

The Percussive Character and the Lyrical Quality in Bartók's Piano Music

By
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the percussive character and the lyrical quality in Bartók's piano works. Bartók realized the nature of the piano as a percussion instrument. He used this idea in his piano works, and through different accents, accent displacement, various rhythmic patterns, and metrical shifts the percussive character emerged as one of the prevalent features of his piano works. The percussive character emphasizes vertical aspects of a phrase.

Bartók's recordings of his own pieces display a lyrical quality in addition to the percussive character. His performances are not completely consistent with the detailed indications that he marked on the score. Bartók believed that composers' recordings of their own work could supplement the notated scores, which might not completely convey the ideas of the composer. Therefore, I argue that Bartók's lyrical performances are another presentation of his musical ideas alongside his scores, and it is worthwhile to explore the lyrical quality and percussive character in his piano music.

This paper will include three chapters to discuss the lyrical quality and percussive character in his piano works. The first chapter will examine the percussive character in his piano works. I will analyze the rhythmic variety and the different markings Bartók used to depict the percussive character. The second chapter will explore the lyrical quality in Bartók's piano music. This chapter will include three sections. The first section will discuss the lyrical quality in Bartók's piano music. The second section will discuss articulation marks that Bartók used to portray the accentuation of the folk music. The third section will discuss modes and different scales in Bartók's piano music. The third chapter will discuss characteristics of Bartók's recordings on his own pieces, and apply ideas from previous chapters to the interpretation of Bartók's piano works. In particular, I will discuss the

performance practices and possibilities of modern pianists approaching Bartók's piano works in a more lyrical manner.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
List of Figures	vi
List of Musical Examples	vi
List of Tables	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	1
The Percussive Character.....	1
Elements.....	3
Chapter 2	11
The Lyrical Quality.....	11
Articulation Marks	13
Modes and Scales.....	17
Chapter 3	22
Recordings	22
Applications	28
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	33
Discography	35

List of Figures

Figure 1 Bartók's percussive and non-percussive touch-forms.....	4
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List of Musical Examples

Example 1 <i>Allegro barbaro</i> , mm. 40–51	5
Example 2 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 2, mm. 216–226.....	6
Example 3 <i>Allegro barbaro</i> , mm. 1–5	7
Example 4 <i>Out of Doors</i> , “With Drums and Pipes,” mm. 1–5	7
Example 5 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 151, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 4, mm. 1–4	8
Example 6 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 4, mm. 10–13.....	8
Example 7 Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs, op. 20, no. 7, mm. 1–10.....	9
Example 8 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 148, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 1, mm. 1–2	10
Example 9 Rhapsody, op. 1, mm. 1–5	14
Example 10 <i>Romanian Folk Dances</i> , no. 1, mm. 1–10	15
Example 11 The original melody of <i>Romanian Folk Dances</i> , no. 1, mm. 1–8	15
Example 12 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 148, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 1, mm. 27–35	18
Example 13 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 125, “Boating,” mm. 1–8	19
Example 14 <i>Romanian Folk Dances</i> , no. 3, mm. 1–6	20
Example 15 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 3, mm. 1–14.....	20
Example 16 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1, mm. 105–109.....	21
Example 17 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 2, mm. 80–87.....	21
Example 18 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 3, mm. 57–65.....	22
Example 19 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 4, mm. 22–25.....	26
Example 20 <i>Allegro barbaro</i> , mm. 13–26.....	29
Example 21 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 148, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 1, mm. 1–2	30
Example 22 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 153, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 6, mm. 1–4	31
Example 23 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 153, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 6, mm. 65–79	31
Example 24 <i>Mikrokosmos</i> , no. 151, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 4, mm. 1–4	32

List of Tables

Table 1. Tempo Changes in Bartók’s 1929 Recording of <i>Allegro barbaro</i>	24
Table 2. Tempo Changes in Bartók's Recording of Piano Suite, op. 14, no. 1.....	24
Table 3. Ostinato Repetition Noted in Score Compared to Bartók's 1929 Recording.....	27

Introduction

Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881–1945) was one of the most important composers of the twentieth century. Similar to many composers of this period, Bartók chose a path that released him from the influence of late Romanticism. Like Stravinsky and Prokofiev, Bartók fully exploited the usage of the piano as a percussion instrument. He employed different compositional devices such as different accents, accent displacement, and repeated-note figures to portray the percussive character in his piano music, making the percussive character one of his work's most prominent features. Second, he used different Eastern European folk melodies as inspiration for his compositions. Bartók collected folk music in Hungary and neighboring countries, and then he researched and analyzed these folk-music sources to develop his own compositional style.

Even though Bartók's piano music features the percussive character, the composer's recordings of his own pieces reflect a more lyrical quality that is very different from many modern pianists' interpretations of Bartók. Therefore, in this paper I will discuss both elements of the percussive character and the lyrical quality. A brief discussion about characteristics in Bartók's recordings on his own pieces will be included. Lastly, I will investigate the applications of balancing the percussive character and the lyrical quality based on the four piano works, *Allegro barbaro*, Piano Suite, op. 14, *Romanian Folk Dances*, and "Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm" from *Mikrokosmos*.

