

Béla Bartók and the Natural Interpretation of Music

By

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Absract

Bartók's fascination with Nature was religious in its devotion. In a letter written to Stefi Geyer, Bartók explained his religious beliefs by describing his devotion to the trinity of "...Nature, Art, and Science".¹ In her article, "Natura naturans, natura naturata", Maria Anna Harley vividly describes the connection between Bartók's views on nature and his compositional output. She asks, "How could such a concept of Nature inform the practice of musical composition?"² I would like to ask, "How could such a concept of Nature inform the practice of musical *interpretation*?" To answer this question, I explore Bartók's folk music arrangements for piano with extant recordings of the original peasant performance. Bartók referred to folk music as a natural phenomenon numerous times in his writings. By examining Bartók's views on Nature and folksong, it is possible to gain insight into natural musical interpretation.

¹ Harley, Maria Anna. "'Natura naturans, natura naturata' and Bartók's Folk Music Idiom." *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 36/3-4, 1995 pp. 329-347, 329.

² *Ibid.*

Introduction

Bartók considered folk music to be a product of Nature. In the introduction to his book *The Hungarian Folk Song*, he wrote:

...peasant music is the outcome of changes wrought by a natural force whose operation is unconscious; it is impulsively created by a community of men who have had no schooling; it is as much a natural product as are the various forms of animal and vegetable life. For this reason, the individuals of which it consists - the single tunes - are so many examples of high artistic perfection. In their small way, they are as perfect as the grandest masterpieces of musical art. They are, indeed, classical models of the way in which a musical idea can be expressed in all its freshness and shapeliness – in short, in the very best possible way, in the briefest possible form and with the simplest of means.³

As the performers of this folk music had no schooling or musical training in the formal sense, they followed their natural human instinct in performance. In this way, the study of folk music provides an insight into elements of natural, instinctive musical interpretation. Furthermore, Bartók provides a valuable connection between studying art music and folk music. Several other twentieth century musicians combined performance, composition, and ethnomusicology, though perhaps none other than Bartok has gained higher prestige across all of these studies. By examining his views on Nature and folksong it is possible to gain an understanding of natural musical interpretation.

³ Bartók, Béla. *The Hungarian folk song* (State U of New York Press, 1981), III.

Bartók and Nature

Bartók's often overlooked fascination with Nature was truly religious in its devotion. He always wrote the word 'Nature' with a capital 'N' and referred to the trinity of "Nature, Art, and Science".⁴ Nature can be viewed as being fundamental to Bartók's philosophy, including being a basis to his love for folk music and peasantry, though surprisingly little has been written on the topic. A great deal of musicological effort has been placed into exploring Bartók's love of folk music, and rightfully so since it was a major part of his life and much of this material remains to be explored. His passion for folk music and peasantry, while being subservient to his fundamental view of Nature, is also deeply entwined with Nature. Bartók referred to folk music as being tied to Nature at the most basic level numerous times in his writings. In her article, "Natura naturans, natura naturata", Maria Anna Harley vividly describes the connection between Bartók's views on Nature, folk music, and his compositional output. She asks, "How could such a concept of Nature inform the practice of musical composition?"⁵ I would like to ask, "How could such a concept of Nature inform the practice of musical *interpretation*?" Bartók's views on Nature are a central issue in his life, and a key idea to understanding his music and style of performance.

In explaining his religious views to his one-time romance, Stefi Geyer, Bartók once wrote, "To be able to work, one must have a zest for life, i.e. a keen interest in the living universe. One has to be filled with enthusiasm for the Trinity ... of Nature, Art, and Science."⁶ Bartók lived out this view in basically all elements of his life. His younger son, Peter, recounted

⁴ Harley, Maria Anna. "'Natura naturans, natura naturata' and Bartók's Folk Music Idiom." *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 36/3-4, 1995 pp. 329-347, 329.

⁵ Harley, 330.

⁶ Harley, 329.

vividly throughout his memoir, *My Father*, many occasions of Bartók expressing his love for Nature. Bartók took frequent holidays to the mountains and spent much time hiking with Peter, whom he taught to respect Nature. He was told, "...one does not defile nature."⁷ Bartók's elder son, Béla Bartók Jr., also had a great deal to say about his father's devotion to Nature. In his article, "The Private Man," he wrote, "He was a real nature-lover and studied all its forms [...]. His love of nature was religious in its devotion. He collected minerals and plants as well, and studied the specialist botanical literature; he loved the stars of the sky, and sought to impart his knowledge of them to others."⁸ These views towards Nature were exemplified not only through Bartók's collections of plants and insects, but also in his compositional output.

