Béla Bartók and the Ideal of Europe
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Abstract
The paper discusses the political message of Bartók's work, asserting that Bartók was a pioneer of a new kind of patriotism and "europeanness". A patriotism which is essential in the building of Europe, and in the process of European integration where the harmony of the neighboring countries is based on mutual knowledge and acknowledgment. Bartok's example for patriotism is unique and it manifests in his music, as he never accepted any kind of political role…

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Béla Bartók has never accepted any kind of political role. He was an artist and a scholar, who understood and followed the political impulses directly deriving from his creative work in the twentieth century of the two world wars. As a result his legacy has a political message for posterity as well, the political message of Europe. It is nowhere more appropriate to speak about it than in the capital city of Romania; his relationship to his homeland, the Banat area, to Transylvania and Bucharest were very strong and fruitful also from the perspective of the formation of his political principles.

I shall summarize some biographical data. Béla Bartók was born in Nagyszentmiklós (Sânnicolau Mare, present-day Romania), a large village inhabited by Romanians, Germans, Serbians, and Hungarians. His birthplace seemed to have been the projection of Europe with Latin, Germanic, and Slavic majority and the Hungarians within it.

He was of Slavic and Germanic origin also, as three of his eight grandparents were Dalmatian, three German, and only two of them were Hungarian. His committed "Hungarianness" was thus not the result of his ancestry, but a matter of education, choice, and decision. Thus it was firm and inevitable. He first accepted the German culture of his non-Hungarian ancestors. He spoke the language at a native level from childhood, and his basic musical training was also of a German influence. Although he began his studies quite late, he caught up by his twenties and became a good "German" musician, a worthy follower of Schumann and Brahms. But by this time his militant Hungarianness started to rise. As a Hungarian citizen, he disapproved of the colonizing policy of the Habsburg Empire, of the German and Jewish character of Budapest, and as a composer he wanted to create typically Hungarian works.

It was first in the summer of 1904 when he was touched by the beauty of folk culture: in Gerlicepuszta (present-day Slovakia), where he first heard Hungarian and Slovakian folk songs and where he first made an adaptation for voice and piano of a Sekler peasant song. He met Zoltán Kodály in the parlor of an extremely intelligent Jewish lady, Emma Sándor, wife of Henrik Gruber. The spirit of this house helped him do away with his youthful anti-Semitism, and his exceptional fellow-composer, who soon became his ally strengthened his devotion towards folk music and Hungarian music. He started to collect folk music in an organized way, and extended his collecting activity to Slovakian folk music in 1906, Romanian in 1909, and later also to Rutenian music. As a folklorist, he also studied a small ethnic group of Hungary, the Catholic Bulgarian community of the Banat area. He collected folk music almost exclusively in places where there had been no folklorists before him, and thus the many thousand folk melodies which he discovered were all unique. Not only did he speak the native language of the various national minorities in the villages, but he also contacted the intellectuals of the national minorities in Hungary and through them the intellectuals of the majority countries. In 1912 he visited Bucharest, the capital of Romania considered to belong to the Balkans (BLev, 194), where he met the excellent musician and folk music collector D. G. Kiriac, and the learned librarian and later president of the Romanian Academy, Ioan Bianu. The volume published in Romania appeared in 1913, which was not followed by others only because of the unfavorable changes of times. His folkloric discoveries and experiences had a decisive effect on his musical creation. He applied original Slovakian, Romanian, Rutenian, and Serbian folk music motifs in many of his works. The folk music of these nationalities together with Hungarian music was absorbed in his original and individual musical language and became a part of the universal musical language of the twentieth century. Although there are no original

Bulgarian folk songs in his creations, it was he who acquainted the whole world with the so-called Bulgarian rhythm.

The outbreak of the First World War was a terrible blow for Bartók, but did not shatter his principles. As a composer he could not write any of his greatest works in 1915 because of the excitements of the war, but it was in this year that he wrote most of his Romanian piano miniatures. In 1917 he finished not only the *Fából faragott királyfi* (The prince carved in wood) and the *Second string quartet*, but he also composed two Slovakian folk music adaptations. He continued the collection of Romanian folk music even after 1916, when the previously neutral Romania declared war against Hungary and the Romanian Army entered Transylvania. He only abandoned his fieldwork on the constraint of the new state borders.

Bartók's life changed after the Trianon peace treaty. He could not go on collecting the folk music of the regions and minorities broken away from Hungary. He could never get over this double loss. It is characteristic that he stopped collecting also in the countryside of the truncated Hungary. In his only later expedition in 1936 he conducted fieldwork in Anatolia, beyond the southeastern borders of Europe, drawing Turkey into the field of comparative European folk music research by demonstrating Hungarian-Turkish and Romanian-Turkish analogies. Apart from this exceptional moment, after 1920 until the end of his life he concentrated on the scientific processing and publication of this huge folk music material. As a composer, he rarely applied the method of folksong adaptation, but with the perfection of his style the Romanian, Slovakian, Rutenian, South-Slavic, and Bulgarian idioms shone through his work on an ever higher level, regardless of the open revisionism of Hungarian state policy, or of the Minor Antant, the alliance of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom against Hungary.

Could he have been an internationalist? A "pan-Européer" anticipating Coudenhove-Kallergi?