Chapter 1

The Percussive Character

Perhaps one of the most identifying aspects of Bartók's piano works is their percussive nature. In 1927, Bartók stated the following perspective on the piano:

The neutral character of the piano tone has been long recognized. Yet it seems to me that its inherent nature comes really expressive only by means of the present tendency to use the piano as a percussion instrument. Indeed, the piano always plays the part of universal instrument. It has not lost its importance for concert performances.¹

Unlike other composers who concentrated more on melodic contour and harmonic progression, Bartók more clearly highlighted the nature of the piano as a percussive instrument. In his works for piano solo, he utilized this idea by notating different accents, articulations, and repeated-note figures to emphasize rhythmic aspects in his piano music. Before discussing the percussive elements that Bartók used in his piano works, I think it is beneficial to briefly explore the action and developments of the piano.

The action of the piano is percussive by nature. When a key is played on the modern piano, it causes a hammer to strike the corresponding strings, while simultaneously lifting the damper so the struck strings vibrate without restriction to produce sound. When a key is released, the damper falls back into place, preventing any string vibration from producing further sound. Although the sound can be sustained by engaging the damper pedal, the effect is rather limited. Every long note gradually decreases after it is played. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even though the sound production of the piano was percussive and its sound could not be sustained like the sound of the string instrument, composers and performers tried to sustain the sound of piano longer by means of certain idiomatic writing and the assistance of pedal. However, in the twentieth century, composers such as Stravinsky and Prokofiev reevaluated the percussive character of the piano. They emphasized composing purposeful and intense rhythms, sometimes in conjunction with strong dissonances and accents, in an effort to highlight the percussive nature of the piano.

There were two major improvements to the instrument during the nineteenth century that not only modernized the piano but also enabled twentieth-century composers' percussive

¹ Béla Bartók, "About the 'Piano' Problem," in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 288.

writing. In 1825, Boston piano maker Alpheus Babcock was the first to patent a one-piece metal frame. He claimed his invention would be “stronger and more durable than a wooden frame or case” and, because the strings and metal frame could expand and contract equally, it prevented the instrument from getting “out of tune by any alteration in the temperature of the air.”² Babcock’s iron frame made the piano sturdier and better able to withstand powerful performances. Steel strings strung with greater tension resolved issues with easily broken strings and soundboards in the early pianos. The technological advances to the modern piano made it a more stable instrument, and provided a wider range of dynamics that projected better in large concert halls.

The second major nineteenth-century piano invention was the double escapement. Unlike the large iron frame and steel strings, the double escapement was a delicate mechanism hidden inside the piano. Double escapement enabled the hammers to strike strings again before falling back to their original position. It allowed the hammer to re-strike strings significantly quicker than single escapement, where the hammer had to return to its original position before re-striking could occur. The invention of the double escapement not only allowed the performer to play repeated notes more quickly but it also resulted in the appearance of more demanding techniques throughout piano literature. Allowing keys to better respond to a player’s sensitive touch, double escapement increased dynamic range and tone color capabilities. Having a greater range and flexibility of expressive elements, composers began writing more virtuosic piano literature.

Elements

The nature of the piano and the results of these nineteenth-century improvements of the instrument influenced and enabled Bartók’s percussive writing. Based on Bartók’s 1927

² Grove Music Online, s.v. “Pianoforte,” by Cynthia Adams Hoover, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.21631>.

statement about the nature of the piano and the invention of the double escapement, I claim that Bartók marked each articulation precisely to suggest different percussive touches on the piano. Bartók clearly notated different symbols and divided these symbols into percussive and non-percussive touches. He also provided descriptions of these symbols in his pedagogical works and editions for the piano. Through the symbols and descriptions, Bartók elucidated the applications of percussive and non-percussive touches employed in his piano works. Bartók's key from *Mikrokosmos* is provided in Figure 1.³

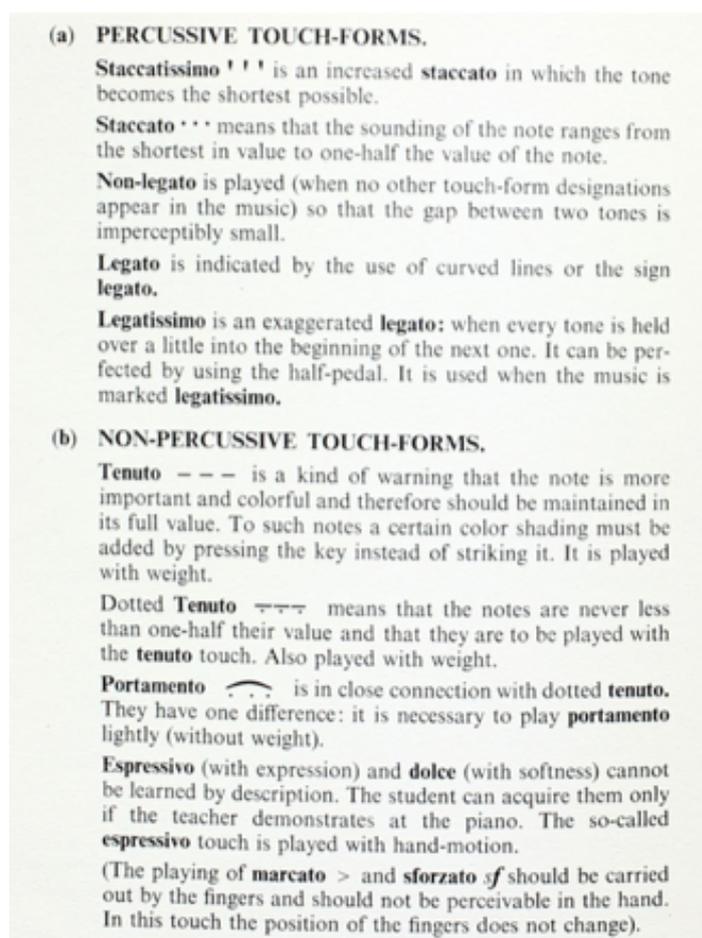


Figure 1 Bartók's percussive and non-percussive touch-forms.