Many of Bartók's compositions deal directly with Nature. Even from an early age, his composition, *The Course of the Danube* (1891), from his youth, describes the Danube River as it flows through Hungary. His *Cantata Profana* (1930) is exemplary with its theme of Nature describing a group of brothers who are magically transformed into the deer as they were hunting. His short piano work, *From the Diary of a Fly* (1939), cleverly portrays a fly's characteristics, and his serene *Evening in the Country* (1908) vividly captures the atmosphere of a natural setting. Portrayals of natural sounds can be found in his night music idiom, such as in the second movement of his *Piano Concerto No. 2* (1930-31), in his piano suite, *Out of Doors* (1926); and in his portrayal of birdsong in his final completed composition, the *Piano Concerto No. 3* (1945). Béla Jr. described his father's *Night Music*, "... in which he immortalized the frog's chorus and the other mysterious sounds of the night which can be heard in the quiet regions of the Plain."⁹ While these compositions span nearly all of Bartók's compositional career in a variety of

⁷ Bartók, Peter. *My Father* (Bartók Records, 2002), 72.

⁸ Antokoletz, Elliot, Victoria Fischer, and Benjamin Suchoff eds. *Bartók Perspectives: Man, Composer, and Ethnomusicologist* (Oxford U Press, 2000), 19, 25.

⁹ Antokoletz, 22.

mediums, his most substantial depiction of Nature in music was through his folk music arrangements.

Nature and Folk Music

In a recent interview, pianist-conductor Zoltán Kocsis had the following to say about Bartók's use of Nature in music:

[Zoltán Kocsis:] “Bartók incorporates the sounds of nature in his music again and again. We can hear them in *Two Pictures (Két kép, Op. 10)*, in the Prelude to *Four Pieces for Orchestra (Op. 12)*, and at the beginning of *The Wooden Prince*, when he represents the sunrise, but also in its depiction of the woods and the dance of the creek and in its second, more fearsome dance in the woods. Bartók does include the sounds of nature in his music and certainly the sounds of birds, too. An American pianist once came to Hungary specifically to listen to the birds that, as he thought, chirped in the *Third Piano Concerto* by Bartók. When he asked me, I had to tell him he needn't have crossed the ocean but could have had made a shorter trip to Asheville, since Bartók listened to the birds while he was composing there. The xylophone and woodwind solo passages in the middle section imitate exactly the quality and rhythm of the sounds from that region. Nature, however, is not present in Bartók's work only on this level.”

Erika Simon: “He considered folk song, too, a product of nature.”

Zoltán Kocsis: “Folk songs are everybody’s composition. They are filtered through the sensitivities of many different singers who all have shaped it in one way or another, so that by the time they assume their final form they have lost all inorganic, extrinsic elements.”¹⁰

While a folk song is perpetually variable and never truly assumes a final form, its present form at any given time is the product of the natural process of instinctive shaping from one singer to another.

As quoted earlier, Bartók described this process in the introduction to his collection, *The Hungarian Folksong*:

[...] peasant music is the outcome of changes wrought by a natural force whose operation is unconscious; it is impulsively created by a community of men who have had no schooling; it is as much a natural product as are the various forms of animal and vegetable life.¹¹

Like other natural elements, peasant music is slowly shaped and developed carefully over many millennia by natural forces, in this case, natural human instinct. Like the development of various forms of living organisms, each folksong is perpetually changing and never stationary.

In his lecture, “The Relationship of Folk Song to the Development of the Art Music of Our Time,” Bartók stated:

Peasant music, in the strict sense of the word, must be regarded as a natural phenomenon; the forms in which it manifests itself are due to the instinctive *transforming power* of a

¹⁰ Simon, Erika. “Zene, zene, zene: Kocsis Zoltánnal Beszelget Simon Erika.” (Budapest: Kairosz Kiado, 2011), 24-25 trans. Zsolt Mohi.

