

# Liszt's Problems, Bartók's Problems, My Problems<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In his inaugural lecture to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Béla Bartók proposed dividing the works of Liszt into two unequally valued portions: the valuable works that showed Liszt as an artistic innovator, and the undesirable ones that adopted a false “Hungarian” style that pleased unsophisticated listeners but corrupted their taste. In sum, he asserted a radical pseudo-aesthetic dichotomy in the interests of a political agenda. Only a dozen years later, Bartók’s own legacy was dichotomized in a very similar way by musicians and politicians, on both sides of the Cold War divide, who were acting according to a political agenda that no one even tried to disguise as aesthetic. The crypto-political pseudo-aesthetics of the twentieth century, whether practiced in the name of pure national traditions, in the name of social justice, or in the name of aesthetic autonomy, has corrupted both the production and the reception of art music and has played a part in its devaluation, all too evident in twenty-first-century society. The many errors of evaluation enumerated in this essay have contributed to that melancholy history.

**Keywords:** Bartók, academic address, Liszt, aesthetics, ethics, poietic fallacy, social conscience

Let me offer apologies at the outset for what must seem the glaring bathos of my title, with its catastrophic descent from Liszt’s problems, through Bartók’s problems, all the way down to my problems, about which I hardly expect you to care. But the problems about which I have been thinking for many years are not just mine. They are problems that all of us who have devoted our lives to the study of

1. Inaugural lecture held at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on 11 December 2017.

art and culture must face, as I hope you will agree. They are perhaps worth thinking about at least for the length of a lecture.

The progression that I have taken as my frame, from the great Hungarian musicians of the past to me – or us – in the present, was prompted by my efforts to solve another problem: the problem of how to respond appropriately to the great honor you have done me by electing me a member of your distinguished company. Casting about for the right theme and the right tone, I of course reflected on one of the reasons why I feel so flattered and grateful at being chosen: besides Professor Somfai, to whom I owe my nomination, and Professor Tallián, another greatly admired friend and colleague, who are in the room with us now, both Bartók and Kodály were members of the Academy (indeed, Kodály was once its president), and I have long known the often reproduced photographs that show Bartók, on 3 February 1936, doing exactly what I am doing now, reading his inaugural lecture in this very room (*Plate 1*). That might give you an inkling into the way I am feeling at this moment – thoroughly intimidated, of course, but at the same time utterly thrilled.

So of course I looked up Bartók's lecture, which (fortunately for me) has been published in an English translation, as a possible guide to what might be an appropriate tone and scope. In the end it gave me much more than that. Bartók took

PLATE 1 Bartók's inaugural lecture at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 3 February 1936



the fiftieth anniversary of Liszt's death in 1936 as an occasion for reflecting on Liszt's significance; and if you know it, you know that his title, "Liszt Problems," prompted mine. Rather than conventional encomia, Bartók offered critical reflections, some of which so resonated with my own preoccupations as to become my own questions, although my answers, as you will see, differ from his.

My title is also slightly but significantly different from his. Bartók was not investigating Liszt's problems, but rather his problems with Liszt, or (more strongly) problems that Liszt created for Bartók and other Hungarian composers of Bartók's generation. He enumerated four of them, of which the biggest, to judge by the amount of space he devoted to it, was the obstacle Liszt had unwittingly placed in the path of modern Hungarian music by mistaking the music of the Roma musicians who performed in urban venues such as restaurants for the authentic folk music of Hungary.

As a result, even as he acknowledged and took pride in Liszt's achievements as the genius who had put Hungary on the musical map of Europe, Bartók found it necessary to reject the specifically national side of Liszt's output. Bartók hastened to assure the Academy that Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies were "perfect creations of their own kind." Indeed, he said, "the material that Liszt uses in them could not be treated with greater artistry and beauty." The problem was "that the material itself is not always of value," and as a result, "the general importance of the works is slight and their popularity great."<sup>2</sup>

You have noticed, of course, the use of the conjunction "and" where Bartók might have said "but." Their popularity with the nonprofessional audience is thus cast as a concomitant of the Hungarian Rhapsodies' slight importance. They are popular, Bartók implies, *because* they are of slight importance. Thus he points to an esthetic contradiction that had grown since the nineteenth century, when it was first identified by the early Romantics, into a huge dilemma for mid-twentieth-century modernists (or, as I like to call them, after Leonard B. Meyer, my favorite music theorist, the "late, late Romantics").<sup>3</sup> That dilemma, the contradiction Bartók purported to identify between aesthetic value and popularity, and which he saw as a problem for Liszt (but which I see more as a problem for Bartók), gave me the idea of counterposing Liszt's problems with Bartók's problems on the way to my own. A related problem, one that Bartók, together with Kodály, had been wrestling with for thirty years, ever since they issued their first collection of Hungarian peasant songs, was the contradiction between what was truly national in Hungarian music and what was popular.<sup>4</sup>

2. Béla Bartók, "Liszt Problems," [1936] in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 504.

3. Cf. Leonard B. Meyer, "A Pride of Prejudices; Or, Delight in Diversity," *Music Theory Spectrum* 13/2 (Fall 1991), 241.

4. Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, "Hungarian Folksongs. Preface" [1906] in *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, ed. Ferenc Bónis, trans. Lili Halápy and Fred Macnicol (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1974), 10.