³ Benjamin Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, 2nd ed. (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1971), 13–14.

Bartók's piano works are full of percussive and non-percussive touches as well as dynamic accents. According to Bartók's edition of the Anna Magdalena Bach book, he graded several dynamic accents in different levels from the strongest accent *subito fortissimo* (*sf*), to a weaker accent *sforzando* (*sf*), then *marcatissimo* (^), and to the weakest accent *marcato* (>).⁴ The following example from his *Allegro barbaro* combines percussive (non-legato) and non-percussive (tenuto) touches, with two dynamic accents, *sf* and ^. Through different touches and displacements of accents, Bartók intensified the rhythmic aspect and emphasized the percussive character in this passage (see Example 1).

Example 1 *Allegro barbaro*, mm. 40–51

The image shows a musical score for two systems of music. The first system (measures 40-45) features a bass line with percussive chords and a treble line with melodic fragments. The second system (measures 46-51) continues the bass line and introduces a treble line with a melodic line. Handwritten annotations include "eight times" above a measure and "dimin." below a measure. Dynamic markings include *sf*, *sf*, and *s*.

In addition to the articulations and dynamic accents, Bartók marked musical terms like *pesante*, *marcatissimo*, and *martellato* to suggest that the interpretation of certain

⁴ László Somfai, *Béla Bartók Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 264.

passages as more percussive. He usually combined these musical terms with louder dynamics. For example, in the last nine measures of his Piano Suite, op. 14, no. 2, Bartók wrote *fff* with *marcatissimo* (Example 2). Bartók indicated that each note should be played with the thumb and the index finger together in both hands. Throughout this passage, Bartók used articulation in dots, strong dynamic marking, percussive musical terms, and the unusual fingering to strengthen the percussive character in his work.

Example 2 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 2, mm. 216–226



In the opening four measures of *Allegro barbaro*, both hands alternatively play chords in succession mimicking percussive playing. Bartók used the opening material as an ostinato that appears as an introduction, transitions, and epilogue of the piece (see Example 3). This type of percussive playing of an ostinato is similar to Bartók's other piano piece, *Out of Doors*. In the first movement of the *Out of Doors*, "With Drums and Pipes," Bartók also wrote successive percussive playing as a bass ostinato like the beginning, using dissonant intervals to strengthen the sonority (see Example 4).

Example 3 *Allegro barbaro*, mm. 1–5

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Tempo giusto, $\text{♩} = 76-84$

Piano

ff *mf* *f*

Example 4 *Out of Doors*, “With Drums and Pipes,” mm. 1–5

Béla Bartók (1926)

Pesante, $\text{♩} = 132$

Piano

f

While these elements relate to different keystrokes, Bartók also emphasized the rhythmic aspect and considered it as the main material rather than melodic or harmonic aspect in his piano works to bring out the percussive character in his works.

Syncopation provides rhythmic variety and is often present in his piano works. Bartók utilized numerous different patterns of syncopations in his piano works. There are 636 different syncopation patterns in Bartók’s six volumes of *Mikrokosmos*.⁵ For example, the time signature indicates the rhythmic pattern in the beginning of the fourth dance of the “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm” is 3+2+3 but Bartók wrote the syncopated pattern 1+2+2+2+1 in the right hand to displace the rhythmic stresses in this section (see Example 5). Different syncopated patterns lead to the displacement of accents in both hands during the last piece of

⁵ Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, 7.

Bartók's Piano Suite, op. 14. The pattern in the right hand becomes 2+2+2 with the last note tied over to the first note of the next measure, which interrupts the original 3+3 pattern of the 6/8 meter (Example 6). Also, the pattern in the left hand is 1+2+2+1 which stresses the second beat instead of the first beat in the first group of the 6/8 time.

Example 5 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 151, "Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm," no. 4, mm. 1–4



Example 6 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 4, mm. 10–13



Frequent meter changes are a landmark of twentieth-century music. Mixed meter results in changing recurrent accents and produces irregularity in the music. Bartók uses changes of meters in his piano music to express the rhythmic aspects of Eastern European folk music. The frequency of changing meters varies between pieces. For example, Bartók changed time signature seven times in the first ten measures in his Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs, op. 20, no. 7 (see Example 7).

Example 7 Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs, op. 20, no. 7, mm. 1–10

Like changing time signatures, asymmetrical meter provides irregular meter in the music. The usage of asymmetrical meter and influence from Eastern European folk music is evident. Bartók pointed out in 1938 that melodies of asymmetrical rhythmic movements were abundant in Hungarian musical material no less than in Slovakian and Romanian melodies.⁶ One of the famous examples of asymmetrical rhythm in Bartók's piano music is the "Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm" in the sixth volume of *Mikrokosmos*. Within each dance, he wrote a different combination of asymmetrical meter (see Example 8).

⁶ Béla Bartók, "The So-Called Bulgarian Rhythm," in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 40.

Example 8 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 148, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 1, mm. 1–2

(1) $\text{♩} : 850$ ($\text{♩} : 89$)

148*

In some of these dances, time signatures are equivalent to the time signatures in the symmetrical meter, but Bartók changed symmetrical patterns of accent and regrouped the beats that are contained in each measure. For example, time signatures in the first and the fifth dance are $4+2+3/8$ and $2+2+2+3/8$, and both time signatures are equivalent to $9/8$ in the symmetrical meter.

