

# Béla Bartók

[ 1881 - 1945 ]

*Combining talents as pianist, composer, musicologist, and teacher, Bartók was one of the major musical figures of his time in Europe. Vigorously outspoken against the Nazi regime, he left Hungary for America in 1940, there to live out his last years in relative obscurity. After his death his music enjoyed a remarkable resurgence in popularity as one of the significant, original musical styles of our time.*

*Vitally concerned with the folk music of his native Hungary, Bartók spent years in the field, collecting, recording, and analyzing this music. Unlike composers such as Liszt who had previously used Hungarian musical material, Bartók had no interest in "civilized" café presentations. His compositions and compositional thinking reveal an absorption in the actual music itself. His concerns with ethnomusicology and composition, therefore, are not mutually exclusive, but demonstrate two facets of a single musical personality. This dual relationship is clarified in the article that follows.*

*One should not suppose, however, that Bartók's creative work was merely the "arrangement" of folk material. His music reveals not only the rhythms, melodies, and harmonic ingenuity of Slavic folk music, but also a deft handling of the formal structures of the past and a keenly creative ear for sound. Such major works as his six string quartets open up new worlds of instrumental color and technical effects unparalleled in the literature.*

*"The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music," translated by Eva Hajnal-Konyi, from *Tempo*, 14 (Winter, 1949-50), pp. 19-23. Originally published in *Uj Idok* (1931).*

17: Schwarz; Childs (1967)

## The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a turning point in the history of modern music.

The excesses of the romanticists began to be unbearable for many. There were composers who felt: "this road does not lead us anywhere; there is no other solution but a complete break with the nineteenth century."

Invaluable help was given to this change (or let us rather call it rejuvenation) by a kind of peasant music unknown up till then.

The right type of peasant music is most varied and perfect in its forms. Its expressive power is amazing, and at the same time it is void of all sentimentality and superfluous ornaments. It is simple, sometimes primitive but never silly. It is the ideal starting point for a musical renaissance, and a composer in search of new ways cannot be led by a better master. What is the best way for a composer to reap the full benefits of his studies in peasant music? It is to assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his musical mother-tongue.

In order to achieve this, Hungarian composers went into the country and made their collections there. It may be that the Russian Strawinsky and the Spaniard Falla did not go on journeys of collection, and mainly drew their material from the collections of others, but they too, I feel sure, must have studied not only books and museums but the living music of their countries.

In my opinion, the effects of peasant music cannot be deep and permanent unless this music is studied in the country as part of a life shared with the peasants. It is not enough to study it as it is stored up in museums. It is the character of peasant music, indescribable in words, that must find its way into our music. It must be pervaded by the very atmosphere of peasant culture. Peasant motifs (or imitations of such motifs) will only lend our music some new ornaments: nothing more.

Some twenty to twenty-five years ago well disposed people often marvelled at our enthusiasm. How was it possible, they asked, that trained musicians, fit to give concerts, took upon themselves the "subaltern" task of going into the country and studying the music of the people on the spot. What a pity, they said, that this task was not carried out by people unsuita-

ble for a higher type of musical work. Many thought our perseverance in our work was due to some crazy idea that had got hold of us.

Little did they know how much this work meant to us. We went into the country and obtained first-hand knowledge of a music that opened up new ways to us.

The question is, what are the ways in which peasant music is taken over and becomes transmuted into modern music?

We may, for instance, take over a peasant melody unchanged or only slightly varied, write an accompaniment to it and possibly some opening and concluding phrases. This kind of work would show a certain analogy with Bach's treatment of chorales.

Two main types can be distinguished among works of this character.

In the one case accompaniment, introductory and concluding phrases, are of secondary-importance, they only serve as an ornamental setting for the precious stone: the peasant melody.

It is the other way round in the second case: the melody only serves as a "motto" while that which is built round it is of real importance.

All shades of transition are possible between these two extremes and some times it is not even possible to decide which of the elements is predominant in any given case. But in every case it is of the greatest importance that the musical qualities of the setting should be derived from the musical qualities of the melody, from such characteristics as are contained in it openly or covertly, so that melody and all additions create the impression of complete unity.

At this point I have to mention a strange notion wide-spread some thirty or forty years ago. Most trained and good musicians then believed that only simple harmonizations were well suited to folk-tunes. And even worse, by simple harmonies they meant a succession of triads of tonic, dominant and possibly subdominant.

How can we account for this strange belief? What kind of folk-songs did these musicians know? Mostly new German and Western songs and so-called folk-songs made up by popular composers. The melody of such songs usually moves along the triad of tonic and dominant; the main melody consists of a breaking up of these chords into single notes ("Oh Du lieber Augustin"). It is obvious that melodies of this description do not go well with a more complex harmonization.

