

Bartók and Kodály: A Parting of the Ways

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Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) have long been regarded as the two greatest Hungarian musicians of the twentieth century. They were close friends and collaborators for thirty-five years, from 1905 until Bartók's emigration from Hungary in 1940. "Bartók and Kodály": from 1910 on their names were paired together consistently, and without doubt this pairing has contributed to the popular misconception that their careers and music were largely similar. In fact, despite a number of common factors in their personal and professional development, their compositional styles and ideological dispositions diverged considerably. In this paper I attempt to bring the reader's attention to similarities between Bartók and Kodály but also to salient distinctions within the similarities. However, instead of presenting a straightforward listing of affinities and divergences, I strive to pursue a discussion of Bartók and Kodály more freely, proceeding in chronological order on the whole.

Both musicians spent their childhood and adolescence in small provincial towns of prewar Hungary, Bartók in Nagyszentmiklós, Nagyszöllős, Nagyvárad and Pozsony and Kodály in Kecskemét, Galánta and Nagyszombat. They both settled in Budapest before the age of twenty. Their years of study at the Liszt Academy overlapped:¹ Bartók was a student from 1899 to 1903 and Kodály, from 1900 to 1905. Many years later (1950), Kodály wrote of these years, pointing to another similarity with Bartók, their avoidance of socializing:

We [Bartók and I] went to the same school, the Liszt Academy for several years after 1900. However, we never met. Bartók was always there on different days than I. In any case, Bartók was always a particularly retiring individual who did not even socialize with his own classmates. [. . .] I did not have a friendly disposition myself; the fact that I was extremely busy also stood in the way of social contact.²

The two musicians made each other's acquaintance months later, in 1905, in the salon of Emma Gruber who later became Kodály's wife. On discovering their common interest in Hungarian folk songs, they quickly struck a friendship and made plans to collaborate in collecting folk songs.³

Already in their youthful careers, differences between Bartók and Kodály were evident in a number of ways. Their course of study differed: Bartók studied primarily to be a concert pianist, his studies in composition constituted a secondary discipline. Indeed, in subsequent years, touring as a concert pianist remained his primary source of income. Kodály also pursued dual avocation, as a composition student at the Liszt Academy and as a student of ethnomusicology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. His doctoral dissertation, entitled "The Strophic Structure of Hungarian Folk Song," was accepted at the University of Budapest in 1905.⁴

A second early difference between Bartók and Kodály concerned their attitudes to Hungarian nationalism. At the turn of the century they were both deeply involved in the anti-Austrian and Anti-German ideological movement. Bartók's fervent patriotism was evident in several areas: he wore national attire in public, as a photograph of 1904 shows; he began all of his letters of the year 1903 with the first line of the Hungarian anthem, "Isten, áldd meg a magyart!" (God bless Hungarians!); and he attached enormous importance to speaking in Hungarian. He even demanded that his mother and sister share his devotion, as the letter of September 8, 1903, to his mother attests: "Speak in a foreign language only when absolutely necessary! [. . .] If 'it's difficult to get used to it,' then one must take pains; the Hungarian language deserves it."⁵

At first Bartók's nationalist fervor and anti-Austrian feeling existed concurrently. This was borne out in his early patriotic symphonic poem,⁶ *Kossuth* (1903) by his quotation, in distorted fashion, of the first two bars of the Austrian national anthem. This work, and in particular, this quotation, was at first accompanied by controversy. Kodály reported later:

At an orchestral rehearsal an Austrian trumpet-player refused to play a parody of the Austrian national anthem as demanded by the score of a new composition. The anthem, *Gott erhalte*. . . , was in Hungary the hated symbol of Austrian oppression, whereas the new work was Bartók's *Kossuth*, a programme symphony, its theme being the latest heroic effort of Hungary towards independence in 1848. The distorted anthem symbolized the Austrians' flight.⁷