The ultimate Liszt problem for Bartók was whether, in light of the spuriousness of the national element in Liszt's music (not to mention the fact that his mother tongue was German, his preferred language French, and that, having left Hungary as a child, he did not return until his musical personality was fully formed), one could nevertheless claim Liszt as a Hungarian musician rather than "a homeless cosmopolitan." For Bartók, the answer was a resounding yes, for Liszt's "art is the antithesis of the excessive density and laboriousness so characteristic of the works of the outstanding German composers of the nineteenth century; it is rather the clarity and transparency of French music that manifests itself in every measure of Liszt's works,"<sup>5</sup> together with the pervasive "imprint of the *bel canto* style of the Italians," which is "plainly to be seen in every work."<sup>6</sup> In sum, therefore, when it comes to characterizing "the style of Liszt's works[, o]ne can say anything of it rather than that it is German."<sup>7</sup> For Bartók, in 1936, as horror of the Germans was mounting toward the point that would eventually cause him to leave Hungary, un-Germanness sufficed to make a great Hungarian out of Liszt.

Bartók's remarks on the Hungarian Rhapsodies leapt out at me and provided the spark that kindled this lecture because I had taken their equivocal status as the starting point for a talk I gave at a Liszt bicentennial conference at the Institute for Musicology in Buda in 2011, half a dozen years ago, titled "Liszt and Bad Taste." Although the title suggested a critique of Liszt, the paper was actually a critique of the other term, bad taste, and its implications, chiefly as regards the relationship between artist and audience.<sup>8</sup> The problem of the audience and its bad taste led Bartók to the "distressing conclusion that music-lovers and average musicians ... liked and accepted, almost exclusively, only [Liszt's] comparatively insignificant and outwardly brilliant works, completely rejecting the most valuable ones which pointed so amazingly ahead of their time." And this in turn became a problem of strategy: how to get listeners to get over their preference for the works "that merely tickle the ears" and begin to prefer "the more interesting but less flashy ones."<sup>9</sup>

In sum, Bartók's solution to the Lisztian dilemma – the dilemma of an indispensable but potentially harmful presence – was to dichotomize his output, split it into two parts: one to promote, the other as far as possible to suppress. Liszt made this project difficult, owing to what Bartók called the many "concessions he makes to the public, even in his finest works."<sup>10</sup> In part this was attributable to his career as a virtuoso, "fascinated," along with "so many of his contemporaries

5. Bartók, "Liszt Problems," 509.

6. *Ibid.*, 502.

7. *Ibid.*, 509.

8. It is published in the original English as Richard Taruskin, "Liszt and Bad Taste," *Studia Musicologica* 54/1 (March 2013), 87–104; and in Hungarian translation (by Balázs Mikusi), as "Liszt és a rossz ízlés," in *Magyar Zene* 50/4 (November 2012), 419–444.

9. Bartók, "Liszt Problems," 501.

10. *Ibid.*, 504.

... by frills and decorations, show and glittering ornamentations, [rather] than by perfectly plain, objective [elsewhere in the lecture he calls it 'classical'] simplicity."<sup>11</sup> Twentieth-century listeners, Bartók urges, ought to surmount the taste of their "grandfathers" and ignore what is "extravagant, over-loaded and rhapsodic" in Liszt.<sup>12</sup> "[T]he essence of [his] works" was to be found not there, but rather in the "new ideas, to which Liszt was the first to give expression, and in [his] prophetic boldnesses" – first and foremost in the "solution of formal problems" such as "the first perfect realization of cyclic sonata form" in the First Piano Concerto.<sup>13</sup>

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These were not new arguments in 1936. Connoisseurs of nineteenth-century musical thought will recognize in Bartók's proposals a revival of the campaign mounted on Liszt's behalf by Franz Brendel, the editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, in the writings with which he proclaimed the advent of the *Neudeutsche Schule*, the "New German School," with Liszt as its *spiritus rector*. Beginning with Liszt, and only with Liszt, Brendel asserted, "content creates its own form" in instrumental music as it had been doing in opera thanks to Wagner.<sup>14</sup> A little earlier, writing in the same journal, Liszt himself had proposed free forms based on literary plots as one of the "steps forward which the art [of music] has still to take" toward "the poetic solution of instrumental music."<sup>15</sup> How ironic to find Bartók reviving these "New German" claims in the same lecture in which he held Liszt up as the antidote to everything in music that was German.

But that is not the only anomaly. Consider the incongruity between the criteria of value Bartók applies to the two sides of Liszt's creative output. The characteristics that account for Liszt's appeal to audiences – ear-tickling brilliance, glittering ornamentations and the like – are matters of immediate sensuous apprehension. That makes them, in the literal and etymological sense of the word, aesthetic characteristics. They are valued (or not) on account of the direct impression that they make upon the listener's perceptions (that is to say, in Greek, on account of their *aisthesis*, whence "aesthetics" courtesy of Alexander Baumgarten's treatise of 1735, in which the word, and the philosophical category, was coined). The characteristics Bartók asserts on behalf of Liszt's better music – that it was ahead of its time, that it was prophetically bold, that it solved long-standing formal problems –

11. *Ibid.*, 506–507.

12. *Ibid.*, 507.

13. *Ibid.*, 503.

14. Franz Brendel, "Die Aesthetik der Tonkunst," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 46/18 (1 May 1857), 186.

