly following the Anschluss, two Hungarian papers re-opened the affair of his Radio ban from the preceding fall. Now, in response to an article reporting the ban published in the January 1938 issue of *Die Musik*,<sup>19</sup> the Hungarian papers ran to Bartók's "defense" by reiterating the "apolitical" motivation for Bartók's action.<sup>20</sup> Dismayed that the affair was attracting publicity once again, Bartók responded with another carefully worded letter to the editor:

[It has] come to my attention that in one of your issues of last week they returned to an affair of mine that we could rightly consider closed with my published response in the November *Pesti Napló* [Pest Journal]. Now they have again published my statement with the mistaken addition that I made it for or sent it to the German officials. I would be very obliged to you for your publication of the fact that to this date, that is until the twenty-seventh of March 1938, I

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18. Two letters from Bartók's manager André Schulhof mention the possibility of Bartók playing on German Radio: 16 July 1936 (Budapest Bartók Archives #BH 1374) and 7 December 1936 (#BH 1378).

19. "Rundfunk," *Die Musik* 30, no. 4 (January 1938): 287.

20. See "Mi igaz abból, hogy Bartók nem engedélyezte műveinek közvetítését az olasz és német rádiók számára?" (What is true about Bartók not allowing his works to be broadcast on Italian and German Radio?), *A Zene*, 16 March 1938, 187; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 662-63; and "Bartók Béla megmagyarázza rádió tilalmát" (Béla Bartók explains his radio boycott), *Az Est*, 22 March 1938; reprinted *ibid.*, 663.

have never made any kind of statement for the German officials, I did not send them anything of the kind.... Whose interest can it be in to continually stir up this matter?<sup>21</sup>

As Bartók seems to have been aware, any report of an action as politically charged as his negotiations with the Hungarian Radio was potentially dangerous. In a climate in which "anglophile" was the term used to describe "neutrality," accounts of Bartók's actions as "apolitical" were likely and perhaps even intended to be read as the exact opposite of their surface meaning.

Bartók's two communications to the Hungarian papers regarding the Radio ban are finely-tuned pieces of writing designed to defuse as much as possible the political content of his stance. While his reluctance to have his views publicized was in part due to the potential dangers of offending the Germans and the pro-German sympathizers in Hungary, Bartók could also have wanted to avoid too close an association with various anti-German factions in Hungary. Articles focusing on his opposition to Germany were likely to be at least as disturbing to Bartók for their domestic implications as they were for their potential to destroy what little relationship he had with institutions in the Third Reich. In Hungary, opposition to Germany was a characteristic common to many factions, from the extreme right, the fascist Turanians—who saw the Magyars (not the Germans) as the true master race—to the far left, the communists. Publicity that painted him as an outspoken opponent of Germany thrust Bartók into a position of prominence that had the potential to allow his stance to be co-opted by any number of political camps. As we will see in a later section, this did in fact occur on at least one

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21. *Az Est*, 27 March 1938; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 663. In the first sentence of the quotation Bartók remembers incorrectly. He wrote the letter in question to the *Pesti Napló* on 10 October 1937, not in November.

occasion, but in general, whatever Bartók's privately held convictions, he wanted no such high-profile role.

Writing his program note for the Lausanne performance of his Second Piano Concerto in 1939, Bartók had a right to be proud of not having played in Germany since Hitler had officially come to power. If this fact shows neither his lack of desire to perform there nor an unwillingness to associate with the cultural institutions of the Third Reich, it is also a testimony to Bartók's skill as a negotiator. For, if he could not always get what he wanted, at least he understood the importance of ambiguity in a time of increasing political polarization.

### *Hungary and the Politics of Withdrawal*

At the same time as Bartók was banning the Hungarian Radio from sharing his broadcasts with the German and Italian Radios, he was enjoying what was for him unprecedented recognition at home. To appreciate Bartók's position in Hungary by 1937, we must briefly trace it from its low point earlier in the decade.

Perhaps the best evidence of Bartók's sense of rejection by Hungary are the events surrounding his fiftieth birthday on 25 March 1931. While he accepted the Legion of Honor bestowed on him by the French government, Bartók simply ignored the Hungarian government's invitation for him to attend the ceremony for the Corvin Award.<sup>22</sup> The contempt Bartók apparently felt toward the government appears to

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22. The Corvin Award was instituted by the Hungarian Regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, in recognition of Hungary's greatest minds. Twelve major and sixty minor awards were to have been awarded and Bartók was slated for one of the minor awards. See Andor Földes, "My First Meeting with Bartók," *Etude* 73, no. 3 (March 1955): 12, 49-50; reprinted in Malcolm Gillies, *Bartók Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 79-80.

have been mutual, for two days after his birthday the Hungarian Opera cancelled what was to have been the Hungarian premiere of *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Sándor Jemnitz, one of Bartók's most vocal Hungarian apologists, summed up the odd relationship between Bartók and his country with a messianic metaphor in the first paragraph of a birthday tribute to the composer:

The definite alienation of Jesus from his people began with his revolutionary step of admitting non-Jews to baptism. For by so doing he opened a wide cleft in the sacred unity till then subsisting intact between race and religion, and, through this breach, carried the theological-ethical conceptions of his brethren—the jealously guarded, priceless intellectual treasure of the nation—far beyond the national boundaries to form an international fellowship.... The nation [Hungary] assumes that mood of cool, reverential aloofness which has always characterized the people's attitude toward precisely its greatest masters.... An artist who would obey the traditional charge of such an [irredentist] exigency and fulfill the requirements of the day, would need no long consideration, but simply make lavish use of the commonplace expedient of a pathetic-patriotic terminology for stirring up passion. He must dare to employ without scruple the slogans of patriotic banality common to all nations....<sup>23</sup>

Jemnitz paints Bartók as Hungary's neglected Messiah, officially ignored because he refused to mine the ever-popular vein of irredentist clichés that formed the bulwark of Hungarian nationalism between the two world wars.<sup>24</sup> As proof of the injustice of Bartók's neglect at home Jemnitz went on to cite Bartók's high reputation abroad. While not without some truth, the disparity between the international and domestic appreciation of Bartók was consistently and

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23. Alexander Jemnitz, "Béla Bartók," *Musical Quarterly* 19 (1933): 260-66; 260, 262. This tribute was originally published in *Népszava*, 25 March 1931; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 398-99.

24. Because Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory in the peace treaty signed at Trianon (4 June 1920), a highly popular movement to recapture that land dominated interwar Hungarian policies. Hitler's promise to reinstate pre-Trianon Hungary was one of the major factors leading to Hungary's alliance with Germany in the Second World War.

productively exaggerated by a few members of the Hungarian press. Ironically, the result was that Bartók's reputation abroad rested to a certain extent on his status as Hungary's foremost composer, while in Hungary the situation was reversed: his reputation (not to be mistaken for popularity) rested on his status as Hungary's only living composer to be widely recognized in elite musical circles abroad.