However, Bartók's intense nationalist sympathy and anti-German stance were soon mollified by his discovery of the music of the German composers Wagner and Richard Strauss; the music of the latter in particular, exercised a strong influence on Bartók's early development. Thus for him the threat of Austro-German inundation soon lifted, signaling the beginning

of a new openness to world music and to the collecting of international folk music sources. According to musicologist György Kroó: "In 1904–1905 he abandoned both his national attire and his active anti-Hapsburg affiliations, recognizing that the specter of German Romantic music . . . was being driven away by the influence of East European peasant songs."⁸

Like Bartók, young Kodály was also passionately devoted to Hungarian nationalism in music. He wrote in 1906:

[. . .] the time will come when there will be Hungarian music in the home, when Hungarian families will not be content with the most inferior foreign music-hall songs or with the products of domestic folksong factories, when there will be Hungarian singers, when not only the lover of rarities will know that there are Hungarian folksongs other than "Ritka búza" and "Ityóka-pityóka."⁹

Bartók's internationalism was not paralleled in Kodály's career. For Kodály, Hungarian national culture continued to be threatened by German culture.¹⁰ Unlike Bartók, Kodály collected only Hungarian folk music. Much of his energy from the 1920s on was occupied in the cultivation and promotion of Hungarian folk music tradition. His nationalism was manifested in three principal ways: by his continuing emphasis on correct Hungarian prosody in vocal music, in the avoidance of stylistic experimentation and in the promotion of a patriotic attitude.¹¹ These were transmitted in his teaching of composition students at the Liszt Academy and in his essays and pedagogical writings.

After their initial meeting in 1905, Bartók and Kodály planned to collaborate in field trips to collect folk-music performances in remote villages of Hungary; their first trip took place in 1906. Most of their field recordings were made individually, but they frequently pooled their resources. Kodály wrote of their collaboration:

We divided the territories between us. From time to time we got together, each of us bringing along in his satchel the results of his collection. We then set side by side the tunes which attracted us the most, and put the whole collection into one pile.¹²

They accomplished their collecting by persuading peasants to sing, then by notating the music by hand or recording it by means of an Edison phonograph. Later they transcribed it into Western musical notation, with an intensive effort to include in their transcriptions refinements of pitch and rhythm. Their choice of research locale diverged, however, reflecting their differing attitudes to Hungarian and non-Hungarian music. Kodály visited outlying Hungarian villages, but Bartók became interested in collecting Slovak, Rumanian and South Slavic songs as well. Later, a year before his death, Bartók acknowledged their difference in an essay written in 1944:

Kodály studied Hungarian peasant music almost exclusively and utilized it as a new resource. I, on the other hand, widened my sphere of interest and my liking to the musical folklore of neighbouring East European countries. Indeed, in the course of my field research, I ventured to Arabic and Turkish lands as well.¹³

Bartók and Kodály incorporated Hungarian folk music (and in Bartók's case, non-Hungarian folk music as well) in three ways. First, they used authentic folksongs intact, unaltered; in such cases the folk melodies were clearly displayed and unchallenged by accompanying material, which usually took the form of chordal harmonizations. Such settings appear in Kodály's *Felszállott a páva* (Peacock Variations, for orchestra, 1937–9) and in Bartók's *Gyermekeknek* (For Children, for piano, 1908–9). Second, folksongs were arranged in more complex, often polyphonic textures, but their melodies still retained their folk authenticity intact. An example of this practice is Bartók's *Improvisations for piano*, Op. 20 (1920). Third, Bartók and Kodály both wrote melodies which are not authentic folksongs per se; rather, they are inspired by authentic folksong models, emulating their style and construction. One finds such melodies in the string quartets of both composers, for example in the third movement of Bartók's *Fifth String Quartet* and in the first and second movement of Kodály's *Second String Quartet*.

