

Compositional Strategies in Béla Bartók's Second Rhapsody for Violin and Piano

At the beginning of the twentieth century, composers continued to push the boundaries of artistic expression, and in turn were presented with more musical styles and schools of thought to choose from than ever before. Romantic chromaticism contended with Expressionist atonality, while exotic scales and new takes on old modes helped expand the musical palette. It was during this time that Béla Bartók, aware that folk music might serve as the foundation for a unique style of composition, began to collect and research the folk songs of his native Hungary and its surrounding areas.¹ A century later, when our present times offer even more limitless possibilities for the budding composer, those who wish to develop their own personal style by incorporating nontraditional repertoire would be well served to study Bartók's method of seamlessly blending folk melodies into his compositions. This paper will attempt such a study by first examining how Bartók's compositional strategies were shaped by his personal attachment to folk music, then applying that knowledge to a musical analysis of his Second Rhapsody for Violin and Piano of 1928.

Bartók's relationship with folk music was tied to his view of humanity, which underwent a significant change during his lifetime. While Bartók in his early twenties subscribed to a provincial, chauvinistic nationalism that was prevalent throughout Hungary in the late nineteenth century, this outlook gave way in his mature years to a broader consciousness of the "brotherhood of peoples."² Interestingly, this change was brought about by his increased understanding of the roots of folk music. Through his extensive travels and encounters with folk musicians, Bartók discovered that the gypsy

¹ Malcolm Gillies, "Bartók, Béla," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40686pg2> (accessed April 14, 2009).

² Judit Frigyesi, "Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and Volk in Modern Germany," *The Musical Quarterly* 78 (Summer 1994): 255-56.

melodies which his fellow countrymen proudly identified as the music of their national heritage were not authentic folk melodies at all, but instead popular art songs newly composed by noblemen to be performed by urban gypsy musicians. The true folk music of Hungary, Bartók argued, was music which remained unheard in the urban centers—that of the rural peasants.³

By questioning long-held assumptions about Hungary's social and cultural hierarchy, Bartók's allegation caused uproar among the Hungarian elite which created a backlash not only against his works, but also against his attempts to create a national musical organization to promote the proper performance of Hungarian music.⁴ This traumatic experience led Bartók to view himself in opposition to the elite class, and to view its patriotism—and, by extension, its musical tastes—as false and hypocritical, while simultaneously casting himself and the peasant music he espoused as representing the true spirit of the Hungarian people.⁵ Thus, Bartók turned his back on the late-Romantic clichés of gypsy music, such as its exaggerated rubatos and mawkish sentimentality,⁶ and embraced the stark modal scales and vibrant dance rhythms of the peasants.⁷ At the same time, this perceived betrayal by his countrymen also freed the composer to expand his previously insular nationalistic feelings into goodwill for the “brotherhood of peoples” and piqued his interest in the peasant music of surrounding nations. The result was a compositional approach that idealized the synthesis of many different musical traditions—including, ultimately, the romantic sentimentality of gypsy music which Bartók initially rejected—as evidenced in his two violin rhapsodies of 1928.⁸

During the 1920s, Bartók's reputation as a pianist had grown remarkably; his renown as a composer, on the other hand, had not. Knowing that his performances afforded him the best opportunity of exposing his music to the public, Bartók envisioned the violin rhapsodies primarily as

³ Béla Bartók, “Gypsy Music or Hungarian Music?” *The Musical Quarterly* 33 (April 1947): 240-41.

⁴ Béla Bartók and Denijs Dille, “The Life of Béla Bartók,” *Tempo* 13 (Autumn 1949): 5.

⁵ Frigyesi, 274-75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷ Bartók and Dille, 4.

⁸ Frigyesi, 277.

practical pieces. Both were originally written for solo violin and piano accompaniment, then transcribed as orchestral versions, with the first rhapsody also available for solo cello and piano, allowing them to be performed by different ensembles and in different venues. Both provide ample opportunities to showcase the soloist's virtuosity.⁹ And despite the melodic embellishments, structural changes, harmonic arrangements, and other compositional decisions made by Bartók, both are faithful to the spirit of their folk song sources, granting them a popular appeal in their own time that has not abated since. While this straightforward simplicity might lend the violin rhapsodies a reputation as lightweight specimens for complex musical analysis, it is ideal for understanding the broader view of how Bartók's affection for these folk melodies influenced his compositional approach.

