

The Expression of National and Personal Identity in Béla Bartók's Music

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The following article explores the significance of musical, specifically melodic, characteristics of ethnic definition in Béla Bartók's music basing its argument on two sets of closely related examples. Revisiting some of the central themes of his first major work, the *Kossuth Symphony*, musical nationalism will be discussed as manifested in a youthful composition. Although Bartók's overtly political work belongs to the very beginning of his professional career, a period many of whose compositional solutions and the *Kossuth* itself he categorically rejected within a few years, his commitment to ethnic musical characteristics in his music remained central to his thinking. His main achievement lies, obviously, in the varied use of newly discovered indigenous folk material from a number of different sources most notably Romanian and Slovak, apart from the Hungarian, thereby representing multiculturalism at a level unparalleled in the period. Still, there are significant moments where his Hungarian identity seems to prevail. The second part of the article examines 'Hungarian' characteristics in a recurring melody type whose repeated use may have been dictated by its 'national' as much as by its 'personal' and biographical significance.

I. MUSICAL PATRIOTISM

Shortly after the enormously successful performance of the *Dance Suite* (1923) at the Prague Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in May 1925, Béla Bartók gave an interview to the Hungarian poet and author Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936). During this insightful as well as poetical conversation, Kosztolányi enquired about the first composition Bartók truly considered his own. The composer singled out the *Fourteen Bagatelles* (1908) and the First String Quartet (1908–9). Perhaps unexpectedly for later readers of the interview Kosztolányi proposed an earlier work, the *Kossuth Symphony* (1903), thereby revealing how deeply impressed Bartók's generation was with that youthful work. In response, Bartók made a gesture, his only remark being 'Not that. Its form is not yet mature'.¹ And this is not the only evidence of Bartók's dissatisfaction with this early symphonic poem. When Denijs Dille prepared a list of Bartók's compositions in the late 1930s, the composer expressed once again his discontent by writing the word *rejetée* in French after the typewritten title of the piece.²

1 'Béla Bartók: An Interview by Dezső Kosztolányi', transl. David E. Schneider, in Peter Laki (ed.), *Bartók and His World* (Princeton, 1995), 230.

2 Cf. Denijs Dille, *Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke Béla Bartóks. 1890–1904* (Budapest, 1974), 148. The page from Dille's list of Bartók's compositions with the composer's annotations is repro-

Bartók's most overtly nationalistic work was undoubtedly his *Kossuth Symphony*, the result of a very specific biographical and historical situation.³ Composed during the height of a political crisis over the use of the Hungarian language in the army, the work addressed the question of the use of a specific Hungarian idiom in music and even included a scene depicting a fateful battle between the Hungarians and the Austrian army. The piece, employing specifically 'Hungarian' themes but otherwise heavily drawing upon Richard Strauss' symphonic poems, the most avant-garde style of the period then known to the twenty-two-year-old composer with a fresh diploma in piano and composition,⁴ might be called a rather naive recounting of the failed 1848-49 uprising whose memory was and still remains particularly cherished in Hungary. With this program, based on a scenario surprisingly closely following Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*, Bartók substituted a national historical event for his model's individualistic subject matter, a fact that significantly contributed to the work's appeal at its premiere in Budapest in 1904 but helped little to change the considerably cooler response it generated at its second performance under Hans Richter's baton in Manchester in the same year. Following this single performance abroad, Bartók never allowed the work to be performed. Together with the national costume Bartók was wearing even at his concerts during the time of the symphony's composition, and other mannerisms of his short-lived excessive patriotic zeal, the piece was put aside for good.

Opinions have indeed significantly changed as far as the work's merits, especially its significance for the development of a national musical style, are concerned. According to the composer Pongrácz Kacsóh's probably best-known Hungarian review of the premiere, Bartók was not only 'the direct heir to Ferenc Liszt's symphonic talent' and 'the congenial rival to the Germans' Richard Strauss, the French's d'Indy, the Russians' Tchaikovsky' but also 'the first truly Hungarian symphonist'.⁵ In 1946, a year after Bartók's death, however, while pondering on why the work did not prove more successful, Zoltán Kodály stated that '[i]t is tragic that he uttered the appeal of Hungarian

duced in *Archives Béla Bartók de Belgique: Fonds Denijs Dille*, ed. Yves Lenoir (Bruxelles, 2002), pl. xxxi. Bartók's remark was finally not included in Dille's book, where it is only marked as 'Onuitgegeven' (unpublished), see Denijs Dille, *Béla Bartók* (n.p., 1939), 89.

- 3 The most detailed discussion of the work with insightful comments on its cultural and political context appears in 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), see Part II, 'Bartók, Political Nationalism, and the *Kossuth Symphony* (1903)'. See also Denijs Dille's still basic article, 'Bemerkungen zum Programm der symphonischen Dichtung "Kossuth" und zur Aufführung dieser Komposition', *Documenta Bartókiana*, 1 (1964), 75-104. Most of the first volume of *Documenta Bartókiana* is devoted to the *Kossuth*.
- 4 Frigyesi's characterization of Bartók's endeavour is very much in keeping with the contemporary reception of the piece, see Frigyesi, 'Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism', esp. 121. Reviews of the two performances have been collected and edited by János Demény, 'Zeitgenössische Kritiken über die Erstaufführungen der Kossuth-Symphonie von Béla Bartók', *Documenta Bartókiana*, 1 (1964), 30-62.
- 5 Originally in *Zenevilág* (Music world), 19 Jan. 1903. The translation is borrowed from the unpublished English version of *Béla Bartók (1881-1945): Multimedia CD-ROM*, ed. György Kroó (Budapest, 1995).

independence in the musical language of Germany' – a sharp criticism in itself but an especially bitter remark in the wake of the Second World War.⁶ Bartók himself obviously saw things differently at the time of composition. Writing to his mother about Hans Richter's sympathy for *Kossuth* and its planned performance in Manchester he proudly stated: 'I'm pleased not only for my own sake, but also because a completely *Hungarian* piece of music will be performed in England – Hungarian in its subject, Hungarian in its style, in short, Hungarian in every respect – a piece which glorifies our greatest patriot and gives voice to those very feelings of ours against Austria'.⁷ Clearly, Kodály in hindsight disagreed. Interestingly, however, he vigorously disclaimed any direct relation between music and politics in general and Bartók and politics in particular before giving his final verdict of the piece in his 1946 article.

