

Bulgarian Rhythm and its Disembodiment in *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, op.7

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‘The So-Called Bulgarian Rhythm’ was identified and defined by Bartók as a fast, asymmetrical dance metre characteristic of Southern Slavic folk musics.¹ He conceived it as distributed metrically in groups of 5 and 7. Bartók’s research was pioneering, and has inevitably been overtaken (even during his life he was corrected on the matter by Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu). What Bartók called ‘Bulgarian Rhythm’ was not particular to Bulgaria, and this is something he suspected early on himself; it has more recently been argued, however, that the characteristics by which he identified it are not the most salient to the rhythmic type.²

Meters of 5 and 7 were used subsequently by several composers in Hungary. They referred to them as ‘Bulgarian’, using them as organisational frameworks alternative to symmetrical time structures. (The eighth piece in Ligeti’s *Musica ricercata* is clearly indebted, but there are many other examples.) I’d assert that what composers meant when they said ‘Bulgarian’ was generally what they learned from Bartók, whether from his essays or his compositions. Composers were not referring to research published in journals of ethnomusicology: their ‘Bulgarian Rhythm’ is primarily a matter of Bartók reception.

Kurtág’s *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* op. 7 (1963–68) contains a recurrent rhythmic feature which has been described by three commentators as ‘Bulgarian’. One of these was Kurtág himself, noting on a draft his intention of reintroducing the Bulgarian Rhythm of the opening at the end of the

¹ ‘The So-Called Bulgarian Rhythm,’ in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1976, pp. 38–49.

² One of the most recent commentaries on Bartók’s work on this rhythmic type is offered by Tim Rice. See ‘Béla Bartók and Bulgarian Rhythm,’ in eds. Antokoletz, Fischer and Suchoff, *Bartók Perspectives*, OUP, 2000, pp. 196–212.

work.³ Another was Péter Várnai, who wrote the programme note for the work's Hungarian première in 1968.⁴ The third was Ferenc Rados, who referred to it as such while teaching *The Sayings* in Budapest in 1992.⁵

In this article I shall expose the main occurrences of this Bulgarian Rhythm in Kurtág's cycle. I shall then juxtapose these with an examination of the text sung at those points. Finally, I would like to open up the question of the type's signification within *The Sayings*. Does it suggest any symbolic meaning? Or is it simply a recurrent, integrating, rhythmic feature?

Kurtág's cycle lies in four sections, entitled 'Confession,' 'Sin,' 'Death' and 'Spring'; only 'Confession' is an unbroken whole, the latter three parts are built up from shorter individual movements. 'Confession' begins with a monotone line on C in the piano, a line of irregular rhythmic units, grouped mainly in values of five and seven. Directly preceding the vocal line's entry on B, D flat is added to this pattern. When the vocal line shifts off B onto A#, the piano incorporates a D. These pitches are moving outwards in a fan shape, although distributed in register. The rhythmic groups of seven and five pervade in the combined texture (*Examples 1a, 1b*).

The character of the rhythm in this opening is suggestive of Bartók's 'hyper-Bulgarian Rhythm,' the fastest form of the type, which Bartók later recognised in his Romanian collection. The metre's smallest basic quantities exceeded even those of the 'normal' Bulgarian in tempo, which were between 300 and 400 per minute. Those of the hyper-Bulgarian were up to 600 per minute.

'Confession' as a whole is characterised by this uneven rhythmic pattern, although it is noticeable to varying degrees. Each of the ensuing five verse-like sections bears a relation to the first one, whether through monotone repetition or pitch pattern; many rhythmic groups from the opening line are reused. Although the complex textures and dramatic shifts in dynamic and register tend to undermine its presence, there is an obvious point of modified 'recapitulation' which ushers in the final verse. At this point, monotone patterns in the piano, spreading fan-like outwards from F sharp, recall the rhythmic patterns of the opening with relative clarity; the piano's postlude also recalls its introduction.

³ Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Sketches for opus 7. References are scattered throughout sketches for 'Spring' 4; see in particular a sketchbook (labelled 'k' on last visit) in which multiple sketches for 'Spring' 4 are compiled.

⁴ *Országos Filharmónia Műsorfüzet* [Philharmonic Programme Booklet], Budapest, 1968/37, pp. 20–21.

⁵ I was a student of Ferenc Rados 1992–95.

