

Essay title: *“Whether it is in a brutal violence animating a sound material in fusion, or in a tranquil gentleness glowing in a halo of grating sounds and colours, Bartók is incomparable and remains unique.” Discuss Boulez's description of Bartók's music with reference to at least three of his works.*

Name	Nikolaos-Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis
Course	BMus Composition
Module	Integrated Studies: Music History - Fragmentation of Tradition
Teacher	Lecture by Matthew King (titled ‘Béla Bartók’)
Date	14 th of January, 2008
Word Count	1,754 words (excluding footnotes)

A comment by a prestigious composer such as Boulez's on Bartók is almost definitely not insignificant. On the contrary, it seems as if such a comment is very important indeed, coming from a composer who as a conductor has conducted most of Bartók's orchestral pieces, including the *Wooden Prince*, *Concerto for Orchestra*, *Violin Concertos*, *Viola Concerto*, *Piano Concerti* and the two *Rhapsodies*, among others.

Béla Bartók is considered by many to be one of the most important composers of the first half of the twentieth century, as well as one of the founders of ethnomusicology as we know it today (along with Kodály). He studied composition and piano at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, where he met Kodály. With Kodály they set out to discover the real Magyar folk music, and Bartók set out to study the folk music of Hungary, Romania and Slovakia (and in later years Arab and Turkish music¹). They both incorporated elements of the music they heard and analysed, albeit in completely different ways. This research on folk music resulted in thousands of folk tunes, scales, dances being transcribed by Bartók, who had ‘a fineness of ear and precision of rhythm which can arouse nothing but admiration,²’ according to Boulez (1991).

In discussing the word “incomparable” from Boulez's quote, we can try and compare Bartók to some of his contemporaries (or predecessors) whose style can be considered similar to Bartók's. Bartók was a very good pianist, a logical comparison would be between Bartók and Liszt. Bartók was certainly familiar with Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies, about which Liszt said he had used Magyar Gypsy melodies and tunes. However, Bartók was not satisfied with the simple quotation or use of Gypsy tunes in compositions, so he and Kodály set off to study the real Magyar folk music only to be surprised by how different original Magyar music sounded like, as opposed to the gypsy melodies in Liszt's pieces. According to Boulez, Bartók ‘could certainly not be satisfied with that rhapsodic gypsy colouring whose purely superficial

1 Boulez, Pierre, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p.239

2 Ibid.

picturesqueness has about it nothing of a genuinely popular music.”³

A more proper juxtaposition, thus, would be one between Bartók and Kodály, since the two of them travelled around Hungary to study the folk music together. However, each took a completely different approach to integrating their findings with their own music. More specifically, Kodály's use of folk tunes in his music is much more superficial than Bartók's, as he just quoted melodies, tunes and uses already existing folk scales in his pieces⁴, whereas Bartók assimilated what he heard and then wrote music which sounded like folk music, but wasn't (although he does quote folk tunes in his music, but not too often). He has, of course, analysed the folk modes and rhythms (the Bulgarian “aksak” rhythms, for example) and all these elements are evident in his music.

A very good example of this ability of his to incorporate his findings in an organic way with his own music is his Concerto for Orchestra. Having finished his research many years ago, and also having worked at Columbia University transcribing recordings of Serbo-Croatian folk music⁵, Bartók made very elaborate choices concerning the themes and modes he used in the Concerto for Orchestra. More analytically, according to David Cooper⁶, the opening theme of the concerto's first movement bears many similarities to a ‘new-style Transdanubian melody [called] *Idelátszik a temető szé*’⁷, whose text is very important on another level, concerning the reason behind Bartók’s choice of this melody. Quoting Cooper,

The text of this song is particularly revealing, given that the Concerto was the first work to be completed after his mother's death:

3 Ibid.

4 Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B%C3%A9la_Bart%C3%B3k “Bela Bartók”, as of 14th of January 2008, “While Kodály would frequently quote folk songs verbatim and write pieces derived entirely from authentic folk melodies, Bartók's style was more of a synthesis of folk music, classicism, and modernism. He rarely used actual peasant melodies in his compositions, but his melodic and harmonic sense was still profoundly influenced by the folk music of Hungary and Romania, and he was very fond of the asymmetrical dance rhythms and pungent harmonies found in Bulgarian music”

5 <http://www.answers.com/topic/b-la-bart-k> as of 14th of January,

6 Cooper, David, *Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge University Press 1996), p.36.

7 Ibid., p.37

From here is seen the graveyard's border
Where rests she who was the light of my eyes.
The grave holds her, who I would hold.
Now only I know how thoroughly I am orphaned.⁸

To sum up on Bartók's uniqueness in the area of combining folk elements with his own style, it is worth mentioning that in the same book that the quote this essay discusses comes from, Boulez describes Bartók's folk melodies and scales as being used by Bartók '*in a directly assimilated and even most nobly authentic form*'⁹

In discussing Boulez's comment on Bartók's music as a 'brutal violence which animates a 'molten sound material' '¹⁰, we can see that many of Bartók's pieces would fit in that description. To begin with, there are obvious pieces such as the *Allegro Barbaro* (Sz.49) or the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (Sz.110) whose titles reveal their aggressiveness either directly (Barbaro as in "barbarous", and thus brutal and violent) or indirectly (through the orchestration – two pianos and percussion, essentially three percussion "instruments"- 'The piano is used above all for its percussive or hammering qualities', Boulez, 1991¹¹). In the Sonata, the instrumentation creates a very special blending of the sound of the two pianos with the percussion instruments, and in particular we can see how this 'brutal violence which animates a 'molten sound material' ' works in the first movement of the Sonata, between measures 128 and 160, among other instances in the score.