All of these elements emphasize the percussive character in Bartók’s piano music but it is not the only character present. Performers should be careful about the boundary between hammering and harsh playing when approaching these articulations and percussive compositional writings. They should also refrain from the overemphasis of rhythmic variety while interpreting Bartók’s music. Even though Bartók’s piano music features many percussive elements through different articulation marks and rhythmic variety, his own recordings of the pieces reflect their lyrical quality. This lyrical quality is sometimes absent in contemporary recordings of Bartók’s piano repertoire, especially when a performer over accentuates the percussive character.

Bartók once said, “It is a well-known fact that notation records on paper, more or less inadequately, the idea of the composer; hence the existence of contrivances with which one can record precisely every intention and idea of the composer is indeed of great importance.”⁷

⁷ Bartók, “The So-Called Bulgarian Rhythm,” 298.

Composers' own recordings supplement their written scores, shedding light on the interpretation of their music. Bartók's recordings of his own pieces displayed the nuances that might not be notated completely on his score. Therefore, the following chapter will examine the lyrical quality in Bartók's notated music in comparison to Bartók's recordings. This comparison will offer greater insight into how Bartók approach the lyrical quality in addition to the percussive character in his piano music.

Chapter 2

The Lyrical Quality

The term "lyrical" is typically employed to describe a musical passage with a singing and expressive quality. Regarding the singing way or singing style, Sarah Day-O'Connell has explored the term in the *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*. Next, I will discuss the lyrical quality in Bartók's piano music based on Day-O'Connell's investigation.⁸

The words, "lyrical" and "singing," are inherently connected to the human voice and the vocal melodies by definition but these terms are currently employed throughout all genres, usually referring to a legato and stepwise melody. Musicologist Heinrich Christoph Koch brought up another definition of "singing" in his treatise, *Musikalisches Lexikon*:

"Singing" is generally the quality of a melody that makes it able to be performed with ease by the human voice. In particular it is understood, however, to indicate a comprehensible and smooth melody, as opposed to the uneven, angular, or so-called Baroque. The singing style has much in common with the Flowing, because these qualities seem to differ only in that the Flowing, for the most part, is made up of small intervals that in performance are more smooth than detached. However, the "singing style" must also apply to those melodies in contain a lot of leaping intervals and detached notes, as well as to melodies in which the notes flow continuously, because even in the expression of stormy passions or in a tumult of sounds, all harshness that are avoidable or unnecessary to the expression, and all unsingable sequences of tones, must still be avoided in the melody.

⁸ Sarah Day-O'Connell, "The Singing Style," in *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 238–256.

In this sense, the “singing style” is the basis whereby a melody becomes the language of emotion, which is comprehensible to every person. If a musical piece lacks this property it becomes incomprehensible, and it lacks that which should capture one’s attention.⁹

By Koch’s definition, the singing style or the singing way is not dependent on a certain constitution of the melody. Both the conjunct melody and disjunct melody should be included in the realm of the singing style on the premise that inappropriate interpretations of melodies, especially the disjunct melody, should be avoided. Therefore, the singing style relies on the comprehensibility of the melody instead of the constitution of the melody, and the inappropriate interpretation due to the incomprehensibility of melodies will lose the lyrical quality.

Although Koch stated the direct association between “singing style” and vocal melody, the singing style can be used to describe both vocal and instrumental melodies. Regarding the comparison between these two kinds of melodies, Day-O’Connell references Johann Mattheson’s discussion between the vocal and the instrumental melody. Composers have limitations in writing vocal melodies because composers are tasked with creating idiomatic lines in a suitable range for each singer with typically a more stepwise contour. Also, the vocal melody has added meaning through text. On the other hand, the instrumental melody is more flexible without text and not as restricted as the vocal melody. The meaning of an instrumental melody is portrayed through pure melody. The expression of the instrumental melody is abstract. However, the instrumental melody features the singing quality as the vocal melody does. When composers are experienced in writing vocal music, the instrumental music that they write is clearly comprehensible, and it might as well have had words instead of sounding like vocal lines.¹⁰

⁹ Day-O’Connell, “The Singing Style,” 240.

¹⁰ Day-O’Connell, “The Singing Style,” 242–245.

According to Koch's definition and Mattheson's discussion, the singing style in the instrumental melody is dependent on neither its imitation of vocal melody nor a certain type of melody. As long as the melody is comprehensible, it possesses the singing style. Moreover, in addition to the comprehensibility of the melody itself, the performance is considered as a form of comprehensibility. Composer Pier Francesco Tosi discussed the vocal performance practice in his treatise *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*.¹¹ He stated that singers were obligatory to make words understood; if the words were not understood, the audience would not be able to fully grasp the meaning that the vocal music conveys.¹² Hence, for performers, the comprehensibility relies on the performer's the interpretation of the melody. In Bartók's piano music, the melody imitated and incorporated Eastern European folk material. He either utilized transcriptions of actual folk music as the melody or integrated folk-elements within the melody. The folk elements Bartók weaves into his melodies are stylistically different from elements used in traditional Western music that many performers are perhaps more familiar with. Unlike Hungarian or other region-related performers, the unfamiliarity with Eastern Europe folk music may cause interpretation issues when performers approach Bartók's piano music. As Koch stated in his treatise, this unfamiliarity with Bartók's music may result in the loss of the singing style and cause the incomprehensibility of his work. Therefore, in order to comprehend the lyrical quality or the singing style in Bartók's piano music, the elements of the melody should be explored.