Party allegiance cannot be expressed in music, but the dynamics of the War of Independence could. So this music signified a clear political stand. Otherwise Bartók never became involved in party politics and would certainly protest energetically against the political propaganda released in his name. It is a pity that the work did not turn out more successfully so that it might be performed today, too; its author considered only the funeral march to be worth printing.⁸

Kodály's 1946 evaluation of the *Kossuth Symphony*, however, differed not only from the composer's original intentions or, for that matter, from Kacsóh's enthusiastic judgement at the premiere, but also from his own earlier publicly voiced opinion. In his first extended article on Bartók written after the First World War for the March 1921 issue of *La Revue Musicale* Kodály told the story of the premiere with characteristically different emphases:

In 1904 the Budapest newspapers reported on an uncommon scandal. At an orchestral rehearsal an Austrian trumpet-player refused to play a parody of the Austrian national anthem as demanded by the score of a new composition. The Anthem *Gott erhalte* (written by Haydn and varied in his *String Quartet* in C major) was in Hungary the hated symbol of Austrian oppression, whereas the new work was Bartók's *Kossuth*, a programme symphony, its theme being the latest heroic effort of Hungary towards independence in 1848. The distorted anthem symbolised the Austrians' flight. (It is a well-known fact that only Russia's intervention turned the war in Austria's favour.) The composer, who wore Hungarian attire, had previously been known as an eminent pianist but now he became famous overnight.⁹

6 Zoltán Kodály, 'Béla Bartók the Man', in *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály* (Budapest, 1974), 99. Kodály might have studied *Kossuth* in 1905, see Bartók to his former piano professor István Thomán, 27 June 1905, *Bartók Béla levelei* (Béla Bartók letters), ed. János Demény (Budapest, 1976), 89: 'What could have happened to "Kossuth"? Did Kodály go and fetch it?'

7 Bartók to his mother, 27 June 1903, in *Bartók Béla Családi levelei* (Béla Bartók family letters), ed. Béla Bartók, Jr., with Adrienne Gombocz (Budapest, 1981), 106-7, English translation quoted from *Bartók Letters. The Musical Mind*, ed. Malcolm Gillies and Adrienne Gombocz, unpublished typescript in the Budapest Bartók Archives.

8 Kodály, 'Béla Bartók the Man', 99.

9 Kodály, 'Béla Bartók', in *Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, 88-89.

After these explanations, Kodály's earlier, certainly more sympathetic evaluation of the piece follows:

Although his work was too original to gain general appreciation it conquered the connoisseurs. It raised the question of national music so often discussed (this was a burning question in France as well), and it held out the promise of a solution in the near future.¹⁰

The parenthetic reference to parallel developments in Hungary and France, not only had a direct appeal to the articles envisaged audience, readers of the then recently founded French musical periodical in general, but it also had a more concealed double message. While it is historically true, and Kodály himself played a very active role in the process, that the French cultural orientation as opposed to the German (traditional for Hungary) was central and liberating for a whole generation of poets, artists and musicians from the later nineteenth century on, the emphasis on Hungary's struggle against Austria militarily in 1848-49 and culturally during the first years of the twentieth century gained new significance in the wake of a World War in which Hungary was considered by the French an enemy nation.

Original or not, the work proved indeed difficult to digest. One of the most sharply criticized parts was section no. 8, the battle scene that included the notorious distorted version of the Austrian anthem. But even this provoked varied reactions at the time. On first hearing the composition, Richter was impressed by the 'Gott erhalte' parody; Bartók quoted him exclaiming 'bravo, grossartig' in his 1903 letter.¹¹ Dohnányi, on the other hand, found that the caricature was not marked enough.¹² In any case, if there is anything that might 'express party allegiance' it is this parody of the 'Gott erhalte' melody carrying the same political message as the composer's preprinted stationary at the time did, which read, in obvious defiance, 'God save the Hungarian people', quoting the first line of the Hungarian national anthem. Even more directly expressing his protest against Austria, Bartók would also draw the following epigraph by hand, 'Down with the Habsburgs!'¹³ The question is, however, whether and to what extent the political content is 'encoded' in the music itself, i.e. whether there is something inherent in it or whether it is rather only the function of a quoted melody (notated by Bartók using actual quotation marks in the score, cf. Ex. 3b) that implies some meaning completely extraneous to the musical material proper.

Following Liszt's and Strauss' tradition, thematic transformation lies in the heart of the *Kossuth*. Whereas the only 'quoted' melody in the piece is the 'Gott erhalte' parody,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bartók to his mother, 27 June 1903, *Bartók Béla Családi levelei*, 107.

¹² It is interesting that according to Bartók's letter of 1 Sept. 1903 from Gmunden, Austria, where he studied with Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi privately following his graduation from the Music Academy, Dohnányi was less impressed with his parody: 'I played my Kossuth symphony for Dohnányi. He did not say anything positive but he found 1000 and 1 things to object, mainly concerning minor things, i.e. his remarks rather did not touch upon the absolute music. Thus, e.g., according to his view on the use of the "Gotterhalte" is that it does not come out markedly enough, it is not parodied sharply enough, etc.' See *Bartók Béla Családi levelei*, 109.