While Bartók was usually forthcoming about the exact geographical origins of earlier folksong arrangements, the violin rhapsodies are simply subtitled "folk dances" in the score, with no specific indication of their provenance. When pressed for more information about the rhapsodies' folk song sources, Bartók simply responded, "No. 1 uses Romanian and Hungarian melodies; No. 2, Romanian, Hungarian, and Ruthenian."¹⁰ We now know that of the sixteen folk songs that make up the rhapsodies, only one is Hungarian, and another is Ruthenian; the rest are Romanian.¹¹ It strikes one as odd that Bartók was not more forthright about the predominantly Romanian character of these melodies, but a simple explanation may be that Bartók came to recognize that different ethnic groups often share similar musical traditions after centuries of mutual borrowing, and thus considered the issue insignificant.¹² A more curious phenomenon is that both rhapsodies follow the structural form

⁹ Vera Lampert, "Violin Rhapsodies," in *The Bartók Companion*, ed. Malcolm Gillies (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), 278.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹¹ Vera Lampert, *Bartók népdalfeldolgozásainak forrásjegyzéke: magyar, szlovák, román, rutén, szerb, és arab népdalok és táncok* [Source Catalog of Bartók's Folksong Arrangements: Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, and Arab Melodies] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1980), 13.

¹² Stephen Erdély, "Bartók and Folk Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 31.

of *verbunkos*, a Hungarian style characteristic of gypsy music and stereotypically employed by past composers of many nationalities to evoke a Hungarian flavor; indeed, it was associated with the very same elitist nationalism which Bartók decried as artificial and from which he had sought to distance himself during his initial studies of folk music.

Verbunkos originated as traditional dance music that was used by the imperial military to recruit young men from Hungarian villages. It is characterized by a pair of movements: an introductory, slow *lassú* that typically features dotted rhythms, followed by a fast *friss*.¹³ The two movements of both violin rhapsodies are labeled by these Hungarian terms in the score, leaving no doubt that Bartók was using the *verbunkos* form as his model, despite its outdated role as an allegorical representation of the tragicomic Hungarian, alternately sobbing and exulting.¹⁴ The most immediate explanation for this is that Bartók's field work exposed him to folk music which could trace *verbunkos* back to its original roots, helping to establish its authenticity in his eyes.¹⁵ But a supplementary observation is also possible: in noting the similarities between the folk traditions of peasants from different regions, Bartók began to understand the blurred nature of the boundary between popular art music and folk music itself. Perhaps this is what also led him in his mature years to recognize the symbiotic relationship between composition and folk tradition, when he wrote that a successful composer is one who "has completely absorbed the idiom of peasant music, which has become his musical mother tongue."¹⁶

Thus, although the Second Rhapsody for Violin and Piano might seem to be an erratic setting of collected folk songs with few substantial changes to the original sources, Bartók must have viewed it as a personal composition, one influenced by peasant music but wholly his own. The following

¹³ Jonathan Bellman, "Verbunkos," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/29184> (accessed April 16, 2009).

¹⁴ Frigyesi, 269.

¹⁵ Lampert, "Violin Rhapsodies," 281-82.

¹⁶ Béla Bartók, "The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music," in *Béla Bartók's Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 343-44.

analysis shall treat it in this light, tracing its composition in the general order of steps that Bartók himself most likely followed: beginning with the initial selection of source material from his folk song collection to the arrangement of these melodies into a logical narrative, finally arriving at a cohesive synthesis between melody and harmonic accompaniment. At the same time, this study will demonstrate that large-scale conception and small-scale creative strategies are inextricable facets of music composition.