There is also another work worth mentioning, one of Bartók's most acclaimed compositions (a 'work of high maturity', it stands 'at the very apex of his works', Boulez 1991¹²), the Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta (Sz.106). After the very tranquil first

8 Ibid., p.37

9 Boulez, Pierre, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p.242

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p.240

12 Ibid., pp.237-38

movement with the very impressive and intriguing fugue (as well as some “explosions” of music at points such as m. such and such), we can generally discern the kind of music that Boulez describes in the second movement (*Allegro*). The whole movement is an excellent blend of the violin sounds (where we see the Bartók Pizzicato, ϕ , another indication of aggressiveness in Bartók’s music), the celesta (which has a very light percussive sound and a harp-like timbre) and lastly the percussion ensemble (which includes a piano, used more as a percussive instrument). As for the 'molten sound material', this can be seen in many places in the score, for example between measures 60 and 66 where there is a conversation between the two string ensembles, and the cross-rhythms and time-signature changes create this fluid and complex feeling of rhythm, while the strong dynamics add to the violence of the passage, but also of the movement in general.

Concerning the other half of Boulez's description of Bartók's music as a ‘general calm suffused in a shimmering, rustling halo’¹³, an equal amount of examples can be brought about to show the accuracy of such a statement. In fact, one could say that Boulez's description is but a very carefully worded definition of what other people have called Bartók’s “night music”. This “night-music” has been described by other people as ‘an atmosphere of hushed expectancy, a tapestry [...] woven of the tiny sounds of nocturnal animals and insects.’¹⁴ The word “night” invokes very serene, mysterious, awaiting the dawn, little change, many different sounds which can not be heard normally due to the high activity of creatures (and mostly man) in during the day etc. In general, most of these elements appear in the instances of Bartók's music that have been characterised as “night music”, and which fits in the description by Boulez. However, what is very important about Boulez's statement is that he describes the music as being in a halo, as if

13 Ibid., p.242

14 World of Classical Music, http://hem.passagen.se/alkerstj/worldofclassicalmusic/early20th/bela_bartok.html , accessed on 14/01/2008

the music is not just very “calm” and “shimmering” in many aspects, but also transparent. And by saying transparent there is no intention to degrade Bartók's music by calling it “background music”, but rather his music is transparent in the way that it is very lightly woven.

There are many examples of this kind of music in Bartók's output, most notably the third movement from his Concerto for Orchestra, which starts slowly (*andante, non troppo*) with some drone-notes on the strings, arpeggios on the harp, clarinet and flute, and an oboe playing a solo (measures 10 to 19, right after the short introduction which reminds us of the beginning of the first movement). Right after that, the clarinet and oboe play a very high, “shimmering” note (with the piccolo joining in after a while to take the music forward) and then a small canonic episode begins on the winds, giving this very fluid and unstable feeling of music, and then the strings, in turn, have another small imitative episode, until they all play in unison (measures 21 to 29). Both of the sections described here are very low in dynamics, movement is done in steps and not in leaps (even the canonic phrases are moving upwards and downwards stepwise), and the music sounds quite static with various relatively little musical activity, which gives us this feeling of a nightly music, slow, dark, mysterious and exotic.

A similar example is that of the third movement of his Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, which bears many common characteristics with the third movement of the Concerto for Orchestra. More precisely, the tempo is slow (*Adagio*), there are drone-notes (violoncellos and double-basses, measures 1 to 15), there is mostly stepwise motion (violas and violins, measures 6 to 15), glissandi on the strings (measures 23 to 31), celesta, harp and piano (measures 35 to 42), and the dynamics are generally low (apart from the middle section, measures 43 to 64, where the music becomes more aggressive, only to return to the tranquillity of the beginning of the movement after measure 65). In the whole movement there is a feeling of uncertainty, of fluid movement, of a fragile moment of the night, with the quite high violin solo giving out the

“shimmering” feeling in the music and the tremolos on the violoncellos creating this “halo” in the movement.

To sum up, Boulez’s “Entry for a musical encyclopaedia” on Bartók seems to acknowledge Bartók’s uniqueness, although it disregards the more “popular” pieces by Bartók such as the Concerto for Orchestra. Boulez considers Bartók as being one of the five most important composers of the 20th century (along with Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg and Webern)¹⁵, and this is understood by the very eloquent description of Bartók’s music Boulez gives in the end of his encyclopaedia entry. Although at the time Boulez wasn’t very active as a conductor, he certainly held Bartók’s in high esteem, and this led to his conducting of many of his orchestral pieces. Above all, the quote in question sums up the most characteristic sound of Bartók’s music and shows how he is unique and incomparable for Boulez.

Bibliography:

Bartók, Béla, *Concerto for Orchestra*, New York: Boosey & Hawkes (2004)
Bartók, Béla, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, New York: Boosey & Hawkes (1937)
Boulez, Pierre, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, Oxford University Press (1991)
Cooper, David, *Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra*, Cambridge University Press (1996)
Wikipedia, <http://www.wikipedia.org>
Answers.com, <http://www.answers.com>
World Of Classical Music, <http://hem.passagen.se/alkerstj/worldofclassicalmusic/>

15 Boulez, Pierre, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 241-42