

Modern Hungarian Composers

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Even in his actual handling of colour I do not think Stravinsky has been conspicuously successful in the Symphony. In some of his earlier works I should be the first to admit that he has done some remarkable things in this way—for example, the music which accompanies the Chinese procession in *The Nightingale*. Here, however, we are in the domain of the ballet, and further comment upon its music would be irrelevant in a discussion concerning 'pure' music.

Enough has been said, I think, to indicate the retrogressive and anti-intellectual character of the Stravinsky theories. I find it difficult to reconcile Mr. Edwin Evans's approbation of them with his admission that art should reflect life, for the whole of life cannot be set within the limits of the merely sensuous. Indeed, the more important elements are found outside those limits. If we are to use our orchestral colours much in the same way as a child uses his box of paints; if our deeper emotions are to remain unawakened; if we are to give up the superb architecture of the symphonic form for disjunct utterances and aimless repetitions; if development (and therefore climax) is to go by the board, then, surely, music will be thrown back into a state of de-civilization, and will cease to be a language capable of expressing the vital forces lying unseen in the heart of man. The Symphony for Wind Instruments fails to stir me in the slightest degree; this is not surprising, for sound *qua* sound no longer interests me. What does surprise me is the fact that the composer of *Petroushka* and *The Nightingale* could bring himself to pen so fatuous a work in conformity with the theories which have formed the subject of this article.

MODERN HUNGARIAN COMPOSERS

BY PHILIP HESELTINE

It is indeed good news that Béla Bartók intends to visit England during the present month, bringing with him a new Sonata for violin and pianoforte and other chamber music for performance in London.

We have now considerable justification for regarding London as the centre of the musical world, so far as performances are concerned. Thanks to the initiative of our concert-givers we are on the whole better acquainted with contemporary music than any other city in the world. Our own composers can no longer complain of undue neglect; and we are more familiar with the work of the most important living composers than Vienna or any of the musical centres of Germany. We are ahead of America in the variety and quantity of new works that are presented to our audiences every year, and ahead of France in our knowledge of any but purely French music. Yet there are strange gaps in this knowledge of ours, of which one of the largest and strangest is our almost total ignorance of the contemporary music of Hungary.

As long ago as 1903 Richter performed an early Symphony of Bartók's at Manchester (one movement alone—a Funeral March—has survived in print), but between that time and the outbreak of war practically nothing of this composer's work was heard in England. In the summer of 1914 some pianoforte pieces by Bartók and Kodály were performed at a concert given by Mr. Liebich in London, and Sir Henry Wood introduced Bartók's first Suite* for orchestra (composed in 1905) at a Promenade Concert in the same year. The war of course prevented the possibility of extending our knowledge of his works very much further, but it is surprising that during the last three years we in England have heard hardly anything of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály (pronounced Kodai, the 'l' resembling that of the French word *mouillé*), and Laszlo Laitha—Hungary's three most distinguished living composers—save an occasional mention of their names in a musical newspaper. For whatever views one may hold as to the



Photo by)

IRÈNE WERNER, BUDAPEST.
BÉLA BARTÓK

respective merits of modern composers, no serious students of the music of Bartók can deny that the power and originality it displays entitle him to at least as much consideration and respect as any composer living.

Last year's Promenade Concerts gave us only the rather immature Rhapsody for pianoforte and Orchestra which dates from 1904. But in the preceding season Sir Henry Wood revived the early but already, to some extent, characteristic Orchestral Suite with conspicuous success, and it is difficult to see why this virile and exhilarating work has never been repeated. Incidentally, there are few modern compositions that could be arranged for a military band with more brilliant effect than the opening movement of this Suite, with its long, march-like theme of a grandeur and sonority scarcely excelled in the *Meistersinger* Overture itself, with which it invites comparison.

* Published by Rózsavölgyi, Budapest.

The four volumes of *Children's Pieces** (without octaves), which consist of simple arrangements of Hungarian and Czecho-Slovakian folk-tunes, have already proved a boon and a blessing to many teachers of the pianoforte in this country. But unlike many 'teaching pieces' they have a real musical value. Their technical simplicity is not factitious but essential. We do not feel that the folk-song and its attendant harmonies are two separate things artificially joined together; they seem inevitably one and indivisible, and each little piece has the appearance of a spontaneous composition:

Children's Pieces, vol. iv. (1908).

EX. 1. *Largo.* BARTÓK.