Bartók's reaction to the neglect of his compositions in Hungary was to withdraw completely from public appearances in Budapest. He stopped giving concerts there altogether from 1930 to 1934 and did not take part in performances of his own compositions from 1930 to 1937. In a letter to Joseph Szigeti, who wanted to include one of Bartók's compositions in a joint recital in 1935, Bartók explains the reason for his boycott of Budapest—acknowledging that it was due to the psychological effect of the poor or indifferent reception he experienced there rather than an objectively better reaction abroad:

I do not play, I cannot play my own works in Budapest. There are a thousand and one reasons for this. I would prefer not to play them anywhere, just as I am fed up with the whole business of giving concerts. I am sick and tired of it. But the trouble is I need money. For this reason I am compelled to undertake as much of the profession—always alien to me—as I can bear. Of course, neither is there any sense in my playing my own works abroad, but I do it regardless of how people behave toward us [me]. I have nothing to do with them. But in Budapest I expect something different from what I receive—and I am not able to endure this in any other way than by withdrawing completely.<sup>25</sup>

Withdrawal for Bartók meant not only a retreat from the Budapest concert stage, but immersion in the solitary world

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25. Letter to Szigeti, 10 August 1935, in *Bartók Béla levelei*, 506. In place of his own Sonata Bartók suggests substituting Ravel's Sonata for Violin and Piano. That Bartók and Szigeti played Ravel's Violin Sonata together may help explain some similarities between the opening of the Sonata's second movement, "Blues," and the opening of the first movement of *Contrasts*, dedicated to Szigeti and Benny Goodman.

of folk-music research. Thus, in the fall of 1934, Bartók succeeded in obtaining a transfer of his civil service position as professor of piano at the Academy of Music to a position transcribing and codifying a large collection of field recordings of Hungarian folk music at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

There is considerable irony in Bartók's escape from the bright lights of Budapest's public stages to the dark isolation of the folk-music studio at the Academy of Sciences. A good part of Bartók's desire to withdraw stemmed from distaste for a government and public unsympathetic to modern art and suspicious of Bartók's broad interest in folk music of many ethnicities. Yet it was in great part the hyper-nationalist, irredentist tendencies of this government—looking for justification of Hungary as the purest, most ancient culture in central Europe—that led to the allocation of funds for folk-related research and made it financially feasible for Bartók to withdraw into folk music.

Just as he was not ignorant of German policies in 1935, Bartók was not innocent of his own government's position. He understood the government's reasons for supporting research on Hungarian music and knew just what they hoped he would find. In his article "Our Folk Music and the Folk Music of Neighboring Peoples" he gets right to the heart of the matter. While beginning with a disclaimer—"I would have made the results of my investigation public even if they did not favor us"—Bartók continues:

It is with all the greater pleasure that I establish a result that can hardly be imagined to be more favorable.... **The old and new melodic material of Hungarian cultural wealth is a cultural treasure that we did not borrow from our present neighbors, but that we gave to them.**<sup>26</sup>

This article is a detailed technical discussion running more than two dozen pages. For those unwilling to wade through

the specifics, however, the main point, the last sentence (quoted above), was the only one completely highlighted in boldface in the March 1934 publication.

While Bartók continued to paint his relationship with various Hungarian authorities in grim tones for some time, the publication of "Our Folk Music and the Folk Music of Neighboring Peoples" appears to have planted seeds in a newly fertile soil that would eventually produce the greatest appreciation for Bartók's work in Hungary during his lifetime.<sup>27</sup> The first sign of this change was his transfer to the Academy of Sciences, which, although he had applied for it several years in a row, was finally approved on 27 July 1934, just four months after the appearance of "Our Folk Music and the Folk Music of Neighboring Peoples."

In spite of the irony of Bartók withdrawing from the politics around him by focusing on what was the most politically charged aspect of his work, and in spite of the fact that Bartók seems to have had enough feel for politics to win himself the possibility of doing the work he loved, it would be a mistake to regard Bartók's folk-music research itself as having been conducted in the service of a Hungarian nationalist agenda.<sup>28</sup> To the end of his life, Bartók

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26. The essay was originally published as a separate volume of the series *Népszerű zenefüzetek* (Popular music notebooks), no. 3, ed. Antal Molnár; reprinted in *Bartók Béla összegyűjtött írásai I*, ed. András Szöllösy (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1966), 403-61. The passage quoted is the last passage in a version dated 15 January 1934. The March publication includes a postscript based on Bartók's just-completed research in Bucharest that he implies further strengthens his findings regarding the unique qualities of Hungarian folk music.

27. On 28 April 1934, in a letter to a German acquaintance who had requested assistance in arranging concerts in Hungary, Bartók reported wryly: "I unfortunately have no influence [in Hungary]: my relations with the Opera are very bad, with Hubay [director of the Academy of Music] utterly bad, with Dohnányi [conductor of the Philharmonic Society] very chilly, with the government quite bad, and I am just on the verge of having a quarrel with the Radio, though we have never been on particularly friendly terms." *Bartók Béla levelei*, 479.

maintained a belief in being able to seal his "purely musical" folk-music research off from politics. This was not due to ignorance of the politically volatile potential of this work, but to the function of folk-music research in his life as a means for insulation and withdrawal.

It is all the more surprising, then, that Bartók's project of classifying Hungarian folk music at the Academy of Sciences did not increase the extent of his withdrawal from public life in Hungary. While it might seem logical to expect that his isolation would have increased throughout the decade as the Hungarian government drifted closer to the ever more radical manifestation of National Socialism in Germany, in fact, more nearly the opposite occurred.

### *Appreciation at Home*

In 1934, at the same time as the Hungarian government began to allocate more money for folk-music research, Gyula Gömbös, the prime minister, also instituted a program known as the New Spiritual Front (*Új szellemi front*). The main goal of this movement was to gain the support of the intelligentsia, specifically a prominent group known as the Folk Writers (*Népi írók*). The unifying characteristic of the Folk Writers was their focus on Hungarian village life as a medium for social criticism. While the group was potentially a dangerous source of opposition to the government, it shared the government's aggressively nationalistic stance. Although Bartók shared their belief in a conception

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28. The extent to which Bartók was able to detach himself from the surrounding political climate in the interest of folk-music research is demonstrated by a plan Bartók drafted for the "purely musical" study of German folk music in preparation for his move to the United States in 1940. See Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók: The Man and His Work*, trans. Gyula Gulyás (Budapest: Gondolat, 1988), 213-14.

of the nation rooted in its peasantry, he tended to remain aloof from them as he did from all movements originating in a generation younger than his own.<sup>29</sup> Still, because the New Spiritual Front supported the Folk Writers, and because in the eyes of the government Bartók fit into their program, the composer gradually began to reap benefits from it as well.

As mentioned above, Bartók's transfer to the Academy of Sciences in the fall of 1934 already reflected an increased governmental interest in peasant culture, but, under Gömbös, support of Bartók also gradually expanded beyond the exclusively peasant/folk sphere. The first sign of this was the Opera's 1935 revival of *The Wooden Prince* following sixteen years of conspicuous neglect. This production, with choreography informed by Hungarian peasant dances, served as an informal transition between Hungarian institutional support of Bartók the folklorist and Bartók the composer.<sup>30</sup> The following season a long-overdue revival of *Bluebeard's Castle* joined continued performances of *The Wooden Prince*.<sup>31</sup>

Still, the balm of these first encouraging signs was slow to start healing the deep wounds inflicted earlier in the

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29. Most notably Bartók refused to collaborate with the great poet Attila József (1905-1937) who wanted Bartók to set his poetry and planned a biography of the composer. József tried to contact Bartók through his psychiatrist, who also treated Bartók's wife Ditta Pásztory. I am thankful to László Somfai for this information.

