The Choral Music of Béla Bartók

by Fred Thayer

Bartók is generally recognized as a composer of instrumental music, a view which is certainly valid when one compares the vast quantity of his instrumental works with the limited number of choral works. Bartők seemed to become more interested in choral music in the latter part of his life, a reason, perhaps, for the small output. Since relatively little has been written previously about Bartók's choral music, this article's intent is to provide information.[1]

The total extent of Bartók's choral music, a cappella unless stated otherwise, is listed below:

A. Student works
   1. 1900—*Three Mixed Choruses* — unpublished
      a. Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht (SATB)
      b. Was streift vorbei im Dämmerlicht (SSATBB)
      c. Suckst du mir denn immer nach (SSATBB); Was streift vorbei im Dämmerlicht—transcribed for (TTBB)
   2. 1903—*Est* (Evening), text by Kálmán Harsányi (TTTT-BBBB)

B. Mature works
   1. 1910—*Four Old Hungarian Folk Songs* (TTBB)
   2. 1915—*Two Rumanian Folk Songs (SSAA)—unpublished*
   3. *1917—Five Slovak Folk Songs* (TTBB)
   4. 1917—*Four Slovak Folk Songs* for SATB and piano
   5. 1930—*Four Hungarian Folk Songs* (SSAATTBB)
   6. 1930—*Cantata Profana* for double chorus (SATB and SATB)
   7. 1932—*Szẽkely Songs* (TTT-BBB)
   8. 1935—*Twenty-Seven Choruses* for 2- and 3-part children's or women's chorus—Bartők added orchestral accompaniment to seven of these twenty-seven (nos. 1, 2, 7, 10, 11, 12, 17)[2]
   9. 1935—*From Olden Times* (TBB)[3]

What makes Bartók's mature choral repertoire important is the manner in which he handled his materials, whether they were folk-song settings or folk-poetry settings. A folk orgin is present in all of his mature choral music: folk poetry in *Cantata Profana*, *Twenty-Seven Choruses*, and *From Olden Times*; folk melodies in all of the rest.

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Bartők specified three methods of utilizing folk melodies:

> We may, for instance, take over a peasant melody unchanged or only slightly varied, write an accompaniment to it and possibly some opening and concluding phrases . . . . Two main types can be distinguished among works of this character.
>
> 1. In the one case accompaniment, introductory and concluding phrases, are of secondary importance, they only serve as an ornamental setting for the precious stone: the peasant melody.
>
> 2. It is the other way round in the second case: the melody only serves as a "motto" while that which is built round it is of real importance.
>
> 3. Another method by which peasant music becomes transmuted into modern music is the following: The composer does not make use of a real peasant melody but invents his own imitation of such melodies. There is no true difference between this method and the . . . two described above.[4]

Perhaps the best known, most often performed choral compositions of Bartók are the three mature mixed-chorus works. Each represents a different one of the above approaches to the use of folk elements:

1917—*Four Slovak Folk Songs*— "ornamental setting for the precious stone";

1930—*Four Hungarian Folk Songs*— "motto";

1930—*Cantata Profana*— "atmosphere."[5]

This can be considered a continuum of complexity coinciding with Bartók's own maturing process. This is not to suggest, however, that the 1917 writings are of less value than those of 1930. The earlier work represents a side of Bartők at that point in history; also, it happens to be his only choral writing utilizing piano. The piano writing for "Wedding Song from Poniky," no. 1 from *Four Slovak Folk Songs*, is particularly outstanding in its blending of folk elements and originality.

Bartók was well aware of criticism of his use of folk songs and felt the need to defend his position:

> Many people think it a comparatively easy task to write a composition round folk-tunes. A lesser achievement at least than a composition on "original" themes. Because, they think, the composer is dispensed of part of the work: the invention of themes.
>
> This way of thought is completely erroneous. To handle folktunes is one of the most difficult tasks; equally difficult if not more so than to write a major original composition. If we keep in mind that borrowing a tune means being bound by its individual peculiarity we shall understand one part of the difficulty. Another is created by the special character of a folk-tune. We must penetrate into it, feel it, and bring it out in sharp contours by the appropriate setting.[6]

In even stronger emotion, he later stated:

> These people must have a strange idea of the practice of composing. They seem to think the composer addicted to collecting folk-songs will sit down at his writing desk with the intention of composing a symphony. He racks and racks his brain but cannot think of a suitable melody. He takes up his collection of folk-songs, picks one or two melodies and the composition of his symphony is done without further labour. . . . The conception that attributes all that importance to the invention of a theme originated in the nineteenth century. It is a romantic conception which values originality above all.
>
> From what has been said above, it must have become clear that it is no sign of "barrenness" or "incompetence" if a composer bases his music on folk-music instead of taking Brahms and Schumann as his models.[7]

In a letter to Octavian Beu, a Rumanian folklorist, Bartők further explained why he desired to quote folk materials:

> My creative work, just because it arises from three sources (Hungarian, Rumanian, Slovakian), might be regarded as the embodiment of the very concept of integration so much empha-

sized in Hungary today. . . . My own idea, however—of which I have been fully conscious since I found myself as a composer—is the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. I try—to the best of my ability—to serve this idea in my music therefore I don't reject any influence, be it Slovakian, Rumanian, Arabic or from any other source. The source must only be clean, fresh and healthy![8]

The letter was written on January 10, 1931, just four months after the completion of *Cantata Profana*, Bartók's principal composition portraying the "brotherhood of peoples."

The following descriptions provide a closer look at several of Bartók's important choral works.

Four Slovak Folk songs—1917

The four folk tunes employed in the settings were collected by Bartók from three towns in the country of Zvolenska. The subject matter of the four texts is generally light. The first, a melancholy wedding song, is the apex of the set. Bartók balanced this woeful mood by following it with a short hay-harvesters' song and two short dancing songs. Even though the cumulative time of the three quick statements of happiness is only approximately one half the length of the sad wedding song, the three-to-one relationship of movements is sufficient to provide a lasting impression that the general mood of the set is light and gay. The four transcriptions are all in the category in which "the folk tune dominates, and accompaniment, prelude, or postlude may be considered only as the 'mounting of a jewel'."[9]

It is possible to perform the *Four Slovak Folk Songs* with orchestra. The piano accompaniments have been transcribed by Endre Szervánsky. However, the sonority seems complete with piano.

Four Slovak Folk Songs should be performed as four movements of a single composition. Although there is some beautiful polyphony in the first folk-song setting, the general style of writing throughout the set must be considered homophonic. This is one of Bartók's most accessible works.

Four Hungarian Folk Songs—1930

Bartók wrote nothing for chorus between 1917 and 1930. Only two vocal pieces were composed during this span:

1. *Village Scenes*—five Slovak folk songs for female voice and piano (1924); nos. 3, 4, and 5 were transcribed for four or eight female voices and chamber orchestra (1926); [10]
2. *Twenty Hungarian Folk Songs* for voice and piano (1929).

During this same period of thirteen years, he produced several major instrumental works:

1. *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1919)
2. *Dance Suite* (1923)
3. *Piano Concerto No. 1* (1926)
4. *String Quartet No. 3* (1927)
5. *String Quartet No. 4* (1928)

The composing of such important instrumental works almost certainly influenced modifications in his choral style. The most pronounced change to be found in the *Four Hungarian Folk Songs* is the predominating element of polyphony.

As was mentioned earlier, Bartók treated folk songs in a more advanced way in the *Four Hungarian Folk Songs*: "the folk tune and the added parts are almost equal in importance." This was achieved by "deliberate or subconscious imitations of folk melodies or phrases."[11]

Gÿorgy Kroó stated that Bartók always had difficulty dealing with texts, something which came easily to Kodály.

After the first performance of *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs*, the year of the *Cantata Profana*, it was Bence Szabolcsi who first noticed that it was as if the composer had burst through some barrier which, ever since the time of *Bluebeard's Castle*, had stood in the way of further truly great vocal compositions. But it seems that still another étude was needed, this time from the point of view of choral sound, and so the *Four Hungarian Folksongs* for mixed chorus was completed in May, 1930.[12]

The *Four Hungarian Folk Songs* contain different types of complexities from those found in Bartók's instrumental works.