Articulation Marks

The direct influence of Eastern European folk music is evident in the articulation marks, modes, scales, and modality. Articulation marks are one of the issues performers face when approaching and interpreting Bartók's music. Bartók notated different articulation

¹¹ Day-O'Connell, "The Singing Style," 245.

¹² Day-O'Connell, "The Singing Style," 248.

marks, which are shown above in the discussion of the percussive character (see Figure 1). Besides suggesting different touches to the piano, these articulation marks reflected the influences of the folk music. His early works have not shown the usage of articulation marks in the folk-music manner. His early work, Rhapsody, op. 1, was published in 1904, and its Lisztian texture and harmony reflect its late-Romantic influence. In this work, Bartók notates few articulation marks, and slurs almost completely dominate the entire piece. Bartók used the slurs to indicate phrasing and legato (see Example 9).

Example 9 Rhapsody, op. 1, mm. 1–5

The image shows a page of musical notation for the first five measures of the Rhapsody, Op. 1 by Béla Bartók. The score is in 3/4 time and is written for piano. The top system is marked 'Mesto. (Adagio. ♩: 58 - 54)' and 'Béla Bartók, Op. 1'. The first system includes the instruction 'p dolce' and a slur over the right hand. The second system includes 'cresc. molto espr.', 'f', 'dim.', 'p', and 'pp' markings, along with a slur over the right hand.

After Bartók started his lifelong ethnomusicological research in 1904, the articulation marks in his piano works became more varied and carried meanings other than those used during the Romantic period. For example, the first dance, “Dance with Stick,” in the *Romanian Folk Dances* is transcribed from an actual Romanian folk tune that was played by

two gypsies and recorded by the composer in Transylvania during 1912.¹³ The original melody transcribed by Bartók is in the anthology of Romanian folk music. The articulation marks in the piano version includes *legato*, *staccato*, and *tenuto*, which were already used in the Romantic period but, here, Bartók uses these marks differently. These marks are used to portray the folk-music quality. The scores of the original folk tune and the piano version are shown below (see Example 10 and Example 11).

Example 10 *Romanian Folk Dances*, no. 1, mm. 1–10

The image shows a piano score for the first ten measures of 'Romanian Folk Dances, no. 1' by Béla Bartók. The tempo is 'Allegro moderato' with a metronome marking of 104 quarter notes per minute. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The score is written for piano, with a forte (f) dynamic. The melody in the right hand is characterized by eighth-note patterns and slurs. The left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. Articulation marks like 'sopra' and 'sotto' are used to indicate specific phrasing or articulation points.

Example 11 The original melody of *Romanian Folk Dances*, no. 1, mm. 1–8

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the first eight measures of the original melody of 'Romanian Folk Dances, no. 1'. The score is numbered '425.' and titled 'Jocul cu bătă'. It is in 2/4 time. The melody in the right hand is written in a single staff with various articulation marks and slurs. The left hand has a bass line with some notes and rests. The handwriting is clear and legible.

¹³ Bartók, "About the 'Piano' Problem," 370.

The melodic contour is almost unchanged while the rhythmic proportions are very different. Bartók simplifies the rhythmic proportion in the piano version. Moreover, these articulation marks were assigned a different meaning from the ones used in the Rhapsody. Though Bartók's articulation marks in the piano version are slightly different from the transcription of the original folk tune, the marks in the piano version correspond with the accentuation of the folk tune. Besides suggesting different touches of the piano and phrasing, these marks in the piano version represent the unique accentuation in the folk music that did not exist before in Western traditional music. Therefore, after the ethnomusicological research, Bartók's articulation marks represent both the traditional meaning and the accentuation of the folk-music elements.

According to László Somfai, the articulation marks in Bartók's piano music can be divided into two basic styles.¹⁴ The first style possessed detailed notation and served a didactic purpose. *Ten Easy Pieces* and *Romanian Folk Dances* are representative of this style. Bartók's editions of other composers' piano works also reflect this style, and some of the works included in Bartók's editions are J.S. Bach's two volumes of *Well-Tempered Clavier* and several of Mozart's piano sonatas. The second style refers to the piano works for Bartók's own performance so the articulation marks are less detailed than the first style. In the second style, pedaling and fingering instructions appear only when they are a part of the intended effect in harmony or touch. His *Piano Suite, op. 14* and *Sonata* are notated in this style.¹⁵ There are also some pieces that do not include either style. Somfai indicates that *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs, op. 20* is one of the most performed works by Bartók himself but the score is precisely notated with articulation marks.¹⁶ Comparing *Romanian Folk Dances* with *Improvisations, op. 20*, the texture and technique are disparate.

¹⁴ László Somfai, "Nineteenth-Century Ideas Developed in Bartók's Piano Notation in the Years 1907–14," *19th-Century Music* 1 (1987): 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/746633>.

¹⁵ Somfai, "Nineteenth-Century Ideas," 89–90.

¹⁶ Somfai, "Nineteenth-Century Ideas," 90.

The works served different purposes, as a teaching and a concert piece. However, melodies in both works were transcribed from actual folk music, and Bartók carefully notated different articulation marks in order to portray the accentuation in the original folk tune. As a result, the detailed articulation marks were used by Bartók not only for the basic touches but also the expression of the accentuation of folk music. It may be assumed that since the accentuation of folk music is unconventional to most performers, in order to introduce and provide enough information about the accentuation of folk music to these performers, Bartók carefully notated the articulation marks in the folk-based pieces.

