Bartók and the 20th Century

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During the course of my studies of Bartók's music and contemporary music in general, it became more and more evident to me that Bartók occupies a very special position among the masters who tried to find solutions to problems in the music of our century. In my talk today, I will first outline these problems and than discuss how Bartók related to them and what solutions he was able to find. I hope my distinguished colleagues will not mind if I refrain from a "scientific analysis" and speak only in general terms.

I think it is clear to us all that today's music — and the music of the preceding one or two generations — is without precedence in the history of music. We all know that the development of our century's art music was paralleled by society's gradual rejection of that music; the composer gradually lost his audience and ended up in total isolation.[1] There is no better proof of this than the fact that today's contemporary music needs the propaganda of special festivals and other events to fill a few rows of an otherwise empty concert hall with a few music lovers, or the fact that the audience will only listen to a contemporary work reluctantly when it is shrewdly "sandwiched" between favorite classical pieces.[2] And the audience will be even more reluctant to hear another performance of the work heard in such a way.

Still, the composer continues to work, for his job is to replenish the repertory, to replace the old masters' worn-out works with new ones. To do this, he must produce works, of course, which reach (if not surpass) the old masters' traditional standards; in other words, the composer of our time must compete with his predecessors. But since he feels he can hardly

[1] A. Copland, *The New Music 1900—1960.* Revised and Enlarged Edition. Norton Library, New York, 1969.

[2] H. Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music,* Simon and Schuster, New York, 1955. p. 7.

compete on the basis of the traditional "rules of the game", and since he wants to eliminate his disadvantage, he arbitrarily makes up new — and ever newer — rules, and it does not bother him in the least that his partners (the performers and the music loving audience) stopped in the meantime playing this game and that he was left to stand alone. He continues to play the game by himself, for he is convinced that even if his contemporaries do not value the ever more complex and "scientifically worked out" rules of the game[3] — and the resulting works —, posterity will.[4] For he forgets that — contrary to popular belief — the old masters were, without exception, known and appreciated in their own time and that there are few if any examples in the history of music where a composer was unrecognized in his lifetime and yet achieved a posthumous fame.[5] Since there is in fact no demand for his music, today's composer may do whatever he pleases, actually no one cares what he does and thus he can follow any fashion and can, through his "progressiveness", win the recognition of at least the small professional circles.[6] Thus it is not public success that is important to him — as it was to his predecessors — but the opinion of that other contemporary composers and the ruling establishment, for he sees that music history does not consider our century's "popular" composers on a par with the "serious" composers, that is to say, he sees that "popularity" and "seriousness" are two mutually exclusive factors.[7] He forgets, however, that music history is made neither by composers nor by the establishment, but by the lay listener and the music loving audience, and that music history is nothing else but the history of music that is accepted and liked by this audience.[8]

Today's composer fails to consider that there is no music without an audience and that both the present and the future can be measured only against the past; that he can meet the requirements of his own time only by observing certain given conventions — or "rules of game". He thinks about the old masters and their circumstances with a certain nostalgia and envy, but at the same time he would not be willing to work under the

[3] M. Babbitt, *Who Cares if You Listen?*, High Fidelity, VIII/2 (February 1958), pp. 38—40, 126—127.
P. Boulez, *Werkstatt-Texte*, translated by Josef Häusler, Propyläen Studienausgabe, Verlag Ullstein, Berlin, 1972.
Harvey, Jonathan, *The Music of Stockhausen*, Faber and Faber, London, 1975. p. 30ff.
[4] N. Nadeau, *The Crisis of Tonality: What Is Avant-Garde?*, Music Educators Journal, March 1981, pp. 37—41.
[5] Pleasants, ibid. pp. 19—20, 63.
[6] Ibid., p. 9.
[7] Ibid., p. 39.
[8] Ibid., pp. 86—87.

same conditions, namely, according to general customs and rules.[9] For the old masters worked mainly for commissions and produced something that entirely corresponded with the general taste of their own time, and their greatest virtue was that they did a better job than their less outstanding contemporaries.[10]

No, the composer of our times is unwilling to live by given conventions, and thus, automatically writes music that fails to meet the demands of our time; at the same time he is reluctant to accept the fact that he is "not being understood" and that his music is not in demand by his contemporaries. He is so preoccupied with the various problems of his own musical language that he loses sight of the real purpose of music; he spends too much time on technical questions and not enough on musicality. But how could the poor man do otherwise as he rejects — and, consequently, does not assimilate — traditions, and thus, he is hardly in a position to make up for the musicality he had lost.[11] At any rate, he loses the game against the classical giants.