¹¹ Bartók, Béla. *The Hungarian folk song*, III.

community entirely devoid of erudition. It is just as much a natural phenomenon as, for instance, the various manifestations of Nature in fauna and flora. Correspondingly it has in its individual parts an absolute artistic perfection [...] Peasant music itself plays the part in composition that natural objects play in painting. Real folk music can be regarded as a natural phenomenon from the point of view of higher art music just as well as the properties of bodies are perceived by the eye are so regarded by the painter [...]¹²

Bartók considered folk music to be a natural source for art music and demonstrated this in his lecture by showing Beethoven's usage of a Yugoslavian folksong as the opening theme for his *Sixth Symphony*. He argued that composers were familiar with folk music and this natural influence was a key element in their works. Bartók stated, "... the pure folk music can be considered as a natural phenomenon influencing higher art music, as bodily properties perceptible with the eye are for fine arts, or the phenomena of life are for the poet."¹³ Likewise, he argued that composers who lacked folk music influence or familiarity with folk music departed from Nature. In regards to Schoenberg's music, Bartók respectfully wrote, "He is free from all peasant influence and his complete alienation to Nature, which of course I do not regard as a blemish, is no doubt the reason why many find his work so difficult."¹⁴

Music can be understood as having derived directly from Nature in its earliest development, and among recent musical trends, folk music is the closest tied to this. Many scientific sources site the earliest development of music and language as coming from Nature. In his book *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*, author Steven Mithen suggests that the earliest human music development could have been an imitation of Nature by imitating animal sounds and rhythms for communication: "One aspect of this is the

¹² Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*. Ed. Benjamin Suchoff. (New York: St. Martin's Press 1976), 321, 324.

¹³ Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*, 318.

¹⁴ Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*, 326.

presence of onomatopoeia, vocal imitation and sound synaesthesia, which are probably most readily apparent in the languages of present-day people who still live traditional lifestyles and are ‘close to nature’.¹⁵ Here, the author relates this to those people who are closest to Nature (those with the most exposure to natural sounds), the same peasantry and their music that Bartók studied.

Even in much earlier writing and other in philosophical backgrounds, music has been understood as originating in Nature. In the introduction to *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*, Leopold Mozart references his biblical understanding of music deriving from Nature in his ‘Short History of Music’:

Adam was able to distinguish the difference between human voices; he heard the song of the various birds; he perceived the changes of the whistling of the wind through the trees, varying from a high to a low pitch; and the tool for singing had been given to him by the good Creator, planted in him by Nature. Then what shall prevent us from believing that Adam, moved by the urge of Nature, essayed an imitation of, for instance, the cheerful songs of the birds and so on, and discovered in them a variety of notes?¹⁶ (Mozart 19)

While Mithen and Leopold Mozart are writing from drastically different philosophical backgrounds, it is remarkable that both come to such a similar conjecture on the origins of music being found in Nature. Surely these words by Leopold Mozart must have been understood not only by his son, but by the great number of musicians who read this work in the eighteenth century.

¹⁵ Mithen, Steven. *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body*. (Orion, 2011), 276.

¹⁶ Mozart, Leopold. *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing*. Trans. Editha Knocker. (New York: Oxford U Press, 1948), 19.

While one cannot definitively say that music originated in Nature or that folk music is a phenomenon of Nature, Bartók believed that folk music is a product of Nature and this was one of his most central, deepest beliefs. Bartók also made strong statements regarding mechanical music which may alienate some readers. Regardless of whether any of the statements made by Bartók are correct or incorrect, or whether the reader agrees or disagrees with them, they remain Bartók's beliefs and my goal is to explore an understanding and application of his ideas towards music.

Mechanization of Music in the Twentieth Century: A Departure from Nature

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the natural qualities of folk music are to contrast it with unnatural qualities found in mechanical music. Folk music has existed since the dawn of humanity, though is nearly extinct in our modern world. On the other hand, mechanical music is a rather recent phenomenon within the scope of human history. Bartók wrote extensively on mechanical music, which can be understood as recorded music or music created by machines. This term can also be applied to a 'mechanical' interpretation: an interpretation that strives to limit human intervention by executing the score objectively. The twentieth century has seen the almost complete desolation of true folk music (which was well under way during Bartók's lifetime) and the simultaneous rise of mechanical music. Bartók was often concerned about the twentieth century and the mechanization of modern life. His son Béla Jr. wrote:

He closely followed our centuries [*sic*] rapid advancements in technology although, while appreciating these achievements, he was also worried by the increasing mechanization foreseeing with startling precision its dehumanizing consequences. [...] The spread of

machine-made music did worry him, although he accepted that this was the only way for music to reach the masses, and for that reason (at least in part) he often played over the radio in Budapest and abroad. He did not have a radio of his own, however, and had no experience of television.¹⁷

The advancements of mechanization and machine-made music, as well as an overall departure from Nature, are now far beyond what Bartók witnessed.