Modes and Scales

The usage of modes and scales in Bartók's piano music are also a reflection of the folk-music influence. When Bartók began exploring Hungarian peasant music, he was surprised that major and minor scales were scarcely used in the folk music. Instead, he found modes and other scales, like pentatonic scales, which were found in Eastern European folk music. Bartók employed those scales in his music.

Modes are an important element in Eastern European folk music and are prevalent throughout Bartók's piano music. Bartók composed in the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, and Aeolian modes. These modes are based on the major scale but each mode starts and ends in a different scale degree. Bartók once indicated that these modes were used from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, when art music primarily started to use major and minor scales. These modes were actually still flourishing in the folk music of Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, other Eastern European nations, and Asia and were not at all antiquated. The Phrygian mode has been used extensively in Hungary for the last 150 years.¹⁷ "Dance with Stick," for example (see Example 11), is an actual Romanian folk tune in the

¹⁷ Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, 32–34.

Dorian mode (mm. 1–8) and Aeolian mode (mm. 17–32). Both modes are based on A as the tonic.

Although Bartók used modes to compose his piano music, the music does not only include one mode at a time. Polymodality is often present in his works. Regarding the discussion about atonality, polytonality, and polymodality, Bartók stated that atonal music did not possess a tonic and polytonality possessed more than one tonic, while polymodality relied on a tonic.¹⁸ He also mentioned that polymodality does not mean that the whole piece stay in a fixed polymodality but rather it is flexible in different proportions in different pieces.¹⁹ In no. 148, the first dance in Bulgarian Rhythm from the same volume, Bartók applied few measures in the polymodality. From measures 29 to 32 in the first dance, the right hand is in E Phrygian while the left hand is in E Lydian (see Example 12).

Example 12 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 148, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 1, mm. 27–35

The image displays two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system, measures 27-35, shows a right hand with a melodic line in E Phrygian mode and a left hand with a bass line in E Lydian mode. Performance markings include *espr.*, *mf*, *rit.*, and *al.*. The second system, measures 240-245, is marked *Meno vivo* and *poco a poco accelerando*, with dynamics *p* and *cresc.*. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals.

¹⁸ Béla Bartók, “Harvard Lectures,” in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 370.

¹⁹ Bartók, “Harvard Lectures,” 370.

elements suggest the Arabic influence.²¹ In Piano Suite, op. 14, the left-hand ostinato in the third piece displays a scale pattern that David Yeomans identifies as “Arabic [in] origin, a result of Bartók’s collecting tours in Algiers in 1913” (Example 15).²²

Example 14 *Romanian Folk Dances*, no. 3, mm. 1–6



Example 15 Piano Suite, op. 14, no. 3, mm. 1–14



Bartók also used both the whole-tone scale and the octatonic scale in his compositions. The whole-tone scale consists of major seconds within an octave that divide the octave, or twelve semitones, into six parts. There are two different whole-tone scales: the one that contains C, and the one that contains C-sharp or D-flat. In Piano Suite, op. 14,

²¹ David Yeomans, *Bartók for Piano* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 11.

²² Yeomans, *Bartók for Piano*, 83.

Bartók applied the first type of whole-tone scale to the ending of the first piece and the middle section of the second piece (see Example 16 and Example 17).

Example 16 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1, mm. 105–109



Example 17 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 2, mm. 80–87



The octatonic scale has three types and is made up of alternating half and whole steps within an octave, or twelve semitones. In the third piece of Piano Suite, op. 14, C-minor triad against an incomplete E-minor harmonic minor scale appears from measure 60 to 63, and this combination uses seven of the eight notes in the first type of the octatonic scale, C–C#–Eb–E–F#–G–A–(A#) (Example 18). In the following two measures, Bartók transposed the combination down a tritone, and the missing A-sharp appeared and completed the first type of the octatonic scale.

Example 18 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 3, mm. 57–65

Folk music plays an essential role in Bartók's music. Through modes and pentatonic scale, Bartók exhibited the folk-music character in his music. In addition to the folk-music character, Bartók also used whole-tone scale and octatonic scale in his music. Hence, it is important to understand these elements in order to approach the lyrical quality in Bartók's music. Besides the elements in Bartók's music, Bartók's recordings on his own piano works is another means to seize the lyrical quality in his music. The following chapter will explore the characteristics of Bartók's recordings.

Chapter 3

Recordings

Bartók's own recordings of his works are another valuable resource because the recording industry was developing during Bartók's lifetime. A variety of formats are available, including phonograph recordings, paper rolls, live performances, and broadcast recordings, but his studio recordings are most prevalent. Bartók recorded several pieces more than once; hence, there are at least several versions and interpretations of same piece. For

example, *Allegro barbaro* was composed in 1911, but it was not recorded until 1929 on the His Master's Voice (HMV) label and it was recorded a second time on the Hilversum Radio in 1935.²³ The following discussions regarding Bartók's recordings will be based on the four piano works including *Allegro barbaro*, Piano Suite op. 14, *Romanian Folk Dances*, and "Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm." The recordings of these four works reveal several characteristics of Bartók's playing. The 1935 version of *Allegro barbaro* was damaged at some point so it will not be included in the discussion.