Molto concitato

ppp

(suttogva/ flusternd/ whispered)

pp

Mi - dőn az ne-gye - dik sesz - hez kez - det - tem val - na,
 Als ich der Pre - dig - ten vier - ten Teil wolle he - gen - au,
 When I was come to the writ - ing this Book of ser - mons,

tá - mass - ta re - ám Is - (s) - ten tit - konn va - ló
 ließ mir kon - men der Schöp - fer für die wüt - lre - de
 lay - ing me a trap. Lord God se - cret - ly sent

f sub. *pp sub.*

f sub. *mp* *f* *mp* *f* *pp sub.*

Example 1a: *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, op. 7, 'Confession'



Example 1b: Fan-shape of pitches

The last movement of the whole cycle, the fourth of 'Spring,' presents a calmer reworking of both the Bulgarian Rhythm and the fan idea. The piano introduction is grouped in irregular rhythmic patterns; the monody's distribution between the pianist's two hands is reminiscent of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, no. 113, 'Bulgarian Rhythm' and also the second of his 'Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm' (*Mikrokosmos*, no. 149). Both this piano monody and the vocal line move outwards from B. This looser form of the idea is closer to

The image contains two musical examples from a score. Example 2a is a piano introduction in a 2/4 time signature, marked 'Tempo I .cca. del precedente'. It features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand and a steady accompaniment in the left hand, with a dynamic marking of *ppp*. Example 2b is a vocal line with lyrics in Latin: 'Sed tu ait non habet choice mat rem. nem. nem. grm. ing'. The vocal line is supported by piano accompaniment in both hands, with dynamic markings of *mf* and *mf* appearing. The piano part has a fan-shaped melodic structure.

Example 2a: *The Sayings*, 'Confession', recall of opening

This musical notation shows a single melodic line in a treble clef. It begins with a single note on a flat (F) and then branches out into a series of notes that form a fan shape, representing the 'fan-shape of pitches' mentioned in the caption.

Example 2b: Fan-shape of pitches

Bartók's composed Bulgarian Rhythm than the version presented in 'Confession' (*Examples 3a, 3b*).

This reappearance provides an arch for the whole cycle, but there is one further appearance of the idea: this takes place in the third part, 'Death,' in movement 4. The piano introduces the movement with a monotone on F, which is joined progressively by pitches on either side, creating a 'fan' again (*Example 4*).

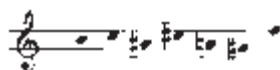
Even though on a monotone, the very opening pitches are to be distributed between two hands. The monotone states a line of uneven rhythmic values, each of which is assigned an articulation and dynamic marking. When the monotone is joined by others, each preserves this rhythmic, articulatory and dynamic formula. Overlaid upon one another, and in combination with the vocal line, a new rhythmic pattern emerges: this is provided underneath

Con allegrezza e vivo

Ki-ke-let- kor hit- juk, long az fak
 When the Spring comes, see we: Die Bäume
 When a- gain it's spring- time we see trees

bim - böz - nak és ki- fa- ka- doz - nak,
 er - feent such, es springen die Kör- pen;
 put forth buds and come out in leaf- lets;

Example 3a: *The Sayings*, 'Spring', movement 4



Example 3b: Fan-shape of pitches

the staff. This combination line includes some non-Bulgarian groups of four, but preserves many divisions of five and seven.

Such uneven rhythmic groups characterise large sections of the movement although, like in 'Confession,' the extreme changes in register and dynamic tend to obscure them. In the closing section, groups of three notes become distinct again, recalling rhythmic cells in 'Confession' that were made evident in a similar way (*Example 5*).

The relations between these movements have a clear musical function within the cycle. It is apparent from Kurtág's manuscript workings that he de-

Giusto, agitato

At em - ber - neck ha - is - is
 Das der Mensch An - ster - An - mud,
 For each man his own death is

l - gen i - sto - nyü ta rit -
 ist nie gra - zow and am - ab -
 ve - ty hid - e - ou, s hor -

Example 4: *The Sayings, 'Death',* movement 4

veloped the closing movement of 'Spring' in reference to 'Confession.' He refers to Spring's rhythm as the same as in 'Confession', but "oldottabb" – "looser," "softer" or "more relaxed."⁶ In sketches for movement 4, it is clear that here too, Kurtág drew on 'Confession'.

⁶ See note 3.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece with piano accompaniment. It is divided into two systems. The first system has a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'senza tempo, ma scorrevole (sings - Grand - allegro)' and 'tempo'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with a 'marcato' marking. The lyrics are in Latin: 'és i - sto - ryú - si - gók - tal, min - den / de - he - re - me - de, he - ma / and vile a - bi - ná - na - rion, wils - ste'.