In modern times we often overlook certain qualities of Nature, such as the complexity that can be found in all natural elements, including folk music. The folk music Bartók studied was often so relentlessly complex, especially in terms intonation, dynamic shadings, and rhythmic nuance, that Bartók went to great lengths in his transcriptions trying to capture these details. In the same way, the anatomical and physiological design of any living organism found in Nature is so complex, that it would be impossible to replicate artificially. In regards to complexity found in natural music Bartók wrote, “Regarding artificially produced music, it is my conviction that the single tones, dynamics, rhythm, tone colour, and all the other nuances of natural music are so complicated that, for the time being, no process can produce anything akin to it, just as it is not possible to produce a human artificially.”¹⁸ In comparison to natural music, elements found in artificially produced music are often less complex. In mechanically generated music, elements such as tempo, rhythmic subdivisions, and dynamics are often rigid and precise to the point that they become simplistic. For example, a subdivided rhythm (such as a dotted-quarter note followed by an eighth note) when generated mechanically is a precise, though simple, ratio of three to one. The subdivided rhythms found in folk music can be infinitely flexible and often create complex irrational ratios. This is also found in art music when adjusting

¹⁷ Antokoletz, 25.

¹⁸ Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*, 297.

dotted-rhythms; a concept that can be traced back to Baroque music but largely ended with the objective approach to music in the twentieth century. While it is possible to adjust all these elements in mechanical music, creating the complexities and the nuances in natural music artificially would be impossible. While technology has certainly become ever-more complex, it arguable does not match the complexity found in Nature. As Bartók wrote, "... [the] spontaneous expression of genius [...] is sometimes more complicated than a mechanical creation."¹⁹

In addition to complexity, natural elements can be described as being more variable than mechanical elements. In regards to variability in folk music Bartók wrote, "Melody, rhythm and structure may endure or show unusual diversity for folksong is basically an idea which is re-created anew in each performance and by each performer."²⁰ Infinite variability can be found in Nature. No two natural objects are ever exactly alike, whether they be two living organisms or two folk music performances. In contrast to this, mechanically produced music, especially recorded music, becomes stationary and fixed. Recording technology has certainly created incredible opportunities in the past century, especially in being able to hear great musicians and the folk music Bartók studied, though they lose the variability found in Nature. While variability is possible between different recordings as a musician is able to create a new recording of a work, the recording itself becomes frozen, permanent, and invariable. In this way, recordings can be viewed as an 'aural picture', and thus serve as a great study tool, which Bartok acknowledged, though not as a substitute for live performance in Bartok's opinion. It would be ideal to hear Bartók perform his music live, or to hear the folk music he studied in its natural state in the

¹⁹ Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*, 135.

²⁰ Bayley, Amanda ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók* (Cambridge U Press, 2001), 30.

village. Since this would be impossible, recordings are highly valuable as they offer the only alternative.

Perhaps Bartók's most strongly worded statement on recorded music can be found at the conclusion of his essay *Mechanical Music*:

That which lives changes from moment to moment; music recorded by machines hardens into something stationary. It is a well-known fact that our notation records on music paper, more or less inadequately, the idea of the composer; hence the existence of contrivances with which one record can record precisely every intention and idea of the composer is indeed of great importance. On the other hand, the composer himself, when he is the performer of his own composition, does not always perform his work in exactly the same way. Why? Because he lives; because perpetual variability is a trait of a living creature's character. Therefore, even if one succeeded in perfectly preserving with a perfect process a composer's works according to his own idea at a given moment, it would not be advisable to listen to these compositions perpetually like that. Because it would cover the composition with boredom. Because it is conceivable that the composer himself would have performed his compositions better or less at some other time – but in any case, otherwise. The same applies to a performing artist of such standards that he is equivalent to the composer in question. The best imaginable phonography, therefore, will never be able to act as a substitute for completely live music. [...] Trouble would begin, however, if mechanical music were to flood the world to the detriment of live music, just as manufactured products have done to the detriment of handicraft [...] May God protect our offspring from this plague!²¹

²¹ Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*, 298.

While Bartók's son, Béla Jr., stated that Bartók foresaw these consequences 'with startling precision', I would argue that his predictions have come short of our current situation. The overwhelming majority of musical experiences in our modern world come strictly from recorded music.