There is frequent division of the chorus into eight parts, and this, together with the rhythmic plasticity and the contrapuntal intricacy of the settings, makes performance as difficult as in any of Bartók's choral work. Yet the handling of the voices is accomplished with the greatest sensitivity and dexterity.[13]

In a review of *Four Hungarian Folk Songs*, Peter J. Pirie said, "They are written with sympathy and understanding for the voice, and with a profound understanding of choral style. . . .It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that such respect for medium is the mark of a master."[14]

Bartók collected most of the folk melodies and texts used in the set in 1907. His choice and ordering of folk songs is comparable in *Four Slovak Folk Songs* and *Four Hungarian Folk Songs*, i.e., nos. 1 and 2 are *parlando* melodies; nos. 3 and 4, *tempo giusto* melodies. The subject matter of the *parlando* melodies, however, is distinctly more serious in this latter set, as it is concerned with peasants' afflictions.

The work is classified as eight-part choral writing, but Bartók used care in determining how far to stretch the *divisi*. For instance, verse three of number one, "The Prisoner," is the first tutti situation. And then, Bartók only employed a *divisi* of seven parts, keeping two sections (SI and SII) in unison on the elusive melody. In fact, the first employment of eight voices simultaneously is in number three, "Finding a Husband." This *divisi* is almost compensated for with simpler harmony and extensive imitation to accompany the shortest song with the fastest tempo of the set.

Bartók's first sketches show that the original order of the last two songs in *Four Hungarian Folk Songs* was the reverse of the present order, thereby ending the set with "Finding a Husband," rather than "Love Song." Both songs end in G. Perhaps Bartók thought that "Finding a Husband" was too short to be a conclusive "final movement."

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Cantata Profana—1930

After completing the *Four Hungarian Folk Songs,* Bartók embarked upon his greatest choral writing achievement, *Cantata Profana.* The work is scored for two SATB choruses, tenor and baritone soloists, and full orchestra. Bartók completed the 16-17 minute work on September 8, 1930.

The first public performance was held in London in 1934 under the direction of Adrian Boult. Prior to the Hungarian premiere in 1936, Hugó Kelen, a composer and chorus leader in Budapest,

> ... tried to persuade Bartók to alter a couple of bars of the tenor part in *Cantata Profana,* which seemed impossible to sing; the singer Endre Rösler had refused to sing the part, thereby jeopardizing the first performance of the work in Hungary. These two measures include the climax of the tenor aria, reaching a high C.
>
> Kelen, who was Rösler's singing-teacher, agreed to mediate and wrote to Bartók, asking him to change the bars but Bartók refused .... Later, however, after listening to Rösler's lengthy plea, the composer yielded and (in the singer's words) "allowed himself to be talked into the alteration." He produced from his pocket an altered version of the two bars which he had after all already prepared.[15]

In an account written for the *Schweizerische Sängerzeitung* in 1933, Bartók wrote the following about *colindas:*

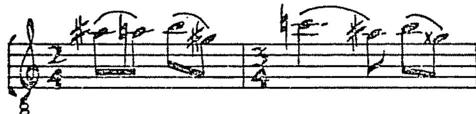
> These Christmas songs . . . should not be interpreted as in any way corresponding to the pious Christmas carols of Western Europe. The most important parts of the texts, perhaps one third of the whole, is in no way related to the Christians' Christmas. Instead of the story of Bethlehem, they tell us how an unconquerable lion (or stag) is miraculously slain; one of the legends is about nine brothers who went hunting in the forest until they turned into stags, and there is a marvelous story about how the sun wedded his sister the moon. . .etc. Thus, pure vestiges of pagan lyricism![18]

Apparently, the above mentioned legend about nine brothers served as the model for *Cantata Profana.* Bartók's libretto was his own Hungarian translation of combined texts from two versions of a Rumanian folk song. The legend has perplexed many listeners and has summoned several writers to attempt constructing "Bartók's moral lesson." It is conclusively known that this work was not meant to stand alone but was intended to be one of a group of cantatas with the underlying concept of "the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts."[19] If any further "moral" was intended, it, perhaps, was being reserved for the final cantata. Unfortunately, Bartók never composed any further cantatas.