We cannot blame, of course, only the composer for all this. For he can only start from the given situation into which he was born, and only in this situation can he try to find some kind of a solution. And the origin of the present situation can be traced all the way to Beethoven, for he was the one who declared war for the first time against conventions, and it was his cult of individuality that nurtured — and continues to nurture — the succeeding individualistic generations which, under the cover of impressive slogans, discarded one tradition after another.[12] In following this process, I will go back only to the times around World War I, for it was at that time when the historically unprecedented break happened which seems to have permanently separated both music and the allied arts from traditions and led them into a dead-end street.[13]

We are accustomed to looking at the history of art, literature and music as a process progressing and developing in a positive direction,[14] although historical chronology does not mean historical progress at all: a new event or development does not necessarily mean a step forward or a higher achievement. This is especially true of the music around the turn of the century when, for the first time, such statements were heard that

[9] Ibid., p. 38.
[10] Ibid., pp. 15—16.
[11] Nadeau.
[12] Babbitt.
[13] Nadeau.
[14] Pleasants, pp. 9—10; Copland, p. 44.

tonality has been exhausted by Wagner and his followers,[15] or that it is not possible anymore to use inherited material in any "new way",[16] nor is it possible to reject it without rejecting the entire tradition.[17]This view — the main protagonists of which were the early atonalists and later the New Viennese School — was finally summarized by the statement that the traditional arts have been exhausted.[18]

The break with traditions began with the rejection of tonality, that is, of melody and harmony.[19] The radical composers of that time, the so-called avantgarde, referring to the historical necessity and continuity mentioned earlier,[20] created a musical language based on entirely new theories and aesthetics.[21] Schoenberg and his followers proclaimed that atonality is the unavoidable consequence of the "breakdown" of tonality,[22] that twelve-note chromaticism cannot be used anymore for generating new harmonies,[23] that in the history of music all crises were caused by the antagonism between the complex and the simple, and that the question of dissonance is only a question of habit.[24] In trying to justify their new theory, they drew a parallel between the change from tonality to atonality and the change from modality to tonality,[25] and talked about Gesualdo's "modernism that was ahead of his time" and about Wagner's and Strauss' "anarchy". The machinery was started, and after melody and harmony became obsolete,[26] the other "conventions" became obsolete as well until the emergence after World War II of total serialism (which had done away with musicality), *musique concrète* and electronic music (which had done away both with the instrument and performer and with the audience), aleatoric music (which had done away with form, constancy and permanence) and finally, total silence (for instance, John Cage's "work" entitled *4' 33"* which had done away with everything) led to the present total destitution.[27] This is the process that is called avantgarde, this is the process that became the "official norm" of the

[15] *Arnold Schoenberg Letters.* Selected and edited by Ervin Stein. Translated by Ernst Kaiser. St. Martin's Press New York, 1965 pp. 103 ff.
[16] A. Webern, *Wege zur neuen Musik.* (Willi Reich, Universal Edition A. G. Wien, 1960.)
[17] Copland, p. 105.
[18] Nadeau.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Webern, pp. 77—78.
[21] Schoenberg, p. 138; pp. 103 ff; (Eimert).
[22] Webern, p. 64.
[23] Schoenberg, pp. 247—8.
[24] Pleasants, pp. 87ff.
[25] Ibid., pp. 90—91.
[26] Schoenberg, pp. 133, 148.
[27] Nadeau.

20th century,[28] this is the process that is the basis for the official establishment's evaluation or judgement of the individual composers.[29] These are the theories and this is the process whose positive, and only positive, experiences are handed down to the younger generations.[30] And all of this is happening despite the fact that these theories failed to become integral parts of the general musical life and musical training although already sixty years have gone by.

The original meaning of *avantgarde* was "point man" who risked his life if he went too far ahead.[31] The radicals mentioned a few moments ago — who liked, and still like, to call themselves avantgarde — not only did not (and do not at present) represent the 20th century's main artistic trends but also cannot be called avantgarde, for they went too early, too fast and too far:[32] they halted the tradition's natural development, alienated the audience, and they themselves became disappointed and totally isolated.[33]

The real avantgarde, on the other hand, safeguards and further develops the tradition, engages in a dialectic struggle with tradition and the audience, but he knows that the conservative audience will, sooner or later, accept his innovations even if at first it finds them strange. The real avantgarde knows that music must speak to the lay music lover too, and knows that he must make a synthesis between conventions and progress.[34] He knows that the standards of quality are achievements of the past on the one hand, and the opinion of the generations to come on the other. He knows that a language cannot "be created" but comes to existence by itself and that, in the final analysis, its usefulness depends on whether people use it or not. He knows that atonality or the twelve-tone system is a synthetic language which may be good in principle but is unuseful in practice, just like esperanto. He knows that Gesualdo was much less "modern" than individualistic and that one should not speak of "anarchy" in connection with Wagner and Strauss. He knows that the concept of dissonance has never changed; what was dissonant earlier is still dissonant today and the various periods defined only the degrees of dissonance which were then acceptable. He knows it is wrong to conduct his experiments in public, and knows that his innovations are acceptable

[28] Harvey.
[29] Boulez, p. 24.
[30] Nadeau.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.; Babbitt.
[34] Nadeau.