30. By the mid-1930s peasant dances had begun to influence some of the choreography at the Hungarian Opera, whose dancers were learning the style in part from the newly-formed folk ensembles known as the Pearly Bouquet (Gyöngyös bokréta), another beneficiary of Gömbös's governmental subventions. For documentation of the choreography of the Hungarian Opera's 1935 production of *The Wooden Prince* see Aladár Tóth, "A fából faragott királyfi: Bartók táncjátéka az Operaházban" (*The Wooden Prince: Bartók's pantomime at the Opera*), *Pesti Napló*, 31 January 1935; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 496-97.

31. *Bluebeard's Castle* had not been performed in Hungary since January 1919.

decade. Sándor Jemnitz's review of the London BBC Orchestra's performance of Bartók's Four Pieces for Orchestra on 24 April 1936 instinctively repeats the theme of unjust neglect as if nothing had changed since the birthday tribute of five years before:

In every country the BBC puts the works of representative significant composers of the places of its tour on its program and in this way expresses its respect for the contemporary music of that country. But the group obviously was mistaken when it performed Bartók's Four Pieces for Orchestra, which was introduced on one of the Philharmonic Society's concerts in 1922 and has never been heard [here] since.... How could they even have suspected that it would not have been performed here for fourteen years?!... This kind of situation glaringly illuminates the complete absurdity of our musical life.... It is, in the last analysis, an untenable situation that precisely those works that established the world fame of Hungary's musical life in other countries are hidden here in the obscurity of being completely unknown.<sup>32</sup>

Bartók seems to have seconded Jemnitz's opinion, for, in the fall of 1936, despite the immense honor of being the first musician elected to membership in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (not to be confused with his 1934 appointment, which simply made Bartók an employee), Bartók's inaugural address to the Academy was a thinly veiled attack on his exclusion from Hungarian concert life. Bartók's meaning was hard to miss. Using Liszt as his surrogate, he accused Hungary of neglecting the most interesting works of its most famous composer.<sup>33</sup> But if his new status as a member of the Academy did not mollify Bartók immediately, in a short time the results of policies initiated by Gömbös were too far-reaching to be ignored by either Bartók or the critics.

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32. *Népszava*, 25 April 1936; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 541.

33. The lecture was published as "Liszt-Problémák" (Liszt Problems) in *Nyugat* (March 1936): 171-79. It has been translated in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 501-10.

Only a year after Sándor Jemnitz had complained so bitterly of Bartók's neglect in Hungary, Aladár Tóth, Bartók's other primary advocate in the daily press, could report:

We have perhaps never felt the power of Bartók's music to be so redeeming, so liberating as this year, when our great composer's works have been performed by ever greater numbers of our singers and musicians. Our pleasure is especially joyous because the majority of the new works are for our youth, our children.<sup>34</sup>

The "year" Tóth refers to is the 1936-37 concert season, which, in addition to performances of *Bluebeard* and *The Wooden Prince* at the Opera, had also seen a celebration of Bartók's orchestral music at the Vigadó, Pest's most prestigious concert hall.<sup>35</sup> For practically the first time, Bartók's works were not just receiving obligatory Hungarian premieres but showed signs of actually entering the repertoire. The specific occasion for Tóth's glowing report, however, was no gala event at the Vigadó or Opera, but an amateur choral festival of Bartók's music in Kecskemét.

Kecskemét, a small city an hour and a half by train from Budapest, was Kodály's birthplace and, not coincidentally, the capital city of the Hungarian chorus movement. From the early 1930s on, community choruses, especially youth choruses, were the life-blood of Kodály's crusade for Hungarian music education, and this manifestation of nationalism united many otherwise opposed political camps.<sup>36</sup> In part because Kodály was the spiritual leader of the chorus movement, a large part of their repertoire consisted of arrangements of folk songs; thus, the movement

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34. "Bartók új műveinek bemutatása az éneklő ifjúság hangversenyén" (Bartók's new works premiered at the concert of the singing youth), *Pesti Napló*, 8 May 1937; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 611-13.

35. The orchestral program featured all revivals: *Two Pictures*; First Suite for Orchestra; the Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra; and most importantly *Cantata Profana*, whose Hungarian premiere had come less than two years before.

acquired a loose association with the Folk Writers. Like the work of the Folk Writers, these choruses were seen as a bridge between city and peasant culture, and they too had begun to thrive in the atmosphere cultivated by Gömbös's New Spiritual Front.

On 7 May 1937, two weeks after the Bartók Festival in Kecskemét, the composer ended his eight-year boycott of the Budapest stage in performances of his own works when he again played from the *Mikrokosmos* at a concert of his works by several of Budapest's youth choruses. Bartók's description of the concert shows his high spirits at this time:

At the concert on May 7th I really did play some pieces from the *Mikrokosmos*. However, at this particular concert they were not so important as the children's choruses. It was a great experience for me when—at the rehearsal—I heard for the first time my little choruses coming from the lips of these children. I shall never forget this impression of the freshness and gaiety of the little ones' voices. There is something in the natural way these children from the urban schools produce their voices that reminds one of the unspoiled sound of peasant singing.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most telling sign of Bartók's new-found success, bordering for the first time in his life on actual popularity in Hungary, is not his own private enthusiasm or the optimistic reviews of critics who had long rallied behind him, but the response to a vicious attack hurled at him from the pages of *Magyar Kultúra*, a highly conservative Catholic paper.<sup>38</sup> Bartók's attacker, a Jesuit priest, charged him and

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36. For Kodály's defense of choral education as a bulwark of Hungarian music education see "Magyarság a zenében" (Hungarianness in music), in *Mi a magyar?* (What is Hungarian?), ed. Gyula Szekfű (Budapest: Magyar szemle társaság, 1939), 379-418.

37. Letter to Mrs. Müller-Widmann, 24 May 1937, *Bartók Béla levelei*, 551.

38. Béla Bangha, "Tollhegygel" (With the tip of a pen), *Magyar Kultúra* 24 (5-20 July 1937); reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 615. In response to articles in Bartók's and Kodály's defense the attack was repeated in *Magyar Kultúra* 24 (5-20 August 1937); reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 621-24.

Kodály with corrupting Hungary's youth with their modernistic arrangements of folk music. That Bartók was now considered threatening enough to warrant a full-throttled attack from a priest with close ties to the government speaks both to the scale of Bartók's public prominence and to the factionalization of the Hungarian government at this time. Moreover, in response to the attack, Bartók and Kodály received a veritable flood of defense in no less than six different papers.<sup>39</sup> Considering Bartók's tendency to withdraw in the face of domestic criticism, that he continued to perform his works and maintain a public presence in Budapest at this time suggests that Bartók now felt solidly supported and appreciated at home.

This atmosphere of success led to a very rare action for Bartók: his participation in a concert with explicitly political overtones. The concert of Bartók's and Kodály's choral compositions organized by a group of Folk Writers calling themselves the "Magyar Múzsza" (Hungarian muse) at the Music Academy on 13 November 1937 was intended to celebrate the success of a petition that had been introduced in Parliament ten days before.<sup>40</sup> At issue had been the imprisonment of Géza Féja and Imre Kovács, two village researchers (*falu kutatók*) whose arrests were widely regarded as an illegal abuse of power. The call for Féja's and Kovács's release had the support of a wide spectrum of left-wing and moderate contingents. In large part because of its basis in folk music, Bartók's and Kodály's choral music was used to bring these diverse groups together.