To find the effects of recorded music on interpretation, one need look no further than writings of Bartók's prominent student György Sándor in his book, *On Piano Playing*:

To sum it all up, the order of priorities in a *live performance* is:

1. Original, personal, and convincing interpretations that are as spontaneous and creative as possible
2. Touch of the finest quality with the most varied range
3. Dynamics of the widest possible range
4. Pauses in proportion to the acoustics of the hall; more is better than less
5. Notes are emphasized according to their importance. Accompanying runs, passages, and filling-in notes should be underplayed; grace notes and derived notes should be treated as complementary ingredients.
6. No wrong notes, but beware of playing every right note in an overly articulated way.

The order of priorities for *recorded performance* is:

1. No wrong notes
2. No extremely soft or loud playing
3. No excessive (out-of-the-ordinary) rubatos
4. Compared to live performances, every pause, especially the ones between sections, should be shortened.

5. Every note should be clearly articulated even in accompaniments or fill-in notes.
6. Enunciation should be clear
7. Gradations exist for the most part by volume. The individual touch is homogenized by the electronic equipment, and therefore it is of little value.²²

It is amazing how similar the priorities under the list of recorded performances is to our modern preferences often times in live performances. In contemporary live performances a great deal of emphasis is often placed on not playing wrong notes. Musicians are often taught to be careful about playing either too loud or too soft. Rubatos are used far less than they were in the past, and oftentimes objectivity replaces emotional spontaneity. In doing so, the interpretation can become mechanical. The music loses the variability found in natural music – that is the original, personal, spontaneous interpretations which vary from performer to performer, and even among different performances by the same musician.

This style of mechanical performance arose during Bartók’s lifetime and was rooted in the developing objective philosophy towards music. Author Karin Bijsterveld writes in the book *Music and Technology in the Twentieth Century*, “The performance of music by machines was considered to proceed from the trend to compose a-sentimental, objective, mechanical music.”²³ Bartók described this trend in his essay *Mechanical Music* by writing:

About 1920, when the slogan ‘objective music’ was in vogue some famous composers (Stravinsky, for instance) wrote compositions for pianola [...] The intent, however, was not to achieve superior performance but to restrict to an absolute minimum the intervention of the performer’s personality.²⁴

²² Sándor, György. *On Piano Playing: Motion, Sound, and Expression* (Schirmer Books, 1981), 225.

²³ Braun, Hans-Joachim ed. *Music and Technology in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U Press, 2002), 131.

²⁴ Bartók, Béla. *Béla Bartók Essays*, 291.

In particular, Stravinsky's approach toward musical interpretation can be viewed as exemplary of the new objective style of performance which arose out of a mechanical mindset.

Stravinsky championed the concept of objective musical performance. While Bartók's music does show influence of Stravinsky's compositional style, such as in his *Second Piano Concerto*, the two composers had conflicting philosophies on musical performance and composition. Stravinsky had folk music influence in his earlier works like Bartók, he later departed from this style. Musicologist Richard Taruskin suggests that Stravinsky criticized Bartók's attachment to folk music to distance himself from his own earlier folk style.²⁵ Stravinsky stated, "... I never could share his lifelong gusto for his native folklore. The devotion was certainly real and touching, but I couldn't help regretting it in the great musician."²⁶

Bartók described Stravinsky's music as, "objective," "impersonal," and "curious, but somewhat dry and empty."²⁷ Bartók expanded on these judgements in an interview with Aladár Tóth:

Stravinsky naturally expounded to Bartók that [Stravinsky's] music is the most objective absolute music; it does not depict, does not symbolize, it does not express anything, it has nothing to do with emotional life, it is just line, harmony, and rhythm. This "objective" theory of music is spreading dangerously [Bartók], by the way, by no means identifies himself with Stravinsky's theories In the midst of their conversation in Paris, when Bartók [complimented *Le Sacre*], Stravinsky did not renounce his earlier

²⁵ Laki, Peter ed. *Bartók and His World* (Princeton U Press, 1995), 177.

²⁶ Laki, 172.

²⁷ Somfai, László. "Classicism as Bartók Conceptualized it in His Classical Period 1926-1937." *Die Klassizistische Moderne in der Musik des. 20 Jahrhunderts Internationalles Symposium der Paul Sacher Stiftung Basel*, 1996 pp. 123-141, 125.

work, but he assured Bartók that the *Rossignol* was the last in his style; after that he already turned to the road of “completely objective” music.²⁸

Elsewhere Aladár Tóth writes:

Bartók was very surprised when Stravinsky said he developed his barbaric, folklike, primitive style completely independently from the influence of Russian peasant music. [...] Stravinsky has already experimented with placing mechanical instruments in the orchestra. But these <objective> instruments left him in the lurch, because it was impossible to start playing them precisely enough.²⁹

The objectivity found in Stravinsky’s compositions can also found in his performances.