As we have seen, Kodály himself acknowledged his and Bartók's reserved character, already evident in their student years at the Liszt Academy. Bartók was a private, solitary, rather forlorn man. After his death in 1945, Kodály wrote of him in eulogy: "He has gone. Happy are those who could help him in removing the barbed-wire fence he raised around him in self-defence."¹⁴ Bartók's anguished loneliness accompanied him throughout his life; he gave vent to bitterly pessimistic feeling in a letter to his mother from Paris on 10 September 1905:

[. . .] there are times when I suddenly become aware of the fact that I am absolutely alone! And I prophesy, I have a foreknowledge, that this spiritual loneliness is to be my destiny. I look about me in search of the ideal companion and yet I am fully aware that it is a vain quest. Even if I should ever succeed in finding someone, I am sure that I would soon be disappointed.¹⁵

The extent of Bartók's dependence on Kodály is indicated by a passage from Bartók's letter to the British composer, Frederick Delius on 7 June, 1910: "I am very much alone here [in Hungary] apart from my one friend, Kodály; I have nobody to talk to . . ."¹⁶

Like Bartók, Kodály was a rather solitary, reclusive person. This reclusiveness was externalized not in anguished soul-searching as in Bartók but

in a certain aloofness which alienated others. For example, the writer Béla Balázs, his fellow-student between 1901 and 1905, wrote in his diary (18 April 1905): "Yesterday I walked in the Buda hills with Kodály. I cannot get close to him. I really don't know what to do. Sometimes it seems to me that his cold aloofness is rooted not in proud avoidance but rather in conceitedness."¹⁷

Kodály's reserve was perceived by his students as well. They found him remarkably distant and difficult of approach. For example, Ferenc Farkas wrote: "He was not friendly. If in the halls of the Liszt Academy or on a city street we greeted him respectfully, he looked over our heads with a vacant glance."¹⁸

Throughout their lives Bartók and Kodály wrote articles in support of each other. Kodály's greatest difficulties with government and press came in 1920. During the communist "Council Republic" of 1919, Kodály assumed a directorial position at the Liszt Academy along with Bartók and fellow-composer Ernő Dohnányi. The subsequent counter-revolutionary government charged him with unpatriotic conduct, relieved him of his professorship at the Liszt Academy and sent him on leave for six months. In addition, he was fiercely attacked in the press for being a pale imitation of Bartók. Bartók himself rushed to Kodály's defence in an article in the periodical, *Nyugat*:

I do not regard Kodály as the best musician in Hungary because he is a friend of mine. He has become my only friend because, apart from his splendid qualities as a man, he is the greatest musician in Hungary. That it is I, and not Kodály, who have most benefited from our friendship is but further proof of his splendid qualities and his self-effacing altruism.¹⁹

Kodály, too, stood in defence of his friend. He had ample opportunity to do so since Bartók's music met almost invariably with incomprehension and hostility from press and public.²⁰ An early example of Kodály's writing in support of Bartók was a newspaper article of 1919:

Nine years had to elapse before Bartók could step before an indifferent concert audience with an evening of his works. During this time, he has completed a long list of new works which have struck terror into the hearts of listeners who have mistakenly wandered into its path; and they have elicited frivolous bantering from uncomprehending and ill-intentioned newspaper criticisms. They have brought ridicule and persecution for Bartók. But he has gone on his own path with the imperturbability of one with a sure instinct.²¹

However, much of the co-operation and support occurred on the human level. When it came to compositional style, differences eventually

overshadowed plans for co-operation. Both composers wrote their second string quartets during the years of World War I, between 1916 and 1919. During these years, they talked intensively about these works sharing many compositional ideas. In fact, as a result of Kodály's advice, Bartók made certain revisions in the second movement of his work (1915–17).

But the reverse was true as well. Kodály's *Second String Quartet* (1916–18) was influenced by Bartók's daring compositional innovations: the first movement of Kodály's quartet constitutes considerable shift from his usual conservative, diatonic, tonal writing to a fairly dissonant, chromatic texture.