Bartók had a vast arsenal of folk melodies at his disposal, leading one to wonder exactly how his selection process for the Second Rhapsody was guided. Given that many of the folk song arrangements in his oeuvre are grouped by one ethnic origin, it is possible that the ever-practical composer simply approached the violin rhapsodies with the same *modus operandi*, preferring to work around the resultant limitations rather than waste time exploring all possible combinations of melodies for the one best suited to creating a fluid, cohesive work. Bartók may have chosen melodies predominantly from Romania because his field studies led him to discover the greatest diversity of musical material in this region.¹⁷ The selection could not have been entirely haphazard, of course; Bartók stays faithful to the *verbunkos* style, choosing slow, dotted-rhythm songs for the opening *lassú* movement, while reserving faster songs characterized by a steady, duple rhythm for the second *friss* movement. Additionally, the original folk songs assigned to the *lassú* all share a propensity for grace notes; those in the *friss* tend to make generous use of mordents and open-string double stops.¹⁸ Bartók chose not to retain many of these embellishments in his composition, indicating that their true value lay in revealing underlying compatibility, under the assumption that melodies which were conducive to being embellished in a similar manner by the peasants probably had harmonic and rhythmic features in common as well.

¹⁷ Erdély, 41.

¹⁸ Lampert, *Source Catalog*, 117-22.

As a whole, the opening *lassú* movement is marked by symmetry and balance in its various features. Structurally, it comprises three Romanian folk songs arranged in a rondo form of ABACA, with the slow, wistful “Romănie” serving as the principal theme, separated from each restatement by contrasting episodes, both of which are slightly more active with faster tempos. All three songs are built on the so-called “uncertain mode,” one of two modal scales prominently represented in Romanian music, whereby certain notes of a heptatonic scale are “mobile steps” that may be arbitrarily flattened or sharpened for the sake of producing richer tonal variety.¹⁹ For example, although the melody is centered on D as its tonic, the key is not necessarily major or minor; the third may be an F \natural or F \sharp , the sixth a B \flat or B \natural , and so forth. Obviously, these are ornamental pitches, not leading tones carrying any applied-dominant functions; the folk songs never modulate, staying with D as the tonic throughout. Overall, then, the melody represents stability: while its modal scale maintains tonal balance, its sectional arrangement maintains structural balance, with each restatement of the principal theme behaving like a series of pillars.

Similarly, on a smaller scale, a newly composed piano motif recurs during a lull in the solo violin part at each transition from one song to the next, helping to unify the movement as a cohesive structure, much like mortar between bricks. This “transition motif”—in which the right hand of the piano rises to the melodic foreground, lingers uncertainly on the tonic, and then wavers back and forth down a step as if hesitant to abandon its accompanimental duties—undergoes several chromatic transformations throughout the piece. In one of its earliest appearances at measure 18 (Example 1a), the motif displays physical and harmonic stability by alternating steadily between a tonic D and the C below, staying within a pentatonic minor scale. As the movement progresses, more chromatic semitones are gradually introduced, until finally, near the structural apex of the movement in measures 42 to 44 (Example 1b), the motif reaches the peak of both chromatic dissonance and

¹⁹ Octavian Cosma, et al., “Romania,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/23736> (accessed April 18, 2009).

intervallic dissimilarity. It then gradually mutates toward its previous form, retaining only a lingering hint of chromaticism by the end of the piece (Example 1c).

EXAMPLE 1: Bartók, *Second Rhapsody for Violin and Piano*, Sz. 89, movt. I.²⁰

a. Transition motif in m. 18.



b. Transition motif in mm. 42-44.



c. Transition motif in mm. 97-99.



Knowing that the mobile steps of the original folk songs were not static, but rather changed upon whim from one performance to another, Bartók took the same liberties in deviating from the source recordings, inflecting whichever notes he pleased. Perhaps it was at this stage that the analytically-minded composer recognized yet another opportunity for classical structure and folk tradition to intersect. Bartók saw that raising or lowering a pitch serves to change the tonal character of an otherwise static modal scale, thereby generating a more active and diverse melody. In a similar manner, this strategy of playing with tonal uncertainty and stability can also be applied on a larger scale to the interaction between melody and harmonic accompaniment, replacing the contrast between tonic and dominant which traditionally fulfills the function of tension and resolution. In this case, the definition of harmonic stability under this new system is flipped on its head: stability is now determined by tonal equality and independence rather than by tonal consonance, which strongly favors certain tones above others. Bartók, of course, knew that harmonic stasis can be achieved using parallel chords and chords made from notes stacked in equal intervals, both of which serve to weaken the tonal center of a piece.²³ Example 2 shows a passage from the piano accompaniment in which these two devices are used concurrently: stacked sixths ascend in parallel, followed by stacked fourths.