15. Franz Liszt, "Berlioz und seine Haroldsymphonie," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 43/5 (27 July 1855), 49; translated as "Berlioz and His 'Harold' Symphony," in *Source Readings in Music History from Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 859.



these are not aesthetic traits at all, but rather historical facts and appraisals. And so is the point, to which Bartók gives special emphasis, that “Liszt’s works had a more fertilizing influence on the following generations than” those of any other composer (even Wagner), and that he “touched upon so many new possibilities in his works ... that he provided an incomparably greater stimulus than” anyone else.<sup>16</sup> These traits and virtues are intelligible only with reference to an historical narrative, and they only appear valuable (or not) with respect to a particular theory of history.

That theory, of course, is the neo-Hegelian historicism first applied to the history of music by the same Franz Brendel. It strongly valorized technical innovation and widespread influence on the work of contemporaries and especially on posterity. Both of these are certainly legitimate indicators of historical importance. But to tout them as marks of creative greatness and high aesthetic value as well, requires the application of what I have sometimes called the poietic fallacy.<sup>17</sup> That is, it takes only the maker’s input (*poiesis* in Greek), not the apprehender’s takeaway (*esthesis*), into account in making judgments of value. It is a fallacy because it confuses aesthetic and historical issues, but it has been the dominant historiographical view since the late nineteenth century, and in all likelihood Bartók never considered alternatives to it.

Bartók’s account of Liszt illustrates the poietic fallacy most clearly when he singles out, for their newness and significance, “the bold harmonic turns, the innumerable modulatory digressions, such as, for instance, the juxtaposition, without any transition at all, of the two keys most distant from each other.”<sup>18</sup> This is another passage that leapt out at me as I read, because the two most distant keys are those at maximum distance on the circle of fifths, whose tonics differ by the interval of the tritone; and Bartók probably knew better than anyone else that this was the harmonic relation on which Stravinsky had staked his chief claim to originality, with *Petrushka*, his second ballet, in 1911. I thought it had been my achievement, in an article I published in 1985, to demonstrate Stravinsky’s indebtedness to Liszt;<sup>19</sup> but here was Bartók in 1936, almost half a century earlier, already showing his awareness of it, though without naming names.

This harmonic effect was famous in Stravinsky for its expressive use. It furnishes the accompaniment to the title character’s expressions of rage in the ballet’s second tableau. Bartók, however, describes it not in terms of its effect, but only as a technique, adding that to elucidate it and the “many other points” that would serve to valorize the essence of Liszt’s music in the eyes of those who have

16. Bartók, “Liszt Problems,” 505.

17. See Richard Taruskin, “The Poietic Fallacy,” *The Musical Times* 145/1886 (Spring 2004), 7–34.

18. Bartók, “Liszt Problems,” 503.

19. See Richard Taruskin, “Chernomor to Kashchei: Harmonic Sorcery; or, Stravinsky’s ‘Angle,’” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38/1 (Spring 1985), 72–142.

“never see[n] the substance, only the exterior”<sup>20</sup> “would require the use of too many technical terms.”<sup>21</sup> The substance, he implies, is only accessible to the informed perception of trained musicians – indeed, only accessible to the perception of what neo-Hegelians would call progressive musicians. (And if we still use that adjective, progressive, to describe music, we are still neo-Hegelians.)

But is this not a pessimistic view, and one, moreover, that perhaps unawares undermines the ostensible thrust of Bartók’s lecture? How can one make a bid for public recognition of the true, substantial Liszt behind the flashy, ear-tickling exterior, if the substance is arcane to the uninitiated? If the Lisztian essence was to be sought only in advanced technical innovations, it should be little cause for wonder if, as Bartók admits, despite some progress in popularizing Liszt’s more significant work, “we are still not where we could and should be[, a]nd the question keeps coming up – why are the favourite works still mainly the least important ones, ... and why do people still shrink from the more interesting but less flashy ones?”<sup>22</sup> Let this be the first hint, speaking from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, when popular appreciation of classical music has stopped making progress but has regressed to a point that Bartók would never have thought possible in 1936, of the problems to which my title alludes at its end.

The final paragraph of Bartók’s inaugural lecture suddenly departs from the measured, scholarly tone befitting an academic address and becomes an impassioned complaint. After clinching the case for Liszt’s acceptance as a true Hungarian and a great one, Bartók turns around and adds a big bewildering “but”:

But – there are important and publicly respected gentlemen in our musical life who are stubbornly opposed to everything new that has happened in Hungarian music since Liszt; who prevent, as far as they can, the following of Liszt’s traditions; who, whether as composers or as writers, spend their whole lives crying down Liszt’s artistic principles; who, in spite of all this, pharisaically call themselves supporters of Liszt, and pay homage to the memory of an artist whose whole life and work was in absolute opposition to their own. It is these who have the least right to take Liszt’s name in vain, to claim him as a Hungarian and to boast of him as a compatriot.<sup>23</sup>

20. Bartók, “Liszt Problems,” 501.

21. *Ibid.*, 503.

22. *Ibid.*, 501.

23. *Ibid.*, 510.