In a letter to Bartók’s mother, Paula Voit Bartók, Bartók’s wife, Ditta, explained her experience hearing Stravinsky perform:

Monday was the Stravinsky concert. Now I know quite exactly what the new direction is. Imagine, Mama, for yourself such a music, in which there is absolutely no room for feelings, in which you can find no part that causes tears to come to your eyes. You know bare rhythm, bare hammering, bare some-kind-of-timbre. I can say that the whole thing, as it is, really carries one away. Stravinsky is a magnificent genius, and we very, very much enjoyed the evening; truly one gets caught up in his miraculously beautiful-timbered machine music, music of pulsating rhythm – but if Béla would make such music, then for Béla I would not be able to be the artist that I am and always will be. Because this music is not my homeland. Mine is Béla’s music, where there is also the

²⁸ Laki, 180.

²⁹ Somfai, 127.

profound pulsating rhythm, the timbre, but where the feelings live and are, and which has soul.³⁰

A mechanical approach to music removes emotion, and most importantly, the soul of the music.

In a published review of the same concert, Hungarian music critic Izor Béldi had the following to say:

[Stravinsky's] playing was bare rhythm, without color, spirit, and soul. It is possible that by the time our earth cools and there is ice on the equator, at that time this will be considered too. But as long as feeling and spirit live in man, as long as feelings and passions find a home in our hearts, this mechanical clattering, this rhythmic but colorless ticking, this mixing of tones without melody or harmony cannot be considered music.³¹

In his book, *Text and Act*, Richard Taruskin describes Stravinsky's ideal performer as being one who "transmits" music and executes the score objectively without their personal feeling and input.³² Machine music was seen as something that removed the human personality from the performance allowing for a correct and precise execution of the score. The removal of human personality from performance removed an essential element of music:

Bartók objected to the idea of music being performed without human influence:

In May 1925 in response to Dezső Kosztolányi's statement that "every art is human by necessity," Bartók replied, "this is natural. Otherwise music would turn into machine music. [...] If I write a deep note and then a higher, that is already rising; if I strike a high note, and after that a lower note, that is already sinking: the one undoubtedly merriment, the other despair."³³

³⁰ Laki, 184.

³¹ Laki, 185.

³² Taruskin, Richard. *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford U Press, 1995), 129.

³³ Laki, 180.

The attitude of perfection and an objective reading of the score can lead to machine-like performances of music. Many modern performances lack the spontaneity of earlier performances. It is the personality, and natural intrinsic approach to musical interpretation that leads to variety among performances. As Bartók wrote:

... eternal changeableness gives life to music, be it folk or art music, whether the changes are considerable or scarcely perceptible. These intrinsic characteristics of music seem to be in contradiction with the contemporary trend of producing music more and more by mechanical means, according to which music would be compressed into a frozen and never-changing form.³⁴

Natural Interpretation of Music

Many natural elements of interpretation are highlighted in folk music interpretation. Among these perhaps the most significant are ideas of rhythm, rubato, and melodic shaping. Bartók wrote in the introduction of *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs: Texts and Transcriptions of 75 Folk Songs from the Milman Parry Collection*, “Notes sung in high pitch sound louder, those in lower pitch, softer.”³⁵ This is especially evident in some of the phonographic recordings of the folk music he arranged for piano. Two fine examples of this are the recordings of *Leszállott a páva* (Figure 1), that was arranged as the first movement of *Three Hungarian Folk-Tunes*, and *Legkötöm lovamot* (Figure 2 – a variant text of the same folksong), that was arranged as the first movement of *Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs*. Many of the extant phonographic recordings are

³⁴ Bartók, Béla, and Albert Lord. *Serbo-Croatian folk songs; texts and transcriptions of seventy-five folk songs from the Milman Parry collection and a morphology of Serbo-Croatian folk melodies* (Columbia U. Press, 1951), 20.