EXAMPLE 2: Bartók, *Second Rhapsody for Violin and Piano*, Sz. 89, movt. I, mm. 19-22.²⁴

The musical score for Example 2 is a piano accompaniment for measures 19-22 of Bartók's *Second Rhapsody*. It is written in 4/8 time and marked *Moderato* with a tempo of 108. The score is in the key of B-flat major. The piano part begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and features a sequence of stacked sixths ascending in parallel, followed by stacked fourths. The dynamics range from mezzo-forte (*mf*) to forte (*f*). The score is labeled 'Piano' and includes a measure number '19' at the beginning.

Tension, then, is not to be found in either harmony or melody by itself, both of which maintain internal stability when taken as individual parts; rather, it is created by the interaction

²³ Elliott Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

²⁴ Bartók, *Second Rhapsody*.

between the two. A simple, modal melody with no modulations or leading-tone functions may still thwart the listener's expectations when imaginatively placed in conflict against the underlying harmonic progression; in fact, as Bartók noted, it is the melody's very simplicity which makes such an approach both practical and favorable. Thus, throughout the rhapsody, melodic notes are placed over harmonic chords to which they do not belong,²⁵ creating passages of relative dissonance that might be thought of as extended suspensions. Bartók employs this strategy to create maximum tension in the center of the movement's arch form, as well as to distinguish cadential moments within each section.

For example, Example 3 shows a passage which behaves much like the consequent of a period phrase, in which the violin's steady position on A in measure 10 seems to indicate an authentic cadence. Instead of writing a dominant chord, however, Bartók harmonizes the melody with a B \flat in the piano's left hand and a G \sharp in its right, sounding half a step both above and below the A in the violin part. Note that each harmonic line is consonant by itself; they are dissonant only when sounding against the solo violin, as well as against each other. The result is an effect which mimics the tension of a dominant chord, creating a similar expectation for resolution. (The right hand in measure 10 also foreshadows the transition motif described earlier, demonstrating how compositional methods are often interweaved.)

EXAMPLE 3: Bartók, *Second Rhapsody for Violin and Piano*, Sz. 89, movt. I, mm. 7-11.²⁶

²⁵ Antokoletz, 28.

²⁶ Bartók, *Second Rhapsody*.

The *friss* movement of the Second Rhapsody follows the same harmonic strategies as the *lassú*. However, it follows no formal structure: the folk songs are strung together in a paratactic series, each one distinguished by its own rhythmic pulse and tempo, mimicking the improvisatory nature of both gypsy and peasant performances.²⁷ Additionally, rapid ostinatos and scalar ascents smooth the transitions from one song to the next, while the virtuosity demanded of the solo violinist—rapid bowing, multiple stops, and left-hand pizzicatos—distinguishes the *friss* as the exciting finale of this pair of movements.

Bartók's classically-grounded approach to composition evolved in parallel conjunction with the growth of his appreciation of folk music. It was this ability and willingness to unify diverse and even conflicting strands of musical influence which molded one of the most brilliantly creative minds of the twentieth century. Bartók never formally taught composition, believing the study of systems and theories to be counterproductive to true musical expression.²⁸ Thus, the modern composer hoping to glean creative insight from Bartók's legacy would be well advised not to ignore the composer's faith in his own intuition and personal sentiment. Bartók's works may be brilliant, but his compositional strategies, at the core, are not revolutionary; their underlying principles—balance and symmetry, tension and resolution—are timeless, reflecting the immutability of listener expectations throughout the ages. For today's budding composers, then, Bartók's works are nothing more than exemplary lessons in how to communicate the personal by speaking the language of the universal.

²⁷ Irén Kertész Wilkinson, "Gypsy music," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/41427> (accessed April 17, 2009).

²⁸ László Somfai, *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 9-10.

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