I knew this paragraph before I knew the rest. Pretty much every Anglophone writer on Bartók cites and paraphrases it. It is quoted in full in the recent Bartók biography by David Cooper, who comments that in lashing out this way at his more conservative compatriots Bartók was “implicitly plac[ing] himself as an heir of Liszt’s legacy.”<sup>24</sup> David Schneider, in his dissertation, of which I was the proud supervisor, and then in his book *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition*, went further. In his view Bartók was “using Liszt as his surrogate” to “lodge a thinly veiled complaint at his exclusion from Hungarian concert life.”<sup>25</sup> Lynn Hooker agrees and goes further yet. She sees the lecture as a counterpart to Bartók’s refusal, the year before, of an award from the Kisfaludy Society for his early *Orchestral Suite No. 1* (1905), a work that no longer represented what he saw as his true, as-yet-unrecognized achievement.<sup>26</sup> The resentment that Bartók was feeling at that neglect, she suggests, was what motivated the strategy of “selective embrace of Liszt.”<sup>27</sup> She writes:

Maintaining this strict separation between the “bad” Liszt and the “good” Liszt – or, to be fairer to Bartók, between Liszt as audience-indulging virtuoso with dubious taste in source material, and Liszt as visionary and important modernist precedent – allowed Bartók to imply that his own work represented the fulfillment of Liszt’s incomplete promise, a promise that Liszt could not carry out due to the limitations of his time.<sup>28</sup>

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But of course Bartók’s strategy implied a similarly strict separation with regard to his own works; and thus he left a time bomb ticking at the end of his inaugural lecture. If it served to promote his more recent, more radical, and (therefore) more important work in preference to an “ear-tickling” piece like the *First Suite*, the opportunistic division could be seen as benign. But such things are rarely benign, and no composer’s work was ever more cruelly parsed into its “good” and “bad” components than we now know Bartók’s was, at a time he never foresaw, after his heartbreakingly premature death in exile, when the defeat of the Fascist occupier of Hungary, for which Bartók yearned, was succeeded by a Soviet occupation he did not live to witness.

24. David Cooper, *Béla Bartók* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2015), 276.

25. David E. Schneider, *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 228.

26. Lynn M. Hooker, *Redefining Hungarian Music from Liszt to Bartók* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 252, note 15.

27. *Ibid.*, 255.

28. *Ibid.*, 254.



This hostile division is the subject of a book by another one of my *Doktor-kinder*, Danielle Fosler-Lussier. Her title, *Music Divided: Bartók's Legacy in Cold War Culture*, already identifies it as a double parsing – doubly opportunistic, doubly cruel. The division itself was not dissimilar to the one that Bartók imposed on Liszt: the popular folkloric pieces on the one hand, and the advanced, modernistic ones on the other. The double, or complementary parsing was the result of the ideological polarization that took hold of the Euro-American world as postwar shaded into cold war, and erstwhile allies became enemies.

The two sides of the cold war divided Bartók just the way they divided Berlin, into eastern and western zones. In the Soviet bloc, where Hungary had landed in 1949, Hungary's greatest composer was lumped with Schoenberg and Stravinsky as one who, in the words of *Sovetskaya muzika*, the organ of the Union of Soviet Composers, "paid tribute to the glamorous excesses of modernism, creating a series of works that are remote from and alien to the people."<sup>29</sup> Hungarian musicians faced a problem similar to the one Bartók had faced in his evaluation of Liszt: the problem of remaining faithful to a precious emblem of Hungarian achievement in music (as well as a symbol of pertinacious resistance to Fascism) and at the same time remaining faithful to an ideology that called his musical commitments into question; or, as Fosler-Lussier puts it, of "simultaneously reclaiming Bartók as a great national composer and denouncing his music as decadent."<sup>30</sup>

The rhetorical solution to this problem can be best observed in a pair of articles by Ferenc Szabó, at the time of writing the head of composition at the Liszt Academy and among composers perhaps "the most active in bringing the ideals of Soviet music to bear in Hungary," in the opinion of one who was in a position to know, namely József Révai, like Szabó a so-called Muscovite, a repatriated communist who had sought refuge from Hungarian fascism in the Soviet Union, and who served as Minister of Culture under Rákosi.<sup>31</sup> Szabó's articles were commissioned as answers to Western criticism of the musical policies of the new Hungary. The second of them, titled, simply, "Bartók Béla," was published in the magazine *Új Zenei Szemle* in September 1950,<sup>32</sup> and reprinted two months later in a Russian version in *Sovetskaya muzika*, titled "In Defense of Bartók," where I encountered it, and from which I will quote. This piece was cast as a specific denial of what was in fact an entirely correct report, broadcast by *The Voice of America* in August 1950, informing listeners that several works of Bartók, including *The Miraculous Mandarin*; the first two piano concertos; the violin sonatas; the third, fourth and fifth quartets; and several piano works and songs, had been banned

29. Editorial introduction to Ferenc Szabó, "V zashchitu Bartoka," *Sovetskaya muzika* (November 1950), 93.

30. Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music Divided: Bartók's Legacy in Cold War Culture* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 65.

31. *Ibid.*, 134, paraphrasing a statement by József Révai.

32. Ferenc Szabó, "Bartók nem alkuszik," *Új Zenei Szemle* 1/4 (September 1950), 3–12.

from public performance and broadcast “since the bourgeois influence can be felt most strongly in them.”<sup>33</sup> The impassioned conclusion of Szabó’s denial recalls Bartók’s impassioned defense of the “true” Liszt:

Having embarked on the path of Socialist Realism, we are striving to reflect in music the building of a new life, the building of socialism. ... Enormous tasks confront us, upon us lies the responsibility of marking out the paths along which our art will develop. We will not deviate from this direction, for we are deeply convinced that, following this path, we will preserve the best progressive tendencies in Bartók and thus assure the growth and development of Hungarian music. ... Our task today is to restore to his music the social significance of which fascist barbarity and decadent bourgeois art had robbed him. ... Therefore we must cleanse the healthy folk roots that remain in Bartók’s musical legacy of all alien influences and all that at the present moment can no longer express the spirit of our epoch.