¹³ Bartók to his mother, 23 Sept. 1903, *Bartók Béla Családi levelei*, 113.

this theme forms part of a complex net of thematic ideas that provide the basis of the entire composition intended to express the sharp opposition between the Hungarians and the Austrians or, for that matter, 'national' and 'foreign' or 'alien'. In his detailed analytical notes first published in *Zeneközlöny* before the Budapest premiere in January 1904 and then also published in English translation in the concert brochure of the Manchester performance on 18 February of the same year, Bartók described the overall program of the piece identifying nine different themes, some of whose variants he also carefully pointed out in a long series of musical examples. It is particularly characteristic of the composition that most of the themes undergo a thorough process of variation and transformation. Thus according to the composer's own analysis the principal theme of the whole work, representing Lajos (Louis) Kossuth himself, appears at least in six different versions: Closely following Strauss' model in *Ein Heldenleben*, this theme opens the piece in a freely developing form (Ex. 1a).¹⁴ In section 3, a significantly more condensed form appears that Bartók does not call a new version (Ex. 1b). '[T]he Kossuth theme slightly altered'¹⁵ is introduced in section 4 (Ex. 1c). Kossuth's resolution to fight in section 6 is expressed with a more angular variant (Ex. 1d). Kossuth's summons in section 7 is yet another character variation of the theme (Ex. 1e) and, finally, the inversion of the theme is employed to express the final catastrophe in section 8 (Ex. 1f).

The image displays six musical examples, labeled (a) through (f), illustrating variations of the Kossuth theme. Example (a) is a treble clef staff with a common time signature, showing a sequence of eighth notes with triplets. Example (b) is a bass clef staff with a common time signature, showing a more condensed version of the theme. Example (c) is a bass clef staff with a key signature of one flat, showing a slightly altered version. Example (d) is a bass clef staff with a key signature of three sharps, showing a more angular variant. Example (e) is a bass clef staff with a key signature of three sharps, showing a character variation of the theme. Example (f) is a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat, showing the inversion of the theme.

Example 1. Variants and transformations of the Kossuth theme in Bartók's *Kossuth Symphony* (1903).

14 While Bartók's analysis with music examples as published in English in 1902 is printed in Béla Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London, 1976), 399-403, an English translation of the longer Hungarian version is included in the appendix of Frigyesi, 'Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism'.
15 Frigyesi, 'Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism', 272.

According to Bartók's description, a new theme represents the Hungarian heroes.¹⁶ Apart from a third theme¹⁷ with which section 4, 'Better fate then was ours', begins, the 'heroes' theme' is the only important new idea that was intended to give voice to the national spirit. The Hungarian heroes' theme, still according to Bartók's analytical notes, produces again six forms – this time mostly with only slight variation. The initial presentation of the theme in section 7 (Ex. 2a) is quickly followed by a more closed version (Ex. 2b). In the battle scene of section 8, the theme is employed as a contrast to the Austrian army's 'Gott erhalte' parody first in diminution (Ex. 2c) and later in augmentation (Ex. 2d) to express the Hungarians temporarily prevailing over the enemy. Finally, two different forms are introduced in the last two sections. The catastrophe is not only expressed by the inversion of the Kossuth theme but is also reinforced by the employment of the inversion of the heroes' theme (Ex. 2e) and a last, rhythmically altered *Adagio* version is heard in section 9 (Ex. 2f).

(a) *pp*

(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

(f)

Example 2. Variants and transformations of the Hungarian heroes' theme.

16 Music ex. 7a, theme 'no. 6', in Bartók, *Essays*, 402.

17 Music ex. 4, theme 'no. 3', in Bartók, *Essays*, 400.

Both Hungarian 'national' themes contain a number of musical characteristics that were intended to evoke associations of *style hongrois*. These include the dotted rhythm in both of its forms (short–long in the accompaniment, not quoted here, and long–short in the initial as well as the final motives of the Kossuth theme), an allusion to the augmented second between the third and the raised fourth degree of the scale again in the Kossuth theme, and the repeated fourth leap at the beginning of the heroes' theme. More than that, Judit Frigyesi in her detailed discussion of the piece, convincingly pointed out some affinity between the Kossuth theme and a late nineteenth-century 'Kossuth song' composed by Ernő Lányi.¹⁸ While Frigyesi also interprets the more disguised relationships linking the piece's families of themes and motives, she further demonstrates that in the last analysis the heroes' theme itself can be derived from the closing motive of the Kossuth theme.

Bartók's themes expressing Hungarian national character – an individual one in case of Kossuth and a 'collective' one in case of the heroes – were put into sharp relief by the introduction of new, 'alien' themes, most notable among them the 'Gott erhalte' parody itself. Just like the Kossuth and the heroes' theme, the Haydn melody itself became subject to further variation to express different turns of events in the narrative. Apart from comparing it with the first two bars of Haydn's theme (Exx. 3a and 3b), Example 3 shows four further different versions, each appearing in section 8 of the piece, an augmented version parallel of the augmented form of the heroes' theme (Ex. 3c), and perhaps most interestingly, two variants that present the theme set in different scales. Of these two further distorted forms the first (Ex. 3d) employs the characteristic degrees of the melodic minor scale while shifting notes five to seven of the melody one degree up. The last two whole-tone-scale variants are used simultaneously in the primary form and in inversion (Exx. 3e and 3f). It should be noted that while rhythm is leveled out in the original form of the parody, the further distorted variants 'restore' Haydn's hymn-like initial dotted rhythm. Bartók's approach to this 'quoted' melody is characteristically different from his handling of the Hungarian themes. Whereas he ostensibly used motives of strong 'national' character drawing on a pool of commonplace elements to build up his very flexible and individual symphonic themes whenever his heroes were concerned, to represent the Austrian army (and their oppression in general), he used a distorted and, thus, alienated version of a familiar tune. Thus even in the latter case, he carefully avoided real quotation.

Bartók's musical means of distortion in the primary form of the 'Gott erhalte' theme – C sharp minor in low register instead of the original singing G major, the metric shift of the theme and its mutilation, the use of non legato, his scoring for the comical bassoon followed by a primitive shadow-imitation on the double bassoon, the employment of the accompanying trill on the kettle drum paired with the pedal point on the tubas, etc. – are too obvious to warrant detailed discussion here. Bartók's first strategy was thus to distort the theme. On a second instance, however, he used it

18 Cf. Frigyesi, 'Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism', 146–47.

(a) Treble clef, C major, quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

(b) Bass clef, C major, eighth notes with accents: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

(c) Bass clef, C major, chords, fortissimo: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

(d) Bass clef, C major, marcato with crescendo, fortissimo and fortississimo: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

(e) Treble clef, C major, chords: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

(f) Bass clef, C major, eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4.