With them may be mentioned the more recent books of Hungarian and Rumanian folk-songs arranged for pianoforte (Universal Edition, Vienna):

Fifteen Hungarian Folk-Songs (1920).

EX. 2. *Allegretto.* BARTÓK.

In these, as indeed in most of his other works, Bartók displays that rare power—which in these days seems to be growing rarer than ever—of writing 'exactly as many notes as are necessary':

* Published by Rózsnyai, Budapest.

neither fewer nor more. These pieces have a freshness and freedom of expression that remind us, strangely enough, of those very personal little pieces of Giles Farnaby—at least three centuries old—which are to be found in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. Children's pieces do not as a rule figure in recital programmes, but the melodic beauty and delicacy of workmanship of these little pieces of Bartók's are by no means unworthy of fine playing; and those who have been privileged to hear the composer play them himself have had a memorable experience of the depths a real master can reveal in the simplest-seeming music. Pianists in search of novelties that will provide them with technical problems in addition to rich musical interest would do well to turn to the magnificent set of three *Études* (1920: Universal), the two *Elegies* (1910: Rózsnyai), and the four *Dirges* (1910: Rózsavölgyi).

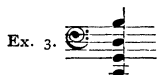
It is, however in his two String Quartets (composed in 1908 and 1917 respectively) that Bartók's singular genius is revealed most clearly. Much fine chamber music has been written in the last few years, but Bartók appears to be the only composer who, working on the lines indicated by Beethoven in his last Quartets, has achieved the same technical perfection in the expression of original ideas in an idiom that is all his own. This is high praise; but that it is fully merited by these profound and arresting works most of those who have studied the scores—or, better still, heard them performed by the superb Waldbauer Quartet—would testify. They are certainly the most significant quartets that have been published since the death of Beethoven.

It must not be supposed from what has been said above that, if we have been somewhat backward in our appreciation of Bartók's genius, his own countrymen have been any less so. On the contrary Budapest is one of the last places to go to to hear his music—except at private gatherings. For many years his professional colleagues looked askance at him, and spoke of madness when his name was mentioned, and although this pedantic opposition has now to some extent given way, political disturbances have prevented Bartók from obtaining as much public recognition as he deserves. In Hungary, as in all countries where the struggle for independence is still continuing or has been but recently ended, it is almost impossible for anyone to remain outside the sphere of politics. Under the old regime the authorities of the State-supported School of Music at Budapest regarded Bartók with marked disfavour, and despite the efforts of his friend Dohnányi on his behalf, persistently refused him an official appointment. But the success achieved by his Ballet *The Wooden Prince*,* which was performed at the Budapest Opera under the direction of Egisto Tango (now conductor of the Rumanian national opera at Kolozsvár) in 1917, and of his opera *Bluebeard** (an opera with a cast of two

* Both these works (published by Universal) are to be performed—for the first time outside Hungary—at Frankfurt-am-Main

characters) produced in the following year, brought him into greater prominence than he had hitherto enjoyed; and when, in March, 1919, the government of the country passed for a brief spell into the hands of the Communist party, Bartók was appointed co-director of the School of Music together with Kodály and Dohnányi. But this regime was short-lived. A few months later the Christian Socialists came into power and consigned the Communists and all their works (including the excellent little review *Ma* ['To-day'] which represented all that is best in contemporary Hungarian art, literature, and music) to outer darkness. So Bartók's connection with the School of Music was abruptly terminated, although he had taken no part in the political activities of the Communists, whose opinions he is very far from sharing. His sole offence was to have accepted from them an appointment their predecessors ought to have given him long before.

The influence of Kodály will probably make itself felt not so much through his compositions as through his genius as a critic and as a teacher who is able to give sympathetic encouragement and sound instruction to the rising generation of composers and executants. But his recently-published chamber music is of very considerable interest. Like Bartók he has steeped himself in the folk-music of his country (the genuine traditional peasant-music, not the comparatively modern gipsy-music popularized in western Europe by Liszt and generally confused with the true folk-music), and its influence is clearly apparent in nearly all his works. Of the four chamber compositions recently issued in the Universal Edition—a Sonata for 'cello (unaccompanied), a Duo for violin and 'cello, a Trio for two violins and viola, and a String Quartet (No. 2)—the most remarkable is the 'Cello Sonata, a veritable *tour de force* of immense technical difficulty but of compensating musical interest which is wonderfully well sustained throughout its three movements. The composer directs that the two lower strings of the instrument be tuned a semitone lower than is customary. Their notes, however, are written as they are to be played, not as they are to sound; so the opening chord of B minor, for example, is notated thus:



The last movement contains a striking example of a *pizzicato glissando*, the strings being plucked, and the fingers shifted while they are still vibrating:



From the Duo for violin and 'cello the beautiful theme of the slow movement may be quoted:

Duo for violin and 'cello.