A concert of Bartók's and Kodály's music did not, however, guarantee the composers' personal participation or

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39. They include the *Magyar Hírlap*, 18 July; *Magyarország*, 15 July; *Pesti Napló*, 18 July; *Magyarság*, 16 July; *Népszava*, 15 July; and *Az Est*, 16 July; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 615-21.

40. Konrád Salamon, "Bartók és a Márciusi Front" (Bartók and the March Front), *Forrás* 13, no. 3 (March 1976): 40-43.

imply their political endorsement. In fact, Bartók's reluctance to openly mix his music with a political cause was so well known that he was reputedly almost not even invited to participate.<sup>41</sup> But, having signed the petition submitted to Parliament (something Kodály could not be persuaded to do), Bartók unexpectedly agreed to lend his prestige to the event with a performance of his *Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs*.

Although the idea of the concert was fairly broadly supported, the most vocal of the groups there were the communist members of the March Front (*Márciusi front*).<sup>42</sup> For them, Bartók's appearance was a publicist's dream come true, and they played up his participation for all it was worth by publishing an article entitled "Bartók for the People" in their official organ *Gondolat* (Thought). In the volume, which was distributed during the concert and publicly presented to Bartók on stage after his performance, the composer was touted as a fearless leader of the Hungarian masses:

[Bartók] the genius researcher of Hungarian folksong could not remain silent when he saw that prison threatened the researchers of the misery of the Hungarian people [*nép*]. . . . Until now he served this cause only with his music, but now he signals with his personal appearance how much he considers it his own. . . . Bartók's signature on the freedom-manifesto [Parliamentary petition] of the Hungarian writers is the most comforting act of the last months. When they heard about it on a cold, stormy day, the Hungarian masses felt gratitude and pride.<sup>43</sup>

Considering Bartók's general allergy to being the subject of political publicity, it seems unlikely that he would have appeared on this concert had he been fully aware of the result.

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41. *Ibid.*, 42.

42. The March Front takes its name from the unsuccessful Hungarian revolution begun on 15 March 1848.

43. Original in György Bálint, "Bartók a népért" (Bartók for the people), *Gondolat* 7-8, 345-46. Quoted in Salamon, "Bartók és a Márciusi Front," 41.

Bence Szabolcsi, the critic arguably closest to Bartók and Kodály, agrees with this view of Bartók's position in his review, significantly the only report by a musician that even acknowledges the concert's political implications.<sup>44</sup> Furi-ously trying to throw water on the partisan flames fanned by *Gondolat* and threatening to consume Bartók, Szabolcsi declares:

It is a fatal mistake to believe that one can fulfill the command of [Bartók's and Kodály's] art by accepting any kind of political program. Everyday politics is a very broad and very narrow test tube for Bartók and Kodály. To be a people, to grow into a unified nation, to rise into a free country...all these things take priority in the requirements of Bartók's and Kodály's credo; but beyond all this and in the service of all this their command requires greatness, freedom, independent opposition to the world of slavery, a consciousness, a bravery that does not exist anywhere in the world at this time except for in them.<sup>45</sup>

However anomalous Bartók's participation on 13 November may have been, it indicates both how far he had come from his years of withdrawal in the face of indifference earlier in the decade, and the extent of his desire to maintain a palpable presence in Hungary. At this time Bartók also returned to concertizing in Hungary with the Rhapsody op. 1, his old standby in the out-of-date Hungarian national style of the nineteenth century. Now that Bartók was feeling a sense of sympathy and support from a greater number of Hungarians, perhaps he was ready to return the favor by adopting more congenial terms

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44. Although Demény's inclusion of reviews is usually admirably complete, he included only one that mentions Bartók's participation in the Magyar Múza concert. This review is an anodyne account by Dezső Szabó from *Szabó Dezső Újabb Művei* (Dezső Szabó's recent works), nos. 34-35 (December 1937-January 1938); reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 632. It is odd that although Szabolcsi was one of the editors of Demény's volume, Demény did not include Szabolcsi's review of the concert written for *Magyar Dal* (Hungarian song).

45. *Magyar Dal*, nos. 7-9 (October-December 1937).

in communicating with them. It seems fitting, then, that under these conditions Bartók's compositional style would also become more warmly accessible than it had been since the First World War.

### *Negotiation in Music: The Violin Concerto*

Although its orchestration was not finished until 31 December 1938, the Violin Concerto is a conception of 1937 and the lushest example of the new style that emerged during Bartók's reconciliation with the Hungarian public in the late 1930s.<sup>46</sup> Although written for Hungarian violinist Zoltán Székely in a manner that implies that Bartók conceived the work to hold special meaning for domestic audiences, the onset of the war caused it to reach Hungary only after Bartók's death. Székely did, however, give four highly successful performances of the Violin Concerto in Holland in 1939 and 1940. At the premiere, the Dutch critics immediately recognized a softening in tone compared to Bartók's works of the past two decades.<sup>47</sup> The change was hard to miss, announced at the outset by the harp's opening B-major chords that seemed to be designed, as one critic put it, to "put the audience in a good mood."<sup>48</sup>

While the critics at the premiere acknowledged the Violin Concerto's immediate success with the audience, at the

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46. For a discussion of the manuscript evidence that implies that at least the first and second movements of the Violin Concerto are primarily products of 1936-1937 see László Somfai "Három vázlat 1936/37-ből a hegedűversenyhez" (Three sketches for the Violin Concerto from 1936/37), *Tizennyolc Bartók-tanulmány* (Eighteen Bartók studies) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981), 104-13.

47. Bartók's compositions familiar to the Dutch critics at this time included the first two Piano Concertos, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, the Fourth and Fifth Quartets, and the two Sonatas for Violin and Piano.

48. L. M. G. Arntzenius, *De Telegraaf*, 24 March 1939; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 698-99.

same time they were made uneasy by the accessibility of the work. The critic for Amsterdam's *De Telegraaf* summed up the dichotomy:

The whole thing strives to please: sharp rhythms or sharp dissonances were relatively undisturbing and frequently created a good impression. "Even I liked it"—they said during the intermission. Nine times out of ten this kind of pleasing is a sign of the composer's weakness.<sup>49</sup>

On first hearing some critics apparently accused Bartók of "dumbing down" his style by avoiding the difficult sonorities they took to be prerequisites for a modern masterpiece. Behind its congenial surface, however, Bartók weaves a complex web of subtle motivic relations and topical allusions that form a rich tapestry conducive to interpretation on many levels. Because I hear a musical analogy to Bartók's ability to navigate politically stormy seas precisely in the high degree of referentiality in the Violin Concerto, it is worth examining the first movement of the work in analytic detail.

### *Motivic Unity*

One way in which Bartók generates a sense of meaning in the Violin Concerto is through motivic unity on several levels. The opening bass line of the first movement contains a motivic kernel that generates much of the material for the movement (example 1, mm. 3-6). On the most direct level, the opening bass line returns as the theme that occupies the first part of the development. This commonly noted return points to several hardly less obvious connections between

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49. *Ibid.* This view was shared in reviews by Herman Rutters for the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 24 March 1939, and Lou van Strien for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 24 March 1939; reprinted in Demény, "Bartók Béla pályája delelőjén," 699-701.

the opening bass line and the melody of the primary theme. Initially, the bass line articulates the harmony B-A<sup>7</sup> over a B pedal, which also serves as the harmonization of the first

Allegro non troppo, ♩ 100

Violin

Piano

Harp *p*

(pizz.)