Example 3. The beginning of Haydn's 'Gott erhalte' melody and variants of the 'Gott erhalte' parody in Section 8 of Bartók's *Kossuth Symphony*.

(just like his other principal themes) as a point of departure for variation and transformation to illustrate the narrative of the program. The idea of thematic transformation was so central to Bartók's compositional strategy that during the course of the piece he chose to introduce the most important theme, Kossuth's theme, not in some primary form but rather in a developed version so that what appears to be the 'primary form' should be uncovered from a later, hidden passage.¹⁹ It seems that exactly this basic attitude would remain characteristic to Bartók's compositions but would be practiced on more original material and in significantly more sophisticated forms.

19 See Frigyesi's convincing interpretation of the Kossuth theme and its derivatives, Frigyesi, 'Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism', 127-28. According to her analysis the 'condensed' form of the Kossuth theme appearing in bb. 50-51 is the actual theme of the work.

II. NATIONAL OR PERSONAL IDENTITY?

An important issue related to a marked 'national allegiance' was pinpointed by László Somfai some 30 years ago when he described a characteristic type of culmination point in Bartók's *oeuvre*, found in compositions from at least the First String Quartet to works of the late 1930s, which invariably features a highly pathetic moment using musical elements that are associated with Hungarian folk music.²⁰ Most important among them is the short-long dotted rhythm (♪ ♩. or ♩ ♩.) as a reference to a basic rhythmic gesture in new style Hungarian peasant song, although, as Somfai convincingly argues, even this can be missing without the passage, underlined by changes in dynamics (mainly *f* or *ff*, but sometimes *p*), tempo (*rallentando*) and fabric (simpler, more homophonic), losing its 'Hungarian' character. Somfai observes that these passages never provide the concluding passage of a work or movement but are generally followed by some alienating or neutralizing passage or section, a fact that clearly testifies Bartók's strategy to conceal, after having showed up, these most emphatic moments. Perhaps the most surprising example among the 'Hungarian' culmination points appears in the first movement of the Second Piano Concerto, where the trumpet motto theme, derived from Stravinsky's theme in the final section of the *Firebird*,²¹ turning the originally slow hymn-like phrase into an unexpectedly vigorous lively motive, suddenly takes on unmistakable 'Hungarian' characteristics when played in retrograde inversion in the culmination point of the first movement.²² The sophisticated counterpoint of the piece is discussed in some detail in the composer's own analysis,²³ and he also underlined the importance of the transformation of the theme when talking to Denijs Dille in 1937.²⁴

When speaking to Kosztlányi in 1925, giving the interview mentioned above, Bartók had just witnessed the final decisive success of his most recent orchestral work, the *Dance Suite*. Although well received at its allegedly rather poor Budapest premiere in 1923, this composition happened to start its career as one of the most widely performed modern orchestral pieces at its first significant performance abroad – in sharp contrast to the fate of the *Kossuth*. Judging from the critical recep-

20 László Somfai, 'A Characteristic Culmination Point in Bartók's Instrumental Forms', in *International Musicological Conference in Commemoration of Béla Bartók 1971*, ed. József Ujfalussy and János Breuer (Budapest, 1972), 53-64.

21 Ferenc Bónis, 'Quotations in Bartók's Music', *Studia Musicologica*, 5 (1963), 355-82.

22 A thorough analysis of the Second Piano Concerto including a detailed discussion of the motto theme and its transformation during the course of the piece is found in László Somfai, 'Statikai tervezés és formai dramaturgia a 2. zongoraversenyben' (Structural planning and formal dramaturgy in the Second Piano Concerto), in id., *Tízennyolc Bartók-tanulmány* (Eighteen Essays on Bartók) (Budapest, 1981), 194-217, esp. 202-3. See also László Somfai's article in the present volume of *Danish Yearbook of Musicology*.

23 Béla Bartók, 'Analysis of the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra', in Bartók, *Essays*, 419-23.

24 'It was not a sheer playful idea on my part to employ the first subject in retrograde [sic] at the end [sic] of my second concerto'. Bartók could only have meant the retrograde inversion of the motto theme towards the end of the first movement. See the text of the interview published in French in Denijs Dille, *Béla Bartók. Regard sur le passé*, ed. Yves Lenoir (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1990), 28.

tion of this Prague performance, the piece was not considered particularly ‘nationalist’ in any sense. Instead, its folkloristic basis was unanimously acknowledged. The composer himself emphasized this aspect.

The aim of the whole work was to put together a kind of idealized peasant music – you could say an invented peasant music – in such a way that the individual movements of the work should introduce particular types of music. – Peasant music of all nationalities served as a model: Magyar, Wallachian [= Romanian], Slovak, and even Arabic. In fact, here and there is even a hybrid from these species. Thus, for example, the melody of the first subject of the first movement is reminiscent of primitive Arabic peasant music, whereas its rhythm is of East European folk music... The ritornello theme is such a faithful imitation of a certain kind of Hungarian folk melodies, that its derivation might puzzle even the most knowledgeable musical folklorist²⁵

In his discussion of the *Dance Suite*, Tibor Tallián described it as supporting ‘the national ideal of Hungarian integration in the post-peace-treaties era’. The work’s ‘national’ character is defined, despite the varied folkloristic material that alternately prevails in the individual movements, by the ever-recurring ritornello. Bartók himself underscores its significance when he explains in the same passage that ‘the ritornello – as its name indicates – returns several times in the manner of a leitmotif’.²⁶



Example 4. Ritornello melody of the *Dance Suite* (1923).

For Tallián, the use of the German word *Leitmotiv* reveals the personal significance of the theme.²⁷ It appears that in a very different way and with very different means this particularly ‘faithful imitation of a certain kind of Hungarian folk melodies’ represents the fusion of national and individual identity as the Kossuth theme attempted to do twenty years earlier.