In Hungary we are most apt to play those of his compositions in which the fundamentals of folk music most clearly and decisively show through, together with the principal classical traditions of the past and the aspiration toward realism. We do not maintain, nor do we have the slightest grounds for maintaining Bartók’s pessimism, understandable from the human standpoint but altogether unacceptable to us who firmly believe in the triumph of progress and in the further development of human culture.

Bartók did not know this faith. But all the same he is ours, for he is with us and only with us. Bartók is ours. He belongs inseparably to the party of peace. He cannot have anything in common with the igniters of a new war, the dollar imperialists.

We Hungarian musicians demand an end to the heinous comedy the heirs of Goebbels [in America and England] are perpetrating around the name of Bartók. [Keep your dirty hands off our Bartók!]<sup>34</sup>

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I hope you will forgive me for quoting at such length from such a text, which amounts exactly to a rationalization of the policy whose existence it denies. The comedy to which Szabó refers at the end was the cold war counterdivision of Bartók in the West, which formed a precise inversion of the one practiced in the East, so that the two Bartóks thus promoted fit one another like two pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Anyone who studied music in American or western European

33. Letter from György Pollner of the Agitation and Propaganda Division to Jenő Széll, 9 August 1950; quoted in Fosler Lussier, *Music Divided*, 54.

34. Ferenc Szabó, “V zashchitu Bartoka,” 95. The sentence in square brackets is not in the Hungarian original.

institutions of higher learning half a century ago, as I did, will know that the list of works that could not be performed in Hungary was precisely the list of works studied and analyzed to death *chez nous*, which earned Bartók his place in the twentieth-century international modernist canon alongside Stravinsky and the Viennese atonalists despite his indulgence in folklore, which Schoenbergians explicitly despised and which Stravinsky nervously (and hypocritically) disavowed. "I never could share his lifelong gusto for his native folklore," Stravinsky said of Bartók in his first book of "conversations" with Robert Craft in 1959.<sup>35</sup> This was as transparent and preposterous a lie as any of Szabó's, but it enabled Stravinsky to condescend to Bartók at a time when such condescension was chic.

The quartets, first performed as a cycle in New York in March 1949 by the Juilliard String Quartet, were the works that made Bartók respectable in the Cold War academy. Milton Babbitt, the leading American twelve-tone composer of those days, who had written his first "total serial" work, *Three Compositions for Piano*, in 1947, reviewed the quartets in the *Musical Quarterly*, then the première American musicological journal, and pronounced Bartók's music "completely of its time," because it "achieves a contemporaneity far transcending mere considerations of style or idiom." In this it "reveals a thorough awareness of the crucial problems confronting contemporary musical composition, and attempts to achieve a total and personally unique solution of these problems."<sup>36</sup> Coming from Babbitt, this had to imply a comparison with twelve-tone or serial technique, which composers of the postwar avant-garde regarded as the single viable method for future composition. Babbitt located Bartók's affinity for serial composition in "the identification of linear and vertical statements" in the "developmental nature of the motival structure."<sup>37</sup>

All this really means is that any sequence of tones presented successively, as a melody, can also be presented simultaneously, as a chord. What Babbitt had recognized was an "emancipation of dissonance" comparable to Schoenberg's. He acknowledged that "serialization in Bartók is but one of many integrative methods in the small, and its specific character is determined by the context in which it occurs," adding that "never does it create the context."<sup>38</sup> So Bartók cannot be classified with the serialists, although Babbitt does admit him, against Bartók's own claims, to the company of atonalists insofar as he showed himself "aware of the hazards inherent in the use of a language overlaid with connotations" arising from "generalized functional tonal relationships, existing prior to a specific composition."<sup>39</sup> And for this reason Babbitt went out of his way to characterize

35. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 82.

36. Milton Babbitt, "The String Quartets of Bartók," *The Musical Quarterly* 35/3 (July 1949), 377.

37. *Ibid.*, 382.

38. *Ibid.*, 382–383.

39. *Ibid.*, 377.

Bartók's music as "non-provincial," implying a refusal to acknowledge the national character that allowed musicians on the other side of the Iron Curtain to admit and even promote a portion of Bartók's output.<sup>40</sup>

Yet even on the western side the national coloration was for most listeners the salient feature. Olin Downes, the *New York Times's* chief critic, who was hearing the quartets (as performed by the Juilliard Quartet) for the first time, confessed that they were "too unfamiliar ... for the writer to have much perspective or even any very settled ideas about any of them," save that "they 'sound' marvelously, and show incorrigibly original and racial [!] approaches to quartet problems."<sup>41</sup> But you will find no mention in Babbitt's analysis of anything racial, whether Bulgarian rhythms or *parlando-rubato*, or even "Bartók pizzicati." Of the eleven musical examples in Babbitt's essay, ten are drawn from the Fourth Quartet, the one that most convincingly illustrates the verticalization of linear statements, and the remaining example comes from the Fifth Quartet, another item in the Communist regime's *index librorum prohibitorum*.