But our musicians wanted to apply the theory derived from this type of songs to an entirely different type of Hungarian songs built up on "pentatonic" scales.

It may sound odd, but I do not hesitate to say: the simpler the melody the more complex and strange may be the harmonization and accompaniment that go well with it. Let us for instance take a melody that moves

on two successive notes only (there are many such melodies in Arab peasant music). It is obvious that we are much freer in the invention of an accompaniment than in the case of a melody of a more complex character. These primitive melodies moreover, show no trace of the stereotyped joining of triads. That again means greater freedom for us in the treatment of the melody. It allows us to bring out the melody most clearly by building round it harmonies of the widest range varying along different keynotes. I might almost say that the traces of polytonality in modern Hungarian music and in Strawinsky's music are to be explained by this possibility.

Similarly, the strange turnings of melodies in our eastern European peasant music showed us new ways of harmonization. For instance the new chord of the seventh which we use as a concord may be traced back to the fact that in our folk melodies of a pentatonic character the seventh appears as an interval of equal importance with the third and the fifth. We so often heard these intervals as of equal value in the succession, that what was more natural than that we should try to make them sound of equal importance when used simultaneously. We sounded the four notes together in a setting which made us feel it not necessary to break them up. In other words: the four notes were made to form a concord.

The frequent use of quart intervals in our old melodies suggested to us the use of quart chords. Here again what we heard in succession we tried to build up in a simultaneous chord.

Another method by which peasant music becomes transmuted into modern music is the following: The composer does not make use of a real peasant melody but invents his own imitation of such melodies. There is no true difference between this method and the one described above.

Strawinsky never mentions the sources of his themes. Neither in his titles nor in footnotes does he ever allude to it, whether a theme of his is his own invention or whether it is taken over from folk-music. In the same way the old composers never gave any data: let me simply mention the beginning of the *Pastoral Symphony*. Strawinsky apparently takes this course deliberately. He wants to demonstrate that it does not matter a jot whether a composer invents his own themes or uses themes from elsewhere. He has a right to use musical material taken from all sources. What he has judged suitable for his purpose has become through this very use his mental property. In the same manner Molière is reported to have replied to a charge of plagiarism: "Je prends mon bien où je le trouve." In maintaining that the question of the origin of a theme is completely unimportant from the artist's point of view, Strawinsky is right. The question of origins can only be interesting from the point of view of musical documentation.

Lacking any data I am unable to tell which themes of Strawinsky's at his

so-called "Russian period" are his own inventions and which are borrowed from folk-music. This much is certain, that if among the thematic material of Stravinsky's there are some of his own invention (and who can doubt that there are) these are the most faithful and clever imitations of folk-songs. It is also notable that during his "Russian" period, from *Le Sacre du Printemps* onward, he seldom uses melodies of a closed form consisting of three or four lines, but short motives of two or three bars and repeats them "à la ostinato". These short recurring primitive motifs are very characteristic of Russian music of a certain category. This type of construction occurs in some of our old music for wind instruments and also in Arab peasant dances.

This primitive construction of the thematic material may partly account for the strange mosaic-like character of Stravinsky's work during his early period.

The steady repetition of primitive motifs creates an air of strange feverish excitement even in the sort of folk-music where it occurs. The effect is increased a hundredfold if a master of Stravinsky's supreme skill and his precise knowledge of dynamic effects employs these rapidly chasing sets of motifs.

There is yet a third way in which the influence of peasant music can be traced in a composer's work. Neither peasant melodies nor imitations of peasant melodies can be found in his music, but it is pervaded by the atmosphere of peasant music. In this case we may say, he has completely absorbed the idiom of peasant music which has become his musical mother tongue. He masters it as completely as a poet masters his mother tongue.

In Hungarian music the best example of this kind can be found in Kodály's work. It is enough to mention "Psalmus Hungaricus", which would not have been written without Hungarian peasant music. (Neither, of course, would it have been written without Kodály.)

## On the Significance of Folk Music

Many people think it a comparatively easy task to write a composition round folk-tunes. A lesser achievement at least than a composition on "original" themes. Because, they think, the composer is dispensed of part of the work: the invention of themes.

This way of thought is completely erroneous. To handle folk-tunes is one of the most difficult tasks; equally difficult if not more so than to write

a major original composition. If we keep in mind that borrowing a tune means being bound by its individual peculiarity we shall understand one part of the difficulty. Another is created by the special character of a folk-tune. We must penetrate into it, feel it, and bring it out in sharp contours by the appropriate setting. The composition round a folk-tune must be done in a "propitious hour" or—as is generally said—it must be a work of inspiration just as much as any other composition.