How to express individuality within a tight net of references can be exemplified by the opening theme of the ‘Tempo di ciaccona’ movement from Bartók’s late Sonata for Solo Violin written in 1944 for Yehudi Menuhin. The central and unmistakable reference here is, of course, to Johann Sebastian Bach’s violin sonatas and partitas.²⁸

25 The quote is taken from Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók: The Man and His Work* (Budapest, 1988), 133.

26 Ibid.

27 Cf. Tallián, ‘Quellenschichten der Tanz-Suite Bartóks’, *Studia Musicologica*, 25 (1983), 211-19, esp. 215-17.

28 The association is so obvious that a contemporary Hungarian composer, Ádám Kondor, could not resist quoting the beginning of the Bartók piece together with the first bar of the Bach Sonata in a song cycle, *Old Bockhampton Tunes* (1996) for mezzo soprano and violin based on selected poems by Thomas Hardy.

Both the instrument and the dedicatee (on whose concert Bartók heard the C major Solo Violin Sonata in 1943) point to that direction.²⁹ And indeed, the work has a four-movement layout including a Fuga and a slow movement 'Melodia' as middle movements, closely following the model of the Sonatas rather than the Partitas. Interestingly, the title of the first movement 'Tempo di ciaccona' refers, in contrast, to the D minor Partita. The relative freedom in combining allusions to more than one specific model that belong to different genres reveals the 'neo-classical' element in the composition. The beginning of the movement seems to refer to the Bach Ciaccona as much as to the tonally closely related first movement of the G minor Sonata.³⁰

(a)

(b)

(c)

Example 5. (a) Bartók, Solo Violin Sonata (1944); (b) Bach, G minor Sonata; (c) Bach, D minor Ciaccona.

- 29 Cf. Bartók's letter to Wilhelmine Creel, 17 Dec. 1943, in which he mentions that he had heard Menuhin playing the C major Sonata in excellent, classic style. The letter has only been published in Hungarian translation, see *Bartók Béla levelei*, 697.
- 30 Yves Lenoir puts the same theme into a very different context when he discusses it with reference to nineteenth-century *verbunkos* style. See Yves Lenoir, *Folklore et transcendance dans l'oeuvre américaine de Béla Bartók (1940–1945)* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1986), 426. Bartók's indebtedness to Bach is emphasized in Gillies' analysis, see Malcolm Gillies, 'Bartók's Sonata for Solo Violin: An Analysis of Tonality and Modality', (M. Diss.; University of London, 1981), i, 29.

Despite all these references, the first aural impression due to the harmonic ‘freedom’ of the idiom (or, rather, what has been termed as extended tonality) immediately distances it from the models, even though the use of ornamental figures leading to structurally important notes lies very close indeed to the style of the Bach *Adagio* while its basic rhythmic character (♩ ♩.. ♪♪ | ♩ ♩.. ♪♪) does evoke the Ciaccona (♩. ♩ | ♩ ♩. ♩ | ♩ ♩. ♩), despite its leaving out the upbeat, alien to Hungarian folk music, and using double-dotted chrotchets followed by two demisemiquavers.

The theme shows strong cohesion because of the relative formal closure of the initial two four-bar units. Clearly and sharply separated from the ensuing bridge passage – a classical rather than baroque strategy – the theme contains yet another stylistic reference that is at least as crucial as the baroque or neo-baroque features themselves. In contrast to the Bach *Adagio* where the most important notes, tiny melodic gestures, freely wander now appearing in the upper voice now in the middle, in the Bartók theme there is a consistent differentiation between melody, formed invariably by the upper notes, and the accompanying lower voices. This differentiation is as consistent as that between main notes and ornamental ones, mentioned already. An important feature is the inclusion into the melody of the conspicuous short–long dotted rhythm played on the strong beat at phrase ends that despite all baroque reminiscences so unmistakably point to Hungarian folk song. However strange it might sound, the piece begins with the heightened intensity of a usual culmination point.³¹ Looking at the theme as a whole it appears to form a simple enough two-phrase period, with the second phrase repeating (with slight variations) the material of the first, only a fifth higher, a strategy, which is, again, at the same time characteristic of baroque and many nineteenth-century – ‘new-style’ – Hungarian folk songs. A complete new-style Hungarian folk song of the A–A⁵ pattern should have two more phrases.³² (The Second Violin Concerto has a first theme cast in a four-phrase quasi folk-song-like form, however different it might be from actual folk songs in style and dimensions.) The irregularity of the ‘unfinished’ A–A⁵ pattern makes a different interpretation of the theme possible: the first phrase itself can be considered as the theme representing a whole folk song stanza rather than a single phrase of it.³³ In fact its basic shape recalls that of the ritornello from the *Dance Suite*.

31 This fact might have something to do with the instrument, the violin, as the (‘second’) Violin Concerto written for Zoltán Székely begins with an intensity that is not unlike the theme of the ‘Tempo di ciaccona’ whereas the Hungarian folk reference is merged with a completely different style that was indicated by the composer when he temporarily called it ‘Tempo di verbunkos’.

32 Lajos Bárdos interpreted this theme as corresponding to the first two phrases of a new-style folk song, see Lajos Bárdos, *Bartók-dallamok és a népzene* (Bartók melodies and folk music) (Budapest, 1977), 84. On the classification of Hungarian folk songs according to old style (Class A), new style (Class B) and miscellaneous further melodies of often foreign origin (Class C) in general, see Bartók’s *Hungarian Folk Music* (or, in more recent editions: *The Hungarian Folk Song*), transl. M. D. Calvocoressi (Oxford, 1931).

33 Cf. the discussion of the compositional memo that only contains the melody of the first four bars in Phillip Coonce, ‘The Genesis of the Béla Bartók Sonata for Solo Violin’ (Ph.D. diss.; Manhattan School of Music, 1992), 14–15. The sketch on a page of Bartók’s Arab folksong col-



Example 6. Main melody notes of the first subject in the 'Tempo di ciaccona' movement of the Solo Violin Sonata.