*f*

Interrupted pickup

11

3

Example 1. Bartók, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 1-11. Melodic correspondence of opening bass line and the first phrase of the primary theme.

phrase of the primary theme. The third beat of the opening melody echoes this initial modal-harmonic move, which also unifies the movement in several other places. In addition to marking the beginning of the exposition (mm. 3-4) and development (as F-E<sup>b</sup> in m. 116), it initiates the transition following the primary theme in both the exposition and recapitulation (mm. 22 and 220); most important structurally, it also defines the tonal areas of the primary and secondary themes, B and A respectively. Furthermore, not counting the sixteenth-note pickups that were added to the score as an afterthought, the opening phrase is a clear derivative of the notes of the bass line that introduce it (example 1, cf. mm. 3-6 and mm. 7-9).<sup>50</sup>

Somewhat more hidden is the connection between the opening bass line and the third, contrasting phrase of the primary theme. Here, Bartók takes the bass's pattern—down a fourth, up a minor third, down a fourth—and uses it as the structural frame for the melodic phrase (example 2). In other words, the third section of the primary theme is a melodic elaboration of the harmonic progression of the first section. The care with which Bartók works out this connection within contrast is even more impressive when we observe that the circle of fifths bass line of the third

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50. Manuscripts of the Violin Concerto in the Budapest Bartók Archives show that Bartók originally conceived of the theme beginning on the downbeat with no pickup. In June 1990 violinist Zoltán Székely told me that Bartók decided to add the pickups shortly before the work's premiere when Vilmos Palotai, cellist of the New Hungarian String Quartet, asked him why he had omitted the pickups in the first statement of the theme although they served to reintroduce the theme at the recapitulation (mm. 212-13). Bartók's original conception may have taken its inspiration from Hungarian folk song, which reflects the first-syllable accent pattern of the Hungarian language by never including voiced pickups. Clearly, in this revision Bartók was concerned more with practical matters of performance than in a rigid notion of authenticity. Székely encouraged Bartók to make the change, claiming that it allowed him to lend a more singing *cantabile* to the whole phrase.

Example 2. Bartók, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 15-18. reduction.

phrase of the theme (G-C-F-B<sup>b</sup>) provides just those pitches needed to expand the notes of the first phrase (B Dorian with an added major third: B-C<sup>#</sup>-D-D<sup>#</sup>-E-F<sup>#</sup>-G<sup>#</sup>-A) into a complete twelve-note chromatic collection (example 3).

Example 3. B-Dorian scale with D/D<sup>#</sup> unstable third degree from the melody of the first phrase of the primary theme; the four-note pentatonic set of pitches from the bass line of the third phrase of the primary theme; and their twelve-tone combination.

To connect this neutral description to the sphere of folk music, we can state that Bartók builds the melody of the opening phrase on the characteristic Dorian with an unstable third degree (represented as D/D<sup>#</sup>) of "New-Style" Hungarian folk song, while the bass line of the third phrase is a subset of a pentatonic collection, the characteristic mode of "Old-Style" Hungarian folk song.<sup>51</sup> When the two are interleaved the result is a kind of modal chromaticism, or, in the loosest sense of the term, a folk-based "dodecaphony," which is exactly what Bartók comes up with for the twelve-note phrases of the second theme (mm. 73ff.).<sup>52</sup>

51. "Old-" and "New-Style" Hungarian Folk Songs are Bartók's own classifications. See Béla Bartók, *The Hungarian Folk Song*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), especially 37-38 and 51-52.

A

"tonal answer"

A<sup>5</sup>

B

B

A

"rhythmic return"

*tr*

*più f*

Example 4. Bartók, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 7-22.  
Four-phase structure of primary theme.

Yet another connection between the primary theme and Hungarian folk music lies in its four-phase structure which echoes a common quatrain structure of the "New-Style" melodies, AA<sup>5</sup>BA (example 4). However, unlike the folk songs that fit this description, this second phrase is not exactly A<sup>5</sup>, that is A transposed up a fifth. Here Bartók begins on the fifth degree, but, like a tonal answer, keeps B as the tonal center—as is demonstrated by the arrival on the dominant, F<sup>♯</sup>, at the end of the phrase (m. 14). The chromatic

52. László Somfai uses manuscript sources to demonstrate that Bartók's original idea was for a ten-note theme, which he later transformed into the twelve-note theme. See László Somfai, *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 158-63.

resolution of the dominant to a  $G^{13}$  chord postpones the return to B by opening up the contrasting harmonic sphere of the third phrase with a circle of fifths progression, whose bass (down a fifth, up a fourth, down a fifth) is a major second expansion of the opening bass line (down a fourth, up a minor third, down a fourth). Bartók ends the sequence on a  $B^b$  pedal, which by the end of the fourth phrase is reinterpreted as the leading tone,  $A^\sharp$ , and brings the harmony back to B (example 5).

Again, the fourth phrase of the quatrain differs from the folk model in that Bartók refers to the melody of the opening phrase only by recalling the typically Hungarian rhythm of its first bar ( $\text{♩} \cdot \text{♩} \cdot \text{♩} \cdot \text{♩}$ ). Bartók then applies this

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the violin and piano parts. The piano part has a bass line with a descending Z cell (down a fourth, up a minor third, down a fourth) circled in red. A box containing the number '22' is located in the upper right of the second system. The second system includes markings for 'poco allarg.', 'a tempo (mosso)', and 'più f'. Above the violin staff, there are three accents (Λ) with numbers 5, 4, and 1 below them, indicating a melodic folk cadence. The piano part continues with a descending Z cell in the bass line.

Example 5. Bartók, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 18-22.

Reinterpretation of the  $B^b$  pedal to  $A^\sharp$  and the transformation of the descending Z cells to a  $5\hat{-}4\hat{-}1\hat{-}$  melodic folk cadence.

rhythmic pattern to a series of so-called descending Z cells,<sup>53</sup> whose symmetry is brought passionately back into the folk realm with an elision to a  $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{1}$  melodic cadence that meets the bass back on B to initiate the next section.

The transformation of three notes of the Z cell ( $\hat{5}-\hat{\#4}-\hat{1}$ , fifth-tritone-root) into a cadence highly typical of eastern European peasant music (the  $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{1}$  melodic cadence) all over a  $B^b$  qua  $A^\sharp$  leading-tone pedal is emblematic of how deftly Bartók negotiates between at least three musical worlds: the structures and modal inflections of peasant music; the world of the late nineteenth-century harmony of his early idol Richard Strauss; and the modernistic world of seemingly abstract musical construction. None of the elements of this mix was new to Bartók's music in 1937, nor was the idea of synthesizing them; what was new was the combination of the clarity and inviting accessibility of the surface in contrast to the sophistication of the whole.