KODÁLY.

Ex. 5.

Adagio, molto espress.



Laïtha's published works consist of a Pianoforte Sonata and two books of shorter pianoforte pieces*. He has been greatly influenced by Bartók, but he is by no means a mere imitator. His music is quite individual, occasionally arid and forbidding but never banal. Indeed, fear of the commonplace and lack of that touch of genius that can lend it distinction seem to have deprived Laïtha of the courage of simplicity. The Sonata in particular fails to convey that sense of inevitability which characterises the work of Bartók. But Laïtha has a fine gift of melody, and some of the shorter pieces are of very considerable beauty.

Soupir inquiet dans la nuit de printemps (Nine Fantasies, 1913).

Ex. 6.

LAÏTHA.



* Publishers, Harmonia, Budapest, and Rózsavölgyi, Budapest.

De l'automne et du champ (Contes pour piano).

Ex. 7. Poco allegretto. LAÏTHA

p *poco sfz* *poco sfz*

f *p sub.*

Some of his titles are peculiar. For instance: *Maternité . . . Comme une lettre sur moi-même . . . Petit conte du calme, des ténèbres, de l'attente, et d'un grand fauteuil—Petit conte d'une allée de châtaigniers en fleurs, d'une écharpe de dentelle oubliée sur la terrasse et de l'Enorme*. But unlike Satie's they make sense, and have a certain emotional suggestiveness.

Of these three composers, in whom modern Hungarian music is summed up, Bartók is by far the most important. As one of our best critics has said of him:

'He reveals new possibilities. He has cut a path through the *selva oscura* wherein so many of the modern composers have gone so hopelessly astray. Over and above his actual tangible donation, he gives us a sense of liberation, fresh hopes, and new energies with which to realise them.'

Already his influence has impressed itself on at least one young English composer of very

considerable talent—W. T. Walton—and it cannot fail to have a beneficial effect; for Bartók is a 'modern' whose originality owes nothing to sensationalism, eccentricity, or 'revolutionary' ideas, and does not depend for its recognition upon the postulation of a world from which the great masters of the past are rigidly excluded. He is, moreover, singularly free from the influence of other contemporary composers; and those who make the acquaintance of his work in 1922 and observe therein that simplicity of texture, directness of expression, and freedom from conventional forms and formulæ—qualities which, though they are conspicuous alike in the work of the English virginalists in the 16th century and of Beethoven in the 19th, some critics would persuade us were introduced into music by Stravinsky—should bear in mind that much of Bartók's best and most characteristic work is already fourteen years old.

England's recognition of this master will not be without its effect upon the musicians and musical public of his own country. For Hungary, unlike Germany, has a very proper respect for England as a musical nation, and the expression of English appreciation of Bartók will go a long way towards breaking down the prejudice and apathy of his own countrymen and finally giving the lie, so far as he is concerned, to 'the aspersion of madness cast on the inspired by the tame high finisher of paltry blots, indefinite and paltry rhymes, and paltry harmonies.'

EDWARD ERNEST COOPER

FEBRUARY 5, 1848.—FEBRUARY 12, 1922

Music and musicians have lost a good friend by the death of Sir Edward Cooper. He was not only a life-long lover of the art, and an active and enthusiastic participant so far as his business ties allowed; he was also for many years a valuable member of various bodies concerned in the administrative side of music. Chairman of the Committee of the Royal Academy of Music, President of the Madrigal Society, Treasurer of the Abbey Glee Club, a Fellow and Trustee of the Philharmonic Society, Master of the Musicians' Company, a member of the Committee of the Mendelssohn Scholarship—it would be rare to find so many offices held even by a leisured amateur. When we see them combined in one who was also a Sheriff of the City of London, an ex-Lord Mayor, and head of a big business house, the fact is doubly impressive. He figured frequently, too, in important representative gatherings, attending the International Congress of Musicians at Berlin, Vienna, and London, and being appointed by the Foreign Office to represent Great Britain at the Congress at Paris, in 1914. Always keenly interested in Church music, it was fitting that at the time of his death he should have been parish clerk of St. Michael's, Cornhill, and a Vice-President of the Royal College of Organists.