While a closer examination reveals the theme to be referring to a specific folk song type, it also belongs to a whole series of thematic ideas within Bartók's *oeuvre*. They are characterized by a four-phrase structure built up of phrases of equal length (or equal number of syllables per line), an overall melodic line descending from the initial high note to the final an octave below, and pentatony put into relief. A similarly condensed theme that has much to do with this one features as the framing motto of Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911).



Example 7. Initial motto theme in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911).

Here, the leveling of rhythm as well as the use of not more than four notes to a phrase (folk songs of this type have six-syllable lines or more) render the theme mysterious as well as emblematic.

Bartók encountered the special folksong type referred to in these themes in 1907 in Transylvania. It was at that time that he 'discovered' the pentatonic scale and noted down in one of his folksong collecting field-books and also in a letter to the violinist Stefi Geyer. Tibor Tallián has convincingly pointed out the very personal significance of this melody type in a recent article.³⁴ In his words, the pentatonic lyric folksong became the composer's 'personality symbol'. This musical symbol first appeared in the First String Quartet (1908-9). The secondary theme of the finale is based on a single pentatonic phrase that was noted down separately in Bartók's sketchbook known as the Black Pocket-book. The sketch shows largely the final form of the theme.³⁵

lecting field-book is reproduced with a brief description in László Somfai, *Bartók's Workshop: Documents of the Composition Process* (exhibition catalogue; Budapest, 1995), 16-17. See further Somfai's transcription of the sketch in his *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996), 76. Unfortunately, the second note in bar 4 seems rather ambiguous on the sketch. It might well be G (as transcribed by Coonce) or F leading to the following B flat (as transcribed by Somfai) although, perhaps, G appears more consistent with the tonality of the theme.

34 Tibor Tallián, 'Béla Bartók: Composer of Folk Songs', *Hungarian Music Quarterly*, 9/1-2 (1998), 5-9.

35 Béla Bartók, *Black Pocket-Book: Sketches 1907-1922*, ed. László Somfai (fasc. edn.; Budapest, 1987), f. 11r.



Example 8. Adagio secondary theme in the finale of the First String Quartet (1908-9).

As can be seen on the sketch, the theme is based on this single initial folksong-like phrase of possibly seven syllables that could be the beginning of a pentatonic tune, but is used in a fragmentary fashion repeating, transposing, and shifting its individual motives, instead of forming a closed stanza built on the initial idea. In his analyses of the piece, János Kárpáti derives this particular motive from a folksong collected in 1907 in Csíkrákos, Transylvania.³⁶ The song was first published in the periodical *Ethnographia* in January 1908. ‘Székely balladák’ (Székely ballads), Bartók’s first scholarly publication presented fifteen Hungarian ballad types, most of them with more than one melody and text. One of the folksongs belonging to no. 12, the ‘Ballad of Úti Miska’ was published later in Bartók’s monograph *The Hungarian Folk Song* with a single stanza ‘Romlott testem a bokorba’ as it is preserved on phonograph recording.³⁷

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Romlott testem a bokorba, | I lie wounded in the thicket, |
| Piros vérem hull a hóba; | My red blood trickles on the snow; |
| Hull a vérem, hull a hóba, | My blood trickles, trickles on the snow, |
| Piros vérem hull a hóba. | My red blood trickles on the snow. |

The first phrase of the melody, especially in the transcription published in 1908 leaving out some of the ornamental notes that were later included in the revised transcription, has an obvious affinity with the theme from the First Quartet finale.³⁸ Since the song belongs to the ‘speech-like’ *parlando* style, rhythmic differences are of secondary importance. In fact, the third phrase, a repetition of the first, begins with

36 János Kárpáti, *Bartók’s Chamber Music*, transl. Fred Macnicol and Mária Steiner (Stuyvesant, NY, 1994), 85-86.

37 The song has been preserved in the folksong collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (now at the folk music department of the Institute for Musicology in Budapest) as arranged and classified by Bartók in the late 1930s. Its record card or base sheet (*támlap*), classified as number 578a, bears a seven-stanza text. The music, notated for two stanzas instead of the usual first stanza only, is in Bartók’s hand and the rest of the text and some of the inscriptions are in the composer’s first wife, Márta Ziegler’s hand. The two notated stanzas beginning with the words ‘Romlott testem’ is marked as stanzas 2 and 3 while the first ensuing stanza is identified as the actual first one. According to an exceptional explanatory remark that follows the last stanza in brackets, legend has it that a woodman had an accident his left hand being caught in a wood crack, who then wrote the poem with his free right hand.

38 I reproduce the melody from *Béla Bartók Írásai*, iii, ed. Vera Lampert with Dorrit Révész (Budapest, 1999), 36.

a longer held-out note as the fermata shows, similarly to the theme in the quartet's finale. Another difference is Bartók's use of a quasi seven-syllable melody in contrast to the eight-syllable lines of the folk song. Thinking, however, of Bartók's designation on a copy of the beginning of the quartet's first movement, '(*az én halottas dalom...*)' (my death song...), this particular folk song seems to lie spiritually close to the piece in more than one way.³⁹



Example 9. 'Romlott testem', folksong collected by Bartók in 1907.

Initially, it seems, the thematic type referring to this folksong might have possessed a very rich connotation for the composer. Accidentally or not, however, the melody type gradually gained a greater and more general significance as a national symbol in Hungary. It was exactly this type that best represented what became considered as a particularly old heritage in Hungarian folk music. Not exactly the same melody but a close variant of it, 'Fölszállott a páva' (The peacock flew), best known from Kodály's symphonic variations of 1938, has been generally quoted as an archetype. The song starting with the slightly different 'Leszállott a páva' first line, was quoted as Example 7 in an enlarged edition, prepared by Lajos Vargyas, of Kodály's basic study of Hungarian folk music (first published in 1937) as one of the more complicated cases of pentatonic melodies that are characterized by the repetition of the first two phrases a fifth below.⁴⁰ This particular performance of the song was recorded on gramophone in 1936. Both Kodály and Bartók contributed to its detailed transcription. Here it is compared to a melody collected among the Mari, a people living in Asia and related to the Hungarians. The parallel appeared to represent the oldness of the melody style that should thus belong to a stratum of ancient Asian cultural heritage of the Magyars.