The nadir of Cold War iniquity toward Bartók and his legacy hooks up in a painfully ironic way with Bartók's inaugural lecture of 1936. It is now widely accepted among scholars and commentators on Bartók's career that the period during which he gave that lecture was the high point of tension between him and the Hungarian musical public, which motivated his exaggerated partition of Liszt's legacy. Also widely observed, and variously explained, is the notable relaxation of that tension in the final decade of Bartók's career, which coincided paradoxically with his despairing removal from Hungary and his unhappy exile in America. The last of Bartók's "difficult" works, and the latest one to be listed on the index of prohibited compositions, was the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, composed in 1937, one year after the inaugural lecture. Beginning with *Contrasts* in 1938, Bartók started softening his style and readmitting to it some of the more popular Hungarian idioms, such as *verbunkos*, which he had formerly excluded on account of what he thought their dubious legitimacy as resources for modern Hungarian music. As a result, the works he wrote during the last six years of his life – the second violin concerto, the *Divertimento*, the sixth quartet, the third piano concerto, and above all the Concerto for Orchestra – are the ones that have won him his place in the enduring concert repertoire and made him a twentieth-century classic. These were also the works of which it could be said that he made the most successful synthesis between the two sides of his creative output that were being cast after the war as irreconcilably opposed.

This was of course regarded in the western academy as backsliding from the fully contemporary into the "racial." Concluding his essay on the quartets, Bab-

40. Ibid.

41. Olin Downes, "Juilliard Quartet in 3 Bartók Works," *New York Times* (29 March 1949), 23.

bitt expressed this concern as tactfully as he could. "Perhaps more problematical than any aspect of Bartók's music itself," he wrote, "is the future of the attitude it embodies." Babbitt wonders whether Bartók's solution to the problem of what he calls "generalized functionality" can be sustained, or extended by others. "There is some evidence in Bartók's own work that such an exhaustion may have taken place," he wrote, for "the sixth quartet is in many respects a retreat from the position of the fourth and the fifth."<sup>42</sup> And that judgment was corroborated by that of the cultural politicians in Hungary, where Bartók had become in effect the composer of two quartets, the First and the Sixth.

But by the time Babbitt voiced his gentlemanly and musicianly reservations, Bartók had been viciously attacked for his apparent relapse on crypto-political grounds in that infamous article by René Leibowitz, which appeared in Jean-Paul Sartre's journal *Les temps modernes*.<sup>43</sup> Leibowitz was astute enough to notice the synthesis I have described as successful; but for him it was an unacceptable and politically suspect regression from the position of "engagement" that he believed a serious composer was obliged to embody in the post-fascist world. So he gave it another name: *Compromis*. Compromise. Just about the worst thing you could say of a person in the aftermath of the Second World War, and he said it in the journal where it would be widely discussed far beyond the professional world of music, translated into many languages, and widely accepted to the detriment of Bartók's reputation – but also furiously resisted. The first of Ferenc Szabó's manifestos, "Bartók nem alkuszik" [Bartók does not compromise], was an agonized direct reply to Leibowitz, even if Szabó was mainly concerned to defend the composer's personal political integrity rather than vindicate the music.<sup>44</sup>

\* \* \*

The real compromise was Szabó's. As Danielle Fosler-Lussier, who has investigated his archive, has noted, in private or unpublished official documents, Szabó testified to his discomfort with the role he was obliged to play in public. Fosler-Lussier quotes the minutes of a meeting of the Communist Action Committee of the Hungarian Musicians' Association in November 1950, just when Szabó's equivocal defenses of Bartók were appearing in the Hungarian and Soviet press. "My own heart draws me strongly toward Bartók," he told his comrades. "I have drawn so much from him. I, who directly occupy myself with musical education, see that we must be very careful in the Bartók question."<sup>45</sup> When I read

42. Babbitt, "The String Quartets," 385.

43. René Leibowitz, "Béla Bartók, ou la possibilité du compromis dans la musique contemporaine," *Les temps modernes* 3/25 (October 1947), 705–734.

44. See Fosler-Lussier, *Music Divided*, 178, note 60.

45. *Ibid.*, note 59.

this, I thought of a tiny article that appeared in the *New York Times* on Tuesday, 29 March 1949, two days after the Cultural and Scientific Congress for World Peace had concluded its business at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. That is the famous convocation to which Dmitry Shostakovich was sent as a delegate, and where he read a speech (or rather, sat silent while a translation of a speech was read in his name) that stridently accused the United States of imperialism and warmongering, and denounced the leading modernist composers of the day, and Stravinsky in particular, for their "moral barrenness" and "nihilism."<sup>46</sup> Two days later, the little *Times* article appeared (*Plate 2*).

PLATE 2 Article from the *New York Times* (29 March 1949), 3

***Bartók's Modern Music  
Soothes Shostakovich***

After the hurly-burly of the last few days, Dmitri Shostakovich took refuge at a concert in Times Hall last night. The music consisted of the three string quartets by the late Béla Bartók, and the modern music apparently took precedence over all other engagements and invitations for the Russian composer.

