

PROGRAMME

Monday, 22 July 2024

3–4.40 PM

Greeting: **Pál RICHTER** (Director, Institute for Musicology)

László VIKÁRIUS (Budapest Bartók Archives – Liszt Academy of Music, Budapest)

The Silent “Swansong” of Bartók’s Voluntary Exile

Virág BÜKY (Budapest Bartók Archives)

Viola Concerto as a Self-Portrait? Self-References in Bartók’s Compositions

Péter LAKI (Bard College, New York)

Bartók and the Viola

– coffee break –

5–6.30 PM

Csilla Mária PINTÉR (Budapest Bartók Archives)

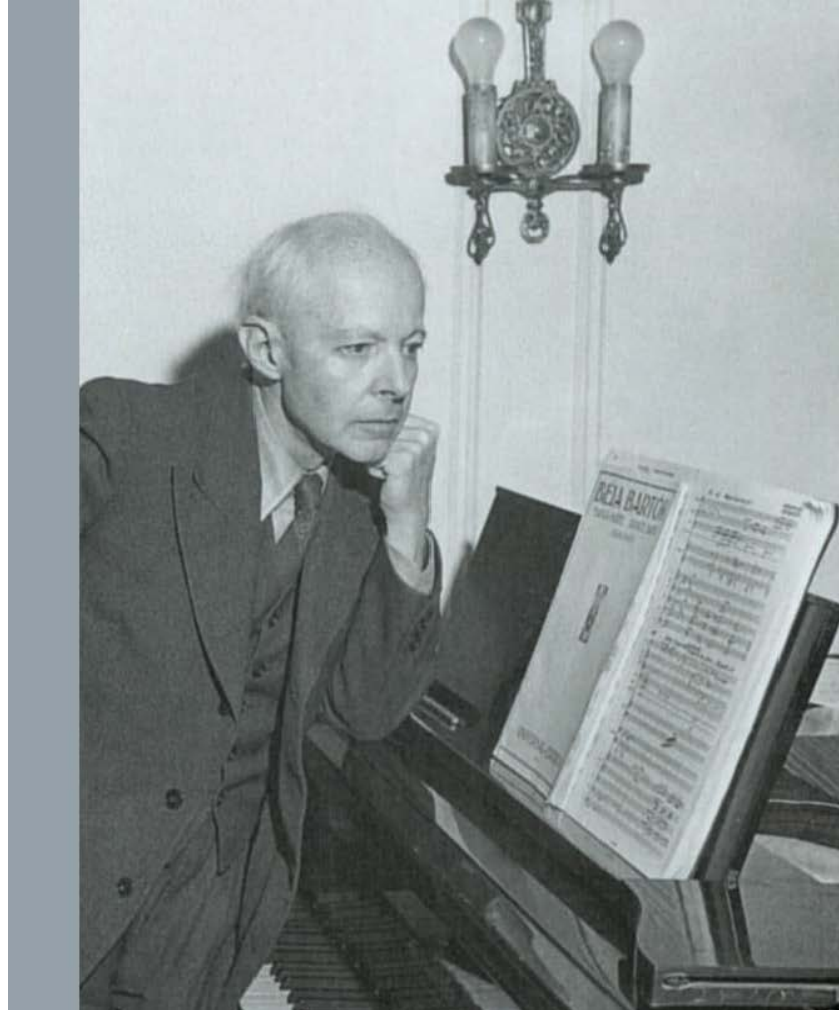
The Orchestra of Béla Bartók, a Painter of Sound

Yusuke NAKAHARA (Osaka University – Budapest Bartók Archives)

Bartók’s “Purely Mechanical Work”: Understanding the Composer’s Working Method

Zsombor NÉMETH (Budapest Bartók Archives)

The Structure and Form of Bartók’s Viola Concerto: Hypotheses and Practical Solutions