There are many who think the basing of modern music on folk-music harmful and not suited to our time.

Before arguing with that school of thought let us consider how is it possible to reconcile music based on folk-music with the modern movement into atonality, or music on twelve tones.

Let us say frankly that this is not possible. Why not? Because folk-tunes are always tonal. Folk-music of atonality is completely inconceivable. Consequently, music on twelve tones cannot be based on folk-music.

The fact that some twentieth century composers went back for inspiration to old folk-music acted as an impediment to the development of twelve tone music.

Far be it from me to maintain that to base his music on folk-music is the only way to salvation for a composer in our days. But I wish that our opponents had an equally liberal opinion of the significance of folk-music.

It is only recently that one of our reputable musicians held forth like this: "The ulterior motive behind the movement of collecting folk-songs that has spread all over the world, is love of comfort. There is a desire to become rejuvenated in this spring of freshness; a wish to revitalize the barren brain. This desire tries to hide an inner incompetence and to evade the struggle by comfortable and soul-killing devices."

This regrettable opinion is based on erroneous assumptions. These people must have a strange idea of the practice of composing. They seem to think the composer addicted to collecting folk-songs will sit down at his writing desk with the intention of composing a symphony. He racks and racks his brain but cannot think of a suitable melody. He takes up his collection of folk-songs, picks out one or two melodies and the composition of his symphony is done without further labour.

Well, it is not as simple as all that. It is a fatal error to attribute so much importance to the subject, the theme of a composition. We know that Shakespeare borrowed the stories of his plays from all sources. Does that prove that his brain was barren and he had to go to his neighbours begging for themes? Did he hide his incompetence? Molière's case is even worse. He not only borrowed the themes for his plays, but also part of the construction, and sometimes took over from his source expressions and whole lines unchanged.

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We know that Handel adapted a work by Stradella in one of his oratorios. His adaptation is so masterly, so much surpassing the original in beauty, that we forget all about Stradella. Is there any sense in talking of plagiarism, of barrenness of brain, of incompetence in these cases?

In music it is the thematic material that corresponds to the story of a drama. And in music too, as in poetry and in painting, it does not signify what themes we use. It is the form into which we mould it that makes the essence of our work. This form reveals the knowledge, the creative power, the individuality of the artist.

The work of Bach is a summing up of the music of some hundred and odd years before him. His musical material is themes and motives used by his predecessors. We can trace in Bach's music motifs, phrases which were also used by Frescobaldi and many others among Bach's predecessors. Is this plagiarism? By no means. For an artist it is not only right to have his roots in the art of some former times, it is a necessity.

Well, in our case it is peasant music which holds our roots.

The conception that attributes all that importance to the invention of a theme originated in the nineteenth century. It is a romantic conception which values originality above all.

From what has been said above, it must have become clear that it is no sign of "barrenness" or "incompetence" if a composer bases his music on folk-music instead of taking Brahms and Schumann as his models.

There exists another conception of modern music which seems exactly the opposite of the former one.

There are people who believe that nothing more is needed to bring about the full bloom in a nation's music than to steep oneself in folk-music and to transplant its motives into established musical forms.

This opinion is founded on the same mistaken conception as the one discussed above. It stresses the all-importance of themes and forgets about the art of formation that alone can make something out of these themes. This process of moulding is the part of the composer's work which proves his creative talent.

And thus we may say: folk-music will become a source of inspiration for a country's music only if the transplantation of its motifs is the work of a great creative talent. In the hands of incompetent composers neither folk-music nor any other musical material will ever attain significance. If a composer has no talent it will be of no use to him to base his music on folk-music or any other music. The result will in every case be nothing.

Folk-music will have an immense transforming influence on music in countries-with little or no musical tradition. Most countries of southern and eastern Europe; Hungary, too, are in this position.

**The Influence of Peasant  
Music on Modern Music**

May I, to conclude my thoughts, [finish] by quoting what Kodály once said in this context about the importance of folk-music.

"So little of written old Hungarian music has survived that the history of Hungarian music cannot be built up without a thorough knowledge of folk-music. It is known that folk language has many similarities with the ancient language of a people. In the same way folk-music must for us replace the remains of our old music. Thus, from a musical point of view, it means more to us than to those peoples that developed their own musical style centuries ago. Folk-music for these peoples become assimilated into their music, and a German musician will be able to find in Bach and Beethoven what we had to search for in our villages; the continuity of a national musical tradition."