³⁵ Bartók, Béla, and Albert Lord, 4.

of variant texts that use the same tune of the Bartók's arrangements such as *Legkötöm lovamot*. The phonographic recordings of these tunes can be found in *Folk Music in Bartók's Compositions: A Source Catalog*, edited by Vera Lampert and László Vikárius.³⁶ In both examples, it is clearly audible that the higher notes sound louder and the lower notes sound softer. In both examples, the shaping heard on the recording has great insight for the shaping of the melody in the arrangement for piano. This is a fundamental idea of natural musical interpretation that can be applied to art music performances as well.

Another key point is the concept of tempo rubato, which has a parallel between Bartók's performances and the folk music itself. Bartók described folk music in terms of *tempo giusto*, and *parlando-rubato*. He explained these in his introduction to *The Hungarian Folk Song*:

(1) *Tempo Giusto* (strict) rhythm consisting chiefly of equal values. It is likely that the earliest music arose in connexion [*sic*] with rhythmical motions of the human body (work, dancing).

(2) *Parlando-rubato* rhythm. In proportion as tunes gradually became independent of the body's motions, the dance like rigour of the original terse rhythms relaxed. The rhythm of the tunes was bound to adapt itself to the rhythm of the words; and performers were enabled to emphasize and prolong single notes. [...]

(3) *Tempo giusto* rhythm, evolved out of the *parlando-rubato* method of performance. Many rhythmic patterns originating in this *parlando-rubato* method of performance may have become set quantities even in *parlando-rubato* performance. Supposing that a tune

³⁶ Lampert, Vera, and László Vikárius, eds. *Folk Music in Bartók's Compositions: A Source Catalog: Arab, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, and Slovak Melodies*. Budapest: Hungarian Heritage House, 2008.

of this kind comes to be performed *tempo giusto* (say, for the purpose of dancing), it will naturally retain the complicated rhythmic patterns created by rubato performance.³⁷

This concept of *parlando-rubato* and *tempo giusto* provides many insights towards musical interpretation. Of particular interest is the concept of *tempo giusto* evolving from *parlando-rubato* as discussed in the third point. While a great deal of Bartók's performing was of an expressive rubato style, and many of the arrangements are clearly in rubato style, musicians are often perplexed by flexibility in *giusto* style performing. This is especially clear in the subordinate theme in Bartók's performance of *Evening in the Country*. Even though he notated "non rubato" in the score, he himself performs with fine rhythmic nuances and departures from what is strictly written on the score. Bartók also wrote, "A melody in rigid dance rhythm is sometimes performed in free *parlando-rubato* rhythm, but it should never the less be grouped as if it were in rigid rhythm."³⁸ Perhaps this concept can help explain why Bartók performed the "non rubato" section of *Evening in the Country* the way he did.

In addition to the folk music influences, many associate Bartók's style of rubato playing to be part of the tradition of performing that connects to much earlier music. As László Somfai wrote:

He knew the tempo rubato in its old (C. Ph. E. Bach) sense, as inherited from the Austro-Hungarian tradition which he adopted not only in the rendition of 18th and 19th century music but also in his own works, even in such 'drumming' pieces as the "Tambourine" in the *Nine Little Piano Pieces*. In addition, in a certain group of earlier works, including the *Rhapsody op. 1, Bagatelles, Two Elegies*, we can trace the influence of what I call the 'Liszt rubato': an exaggerated romantic freedom in speed and beat, often *senza misura*, or

³⁷ Bartók, Béla. *The Hungarian folk song*, IX.

³⁸ Bartók, Béla, and Albert Lord, 19.

as a diabolic jerkiness. But most important, owing to the special folk-music sources of his creative world, Bartók's music is rich in parlando-rubato styles that he thought either impossible and impractical to notate exactly, or too complicated to fit into the conception of a piece.³⁹

While many connect Bartók's style of rubato strictly to the folk music he studied, others link it to the tradition of rubato playing in which he was trained.

At the 2011 Bartók Symposium in Szombathely, Hungary, Richard Taruskin gave a lecture describing Bartók's use of rubato by contrasting a recorded piano duo performance of Mozart by Igor Stravinsky and his son Soulima to a recorded piano duo performance of Mozart by Bartók and his wife, Ditta. The performance by Bartók and his wife was full of drastic tempo changes and interpretational freedom, while the performance by Stravinsky and his son was objective, carefully controlled, and carefully executed in a mechanical and objective manner according to the written score. Taruskin argued that Bartók's interpretational style and rubato were part of the musical interpretation tradition that extended back to Mozart's time and was closer to the composer's intent than Stravinsky's modern style performance.⁴⁰