No. Bartók was a Hungarian patriot, who wrote in 1903 that "all my life, in all fields, always, and in any possible way I will serve one single purpose: to benefit the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian homeland" (BLev, 61), and who remained faithful to this goal all his life. But he was a patriot in a different way then most of those who made similar declarations at that time. The facts and his rare confessions reveal the formation of his unique system of ideas. He did not apply elevated ideals in his scientific and artistic workshop, but exactly the opposite: his experience gained in his scientific and artistic practice made him the pioneer of a new kind of patriotism and Europeanness. First he discovered that what had been considered a Hungarian folk song is actually not the true one, and that the roots of Hungarian music must be sought in the countryside, among the peasants. He realized only afterwards that the specificities of Hungarian folk music can only be grasped in the mirror of the neighboring peoples' music, and thus, exceeding the limits of descriptive musicology he became the master of comparative musicology then in formation. He did not stop at a mere comparison in the research of the neighboring peoples' music. He identified so deeply with these folkloric treasures that – at least in the case of Romanian and Slovakian folklore – he aimed at their complete examination.

His contact with the peasants of different national communities had an effect not only on his musicological views and constitution as a composer, but also on his worldview. It was only after the Second World War that he wrote down his experiences before the first one: "There is not, and has never been, a single trace of furious hatred in peasants toward other nations. They live peacefully near each other; all follow their own customs and take it as natural that their neighbor speaking a different language does the same. […] There is peace among the peasants; – hatred against those who are different is only inspired by the highest circles" (BÖI, 605). Bartók, as an exceptional representative of the "highest circles", practiced this peasant virtue elevated high above his class, even to the level of tending to sympathize more with the national minorities in their conflict with Hungarians. In his younger years he suffered mostly from the Austrian imperial patronage toward the Hungarians, later on he suffered just as much when he saw Hungarians patronizing their national minorities. On the spring of 1914 he considered it natural that the Romanian peasants of Hodák and Libánfalva, who lived in closed, completely Romanian communities, although being citizens of the Hungarian Kingdom, did not speak the language of the state, and he despised the Hungarian "gentleman" (Bartók's quote) accredited with a notary's work who tried to speak only in Hungarian with them (BCsLev, 227). In a letter written on Christmas, 1916 he complained about an Austrian landowner family who consciously Germanized their environment: "I start to think: how is this possible? Is it not nicer to join those suppressed [i.e. the Hungarians]?! If I were – say – a Russian count and I would go to Finland, I would probably help the Finnish against the Russians. This explains my sympathy for Slovakians and Romanians, there [i.e. in Hungary] they are the suppressed" (BCsLev, 248). When he wrote these sentences, Hungary was at war with Romania!

In 1931 he was summoned to speak about the diversified folkloric roots of his work. He wrote in response to the letter of the Romanian legal expert and diplomat Octavian Beu: "My work as a composer, exactly for the reason that it derives from these three sources (Hungarian, Romanian, and Slovakian), can be regarded in fact as the embodiment of that idea of integrity which is so often claimed in Hungary these days." (BLev, 397). A few lines below Bartók informed the addressee that he thought of this explanation when the Hungarian chauvinists after Trianon declared him a traitor of the Hungarian cause because of his research of the folk music of national minorities and the Romanian and Slovakian influences in his music. He never stopped constructing the integrative musical Great Hungary, the spiritual home of Hungarians, Romanians, and Slovakians alike, even when the political Great Hungary fell apart and the two great nationalities began to share the eternal glory of the Bartókian work as neighboring nations of the Hungarians, and when the Bartókian version of the Hungarian idea of integrity began to anticipate the idea of integrity stretching over country borders, and a Hungary being integrated into the new Europe.

The political message of Béla Bartók's work, going beyond its immanent artistry and musicological importance, can be summarized in the following:

1. In the relationship of the majority nation of the state and the national minorities the latter is entitled to positive discrimination (the "Russian count" helps the Finnish – the minority – against the Russian state power!)
2. Passive tolerance toward minorities stopped being a positive ideal in the twentieth century following Bartók. Let us hope in the twenty-first century the ideal of the active interest in minority existence and culture will take its place!
3. The patriot as an adept of Bartók will learn the language of national minorities, and will strive, as far as he can, to enrich their specific culture and strengthen their national identity.
4. The patriot as an adept of Bartók will represent the minority cultures of his country together with his own culture in front of the world.
5. The patriot as an adept of Bartók will consider the minorities of his country as natural mediators in the relation and communication with neighboring nations.

Such kind of patriotism is at the same time the building of Europe, as in the process of European integration the concordance of neighboring countries based on the mutual knowledge and acknowledgment of their culture is at least as important as the negotiations of world-powers. It is obvious that it would be impossible to build a common Europe without the political consent of the great Western powers. But what would the political unity of Europe be worth without the individual dignity and common relations of diverse national cultures? Bartók's model may be somewhat contrary to the politics of the great European powers, but it also completes it as a typical Central-European kind of politics. This is one of the special additions of the region to modern European politics consecrated by the historical handshake of Adenauer and De Gaulle.

Bartók never accepted any political role. He was an artist and a scholar who understood and followed the political suggestions naturally deriving from his creative work in a twentieth century burdened with world wars. In the twenty-first century it is now the turn of politics to understand and follow Bartók's unique example.

Sources of the citations:

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