Example 5: *The Sayings*, 'Death', movement 4, shortly before end

Let's now look at the texts of each of these movements.

'Confession'

As I came to begin the fourth part,
 God pressed me with secret, devilish temptations;
 Bearing down on me,
 they urged me to write about the manifold temptations of the devil,
 but such terrible thoughts came to me that I feared to write,
 and crying, pleaded with God to entrust that kind of writing to another.
 But the more I endeavoured to suppress them,
 the more they steadily grew and swelled, mounting up on me, the many
 temptations.
 There was nothing that I could do about them,
 and utterly against my will and with great shame,
 I had to publish my writings for all the world to see.

Whoever had eyes would thus recognise his own odiousness
as would a basilisk as it gazed into a mirror.

'Death'

For every man, his death is a terrible and horrible thing.
For initially it besets him with pain, disease, spiritual and bodily tribulations,
with much grief and sorrow, strife and dread.
Finally, frightful and agonising pain breaks out in the muscles and tendons
as it tears the spirit from the body.
The body decays, becomes smelly,
and disintegrates into dust and ashes.

'Spring'

At Springtime we see the trees budding and bursting forth,
lawns, grasses, flowers begin to revive;
we rejoice in the knowledge that summer will soon be here,
following the long, freezing, frosty, snowy, wet wintertime;
and the lovely long warming bedecking, green-decking, life-creating,
nourishing summer weather is coming,
in which everything renews itself and revives;
many creatures, game, birds, cattle, hens, geese, calves, lambs, many lovely
flowers and vines grow,
and the famished chilled poor are warmed and given life anew.⁷

Drawing the differing presentations of the Bulgarian fan idea into these texts suggests an entanglement. Initially, we encounter a very rapidly-moving form. Strictly speaking, the fastest version of the Bulgarian type is evident, the 'hyper-Bulgarian' of Romania, but I'd rather separate the rhythm from its peasant roots at this point.⁸ It is more useful to chart the contrasts between the same abstracted material within this work, than it is to identify the closest possible historical source. Within the cycle, this tempo is extreme. The extreme tempo sits well with the terror of Bornemisza in the face of his horrific task.

The rhythm becomes less audible in the central area of the movement, but it returns just as Bornemisza realises that he has no escape from performing his duty. "There was nothing that I could do about them, and utterly against my will and with great shame, I had to publish my writings for all the world to see." (The monotone tapping of the piano might even be read as the imitation of the sound of pen on paper – if not of an authentically sixteenth-century quill!)

⁷ My own translation.

⁸ Incidentally, Rice (see note 2) challenges Bartók's understanding that a rapid tempo was characteristic of the rhythmic type.

In the text of 'Death' movement 4, fear is paramount once again. This time it is of the corporal suffering which precedes death, evoked here in accents and *sforzandi* that penetrate the texture. But this passage in which the Bulgarian fan is used is very short; although the movement uses the rhythmic type, it is barely perceivable. It is present in the score, but almost erased from audible presence.

In the text of 'Spring' movement 4, we are presented with a pastoral scene and an image of rebirth. Here the Bulgarian fan has more of a chance of being recognised by the informed listener: it is the most similar to Bartók's *Microcosmos*. The three occurrences of the type could be interpreted, then, as embodying the fear, death and rebirth expressed in the text.

I'd like to return to the Bulgarian Rhythm itself and explore the sorts of significance it might have developed since Bartók first presented it. In the most general sense, Bulgarian rhythm is a type of folk music; more specifically, it is a non-Hungarian folk music (although not necessarily Bulgarian in origin); it is a dance rhythm; it is associated with Bartók as both ethnomusicologist and composer; it has also been appropriated by other composers.

The most focused of the associations I have suggested so far, Bartók as ethnomusicologist, invites an intriguing interpretation of the Bulgarian rhythm type in Kurtág's op. 7. In his essay on the subject, Bartók discusses how difficult it was for professional musicians to play Bulgarian rhythm's 5/16, 7/16 and 9/16 metres, because, I quote, "counting of such exceptionally short sixteenth values is... out of the question; there is no language in which the simple numbers can be pronounced at such a fast tempo".⁹

In this essay, not only the rhythmic nature of Bulgarian Rhythm is described, but a bodily engagement with music is invoked too. This engagement was effortlessly achieved by peasants, for whom the rhythms had evolved from what Bartók called a 'natural development': from village music making. He was convinced that Bulgarian Rhythm had an educational value, in that were it grasped by young children, it would enable them to tackle the asymmetrical scores later in life. He draws attention to the Bulgarian scholar Raina Katarova's recommendation that instead of counting, pupils could use "the syllables 'ti' and 'ri'; for example the pupils would say 'ti-ri' for an eighth-note and 'ti-ri-ri' for a dotted one". Bartók himself suggests that the syllables '*m-ta*' would work too. But his last comment is of

⁹ *Béla Bartók Essays*, p. 48.

most significance: he proposes that “gestures” might usefully replace counting. He is advocating a choreography of the rhythm as a means to learning.