39 Cf. Oliver Neighbour, 'A Stray Leaf from Bartók's Black Pocket-Book', in *Studies in the Sources and the Interpretation of Music: Essays in Honor of László Somfai on His 70th Birthday*, ed. László Vikárius and Vera Lampert (Lanham, Md.: to be published in 2005), 401-2.

40 Zoltán Kodály, *Folk Music of Hungary*, enlarged edn. rev. Lajos Vargyas (Budapest, 1971), 26. The 'peacock' melody, however, does not appear in the original version of Kodály's study, see Kodály, *A magyar népzene* (Budapest, 1937).

Parlando

Le-szál-lott a pá-va Vár-me-gye-házá-ra.

De nem ám a ra-bok Sza-ba-du-lá-sá-ra.

NB 4 4 3 1 4 3 NB 5

Example 10. 'Leszállott a páva', folksong compared to a Mari folksong.

In other later editions of Kodály's study, which were supplemented with a large selection of folk melodies also by Vargyas, the 'peacock' song was printed as the very first music example of the extended appendix. No doubt, its text, also printed in the score of Kodály's variations, might have played a role in the symbolic significance the song has gradually taken on.

Röpülj páva, röpij,
Vármegye házára,
A szegény raboknak
Szabadulására,

Fly peacock, fly
Onto the County Hall,
Bring release
For the poor prisoners,

Fölszállott a páva
Vármegye házára,
Hej, de nem a rabok
Szabadulására.

The peacock flew
Onto the County Hall,
But, ah! Not to bring release
To the prisoners.

Fölszállott a páva
Vármegye házára,
A szegény raboknak
szabadulására.

The peacock flew
Onto the County Hall,
Bringing release
To the poor prisoners.

However general a symbolic meaning the peacock song was to take on at least from the later 1930s on, Bartók's reference, as it appears, was rather to the 'Romlott testem' ballad. His use of the type did not confine to the cases cited above. Neither did he use it necessarily in the hidden way as it appears in the late Violin Sonata. Sometimes it appears in a more real song-like form. Still, none of these versions are actual folk songs; they are rather imitations or recreations of the song type in the spirit of

a *folklore imaginaire*.⁴¹ The best-known and most explicit example is 'An Evening at the Village', no. 5 of *Ten Easy Piano Pieces* (1908) built on melodies of the composer's invention.



Example 11. The melody of Bartók's 'An Evening at the Village' (1908).

The same type is used as the first of a series of folksong imitations in the 'Dance of Waves' from the *Wooden Prince* (1914-17) but this time the melody, played on the saxophones, includes an unexpected tonal shift that makes it lie significantly farther from actual folk songs (Ex. 12a). In this case, however, it is obvious that Bartók deliberately shaped the melody line so that it ends a fourth too low. It is possible to reshape the melody to make it lie closer to actual folk songs. Here is a proposed 'revised' or 'original' form (see Ex. 12b).



Example 12. (a) A passage in the 'Dance of Waves' of Bartók's ballet *The Wooden Prince*; (b) the same melody slightly altered to resemble the style of real folksongs more closely.

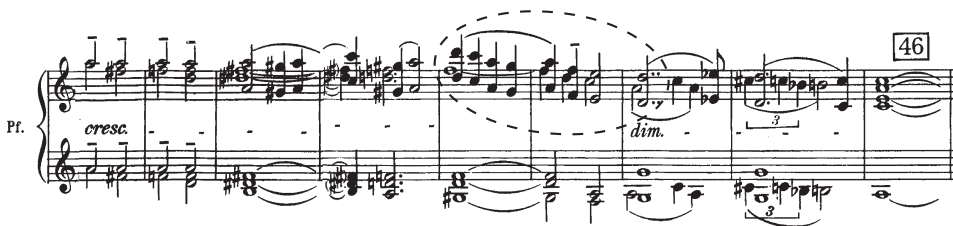
In the *Wooden Prince* the melody is heard at a moment of repose. In 'An Evening at the Village' the melody alternates with a contrasting livelier section of distinctly instrumental (peasant flute or *furulya*) character. Just like in these manifestations, but

⁴¹ The significance of Bartók's choice to 'create' folk-like songs rather than quote actual specimens are discussed in Tallián, 'Béla Bartók: Composer of Folk Songs'.

even more strongly, the melody appears in the *Dance Suite* as an idyll. Its peaceful calm gives consolation and hope. It serves as representation of home and warmth. That this type is again pointedly Hungarian in character has emotional as well as political significance.

It appears, thus, that whenever used in its entirety and ‘faithfully’ to the folk model, this melody type carries idyllic associations. This is certainly different from its use either in *Bluebeard’s Castle* or in the ‘Tempo di ciaccona’ movement, both works presenting a stylized, concise, even ‘abstract’ version of the melody type overtly presented in the opera and alluded to in a hidden way in the violin sonata. However, some sense of self-satisfaction and closure might be relevant to these ‘abstract’ appearances, too.

Added to the above two groups of ‘faithful’ recreations and ‘abstract’ versions, reference to this type can happen in Bartók’s works in a third, fragmentary, way, too. The very first appearance of this thematic type that forms the culmination point in the last movement of the First String Quartet is restricted, as we have seen, to a single first phrase of the song type. This isolated quote-like occurrence of the first phrase does possess something of the idyllic quality but without implying the fulfillment characteristic of the full-length imitations in ‘An Evening at the Village’ and the *Dance Suite*. Bartók’s last completed composition, the Third Piano Concerto (1945) also has a brief (almost fleeting) reminiscence of the melody type. It occurs in the slow second movement at an emotionally heightened moment.



Example 13. Passage from the first slow section of the second movement of the Third Piano Concerto (1945).

This is again a single phrase, but this time it is not the first phrase but the second or the fourth, in any case a closing one, that is alluded to. Thus, it is almost as if this fleeting idea would be the continuation of the melody started in the First Quartet.