Movement II—mm. 84. and 85

Bartók's altered version for E. Rösler

Bartók's original version



Cantata Profana is an original work "pervaded by the atmosphere of folk music."[16] In the same letter of January 10, 1931, to Octavian Beu, already cited, Bartók indicated precisely the extent of folk material that was used in *Cantata Profana.*

> In the *Cantata Profana* only the text is Rumanian; the thematic material is my own invention, nor is it an imitation of Rumanian folk-music, indeed much of it has no folk character. This work can only be mentioned as a "setting to music of a Rumanian *colinda* [Rumanian Christmas song] text."[17]

Two Companion Pieces—Bartók's Last Choral Compositions (1935)

Twenty-seven Choruses and *From Olden Times* were written in 1935, and, when combined with *Cantata Profana,* they comprise all of Bartók's mature choral compositions that do not quote folk melodies. However, these three works are pervaded with a folk-like "atmosphere" and draw their texts from folk poetry.

1. *Twenty-Seven Choruses*

The world of children was of interest to Bartók throughout his mature composing life. From 1905-1939, he wrote several instrumental collections, especially for piano and later for violin, that were intended for student performers. *Twenty-Seven Choruses* was originally published in eight separate volumes with the indication that nineteen of the choruses were for children's voices and the other eight for women's voices. The twenty-seven are now published in one volume with the children's choruses placed first. The range of a fourteenth, from g to f#², can be found in both groups of choruses; some of the "women's choruses" are longer and perhaps more chromatically difficult than those for "children."

From information written by Bartók in two letters, it becomes obvious that these children's choruses were very important to him:

> At the concert on May 7th, I really did play some pieces from the *Mikrokosmos.* However, at this particular concert they were not so important as the children's choruses. It was a great experience for me when—at the rehearsal—I heard for the first time my little choruses coming from the lips of these children. I shall never forget this impression of the freshness and gaiety of the little ones' voices. There is something in the natural way these children from the suburban schools produce their voices, that reminds one of the unspoilt sound of peasant singing.[20]

Four years later, in a letter of June 20, 1941, to his son Béla, Jr., Bartók used most of the writing space to explain the many frustrations that he was encountering living in the U.S.A. In a departure from his depressed mood, he wrote:

> Two good things have happened in the meantime: (1) Columbia University has extended my contract until June 30, 1942 . . . And secondly: At the Michigan University music festival next May . . . they intend to perform 4 or 6 of my choruses for children (those with

orchestral accompaniment): they would be sung by 450 children, accompanied by the Philadelphia Orchestra. Their Director of Music heard a few of them in Budapest in 1937! Hence the idea.[21]

Bartók did not change any vocal pitches when he later added orchestral accompaniments to seven of the children's choruses. He ingeniously integrated the new writing by implementation of orchestral preludes, interludes, and postludes.

Nine of the *Twenty-Seven Choruses* (nos. 1, 2, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17) have been translated and are published in English. The Hungarian flavor has been somewhat diluted by replacing the common Hungarian jagged rhythm (┌┐.) with even rhythm (┌──┐).

2. *From Olden Times*

From Olden Times, for three-part, a cappella male chorus, is in some ways a miniature of *Cantata Profana*. Although the former is nationalistic, it, nevertheless, poses a worldly concern for fellow men of all nationalities. Both works are in a three-movement, ABA form.

Movements one and three of *From Olden Times* are composed in a *parlando* style. The central idea of movement one is, "No one's more unhappy, than the peasant"; the central idea of movement three is, "No one's more happy than the peasant." Unlike *Cantata Profana*, movement three is not a recapitulation of movement one. With the change from "unhappy" to "happy," the central idea is reversed. Though the *parlando* style is common to both movements one and three, the mood is changed by the implementation of different meter types. Simple mixed meters of movement one complement the grim, resolute text, whereas, the more graceful textual attitude of movement three is complemented by compound mixed meters.

Movement two, with its *giusto*, dancelike quality, is the contrast between the two similar movements. The meter is essentially continuous $\frac{2}{4}$, rather than mixed meters.

The entire work is written in a contrapuntal, imitative style. Of the three movements, two is the most similar in style to the *Twenty-Seven Choruses*. It is more diatonic than movements one or three and is exceedingly thrifty in its use of materials. Movement two is particularly suggestive of "Legenycsufolo," no. 17 from *Twenty-Seven choruses*.

Summary

Bartók's SATB choral music may be viewed as a continuum of complexity coinciding with his own maturing process. Each of the three mature mixed-chorus works represents a different approach to the use of folk materials: *Four Slovak Folk Songs*— "ornamental setting"; *Four Hungarian Folk Songs*— "motto"; *Cantata Profana*— "atmosphere."