Béla Bartók’s Viola Concerto Revisited

An international conference
organized by the Budapest Bartók Archives

Monday, 22 July 2024, 3-6.30 pm

Bartók Hall, Institute for Musicology
HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities
(7, Táncsics M. utca, Budapest, I)

<https://zti.hu/index.php/hu/bartok>

ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS

The Silent “Swansong” of Bartók’s Voluntary Exile

László VIKÁRIUS

Budapest Bartók Archives

In a poetic vein, Donald Maurice’s “remarkable story” of the unfinished Viola Concerto rightly calls the work a “swansong.” It was the composer’s last work that remained, however, unfortunately “unsung.” The question as to how incomplete the single autograph manuscript of the sketchy compositional draft is, have already received significant attention in the literature, in reconstructions, and in its facsimile edition. From various perspectives, my colleagues from the Budapest Bartók Archives will further discuss this question relying on fresh experience with compositional sources, in connection with editorial work on the Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition series. What I am trying to consider in my paper is why this work remained, as it appears, necessarily fragmentary. In what way, Bartók’s final years were burdened with personal and professional hardships that, added to his frail and failing health, could not but exhaust his energies. Although his final years now seem more productive than perhaps he himself would have acknowledged, his last works, unquestionable masterpieces, the Sonata for Solo Violin (1944), the Third Piano Concerto (1945), and the Viola Concerto (1945) were all published unavoidably posthumously with varying degree of editorial assistance. In comparison, though, the composer left the Viola Concerto behind without its finally worked-out written form, despite its rich (perhaps even complete) collection of necessary material. While revisiting the difficulties of those final years spent in voluntary exile in the United States, I am also trying to consider their meaning and significance more generally.

Viola Concerto as a Self-Portrait? Self-References in Bartók’s Compositions

Virág BÜKY

Budapest Bartók Archives

In his last letter to William Primrose (8 Sep. 1945) Bartók used the following words to describe the “general character” of the Viola Concerto he had been writing for him: “... the sombre, more masculine character of your instrument exerted some influence on the general character of the work.” These few words have led to the speculation that Bartók may have intended the work as a self-portrait. This hypothesis has been strengthened by another suggestion that his 3rd Piano Concerto, written for his wife, Ditta Pásztory Bartók, was also a portrait of her.

It is true that Bartók composed a few portraits in his oeuvre (the titles of the compositions clearly refer to them), but none of them, as far as we know, was directly intended as a self-portrait. At the same time, there are certain recurring formulas in his compositions, some characteristic motifs, moods, the use of certain instruments or even some allusions to certain scenes in his stage works, which can be considered as self-references.

Although the surviving manuscript sources of the Viola Concerto do not provide clear answers to many questions about the final form of the work, we can identify a number of important motifs that can give us at least some idea of the “content” of the work, even in this fragmentary form of the composition. After providing an overview of Bartók’s various musical self-references, an attempt will be made to discover what ideas could be behind his Viola Concerto.

Bartók and the Viola

Péter LAKI

Bard College

In his autobiography, William Primrose recalled that Bartók, upon receiving the commission for the Viola Concerto, “was reluctant at first because he felt he didn’t know enough about the viola as a solo instrument.” Yet, while it is true that Bartók had never written a work for solo viola before, he used the instrument with great sensitivity in his string quartets and orchestral music. In this paper, I will discuss a few striking viola passages in Bartók’s works, and attempt to define some of the meanings that the instrument may have held for him.

When working on his violin concerto for Zoltán Székely, Bartók asked his publisher to provide him with scores of some recent works in the genre. Wartime conditions may have prevented him from acting similarly this time. He reportedly listened to the Walton concerto on the radio, but otherwise we don’t know what other 20th-century viola concertos he may have known, and in particular, whether he was familiar with any solo viola works by Paul Hindemith, whom he knew personally. For this reason, it is important to remember that he was present at the Budapest Academy of Music when Tibor Serly’s viola concerto was played in 1935. The soloist was János

Temesváry who, as a member of the Waldbauer-Kerpely quartet, was a close associate of his. There is one passage in Serly’s work that bears an uncanny relationship to a certain moment in the Bartók concerto.