Substantially different from Kodály's quartet is Bartók's *Second Quartet*, written at about the same time as *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Its fast and vigorous second movement in particular constitutes Bartók's contribution to the powerful revolution in rhythm of the early twentieth century, of which the best-known example is Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Bartók's movement contains a very high level of harmonic dissonance and a great deal of narrow-gauged, chromatic melody; these factors place it firmly within the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century. In addition, it has passages which emulate Arabic folk music which Bartók collected in 1913 during his field trip to Biskra, Algeria. The third movement of Bartók's quartet is a sombre dirge-like piece which betrays also the influence of the new, atonal music of the pioneering Viennese composer, Arnold Schönberg.

The stylistic chasm between Bartók and Kodály widened further in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Between 1919 and 1923, Kodály, challenged by government and the press, composed little. In fact, his only published composition from this period is the *Serenade for Two Violins and Viola* (Op. 12). This work constitutes a step backward in experimentation, from the moderate adventure of the *Second String Quartet* to a safer, more conservative, diatonic style. By contrast, Bartók was furiously active. He composed his boldest, most chromatic music during these years, *Three Studies for Piano* (Op. 18, 1918), two sonatas for violin and piano (1921 and 1922) and *The Miraculous Mandarin*, a pantomime for dancers and orchestra (1918–19).

Two compositions written in 1923 provide a further illustration of the gradually widening stylistic gap between Bartók and Kodály. The occasion was the Hungarian celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Buda and Pest, an event for which both Kodály and Bartók were commissioned to write festive works. Bartók set to work first and completed the *Dance Suite*, which included folksong elements from North Africa, Rumania and Hungary. Initially Kodály also wanted to write a dance suite, but upon learning of Bartók's composition, changed his mind. Instead, he composed a choral-orchestral work, the *Psalmus hungaricus*, based on the fifty-fifth psalm adapted by a 16th century Hungarian poet, Mihály Kecskeméti Végh.

The opening of the *Psalmus hungaricus* contains some harsh dissonances, but the tune, played by the violins, utilizes the pentatonic scale, which is found throughout Hungarian folksongs (and in the folksongs of many other nations). The crisis-like introduction soon gives way to the first four lines of the psalm sung in a reassuring, conservative idiom: it is sung unaccompanied, in unison and in four-square phrases by the chorus. This is the prevailing style of the work.

By contrast, Bartók's *Dance Suite* begins with a somewhat threatening atmosphere, with the bassoons playing a low-range conjunct, dance-like melody, with occasional interruptions by strings and piano with very harsh, dissonant harmony. Bartók's phrases are rarely regular in this piece, and he is constantly driven to vary melodies and themes which, on their return, are quite difficult and challenging to recognize. Bartók treads the middle ground between avant-garde experimentation and attractive, accessible folk music, with a masterful result.

In the 1920s and 1930s and indeed, throughout the remainder of his career, Kodály's style remained virtually unchanged. By contrast, Bartók's style changed constantly: stepping back from his earlier, radical experimentation of the 1920s, he reached his "classical" period in the 1930s with works like *Cantata profana* (1930), *String Quartet No. 5* (1934), *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste* (1936) and *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937). However, in the works of his last six years (1939–45), composed after his immigration to Western Europe and to the United States, he reverted to a tonal, more easily accessible language in works like *Divertimento* (1939), *String Quartet No. 6* (1939), *Concerto for Orchestra* (1943), *Piano Concerto No. 3* (1945) and *Viola Concerto* (1945).

The differences between Bartók and Kodály were exalted in the reception of their music in the Stalinist era, between 1948 and 1955.²² In these years, Kodály's multi-volume choral method, intended as a complete text for universal music education, was disseminated widely and gained enormous recognition and acceptance on the international scene. Moreover, given the readily accessible style of his music and the easy recognizability of its folk tunes, Kodály's music was deemed completely compatible with the Zhdanovian strictures imposed by the government in 1948–49. As a result, he was installed as the institutional composer par excellence. His compositions became the exclusive model which young composers used in learning their craft, and divergence from this model was not tolerated.