Halsey Stevens wrote about the tendency of many twentieth-century composers to avoid writing literature for choruses and about how Bartók dealt effectively with the problem:

> Choral literature in a convincing contemporary style is not plentiful. Most composers, reluctant to limit themselves to a style which they feel the general state of choral singing imposes, are unwilling to study the problem with open minds, to discover what may reasonably be expected of a choral group today. . . . But within its own frame, there is an adaptability to contemporary expression which makes it a subtle and flexible medium for the composer who will approach it understandingly, with a sensitive ear to its unique virtues. This Bartók did, in both his original work and his settings of peasant music for various choral combinations. In even his earliest choral work, the *Four Old Hungarian Folksongs* for unaccompanied male chorus (1912), he uses harmonies of somewhat dissonant character; but the individual lines are so logical that it is not difficult to attain the desired sonority. This is the fundamental secret of Bartók's choral writing, as it is of the chorale harmonizations of Bach: the predominance of horizontal motion over vertical harmony.[22]

By examining Bartók's choral music, idiomatic skills are discovered that cannot be observed when one investigates only Bartók's instrumental compositions. His choral writing maintains freshness, rhythmic vitality, and contrapuntal beauty, qualitites that continue to attract performers and audiences alike.

NOTES

[1]The major sources are: The Bartók Archives, Budapest, Hungary—László Somfai, head; and The New York Bartók Archives—Benjamin Suchoff, trustee until the death of Mrs. Bartók, November 21, 1982.

[2]Bartók first orchestrated five of the twenty-seven for a 1937 concert in Budapest: (nos. 1, 7, 10, 11, 12). The orchestration was for two recorders, percussion, piano, and strings. Later, he orchestrated nos. 2 and 17 similarly, but using a larger number of wind instruments. When the seven are now performed as a unit, the two with heavier orchestrations frame the other five in the following order (2, 1, 11, 12, 7, 10, 17). The form becomes fast, slow, fast, slow, fast, slow, fast. All of these choral-orchestral versions, except no. 12, are published by Boosey and Hawkes.

[3]The publishers handling these listings are Boosey and Hawkes, Universal Edition, Magyar Kórus, and Zeneműkiadó Vállata.

[4]Béla Bartók, "The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music," *A Memorial Review* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, Inc., 1950), pp. 72-73.

[5]Benjamin Suchoff, "Béla Bartók's Contributions to Music Education," *The Journal of Research in Music Education*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring 1961), p. 4.

[6]Bartók, "Influence of Peasant Music," p. 74.

[7]*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

[8]János Demény, ed., *Béla Bartók Letters*, English trans. Péter Balabán and István Farkas, rev. Elisabeth West and Colin Mason (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 201.

[9]Suchoff, "Bartók's Contributions," p. 4.

[10]The transcription contains fragments of two- and three-part choral harmonizing, but because of its relative scarcity, the vocal writing must be classified as solo vocal literature rather than as a choral composition.

[11]Suchoff, "Bartók's Contributions," pp. 4-5.

[12]György Kroó, *A Guide to Bartók*, trans. Ruth Pataki and Mária Steiner, rev. Elisabeth West (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1974), pp. 158-59.

[13]Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (New York: Oxford Press, revised edition, 1964), p. 159.

[14]Peter J. Pirie, "Reviews of Music—*Four Hungarian Folksongs*—Bartók," *Music and Letters*, vol. 37 (1956), pp. 416-17.

[15]Demény, *Béla Bartók Letters*, pp. 252, 421.

[16]Suchoff, "Bartók's Contributions," p. 4.

[17]Demény, *Béla Bartók Letters*, p. 203. From a letter of January 10, 1931, to Octavian Beu.

[18]József Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, English trans. by Ruth Pataki, rev. Elisabeth West (Boston: Crescendo Pub. Co., 1972), pp. 280-82.

[19]Demény, *Béla Bartók Letters*, p. 201. From a letter of January 10, 1931, to Octavian Beu.

[20]*Ibid.*, p. 257. From a letter of May 24, 1937, to Mme. Müller-Widmann.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 305.

[22]Stevens, *Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, p. 154.