In Bartók's own recordings, he has a tendency to play a faster tempo than the metronome marking that he indicated for the piece. For instance, Bartók marked the tempo 76 to 84 per half note at the beginning of *Allegro barbaro*; however, he started around 96 per half note in his 1929 recording. In addition to starting at a faster tempo than the metronome marking on the music, Bartók played with a flexible tempo throughout all of his recordings. Both his recording of *Allegro barbaro* and the first piece in Piano Suite, op. 14 contain slight tempo adjustments. After the beginning metronome markings, Bartók notated several music terms to indicate changes of tempo in both pieces. However, his recordings contain other shifts of tempo that are not notated in the score. In the recordings, Bartók usually changed his tempo when a new theme or a section appears in the music. Table 1 and Table 2 show the relationship between changes of tempo and the appearance of a theme or a section. For example, when the second theme begins in *Allegro barbaro*, Bartók slowed 96 to 90 per half note. In the score, the beginning of the second theme at measure 34 was marked *pesante* by Bartók, and it is probably the reason that Bartók slowed his tempo down in order to express the heaviness of the section.

²³ Somfai, *Béla Bartók Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources*, 281.

Table 1. Tempo Changes in Bartók's 1929 Recording of *Allegro barbaro*

<i>Allegro barbaro</i>	Measure	Bartók's tempo (based on per half note)	
Introduction+Theme 1	1	96	
Theme 2	34	90	Metronome marking indicated on the score is 76 to 84 per half note
Theme 3	58	110	
Theme 4 (poco sostenuto)	101	72	
Theme 1	152	108	

Table 2. Tempo Changes in Bartók's Recording of Piano Suite, op. 14, no. 1

Piano Suite, op. 14/ 1	Measure	Bartók's tempo (per quarter)	Description	
	1	120	opening	
Section A	4	138	main melody	
	21	152	main melody in a higher octave	
Section B	37	126	beginning of section B	Metronome marking indicated on the score is 120 per quarter
	60	152	winding melody in left hand	
	65	132	Tempo I	
	74	152	winding melody in left hand	
	84	144	stringendo	
Section A'	87	152	Tempo I	
	100	138	Meno mosso	
	106	152	Tempo I	

Bartók played with greater flexibility of tempo in Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1 than in *Allegro barbaro*. Compared to *Allegro barbaro*, Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1 possesses more folk-music characteristics. In Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1, the pattern of an eighth and two sixteenth notes with regular phrases reflects the influence of Romanian folk music.²⁴ Bartók most likely applied a more flexible approach to tempo in Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1 to convey the folk music quality.

The above tables are not meant to criticize Bartók's lack of tempo control but rather highlight his use of tempo as an expression of folk music. Bartók's performances also reflect contemporary performance practice. In the Romantic period, performing music with a flexibility of tempo was considered a natural performance and this tradition was still prevalent during the early twentieth century. According to Wilhelm von Lenz, there was an occasion when Chopin played his Mazurka in C op. 33, no. 3; Meyerbeer heard his performance and believed the Mazurka was in 2/4 instead of 3/4 due to his flexibility of tempo.²⁵

In his recording of Piano Suite, op. 14, Bartók modified some of the rhythmic values, and rushed the sixteenth notes in the main melody. The value of sixteenth notes became shorter in comparison to what is indicated in the notated score. This kind of rhythmic modification in the melody of Bartók's playing reflects the improvisatory character of the folk tunes he observed in the folk performances. In the last piece of Piano Suite, op. 14, Bartók played the rhythm in the middle section with *rubato*, another influence of the late-Romantic performing style. The example of the middle section is shown in Example 19. The rhythmic pattern mainly consists of a group of a dotted quarter and two eighth notes. In Bartók's recording, he lengthened the value of the first eighth note and shortened one of the

²⁴ Yeomans, *Bartók for Piano*, 84.

²⁵ Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 73.

second eighth notes in each group. By intentionally lengthening the first group of eighth notes, Bartók emphasized harmonic tension in each group. Unlike the rhythmic modification in the first piece, the *rubato* here was less related with the folk-music character and more in line with Romantic performance practice.

Example 19 Piano Suite, op.14, no. 4, mm. 22–25

The alterations of notes also occurred in his recordings. The modification included an omission from the score and addition notes to his recordings. The omission from the score happened in Bartók's recordings of *Allegro barbaro*. The opening ostinato appeared in the score as the introduction, epilogue, and transitions between sections, but the lengths of ostinato in each transition varied. For example, in some transitions, Bartók reduced the length of ostinato. In his 1929 version of *Allegro barbaro*, there were three transitions where Bartók reduced the length of the ostinato (see Table 3).

Table 3. Ostinato Repetition Noted in Score Compared to Bartók's 1929 Recording

Structure	Mm.	Measures of Ostinato in score	1929 Bartók's recording (measures)
Introduction (Ostinato)	1–4	4	4
Section I (T1+T2)	5–49		
Transition (dim.-Ostinato)	50–57	8	6
Section II T3/O/T3/O/T3/O/T3	58–61/62–66/67– 70/71–75/76– 80/81–83/84–87	5–5–3	5–5–3
Transition (dim.-Ostinato)	88–100	13	12
Section III (T4)	101–151		
Section IV (T1+T2)	152–212		
Epilogue (dim.-Ostinato)	213–224	8	8

Bartók reduced the length of ostinato twice during transitions, once from measure 50 to 57 and then again from measure 88 to 100. Between measure 50 and 57, Bartók played the ostinato six times instead of eight times, and in measure 88 through 100, Bartók played it twelve times instead of the thirteen times he notated on the score. Although Bartók reduced the length of ostinato in his recording, he contrarily suggested that his student, György Sándor, prolong the transition from between measure 88 to 100 in order to provide enough time to lessen the dynamic from *f* to *pppp*.²⁶ It is unclear why Bartók approached this passage so differently himself but through the indication on the notated score, Bartók's suggestion to Sándor and Bartók's own recording of this piece, the ostinato passage has to project a clear and steady *diminuendo* during the performance.