He and a friend sat unobtrusively in the balcony throughout the performance, listening intently. When the music was over, they went backstage to congratulate the performers, members of the Juilliard String Quartet, and then slipped quietly out into the night. ♣

**The New York Times**

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It was probably an ignorant editor who put the word "the" before "three string quartets by the late Béla Bartók" in the reporter's copy. If, as I suspect, the reporter was the same Olin Downes whose review (already quoted) appeared elsewhere in the same issue of the *Times*, he knew perfectly well that the three quartets

46. Laurel Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173.



performed were the First, the Fourth and the Sixth. There is a report of Shostakovich's participation in the hurly-burly of the Waldorf Conference in *Sovetskaya muzika* signed by the composer. That is no guarantee that he wrote it, but still, the article may record some first-hand impressions. Two paragraphs pertain to the concert at which the *Times* reporter spotted Shostakovich in the balcony. (Milton Babbitt, as we know, was also there.)

On the evening of 28 March (1949) we dropped in on a very good concert by the Juilliard String Quartet at Times Hall. This quartet, consisting of young musicians, has only existed for the past three years. They devoted both of their concerts to the quartets of Béla Bartók, who died in New York in 1945, as I was told, literally of malnutrition, in a state of dire need.

On this evening they performed the First (1907), the Fourth (1928) and the Sixth (1939) quartets of Béla Bartók. I did not like the Fourth Quartet but very much liked the Sixth. This is an outstanding work by a first-class master. The young quartet played it superbly, and the evening left me feeling very pleased.<sup>47</sup>

As I say, it is impossible to know just what to attribute to Shostakovich in this report. That he takes the trouble to compare the Fourth Quartet invidiously with the Sixth accords with official Soviet policy, and by so neatly complementing the precisely opposing judgment of Milton Babbitt, crisply illustrates the Cold War dichotomization that played such havoc with the reception of Bartók's music on both sides of the curtain. To my ear, however, the bare fact of Shostakovich's presence at the concert speaks louder than the judgment he submitted for public consumption in the USSR, assuming that it was he who submitted it. Musicians seek out music for their own reasons. In the official speech read at the conference on his behalf, Shostakovich roundly denounced Stravinsky in exactly the terms dictated by the official line. And yet, in his "Travel Notes," we read this:

I wanted to obtain some records of Stravinsky's music. In not a single record shop on Broadway did the salespeople know the name of this composer; they asked me to look it up in the catalogue. But jazz they knew thoroughly, in every detail, down to the most intimate details of the personal lives of jazz composers and performers.<sup>48</sup>

Whoever wrote up this anecdote for publication evidently intended it as an indictment of American culture, along lines long familiar from Theodor W. Adorno and his many epigones. But what leaps out at me is the fact that Shostakovich, who

47. Dmitry Shostakovich, "Puteviye zametki" [Travel Notes], *Sovetskaya muzika* (May 1949), 21.

48. *Ibid.*

had just delivered a ringing denunciation of Stravinsky, went out immediately afterwards to buy whatever Stravinsky records he could find. His composer's ear hungered for the very sounds he had just condemned – and perhaps even sincerely condemned – for political reasons, or reasons of state. Ferenc Szabó, whose ear and heart were drawn to Bartók even as he participated – again, I believe, sincerely – in the suppression of a significant portion of his work, would have sympathized with Shostakovich's ambivalence. I, too, sympathize. I have expressed my own disapproval of performers and audiences who now listen with enthusiasm to works such as Prokofieff's *Zdravitsa*, his cantata in praise of Stalin, because they think it is beautiful. I, too, think it is beautiful – and worth listening to, but not in blissful oblivion. While, unlike Szabó, I deplore censorship, I also deplore the unthinking elevation of aesthetics over ethics, and to that extent perhaps I am like Szabó. We are all, in varying degrees and in varying connections, ambivalent.

\* \* \*

So I am wrestling with the same problems as Bartók when it came to Liszt, or Szabó when it came to Bartók, or Shostakovich (or perhaps pseudo-Shostakovich) when it came to Stravinsky – about whom, having spent so many years in close scholarly communion with him, I entertain especially ambivalent feelings. Bartók's problems were especially acute, and especially illustrative of the ambivalence that must attend these questions. The operation he performed on Liszt, for what seemed to him very pressing and necessary reasons, gravely injured him when he posthumously became, so to speak, the operand rather than the operator. Those who operated on him had equally pressing agendas. Thus I broach the third, last, and shortest part of this talk, which, as promised in my title, will be about my problems.

My problem is not with agendas as such. I am critical of them all, Bartók's, Szabó's, Babbitt's, Leibowitz's, Adorno's, Shostakovich's, and my own. But I acknowledge their necessity. We all have them. We all believe – do we not? – that there is more to art than the pleasure that it gives. We all believe that art also plays a social role, that it can do good, or harm, and our view of its social role is not necessarily correlated with our immediate sensory or visceral or cognitive response to it.

I feel especially confident that my audience today recognizes the issues that I am raising, because there is a strong tradition in Hungary for such recognition, even on the part of musicians thought of as modernists. Certainly it was true of Bartók, and perhaps even truer of Kodály. Although I presented Bartók today as an upholder of the poietic fallacy, that was only one facet of his complex and ambivalent outlook. In my *Oxford History of Western Music* I dealt with Bartók and Kodály, along with Janáček and a few others, in a chapter to which I gave the

title “Social Validation,” and I took note of the fact that both Bartók and Kodály, in strong contrast to Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and other modernist icons, were vitally concerned with pedagogy (that is, the education of children), the strongest possible testimony to a social conscience in a composer.