All these melodies might and do have closer relatives and models among actual folk melodies (or individual phrases thereof) but the most important seems to me exactly that all of them belong or refer to a single basic type. Example 14 compares all the melodies identified above transposed to end on G following Bartók’s and Kodály’s method of editing real folk songs.

(a) 

(b) 

(c) 

(d) 

(e) 

(f) 

(g) 

Example 14. Original themes by Bartók simplified and transposed to G in the manner of folksong transcriptions: (a) First String Quartet, third movement; (b) 'An Evening at the Village'; (c) motto theme of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*; (d) from the 'Dance of Waves' in *The Wooden Prince*, slightly altered; (e) *Dance Suite*, ritornello; (f) Sonata for Solo Violin, first movement; (g) Third Piano Concerto, second movement.

Bartók's early *Kossuth Symphony* is evidence not only of the composer's naive nationalism but also of his use of thematic transformation as a basic compositional means to form a large-scale work based on a programmatic subtext. The well-known Stefi Geyer motif (D–F#–A–C#) of the early Violin Concerto written in 1907–8 resurfaces in a number of later compositions. Its use, for example, in a distorted form in Bagatelle no. 14 and its orchestrated form as the second movement of *Two Portraits* has a lot to do with Bartók's distorted version of the 'Gott erhalte' melody. The various transformations of principal thematic ideas expressing changing psychological reactions toward an inner object remain crucial for Bartók's composition up to the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (1936) and beyond. Furthermore, the series of transformational variants of three important themes from *Kossuth* discussed at the beginning of this essay are not unlike the varied appearances of the form and character of a single folksong type in different pieces. Finally, the obvious 'national' significance of the chosen type, apart from the personal significance it apparently possessed, reveals how deeply ingrained the national aspect was in what might be termed as Bartók's musical 'persona'.

However, there was also a wider context to Bartók's interest in what we might term as the national definition of one of his basic thematic ideas. His Hungarian-ness and East-European-ness was obviously crucial in the critical reception of his music. The European musical scene was made up of 'national schools'; throughout the 1920s and 1930s musical periodicals were busy presenting the musical life and composition of individual countries or nations. Several of them, such as the *Musikblätter des Anbruch* or *La Revue Musicale*, published series of articles devoted to a different country each. While concert reports still respected musical centres (which dominated eighteenth-century musical life), these became necessarily subordinate to the nation they stood for. While the yearly international festivals of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) founded in Salzburg in 1922 represented the most important events of contemporary music, it was also natural that this organization comprised national sections. Bartók himself provided articles on Hungarian music for reviews and Encyclopedias and, whenever discussing aspects of his compositional methods, he chose either 'new Hungarian music' or 'the influence of folk/peasant music on modern composition' as title for his lecture or article. Although he performed compositions by Debussy, Ravel, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Szymanowski and other contemporary composers in Budapest and occasionally elsewhere, the programmes of his representative concerts abroad served quite naturally to propagate contemporary Hungarian composition, principally the works of Kodály, apart from his own works. It is symbolic that when Bartók, probably surprisingly for most of us, pondered on setting *German* melodies, an idea he was careful enough to discuss with his publisher in Vienna, Emil Hertzka, director of Universal Edition, tactfully but categorically dissuaded him writing that

If you happen to find something among the German songs in the Erk-Boeme folksong collection that you consider especially suitable, there is nothing to object to it, but I do

think that your special field is rather the Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian folksong and that your work on that field would attract particular attention.⁴²

Even if Igor Stravinsky's only memorable remark about Bartók expressed his pity for the 'great musician's' insistence on relying on folk music ('I never could share his lifelong gusto for his native folklore'),⁴³ it was this source that provided him with a unique composer's voice as well as general cultural significance. The single melodic idea – representative of a Hungarian song type – that could permeate Bartók's *oeuvre* in ever changing ways and thereby taking on now similar, now different meanings, testify the personal and at the same time national aspect of certain decisive moments in his composition.

⁴² Hertzka to Bartók, 27 Jan. 1920, unpubl. letter in the Budapest Bartók Archives.

⁴³ Quoted among others in David E. Schneider, 'Bartók and Stravinsky: Respect, Competition, Influence, and the Hungarian Reaction to Modernism in the 1920s', in Laki (ed.), *Bartók and His World*, 172-73.

SUMMARY

The article explores the significance of musical, specifically melodic, characteristics of ethnic definition in Béla Bartók's music. The argument is principally based on two sets of closely related examples. First, revisiting Bartók's first major work the *Kossuth Symphony* (1903), written to depict and commemorate the 1848-49 Hungarian war of independence, his youthful musical nationalism (or patriotism) is discussed. An analysis of some of its central themes – those representing Lajos (Louis) Kossuth, the leader of the uprising, the Hungarian heroes and, as a contrast, that of the Austrian enemy (this latter famously parodying Haydn's 'Gott erhalte') – reveals not only the presence of musical stereotypes but also the strategic importance of motif transformation, a technique that was to remain crucial for Bartók's later ('mature') composition, too. Furthermore, although this overtly political work belongs to the very beginning of Bartók's professional career, a period many of whose compositional solutions and the *Kossuth* itself he categorically rejected within a few years, his commitment to the employment of ethnic musical characteristics in his music proved to be central to his thinking. His main achievement lies, obviously, in the varied use of the newly discovered indigenous folk material from a number of different sources most notably Romanian and Slovak, apart from the Hungarian, thereby representing multiculturalism at an unparalleled level in the period. Still, there are significant moments where his Hungarian identity seems to prevail. Thirty years ago, László Somfai pointed out one such moment by describing what he called the 'Hungarian culmination point' characteristic of several of Bartók's compositions. The second part of the article examines 'Hungarian' characteristics in a melody type recurring from the First String Quartet (1908-9) to the last compositions, the Solo Violin Sonata (1944) and the Third Piano Concerto (1945), and most memorably present in the slow sections of 'Evening at the Village' and in the ritornello theme of the *Dance Suite* (1923). Interestingly, however, the repeated use of the melody type may have been dictated by its 'national' as much as by its 'personal' and biographical significance.