Bartók's played additional notes in his recordings of *Romanian Folk Dances* and "Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm." In the second and fourth dance of *Romanian Folk Dances*,

²⁶ Vera Lampert, "Bartók at the Piano: Lessons From the Composer's Sound Recordings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 239–40.

“Waistband Dance” and “Hornpipe Dance,” Bartók played octaves in melody with the repetition of dances in his recording. Like the application of rhythmic modification in Piano Suite, op.14, no. 1, the addition of these notes depicted the improvisatory character in the folk music. Also, *Romanian Folk Dances* is considered as a didactic work. Hence, it is reasonable that Bartók played octaves when he performed this work.

The last exploration of these recordings addresses the additive rhythm. In his recording of “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” Bartók played accents that were not notated in the score. For instance, the rhythm of the first dance is $4+2+3/8$ (see Example 8). Although Bartók did not indicate accent marks in the score, his recording clearly reveals that he played this passage with accents, especially the three amidst the asymmetrical rhythm. Through the unwritten accents, Bartók emphasized the asymmetrical metric pattern in the additive rhythm and the unique accentuation of the Bulgarian rhythm.

Applications

Bartók’s recordings reveal several characteristics that encompass flexibility of tempo, modified rhythmic value, alterations, and unwritten accents. According to his recordings, Bartók did not approach the percussive character noisily or with rhythmic variety inflexibly in his music; instead, his approach to the rhythmic variety reflected the influence of folk music and the late-Romantic performance practice.

With regards to the percussive character in his playing, the scholar David Yeomans indicated that Bartók’s playing possessed the virtual absence of any harshness of sound or blatant percussiveness; in fact, many of the loud dynamics or sharply accented syncopations called for in the written score are surprisingly modified in favor of the melodic or linear effect in the Bartók performances.²⁷ Moreover, in the percussive and non-percussive touch-

²⁷ Yeomans, *Bartók for Piano*, 2.

forms, Bartók's instructions did not indicate the relationship between the percussive touches and any production of harsh sound at all (see Figure 1). The word "percussive" was used to refer to the nature of the piano as a percussion instrument and the action of the piano.

Therefore, when performers are approaching the percussive character that is especially prominent in pieces like *Allegro barbaro*, Piano Suite, op.14, nos. 2 and 3, performers should avoid producing any harsh sounds. Regarding percussive and non-percussive touches of articulation marks, performers can consult the descriptions of the touch-forms. In this diagram, Bartók outlined clear instructions about applications of different articulation marks.

In the percussive passage between measure 13 and 26 in *Allegro barbaro*, Bartók clearly indicated the relationship between the melody and the ostinato accompaniment by notating articulation marks and accents in the melody (see Example 20). Therefore, performers should approach different tone qualities between the notes with articulation marks or accents and the notes without any marks or accent.

Example 20 *Allegro barbaro*, mm. 13–26

Besides their different touches to the keyboard, the articulation markings in *Romanian Folk Dances* are also used to express the accentuation of the traditional folk music.

Therefore, performers should also consult the descriptions in the touch-forms, and approach different tone qualities to express the nuances in the melody. Also, the dances presented in *Romanian Folk Dances* are based on four or eight measure phrases. Bartók usually combined *sf* and *tenuto* together in the end of each phrase so performers may use agogic accents in the end to suggest the structure of the dance.

“Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm” features asymmetrical meter. When performers approach the asymmetrical meter in this set, they should emphasize the asymmetrical unit of beats in each measure to show the special rhythmic patterns of Bulgarian folk music. Performers can refer to Bartók’s commentary in *Guide to the Mikrokosmos* by Benjamin Suchoff. Bartók indicated that changes of accentuation are typically present in Bulgarian rhythm and performers have to approach each phrase with clear accents. For example, the asymmetrical meter in the first dance in Bulgarian rhythm is in 4+2+3/8. Performers should accent the first beat of each unit in the measure, especially the third unit that must be heavily accented (see Example 21).²⁸

Example 21 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 148, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 1, mm. 1–2

(1) $\text{♩} : 850$ ($\text{♩} : 89$)

148* *mf*

²⁸ Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, 133–134.

For the same reason, performers should also apply accents in each group in the sixth dance in Bulgarian rhythm, especially the third unit. Approaching accent in the third unit can also emphasize the dissonance between two hands. From measure 68 to 74, a repeated-note section appears in the left hand part. In order to bring out the asymmetrical rhythmic pattern, the left hand should approach accents (see Example 22 and Example 23).²⁹

Example 22 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 153, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 6, mm. 1–4

Example 23 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 153, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 6, mm. 65–79

²⁹ Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, 141.

The syncopated pattern stands out in the fourth dance of the piece and performers should accent quarter notes in the right hand in order to present the syncopation pattern in this dance (see Example 24).³⁰

Example 24 *Mikrokosmos*, no. 151, “Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm,” no. 4, mm. 1–4



Conclusion

When some modern performers interpret Bartók’s music, they approach the percussive character in a precise way. However, Bartók’s recordings of his own pieces reflect that the percussive character as related to folk-music elements. Elements of Eastern European folk music are unfamiliar to most performers. If performers are unfamiliar with the folk-music elements in Bartók’s music, they only present the percussive character in its basic meaning rather than highlighting the folk qualities. In order to present the lyrical quality in Bartók’s music, performers should approach the percussive character with an understanding of the folk-music elements.

³⁰ Suchoff, *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, 138.

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