Or do we believe in the social role of art – that is, of so-called high art? I am no longer so sure, and that is my chief problem. I can broach it best with a true and very prosaic story. I have often joked that I know that there is a God in heaven because whenever I am thinking hard about something, especially when I am drafting a text like the one I am now reading to you, God has a way of sending me clippings. Things happen or come to me out of the blue that help me formulate my thoughts. Sometimes they take strange forms indeed. What I am about to tell you happened to me on the morning of Wednesday, 29 November 2017, about two weeks before I was scheduled to deliver this talk, when I paid a routine visit to the urologist, something I do twice a year like many men of a certain age. The fact that a urologist’s office is a veritable old men’s club is something I normally take for granted and do not pay much attention to; but this time I happened to leave the office with two other men, one of whom made a remark that when he goes to the urologist he realizes how old he is. To which the other replied, “If I want to feel somewhat young I have to go to the Symphony.”

I think you know what he meant. He did not mean that at the Symphony he would hobnob exhilaratingly with youth. He meant that at the Symphony he would be among people even older than he is. Classical music is losing its audience. The audience is literally dying off. After a century or so of heavy promotion both by governments (in one part of the world) and commercial interests (in another), it is reverting to its aristocratic niche, which means to a narrowly hedonistic assessment of its value to a very small coterie. The sense of urgency that led to polemics about its social value – Bartók’s about Liszt’s, Leibowitz’s about Bartók’s – is vanishing from our daily discourse.

I am not proclaiming the end of the world when I say this. I do not even deplore the changes to which I am bearing witness, because to do so would be fruitless as well as egotistical. After the experience of barbarism in the countries of Europe that boasted the longest and most distinguished high-art traditions, it is no longer possible to pretend that high art is high for reasons having to do with superior moral or ethical quality. What is, or was, high about high art, as any historian will agree, was its social status, the very thing it has been losing since the middle of the twentieth century.

To account for the loss in full, even were we to confine the question to the world of music, would require an as-yet-unwritten book, and it is a book I actually am planning to attempt – not for the purpose of assigning blame: the endless contributing factors – economic, social, cultural, political, demographic – include factors of which I actually feel one must approve, such as the greater serious-

ness with which my country, for one, now takes the rarely-lived-up-to egalitarian principles on which it was founded. While I do not think the trend is reversible, and do not see it only in terms of loss, I have a wish – the wish of my academic profession, after all – to understand it. And so I look to the past history of the art, including the history of discourse about the art (the part to which people like me have contributed), for clues about its trajectory, up to the recent past and extending to the future.

Here is where Liszt's problems and Bartók's problems have light to shed on my problems. The tendency, or the attempt, to protect high art by removing it from the concerns of the real world – something that first occurred to artists and philosophers exactly when artists were abandoned by their patrons at the beginning of the period we now call romantic – was all too successful. It found expression in Kant's notion (asserted in the *Critique of Judgment*) of disinterestedness as an aesthetic *sine qua non* (indeed as the very definition of the aesthetic), and in Schopenhauer's classic assertion, in his *Parerga und Paralipomena*, of the principle of aesthetic autonomy, which I have quoted more times than I can count because of the damage I think it has done, and so I will quote it once more:

This intellectual life floats ethereally, like a fragrant cloud rising from fermentation, above the reality of the worldly activities which make up the lives of the peoples, governed by the will; alongside world history there goes, guiltless and unstained by blood, the history of philosophy, science and the arts.<sup>49</sup>

What Schopenhauer wrote was not true when he wrote it; it had never been true; nor is it true today. But artists (and, as we see, philosophers) needed to believe it in order to carry on after their social abandonment. It laid the intellectual foundation for an unprecedented flowering of the arts, and music especially, in the nineteenth century, but it reached a corrupted and deleterious epitome in the twentieth. It produced what I have already named as the poietic fallacy, the insistence that the maker's technical achievements create the value of the art work, and that the public should be taught to value art the same way professionals judge it. That was the principle that determined Bartók's splitting of Liszt into the bad – the works that appealed to the philistine public – and the good, the ones that influenced the work of later composers like himself. Later Bartók's own works were split between those that were promoted by political powers who wanted to take control of cultural production and those that were held up as a bulwark by supporters of Schopenhauer's principle of aesthetic autonomy in its debased culminating phase.

It was a contest of mendacity. The politicians pretended to speak for the public. (Soviet newspapers, for example, used to print phony letters from fictitious

49. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, vol. 2, §52.

collective farmers judging the symphonies of Prokofieff or Myaskovsky from the point of view of “the people.”) The protectors saw in audience appeal a fatal compromise with totalitarian power. Is it any wonder that over the course of the twentieth century aesthetic autonomy should have shaded into irrelevance and disinterestedness should have shaded into moral indifference?

We in the twenty-first century are paying the price. High art no longer matters the way it did, and perhaps it no longer deserves to matter that much. My effort to understand what brought us to this pass, and it has not made me popular in my field, has stemmed from a sense of responsibility that I could not shake – that is, the consciousness that my own profession, that of critics, scholars and commentators, has contributed, through commission and through omission, not crucially, perhaps, but nevertheless significantly, to the irreversible decline. It leaves me, in my belated, ineffectual way, feeling lonely the way Bartók was feeling when he addressed this very body in 1936. That feeling of sorrowful solidarity has motivated my offering today. It is one of many tokens of solidarity I have shared with my Hungarian colleagues over the last dozen years, and my feeling of solidarity makes me all the more grateful for the gift of recognition you have made me in inviting me here.