The Orchestra of Béla Bartók, a Painter of Sound

Csilla Mária PINTÉR

Budapest Bartók Archives

Béla Bartók was a superb orchestrator with an exceptional sense of colour. His scorings have fascinating effects with unique timbres that can be both subtle and dramatic. Colours are key components of his style. They do not function merely as a supplementary element of music but as an essential shaping force.

Bartók’s intense interest in the technical possibilities of the instruments concerning timbres and his constant search for new colours are also important characteristics of his way of thinking about orchestration. An outline of his 6th Harvard Lecture suggests that he would have emphasised the innovative aspect of his orchestration if illness had not prevented writing it.

The present paper, based on Anikó Vászka’s Hungarian PhD dissertation *Orchestration in Bartók’s Workshop: The Expression of Individual Instrumental Timbres in the Orchestral Works*, aims to summarize the most important features of Bartók’s orchestration highlighting the types of the orchestral ensembles he has formed or for which he composed, and his efforts to constantly expand and innovate sound possibilities. The investigation pays special attention to the compositions for solo instrument and orchestra, as well as the American orchestral works in order to help reconstruct the orchestration of the Viola Concerto. Tibor Serly’s attempt to assemble the Viola Concerto’s ensemble is also discussed in the context of the present research findings.

Bartók’s “Purely Mechanical Work”: Understanding the Composer’s Working Method

Yusuke NAKAHARA

Budapest Bartók Archives

Concerning the finality of Bartók’s Viola Concerto, scholars agree that this work is unfinished, and even though the composer considered it was “a purely mechanical work” for him to complete the concerto, nobody can carry out that “mechanical work” to complete the composition. Some scholars seem to emphasise the unfinished character of the work by labelling the manuscript as “sketch” or “first draft,” i.e., the manuscript is still far from the final version. This assumption might be changed, however, by the examination of the compositional sources of Bartók’s other compositions. Especially a comparison with the continuity draft of the contemporary Third Piano Concerto elucidates what the “mechanical work” would have been, and what kind of creative steps are missing from the autograph of the Viola Concerto; at the same time, the comparison nevertheless suggests that the manuscript of the Viola Concerto can still be considered a finished continuity draft, despite its sketchy nature.

In addition to the comparative analysis, this paper delves into two distinctive aspects of Bartók’s manuscript: the presence of the so-called “soft part” (immediate or subsequent addition of repetition) and the “concealed fragmentariness” (the music originally notated in fragments but subsequently forged into a continuity). If these aspects do not change our concept of the notated music, they nevertheless signal where we can depart from Bartók’s manuscript.

The Structure and Form of Bartók’s Viola Concerto: Hypotheses and Practical Solutions

Zsombor NÉMETH

Budapest Bartók Archives

In a letter to William Primrose, dated 8 September 1945, Béla Bartók indicated that the Viola Concerto was essentially complete, with only the “mechanical work” remaining. It is reasonable to assume that the composer had the complete work in his mind at the time of his death. However, the famous 14 pages that he left behind are very sketchy and do not provide any insight into certain parameters of the music. While the manuscript does not give any information on various aspects (such as articulation or tempo), it does reveal a great deal about structure and form. However, this does not mean that everything is one hundred per cent clear: there are numerous uncertainties here as well, not to mention the formal plan Bartók suggested in his letter of 5 August 1945 to Primrose, which complicates the matter further. In my paper, I will present a summary of the findings regarding the intended form of the Viola Concerto. In the first part, I will summarize what eminent scholars (Sándor Kovács, László Somfai, Nelson Dellamaggiore, Donald Maurice) have been able to decipher from the surviving source and what hypotheses they have addressed. In the second part, I will discuss the practical solutions that have been proposed so far (Tibor Serly, Péter Bartók/Nelson Dellamaggiore, Csaba Erdélyi, Lars Anders Tomter, Miklós Rakos).