## *Verbunkos*

Especially in contrast to much of his music from the previous decade, Bartók's works of the late 1930s tended to pay more explicit homage to nineteenth-century Hungarian national music with its reliance on the gestures of so-called recruiting music or *verbunkos* (from the German *Werbung*: recruiting). The result was a style in which Bartók fused

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53. Leo Treitler first coined the term Z cell to refer to a tetrachord composed of two conjunct ascending or descending fourths joined by a half step in the same direction as the leaps. "Harmonic Procedure in the Fourth Quartet of Béla Bartók," *Journal of Music Theory* (November 1959): 292-98. The term has subsequently been widely adopted among American music theorists, especially George Perle and Elliott Antokoletz. For an introduction to Bartók's use of the Z cell see Elliott Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), especially 71-72.

elements of *verbunkos* nearly seamlessly with peasant music, and, in the process, smoothed over the jagged dissonances so characteristic of his music in the 1920s. Before considering the implications of the *verbunkos* in the late 1930s, let us briefly examine its manifestation in the portion of the Violin Concerto we have already considered in other terms.

As Bartók indicated by writing "Tempo di verbunkos" in the solo violin part he copied out for a rehearsal with Zoltán Székely, tempo and accompaniment immediately convey the topos of the *verbunkos* in the Violin Concerto. The harp's steady, medium-fast, quarter-note opening accompaniment in 4/4 time stems from the Gypsy accompanimental style known as *dűvő*, the nearly omnipresent accompaniment of *verbunkos* violin tunes. *Dűvő* takes its name from *dui*, the Gypsies' Romany word for "twice."<sup>54</sup> This describes the fact that *dűvő* is an even series of chords grouped two to a single portato bow stroke with the second of the pair heavily accented. The flat-bridged viola (*brácsa*) and second violin of Hungarian folk and Gypsy ensembles play little else. They are often joined by cello, bass and, most important for our purposes, cimbalom. In the opening of the Violin Concerto Bartók urbanizes the *dűvő* by employing the cimbalom's "city cousin," the harp, and smoothing over the *dűvő*'s characteristic accents, which would fall on the second and fourth beats of the bar. By comparing the *dűvő* accompaniments from an example of Hungarian folk music (example 6a) with the opening accompaniments to Bartók's Violin Rhapsodies (examples 6b and 6c), we see more clearly how the opening of the Violin Concerto is

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54. "Dűvő," *Riemann zenei lexikon* (Riemann musical dictionary) 1, ed. Carl Dahlhaus, Hans Eggebrecht, and Antal Boronkay (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1983), 479.

$\text{♩} = \text{ca } 69$  poco a poco accel. *tr*

Violino I

Violino II

Contrabbasso

Example 6a. Characteristic *dúvó* accompaniment from a gypsy ensemble (cimbalom omitted) recorded by György Martin and Bálint Sárant in Szatmárökörítő (northeast Hungary) and transcribed by B. Sárosi.

*simile*

Cimbalom

*f* *p*

*And.*

Moderato  $\text{♩} = 108$

Violino Solo

*f* *p*

Violini I

*f* *p*

Violini II

*f* *p*

Viola

*f* *p* *simile*

Violoncelli

*f* *p*

Contrabassi

*f* *p*

1) With 1 hammer

Example 6b. Bartók, First Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra, mm. 1-4 (winds omitted). Note *dúvó* accompaniment.

Arpa

*f* *p*

Moderato  $\text{♩} = 108$

Violino Solo

*mp*

Example 6c. Bartók, Second Rhapsody for Violin and Orchestra, mm. 1-4 (winds omitted). Note *dúvó* accompaniment.

indebted to both the traditional *dúvó* and Bartók's earlier attempts at realizing it (cf. example 1).

Several other details in the opening bars of the Violin Concertos also reveal Bartók's debt to the *verbunkos* tradition. The space-opening effect of a pedal in the horn both conveys a pastoral tone and may also have been inspired by the traditional *verbunkos* accompaniment in which the *brácsa* often used at least one of its open strings as a drone. Another detail of orchestration, the clarinet as the first instrument to begin a countermelody, also echoes a typical Gypsy *verbunkos* ensemble (violin, clarinet, *brácsa*, bass, and cimbalom—the ensemble even more explicitly recalled in *Contrasts*). Finally, the hiccuped or interrupted pickup to the second phrase of the opening melody in the solo violin (m. 10) is another *verbunkos* cliché with familiar precedents in Kodály's opera *Háry János* and Bartók's First Rhapsody (cf. example 1, m. 10 and examples 7a and 7b).

Andante maestoso ma con fuoco ( $\text{♩} = 120$ )

7a: Violin

*f*

tranquillo

12 a tempo ( $\text{♩} = 108$ )

7b: Violin

*sf* *f*

Example 7. Characteristic *verbunkos* pickups  
 7a: "Közjáték" from Kodály's *Háry János* (m. 1)  
 7b: Bartók's First Rhapsody for Violin (mm. 75-76).

In fact, once one is alert to the presence of *verbunkos* elements in the first movement of the Violin Concerto, one hardly knows where nineteenth-century *verbunkos* leaves off and other related elements—Hungarian peasant song, for example—begin. More specifically, as I have already hinted by my adjectival use of “Gypsy,” the question arises: Which of these so-called *verbunkos* gestures are derived from “authentic” peasant culture—to return to Bartók’s earlier writings—and which from what he had considered the “corrupt” imitations of urban Gypsy bands or nineteenth-century Hungarian composers? Indeed, we are forced to ask a question fundamental to Hungarian music, a question never broached satisfactorily in Bartók’s own writings and subsequently ill-defined in every history of Hungarian music or dictionary of musical terms known to me.<sup>55</sup> What is this thing called *verbunkos*—is it Gypsy music, a Transylvanian peasant violin style, an ensemble, a recruiting dance, a form, an accompaniment, a melody, or

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55. In addition to Bartók’s writings, works I have consulted include: Marián Prikkel Réthei, *A magyarság táncjai* (Hungarian dances) (Budapest, 1924); *Zenei lexikon*, ed. Bence Szabolcsi and Aladár Tóth (Budapest, 1930); György Martin, *Magyar tánc típusok és táncdialektusok* (Hungarian dance types and dance dialects) (Budapest, 1970); Bence Szabolcsi, *A Concise History of Hungarian Music*, trans. Sára Karig and Fred Macnicol (Budapest, 1974); György Martin, *Hungarian Folk Dances* (Budapest, 1974); entries on “Verbunkos,” “Gypsy Music,” and “Hungary,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, 1980); Zoltán Kodály, *A magyar népzene* (Hungarian folk music) ed. Lajos Vargyas (Budapest, 1981); György Martin and András Takács, *Mátyusföldi népi táncok* (Folk dances of Mátyusföld) (Bratislava, 1981); *Riemann zenei lexikon*, ed. Carl Dahlhaus, Hans Eggebrecht, and Antal Boronkay (Budapest, 1983); Géza Papp, “Die Quellen der ‘Verbunkos-Musik’: Ein bibliographischer Versuch,” *Studia musicologica* (1979): 152-217; (1982): 35-97; (1984): 59-132; (1990): 55-224; “Hungarian Dances (1784-1810),” *Musicalia Danubiana* vol. 7, ed. Géza Papp (Budapest, 1986); Bálint Sárosi, *Folk Music: Hungarian Musical Idiom*, trans. Maria Steiner (Budapest, 1986); Katalin Paksa, *Magyar népzene kutatás a tizenkilencedik században* (Hungarian folk-music research in the nineteenth century) (Budapest, 1988); Ferenc Sebő, *Népzenei olvasókönyv* (A folk-music reader) (Budapest, 1990); Ferenc Bónis, “Bartók és a verbunkos” (Bartók and verbunkos), *Hódolat Bartóknak és Kodálynak* (Budapest, 1992), 19-31. I thank Ágnes Papp for her help in procuring a number of these Hungarian publications.

any of a number of recognizably Hungarian gestures from the nineteenth century collectively known as *le style hongrois*?<sup>56</sup> What, we ask, is the significant conceptual difference behind Bartók's mature music and the best of his nineteenth-century Hungarian predecessors? Is there a crucial difference between Bartók's music and that of Ferenc Erkel, whose Hungarian musical style Bartók repudiated after his discovery of peasant music?