Apart from the tempo implications of rubato, the concept of flexibility in sub-divided rhythm is quite significant. Bartók wrote, "...an absolute rigid rhythm never prevails even in so-called "rigid" dance rhythms [...] The same can be said of art music performances."⁴¹ When I studied certain movements of *For Children*, my professors at the Liszt Academy of Music (Balázs Réti and Attila Némethy) suggested varying some of the dotted-eighth note rhythms by over-dotting, and adjusting consecutive sixteenth note rhythms. Bartók described these rhythms

³⁹ Somfai, László. "Tempo, Metronome, Timing in Bartók's Music: The Case of the Pianist Composer." *Basler Studien zur Musik in Theorie und Praxis*. Band 1. 1998 pp. 47-71, 52.

⁴⁰ Taruskin, Richard. *Stravinsky Meets Bartók on the Field of Mozart*. Scholarly Research and Performance Practice in Bartók Studies: The Importance of the Dialogue, Szombathely. 18 July 2011.

⁴¹ Bartók, Béla, and Albert Lord, 5.

in the introduction to *The Hungarian Folk Song* and said there is "...an almost endless series of variants." (XVIII). He described both under-dotting, and over-dotting these rhythms. In faster tempos, he stated that the rhythm would be less sharp (almost to the point of being a triplet rhythm) and in slower tempos, it was more likely to be over-dotted. It is also possible to hear the same rhythm performed differently in the same piece. Bartók wrote, "Naturally, the rhythmic combinations change from verse to verse, according to the metric idiosyncrasies of each new verse. Consequently, here we have to deal not with any permanent and absolute rhythm but with an ever-changing rhythm..."⁴² One example of this is the song *Megöltek egy legényt* which Bartók arranged as No. 13 in his work *For Children*. In this example, the singer alters the dotted-eighth note rhythm in the opening bar by singing it slightly differently in each verse.

Conclusion

Bartók's musical world, both folk and art music, was filled with wonderfully spontaneous musical performances, flexible rubato and rhythmic figures, and melodic shaping in expressive music. In many ways, modern performances of art music have lost many of these essential natural elements. Performers are often more concerned about correctness and an objective reading of the score than being spontaneous and creating an original interpretation of a piece. Bartók had few exposures to such objectivity in musical performance because it did not exist predominantly in his world.

⁴² Bartók, Béla. *The Hungarian folk song*, XXVIII.

Figure 1

29a

M. F. 55 b)
Kaposújlak (Somogy)
Pál József

Gy: Vikár Béla
L: Bartók Béla
4 1 4

Lészál-lott a pá - va Vár - megye há - zá - ra,
Száj - já - ba visz vi - zet A ra-bok szá - má - ra.

Ziegler Márta másolata Bartók javításaival. — P11a; 75e. — Publ: MND: 33c; Kodály—Vargyas: 101; Lampert: 197. — D: 1899. IV. körül.

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⁴³ “Béla Bartók: Complete Collection of Hungarian Folk Songs.” Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute for Musicology, 2006-2007. 19 April 2012 <http://db.zti.hu/nza/br_en.asp>.

Figure 2 – Variation of *Legkötöm lovamot*

126b

M. F. 1229 b); 1230 b)
Menyhe (Nyitra)
Lányok

Gy: Kodály Zoltán
1909

8	5	5
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Tempo giusto, poco parlando, ♩=76



1. Semmit sē vé - tet-tem Nyit - ra vá-ro - sá-nak,
Még - is {be-so-ro-zott } Engem ka-to - ná - nak.
{be-so-roz-tak}

Var
1)



2. Huszárnak sarazott,
Bakancsnak iratott,
Verje meg az Isten,
De megszorított.
3. Ez lesz jó, ez a ló,
Ez a sárga csikó,
Ez a három éves
Huszár alá való.
4. Elvisznek messzire,
Messze a hazámtól,
El se búcsuzhattam
A kedves babámtól.

Kodály Zoltánné másolata Kodály bejegyzéseivel. — P74b; 97b. — **Publ:** Vargyas: 191. — **Fon, Ak:** M. F. 1229 b) 1 str. (2 lány); M. F. 1230 b) 4 str. (9 lány) [Kodály].

* A sorok közt ♪ ritkán hosszabb (♯), például a 4. versszakban [Kodály].

⁴⁴ “Béla Bartók: Complete Collection of Hungarian Folk Songs.” Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute for Musicology, 2006-2007. 19 April 2012 <http://db.zti.hu/nza/br_en.asp>.

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