only as long as the music loving audience also accepts them. Today's avantgarde composer finds himself between three fires: the radicals, the audience, and popular music. In this position he sees the decadence of the radicals, he sees the similarities between the syntax of music and the syntax of language; he sees that traditional possibilities are not exhausted either in language or in music and thus it is possible to return to simpler musical manifestations, for the issue is not that the listener is bored by them but that the deviations from simplicity have no longer any effect on him. The avantgarde composer knows that vocal melody — or its instrumental imitation — is still the alpha and omega of music both in opera and on the concert stage, and knows that a lack of it is the composer's greatest imaginable sin. And finally, he knows that if he does not give his audience enough "familiar" material, then it will seek pleasure not in his music but in the music of the past or in popular music.

In Bartók's time, this avantgarde was represented by two great masters: by Bartók himself and by Stravinsky. Their common characteristic was that both used East-European folk traditions in revitalizing the romantic musical style.[35] For decades, Stravinsky was the main representative of neo-classicism, but toward the end of his life, he too — like so many of his contemporaries — joined the radical Schoenberg school,[36] and thus, quasi revoked his earlier *credo*.[37]

In the final analysis, then, Bartók was, among the three, the only one who can be called avantgarde in the original sense of the word, for — although he was often criticized both for being "modern"[38] and for being "old-fashioned"[39] — he never, not even for a moment, abandoned the traditions. Indeed, after he came even closer than Stravinsky ever did (not counting his last works) to the Schoenbergian sound, receiving much praise as a "modern" and even "radical" composer,[40] from the 1930s on, he returned more and more consciously where he started from at the beginning: to the pure classical traditions.[41] For this "retrogression", as

[35] H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Schöpfer der neuen Musik*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 1958, pp. 103, 133.

[36] Vid. *Canticum Sacrum, In Memoriam Dylan Thomas, Agon, Threni, Movements* etc.

[37] White, Eric Walter, *Stravinsky — The Composer and his Works*. University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1966 p. 514.

[38] *Bartók Breviárium — levelek, írások, dokumentumok* (Bartók Anthology — Letters, Writings, Documents), compiled by József Ujfalussy, edited by Vera Lampert, second edition, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1974, pp. 259ff.

[39] A. Szentkirályi, *Bartók's Second Sonata for Violin and Piano (1922)*. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1976, pp. X—XI.

[40] Ibid., pp. Vff; *Bartók Breviárium*, pp. 593—594.

[41] *Bartók Béla válogatott írásai* (Béla Bartók's Selected Writings), edited by András Szőllősy, Művelt Nép, Budapest, 1956, p. 356.

we all know, he was often reproached, although this was one of his greatest virtues. For he saw not only that some of his innovations were leading him in a false direction, but also that the allegedly exhausted and obsolete traditions were in fact still viable and that they must be the basis for the new music to be created.[42] And he not only saw this but also acted accordingly. We all know about his statement that the new can be created only from the old.[43]

Bartók continued to refine and perfect his earlier innovations which served the development of tradition; however, he gradually discarded those which led him too far away from tradition, for the conservation of the classical ideal of beauty was his ultimate goal.[44] He greatly expanded the total-functional system,[45] redefined the treatment of consonance and dissonance and the classical forms built on tonality,[46] and continued to enrich the playing technique of the traditional instruments and the sound of the traditional ensembles.[47] He held out to the end with the folksong and with melodiousness originating from the folksong;[48] through his unparalleled genius and virtuoso compositional technique, he created masterworks that may very well have as much justification for becoming models and examples for the coming generations as the works of Bach, Beethoven and the other classical masters.

Had Bartók happened to make as much propaganda as Schoenberg did, for example, the composer would be perhaps in a different position today: the norm of the century could have become Bartók's "New Budapest School" instead of the atonal twelve-tone system, and it could be his steps the world of music would be following. It is conceivable that it will be Bartók whom posterity will justify: he is already the most popular among the three composers, and the lay public is also beginning to accept, indeed like, his music. More and more young composers are abandoning atonality, serialism and aleatory, and are studying Bartók's works in their search for solutions. It is conceivable that the music history books of the 21st century will view Bartók as the greatest pioneer of the music in the 20th century.

[42] *Bartók-Breviárium*, pp. 435—439, 480.
[43] A. Fassett, *Béla Bartók's Last Years: The Naked Face of Genius*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1970, pp. 345—346.
[44] *Bartók-Breviárium*, p. 602.
[45] Vid. the theories of Ernő Lendvai. For bibliography, vid. Szentkirályi.
[46] *Bartók-Breviárium*, p. 483.
[47] Vid. *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste, Cantata Profana, Divertimento, String Quartet No. 6, Concerto for Orchestra, Sonata for Solo Violin* etc.
[48] *Bartók válogatott írásai*, pp. 189ff; *Bartók-Breviárium*, pp. 228, 479—480.