### *Bánk Bán*

A comparison of a musical high point from Erkel's most influential opera *Bánk Bán* and the climactic third phrase of the primary theme of Bartók's Violin Concerto helps answer these questions (examples 8a and 8b).<sup>57</sup> The passage from *Bánk Bán* is the climax of the duet between Melinda and Bánk from the opera's second act. Erkel also uses this music for Melinda's closing lines in Act I and for the B section of the opera's ABA prelude; it serves as the opera's most potent musical theme of reminiscence.

Bartók's and Erkel's passages have a number of similarities: both are in quadruple meter; both begin with a pick-up run ascending to the highest note of a four-bar phrase a major sixth above the bass; and both four-bar phrases are divided into two nearly identical sub-phrases, each tied off with a characteristically Hungarian front-accented, short-long descending fourth, the first of which is accompanied by a fifth-related harmonic progression. Both four-bar

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56. See Jonathan Bellman, *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), especially chapters 1-5.

57. Ernő Lendvai mentions the similarity of the shape of Melinda's music at the end of Act I of *Bánk Bán* and the third phrase of the primary theme of Bartók's Violin Concerto in his *The Workshop of Bartók and Kodály* (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1983), 438.

13

9

10

22

*poco allarg.* ..... *a tempo (mosso)*, ♩. 112-108

*piu f*

*mf*

Example 8a. B section of the primary theme of Bartók's Violin Concerto, I, mm. 14-22. Compare with Example 8b.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system is marked *ff* and features a melodic line in the treble clef and a rhythmic accompaniment in the bass clef. The second system is marked *pp* and shows the melodic line continuing, with several notes in the bass clef circled. The third system includes a trill *tr* in the treble clef and a piano *p* marking in the bass clef.

Example 8b. The climactic phrase of Bánk and Melinda's duet from Ferenc Erkel's *Bánk Bán* (Act II). Compare with Example 8a.

phrases are answered by another that brings them back to rest on a lower tonic; and both capture the unstable third and sixth scale degrees of folk music by mixing sharp and natural versions of these scale degrees.

Of course there are also important differences. Bartók avoids the repeated dotted figure found in Erkel's first bar, a common eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hungarianism. Furthermore, the flats and sharps used to reflect the unstable degrees of folk music in Erkel's example are separated from each other by the articulation provided by the repeat of the phrase. These accidentals represent chordal borrowings from the minor mode. In other words, Erkel's representation of the unstable scale degrees of folk music coincide with the color changes of major-minor mixtures

common to the art music of the time. On the other hand, Bartók's dual scale degrees often occur together in a single harmony. They result from the conflicting demands of chordal progression and melodic line, which Bartók welds together with deft scoring, careful spacing, and luxuriant harmony. In this example at least, Bartók's practice falls in line with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century chromaticism. In sum, Erkel's and Bartók's phrases, composed some eighty years apart, are both syntheses of the standard western-European harmonic practices of their times (selected fairly conservatively in both cases) and the composers' respective understandings of Hungarian folk music.

Although Bartók gained his knowledge by working with actual peasants in the countryside whereas Erkel learned the folk style from other composers and urban Gypsy bands, many of the folk features from which they drew inspiration are indistinguishable in practice. Many of the Hungarianisms in Erkel's and Bartók's music are shared equally by the "authentic" (rural Transylvanian fiddling) and by what Bartók took to be the "ersatz" (urban bastardizations of the Gypsy bands). Because of this, the difference between Bartók's and Erkel's music is less compellingly a reflection of their different relationships to folk music than of their differently Western-oriented compositional training separated by some sixty-five years.

Erkel, as a young opera conductor in Kolozsvár (now Cluj, Romania) learned his craft from the examples of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Meyerbeer, and early Verdi. Bartók, as a student at the Music Academy, grew to musical maturity with a diet of Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt and, later, Strauss. Given this training, it is no surprise that he cared passionately about the organic unity of his music. We have already demonstrated this in our discussion of the relationship between the opening bass line and the primary theme

of the first movement of the Violin Concerto. When he brings back the third phrase of the primary theme as the "culmination point" of the movement, the multivalent connections are even more potent.<sup>58</sup> This is a carefully planned moment designed to summarize and surpass what has come before. Although Bartók restates material from the A section of the primary theme a total of five times in the exposition, development, and recapitulation (mm. 43, 51, 115, 194, 213), in each of these thematic recalls he changes the trajectory of the phrase and avoids arriving at a restatement of the B section. Bartók saves this music for the emotional climax of the movement, which occurs in the coda after the violin cadenza (example 9, mm. 354ff.). Here he begins the B section of the theme a major second higher than he had in its first appearance and extends the circle of fifths sequence so that the bass line now encompasses a full pentatonic collection. Therefore, in this culmination point Bartók completes a crucial element of "Old-Style" Hungarian folk song that was incomplete in the passage's first incarnation.

Furthermore, beginning the sequence a major second higher not only lends more brilliance and passion to the solo violin, but also allows Bartók to avoid ending on the B<sup>b</sup>/A<sup>#</sup> leading tone in the bass. He saves the harmonically significant use of the leading tone until bar 363 and reserves its appearance in the bass until the final five bars of the movement. The structurally prominent pitches of the culmination point's melody reinforce the notion that Bartók has specifically constructed the passage to use every pitch of the chromatic scale except B<sup>b</sup>/A<sup>#</sup> (example 10).

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58. My use of the phrase "culmination point" is indebted to László Somfai's "A Characteristic Culmination Point in Bartók's Instrumental Forms," *International Musicological Conference in Commemoration of Béla Bartók, 1971* (Budapest, 1972), 53-64. Somfai defines culmination points in Bartók's works as their strikingly emotional climaxes embodying Hungarian elements (pentatony, major/minor constructions, and/or short-long, front-accented rhythms).

354

(quasi) Tempo I., J. ca. 110

Solo Vln. *ff*

Harp C# D, E, F#, G#, A, B *gliss.* *p*

Orch. *espr.*

355

Solo Vln. *f*

Harp C# D, E, F#, G#, A, B *p* *f*

Orch. *espr.* *cantabile*

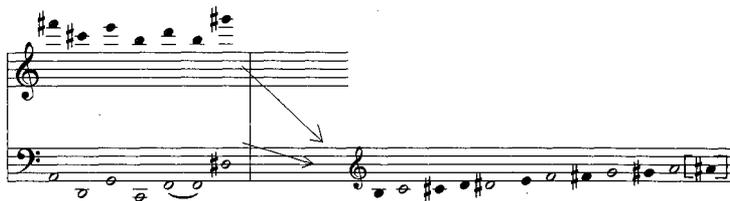
360

Solo Vln. *f*

Harp *p*

Orch. *espr.*

Example 9. Bartók, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 354-60, the "culmination point."