On the other hand, the reception of Bartók's music suffered a devastating blow during these years. Most of his important works were banned from the concert and theatre stage, except for a few works where Hungarian folksongs could be unequivocally identified by listeners. Kroó wrote:

[. . .] Bartók's mentality, the essence of his heritage, proved unusable

and anachronistic to his compatriots. The complex laws of his works pointed towards an aristocratic manner of composition that seemed impossible to follow and was consequently banned by the cultural leadership.²³

A great reversal came in 1955–56: with the easing of political and cultural tensions, the banned works of Bartók quickly became accessible to musicians and to the public. At once his music became the symbol for stylistic experimentation for Hungarian composers; indeed, his music was the first gate through which they passed in the opening up of their artistic horizon. He quickly came to be regarded as a hero, an artist determined to create in his own manner, despite societal hostility and incomprehension. In this period, contemporary Hungarian composers studied Bartók's music for its own sake, but also as a first step in re-establishing contact with the music of other countries.²⁴ Much later, in the 1980s, Bartók's influence can still be seen, especially in contemporary Hungarian string quartets.

In the world of today's international art-music, Kodály is regarded as a conservative composer, a representative of the national trend of the early twentieth century. Paul Griffiths, a British writer on twentieth-century music, wrote of Kodály: ". . . he contributed to the founding of a strong compositional tradition in Hungary, if more as teacher than as composer."²⁵ And Hungarian musicologist György Kroó wrote:

The oeuvre of Kodály [. . .] primarily developed the national character of the new Hungarian school (exclusive dependence on Hungarian folklore, interest in Hungarian history, Hungarian subjects and the historical layers of Hungarian art music, close relationship with Hungarian literary and folk language and genres) and it set a classical example by its sense of and demand for quality.²⁶

Musicians, on the other hand, have viewed Bartók as one of the three or four most important composers of our century, and a tremendous inspiration for today's musical world. Of Bartók Griffiths wrote: "His six string quartets and other works [. . .] count among the highest achievements in twentieth-century music."²⁷ And György Kroó echoed this sentiment: "Bartók began a general stylistic germination, melted the ice and with his own works drew attention to Stravinsky and Schönberg as well. He widened the horizon and provided a new perspective, backward and forward."²⁸

The music of Kodály and Bartók represent conservative and liberal tendencies in Hungarian music. Despite the amicable coexistence and cooperation of the two musicians during their lifetime, their distinctive musical attitudes stamped the history of twentieth-century Hungarian music with a characteristic, fascinating duality.

NOTES

- 1 This institution, founded by Franz Liszt in 1875, is most commonly known in English as the Liszt Academy. Hungarians refer to it most frequently as Zeneművészeti Főiskola (College of Musical Arts) or as Zeneakadémia (Academy of Music).
- 2 László Eöszé, *Kodály életének krónikája* (Chronicle of Kodály's Life) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1977), p. 30. The translation is mine [S.S.], here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated.
- 3 They met four times in May and June 1905 at Emma Gruber's residence.
- 4 Bartók did not write a dissertation.
- 5 Demény, János (ed.), *Béla Bartók: Letters*, tr. Péter Balabán and István Farkas (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 30.
- 6 The symphonic poem is an orchestral genre which flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, generally composed in a single movement. One of its most important exponents was Franz Liszt whose works in this genre undoubtedly inspired Bartók's composition.
- 7 From "Béla Bartók," (1921) *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, tr. Lili Halápy and Fred Macnicol (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1974), p. 87.
- 8 "Bartók and Hungarian Music," *Bartók and Kodály Revisited*, György Ránki, ed. (Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), p. 134.
- 9 From "Hungarian Folksongs," (1906) *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 10.
- 10 Surprisingly, his early writings and correspondence contain no reference to his fear of the German inundation of Hungarian music. It was not until 1932 that he said in a speech to the Circle of Friends of the West (Budapest): "That [the first decade of the twentieth century] was when the Wagner-cult was at its peak here. At concerts they played only pieces where if it had not been for the fact that the programme notes were printed in Hungarian, one would have believed that one was in a small town in Germany." *Visszatekintés—összegyűjtött írások, beszédek, nyilatkozatok* (Looking Back—Collected Writings, Speeches and Articles), Ferenc Bónis, ed. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1964), Volume II, p. 488.
- 11 György Kroó. *A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve* (Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1975), p. 35.
- 12 *Visszatekintés*, Volume II, p. 457.
- 13 From "Magyar zene," *Bartók Béla összegyűjtött írásai* (The Collected Writings of Béla Bartók), András Szöllősy, ed. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1966), Volume I, pp. 759–60.
- 14 "Béla Bartók the Man," *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, p. 101.
- 15 Demény, *op. cit.*, p. 53. It is somewhat surprising that Bartók did not find solace from his loneliness in his two marriages, to Márta Ziegler (1909–23) and Ditta Pásztor (1923–45).
- 16 Demény, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 17 Quoted in István Gál. "Kodály és Balázs Béla barátsága—a fiatal Kodály Balázs Béla naplójában" (The Friendship between Kodály and Béla Balázs—Young Kodály in the Diary of Béla Balázs) *Kodály-mérleg* (Kodály Balance), János

