

The Life and Works of Bela Bartok (1881-1945)

by Liz Palter

Sources:

- *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, Bela Bartok, Article by Peter Hughes, May 12, 2001, 7 pp.
- Wikipedia, "Bela Bartok." Includes Discography and extensive Further Readings, 11pp.
- "Bartok." Robert Hickok, *Exploring Music*, pp.355-359.
- *Overview*: I will discuss Bartok's life, interests and philosophy, highlight his chief works, and note his significance. I believe that his life elucidates his music.

Chief Dates

1881, March 25 - Born in Greater Hungary of the Austrian Hungarian Empire. He was to start life as a Roman Catholic. By the age of four, Bela appeared to be musically precocious, discerning various rhythms in his mother's piano playing before he could talk. During his early childhood he was isolated because of a skin ailment, and this may also help support his turn towards music.

1888- At the age of seven, his father died; his mother frequently moved the family (a sister and Bela) to various parts of the empire, now known as Transylvania, Romania, and Slovakia, with an eye to having Bela study with fine music teachers. At a young age he was already composing and by the age of 11 composing.

1890's – Bela attended high school in Budapest, befriending the composer Dohnanyi who was four years ahead of him. Bartok followed him in 1899 to study in the Academy of Music in Budapest. On one occasion during these formative years Bartok was greatly influenced by Richard Strauss's "Thus Sake Zarathustra," derived from Nietzsche's philosophy which he seemed to know well. During this period in his life he also embraced a youthful nationalism. Combining these influences, he wrote his symphonic poem, "Kossuth," in honor of the 1848 revolutionary hero... After his graduation from the Academy, he pursued a career of concert performances on the piano and taught At the Academy for 20 years.

In 1904, Bartok was again inspired to take up a new direction in his composition when he heard the music of a Szekely woman from Transylvania sing a folk song, *Piros Alma* (The Red Apple). Bartok took numerous trips to various parts of Eastern Europe to collect, study, and preserve folk music. The composer Kodaly was also collecting folk music and soon became his closest friend. Kodaly was using an Edison cylinder recorder to record this music.

By 1907 he was seeking out the work of the Szekely people who lived largely in isolation in the mountains. Together from their studies, Bartok and Kodaly determined that Magyar folk music, which had been categorized as gypsy music, was not, in fact, gypsy music as the Romani played. Actually the old Magyar melodies, they determined, were based on the "pentatonic scales, similar to those in Asian folk traditions, such as those of Central Asia, Anatolia and Siberia." This discovery helped to shape their tonality and melodies. What Liszt's music had captured were songs of the Romani gypsy, quite different music. Both Kodaly and Bartok incorporated

these ancient folk melodies of eastern origin into their music – now clearly differentiated from gypsy music.

Bartok, however, went well beyond what Kodalyi was collecting, and traveled widely to collect the folk music of Romanians, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, Bulgarians, Turks, and North Africans as well as Hungarians. His dream was no longer that of playing and composing salon music. (As an aside, I would like to point out that the artists of the time were traveling widely and infusing their work with ethnic imagery – Matisse, Picasso, Gauguin.)

1909 Bartok married Marta Ziegler, and his son Bela, Jr. was born in 1910. The new father prepared two volumes of 80 folk song melodies for children for solo piano to support his son's study of the piano. This is a well appreciated set of books, I believe.

1916 – Our biographies don't allude to this historic time, that is- the collapse of the Empire and stirring of war. It is at this time, Bartok undergoes a conversion. He seems to have experienced long periods of spiritual isolation, being the loner that he was, according to one account. Perhaps the upheaval in Europe had something to do with it? He was considered "stoic and pessimistic," staying aloof from those who would spend their time with trifles. In 1910, and in front of his son, he took up the Unitarian faith and joined the Unitarian Church in Budapest, taking his son weekly so he would not be exposed to the catechism. Bela, Jr. later wrote that his father joined the Unitarian faith "primarily because he held it to be the freest, most humanistic faith."

Regarding the influences on Bartok's life and works, I have commented on Bartok's undertaking his *ethnomusicology* and its infusion into his compositions. I have also noted his *religious faith and stoic philosophy*. Briefly I should mention also that he was a *nature lover* as this shows up in his compositions as well. He had a particular interest in the study and collection of plants, minerals and insects. The sounds of birds appear in his last compositions.

By the 1920's his "international reputation was secure." What stands out are these works:

- Violin Sonatas, 1921 and 1922
- The Dance Suites, 1923 for the 50th anniversary of the unification of Budapest.
- Major works for the piano in 1926
- His third and fourth string quartets from 1927 and 1928 (in most abstract and concentrated style, the article of Wikipedia notes).

1921- By the 1920's Bartok also had *strong political views*. The Empire was to collapse in the second decade of the new century, and it got chopped up after World War I by the Treaty of Trianon. This was to have dire consequences for Bartok *politically* as well. Traveling to various parts of the old empire -- for instance his motherland of Transylvania, was no longer feasible. And with the rise of fascism after the First World War, he refused to perform in Germany or Italy and refused to have his music performed there also. His strong views did not befriend the Hungarian regime either.

1924 – Bartok divorced his first wife and married his 19 year old student Ditta. They had a son Peter in 1925

1926-1927 -"His major contribution to piano literature is the six-volume 'Mikrokosmos,' a collection of 153 pieces graded to order of difficulty."

By the 1930's he had written much of the music for which he is remembered:

- Fifth String Quartet, 1934 for Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (Dvorak's benefactor?) is considered a pivotal point in his stylistic development as a composer, after which his compositions become more accessible to his audiences, according to Hickock.
- Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, 1936
- Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, 1937
- Divertimento, 1939
- "Contrasts," a piece commissioned by Benny Goodman, for clarinet, violin, and Piano, 1938.

With the political scene worsening in Europe, Bartok was trying to consider what to do, and sent his manuscripts out of the country. In 1940, he emigrated to NYC with his family. Shortly thereafter he showed signs of illness, and too late he was diagnosed with a form of leukemia. This time in NYC was nevertheless a highly creative time for him. His "Concerto for Orchestra" in 1943 is deemed his orchestral masterpiece and one of the great works of the 20th century (Hickock). There were a variety of commissions, to help him financially, from Fritz Reiner and Koussevitzky (The Concerto for Orchestra) and a piece written for Yehudi Menuhin, and assistance for medical bills from ASCAP. He died in September of 1945 with services in All Souls Unitarian Church and reinternment years later in his church in Budapest.

Significance

Bartok's compositions are included in most contemporary repertoires. He is remembered for his accomplishments as an ethnomusicologist of the folk music of Central Europe and for his original contributions to modern music. The folk music had great consequence for developing his tonal style. According to Hickock, he seldom used the folk tunes directly. What he did was understand how they were constructed and created out of this understanding. Yet his composition using traditional forms such his string quartets, and devices fit him into a new stream of music designated as Neo-Classical. Along with Stravinsky and Hindemith, Bartok's music is thus characterized for its New Tonality and Neoclassicism distinct from atonal composers of the time.

There is so much to be covered in a discussion of Bartok and his music that I suggest a look at the references in Wikipedia and the Dictionary of Music.

Notes prepared by Liz Palter, November 11, 2013