Example 10. Bartók, Violin Concerto, I, mm. 354-60, reduction.

In addition to nearly super-saturating the passage in terms of pitch content, Bartók also concentrates the thematic content of the culmination point by again uniting the music of the B section of the primary theme with that of the A section. This time, however, he superimposes the two phrases by using music from the A section of the primary theme as a countermelody to the high-flying B section in the solo violin. Since the melodic outline of the B phrase takes its shape from the thematic kernel of the movement (the opening bass line) and the bass line of the B section is a thematic transformation of the same material, the culmination point in fact embodies three simultaneous statements of the same basic thematic kernel. Although Bartók grounds the entire texture in the "Old-Style" pentatonicism of the bass, the harp no longer provides a link to its "New-Style" *verbunkos* roots. Instead of an accompaniment derived from the *dúvó*, the harp joins in the sensuality of the moment with glissandi that add sweep to the ascending runs of the solo violin (example 9). If Bartók ever truly wrote a passage that not only synthesized peasant music and art music, but integrated the extreme poles of "Old-Style" Hungarian peasant song and the nineteenth-century Hungarian national tradition, this was it.

To answer a question raised at the beginning of this section: the most impressive aspect of Bartók's technique is the extent to which he was able to maximize organic connections in his music, thereby erasing a sense of division between his folk-music models and his personal style. It is

primarily the highly refined complexity of this synthesis, not simply its presence, that emerges as the most enduring conceptual difference between Bartók and his Hungarian nationalist predecessors.

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In 1937, in direct response to the racism inherent in growing ultranationalism, Bartók admitted in print that rigid distinctions between various folk styles are generally the fabrication of aggressive nationalists. In his essay "Folk Song Research and Nationalism," he wrote:

It cannot be denied that the impulse to begin folk-song research...is attributable to the awakening of national feeling. The discovery of the values of folklore and folk music excited the national pride, and...the members of each nation were convinced that the possession of such treasures was their only and particular privilege.... But soon these nations encountered some disappointments: ...it was impossible to avoid coming into contact now and then with some aspect of the neighboring nation's cultural treasure. And so the trouble began. The offended national sentiment had to defend itself somehow, and—offended by the fact that the neighboring nation was also in possession of the treasure that up to that time had been considered ancient, original national property—did so by claiming priority.... It is regrettable that the ideological tensions of our time further the spread of morbid one-sidedness instead of promoting an unbiased view.... Even if musical folklore is very indebted to nationalism, today's ultranationalism does it such harm as many times exceeds its benefits.<sup>59</sup>

In 1942, Bartók phrased virtually the same idea even more strongly:

There is much talk these days, mostly for political reasons, about the purity and impurity of the human race, the usual implication being

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59. Béla Bartók, "Népdalkutatás és nacionalizmus" (Folk-song research and nationalism), *Tükör* 3, no. 3 (1937): 173-81; reprinted in *Bartók Béla összegyűjtött írásai I*, ed. András Szöllösy (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, 1966), 597-600. My translation mainly follows that in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 25-28.

that purity of race should be preserved, even by means of prohibitive laws.

He goes on to proclaim:

[The wealth of folk music in eastern Europe is due to a] continuous give and take of melodies, a constant crossing and recrossing that persisted for centuries.... The situation of folk music in eastern Europe may be summed up thus: as a result of uninterrupted reciprocal influence upon the folk music of these peoples there are an immense variety and wealth of melodies and melodic types. The "racial impurity" finally attained is definitely beneficial.<sup>60</sup>

Bartók's agenda in these two writings differs considerably from that in "Our Folk Music and the Folk Music of Neighboring Peoples," written when he was hoping to withdraw into the cloistered world of the Academy of Sciences in 1934. The writings from the late 1930s and early 1940s reflect Bartók's desire to break down barriers rather than construct them. As we have already seen in reference to his Hungarian performances of his own works, by 1937 Bartók was also more interested in increasing communication between himself and his Hungarian audience than he had been earlier in the decade. Bartók's resurrection and elevation of the *verbunkos* tradition was perhaps the most significant result of his new status at home. This development once again confronts us with a paradox. For, at the same time as Bartók was reacting against ultranationalism with a flexible notion of the productive intercourse between various folk cultures, by evoking the *verbunkos* he returned in part to the musical style that had represented a chauvinistic brand of Hungarian nationalism at the turn of the century.<sup>61</sup>

60. Béla Bartók, "Race Purity in Music," *Modern Music* 19, no. 3 (March-April 1942): 153-55; reprinted in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 29-32.

61. For an in-depth treatment of Bartók's relationship to Hungarian nationalism at the turn of the century, see Judit Frigyesi, "Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism: The Development of Bartók's Social and Political Ideas at the Turn of the Century (1899-1903)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989).

This said, I would like to speculate on several more possible motivations for Bartók's invocation of the *verbunkos*. In the face of Germany's growing influence over Hungary and from the distance of more than three decades, could Bartók have looked back on the days of his early works in the *verbunkos* style out of a desire to reinvoke their anti-Austrian associations? More specifically, could the passage in the Violin Concerto that I compare to *Bánk Bán* perhaps have been intended to recall one of the main themes of the opera—namely the corrupting force of western Europeans in Hungary's court?<sup>62</sup> Despite Bartók's subsequent rejection of his youthful *verbunkos* style along with the chauvinistic nationalism it represented, memory can render long-past events idyllic.

A similar sense of nostalgia could explain Bartók's return to the *verbunkos* in his late works. But, in interpreting the Violin Concerto, I counsel caution. By focusing too specifically on some of the associations of the style of the work—be they the twelve-tone row of the second theme or the *verbunkos* topos of the first—we can all too easily fall into the same traps as Halsey Stevens or György Kroó: trivializing the work by expecting it to correspond simply and directly to its historical context or, in the absence of such an obvious connection, denying that a relationship between the two exists at all. A monochromatic interpretation of the Violin Concerto would miss the rich network of associations crucial to Bartók's late style. In this work, Bartók reaches out to the Hungarian public in a style they would have understood. As in the works of Liszt, motivic transfor-

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62. That Bartók knew *Bánk Bán* hardly needs proof as Bartók was a student of Ferenc Erkel's son László in Pozsony and the opera has been a staple of the Hungarian Opera's repertoire since the 1890s. We do know, however, that Bartók specifically studied the opera in 1901. See Denijs Dille, *Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke Béla Bartóks, 1890-1904* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974), 233.

mation, thematic recall, and topical allusion guarantee the *Violin Concerto* a certain semiotic intensity; but without the hint of a program provided by the composer, what Bartók communicates must remain above all musical, its precise meaning elusive.

Describing Bartók's almost pathological reluctance to communicate in words, Kodály said in a memorial tribute, "Happy are those who could help him in removing the barbed-wire fence he raised around himself in self-defense."<sup>63</sup> How much Bartók's careful reticence, especially in discussing the meanings of his own creative work, was due to his innate personality and how much was conditioned by the tensions of his time, we will probably never know. But, given that Bartók lived under circumstances in which barbed wire was hardly a neutral metaphor for artistic isolation, we can be thankful for his ability to withdraw. In self-imposed isolation, Bartók found a space for expressive complexity at a time generally beset with crudely reductive polarization.

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63. "Béla Bartók the Man" (1946) in *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, trans. Lili Halápy and Fred Macnicol (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1974), 101.