- Breuer, ed. (Budapest: Gondolat, 1982), p. 372.
- 18 *Igy láttuk Kodályt* (This is How We Saw Kodály), Ferenc Bónis, ed. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1979), p. 190.
 - 19 Béla Bartók, "Kodály Zoltán," *Nyugat* 14/3 (February 1921), pp. 235–6. Republished in Hungarian in Szöllősy, *op. cit.*, Volume I, pp. 621–2; in English translation in Béla Bartók *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), pp. 469–70.
 - 20 Already early in his career Bartók's piano compositions were attacked with venom in a Berlin newspaper: "We must wonder if there is anyone at all who takes Bartók seriously, as for example his publisher has done; otherwise how could he have published his Ten Easy Pieces for Piano and Fourteen Bagatelles? [. . .] It is clear that here we are dealing with a pathological case [. . .] Compared to these partially stupid orgies of dissonance Max Reger, Debussy and Scriabin seem timid, pale orphans. There is hardly a single piece in either collection which does not seem a bad joke." (From an article by August Spanuth in *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 76/33 (18 August 1909), translated into Hungarian in János Breuer, *Bartók és Kodály—Tanulmányok századunk magyar zenetörténetéhez* (Bartók and Kodály—Studies in the Hungarian Musical History of Our Century) (Budapest: Magvető, 1978), p. 41. Later, in 1926, the Cologne première of one of his greatest masterworks, *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–19) was interrupted by scandal and its performance was violently attacked in the German press. At the Budapest Opera two performances were planned, in 1931 and 1941; each was cancelled at the last minute. The *Mandarin* was shelved and not performed in full in Budapest until 1956.
 - 21 *Pesti Napló* (Pest Diary), 22 April 1919. Reprinted in *Zenetudományi Tanulmányok*, Vol. VII, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1959).
 - 22 Neither could help the reception of their music in the Zhdanovian era. Bartók died in 1945 and Kodály found himself in a position of prominence created by others. However, Kodály continued to write essays in unflinching support of Bartók's music during the 1950s: "Bartók the Folklorist" (1950), "In Memory of Bartók" (1955) and "On Béla Bartók," (1956) *Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, pp. 102–8, 109–111, 112–3 respectively.
 - 23 György Kroó, "Bartók and Hungarian Music," *Bartók and Kodály Revisited*, György Ránki, ed. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987), p. 139.
 - 24 Stephen Satory. String Quartet Composition in Hungary, 1958–1981. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1991.
 - 25 Paul Griffiths, "Zoltán Kodály," *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Music* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), pp. 104–5.
 - 26 György Kroó, "New Hungarian Music," *Contemporary Hungarian Music in the International Press*, B.A. Varga, ed. (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1982), p. 7.
 - 27 Griffiths, "Béla Bartók," *op. cit.*, p. 27.
 - 28 Kroó, *A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve*, p. 87.