If we compare this with Kurtág’s statements about *Játékok*, in which he advocates a child-like spontaneity, improvisatory creative process for the performer, it is not difficult to see a connection. Like those of Bartók, his words suggest a rejection of the mechanical, ‘conscious’ processes of musical engagement. They advocate a journey of discovery through the harnessing of intuition: by implication, modern intellectualised, automated processes of learning are criticised. *Játékok* is presented as a corrective to modern methods – like Bartók’s Bulgarian Rhythm.

Kurtág’s musical ideals, as presented in his statement in *Játékok*, are apparent when he prepares his works for performance. His relationship with music seems to strive for an embodiment of it: many times he associates a sound pattern with a physical gesture, the sort of association termed ‘indexical,’ that is, *caused* by a physical process. *Játékok* pieces provide a compendium of such indexical units and their extensions. The performer’s task, apparently, is to relocate that initial departure point for a gesture, in order to re-embodiment it – not only in sound, but also, conceptually, within their body.

The closeness – union, even – between performer and sound, might be compared with Stanislavski’s so-called ‘method acting,’ in which the performer is expected to ‘become’ the part they are playing. This is not articulated merely in terms of a loosely-defined ‘spirit,’ but also with specific reference to the role of the body. When I was a student of Kurtág, he once said to me, as I missed a note on the piano to be reached by a major leap – “you cannot miss the note, your finger IS the F sharp before it starts its journey.” For Kurtág, the body had to be conceived as a Nietzschean *location* of spirit and intellect, rather than an opponent to them: this chimes in strikingly with Bartók’s observations about Bulgarian Rhythm.

From a very different intellectual tradition, Roland Barthes, too, conceptualised the body as a crucial presence in music. In his essay ‘The Grain of the Voice’, he invoked “body in the voice as it sings, the hands as it writes, the limb as it performs” as constituents that were frequently absent from musical performance – to its detriment.¹⁰ The “grain” he missed was “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue”.¹¹ Instead, he heard an otherwise irreproachable presentation of style, structure and syntax which might even,

¹⁰ *Image, Music, Text*, London, 1977, p. 188.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

through artful use of breath, invoke the “soul,” but had lost its “body.”¹² In Fischer-Dieskau’s recordings Barthes hears lungs, but not tongue, glottis, teeth or nose. In Barthes’ lament he mourns the culture that has removed practical music making from society and reduced listening to music to a process of decoding recognisable signs. It is not far from Bartók’s idealisation of union between person and music in peasant music; it is also close to Kurtág’s engagement with practical aspects of playing the piano in *Játékok* and also his attitude to musical performance in general.

The Bulgarian Rhythm type, as discussed by Bartók, bears this significance of bodily presence. If we bring this significance to an interpretation of *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, we recognise a new relationship between text and music opening up. In ‘Spring’ movement 4, the most dance-like presentation of the type takes place, in the textual context of rebirth and hope: a pastoral scene is invoked as resolution to the cycle. ‘Death’ movement 4 has described actual physical death, and examining the treatment of the Bulgarian rhythmic type here reveals a nexus of interpretative possibilities.

There is no hope for dance gestures surviving the performance of this movement’s opening. The pianist is presented with a canon of extraordinary complexity; the dynamic markings and articulations are actually preordained in a mechanical way. The pianist’s bodily engagement, in terms of its projection of gestural understanding other than formulaic pushing down of piano keys, is rendered impossible. Nor is the pattern allowed to be heard: it passes too rapidly and the soprano singing above obscures it.

The fact that this movement is drawing on Penderecki’s pointillism and sound masses – it was written as an ‘answer’ to his *Threnody to the victims of Hiroshima* – might be interpreted as a further reflection. Is this loss of body through death expressed by Bornemisza, by Kurtág’s Bulgarian Rhythm, by Penderecki’s title – something also to do with a loss of body in music of this avant-garde pointillistic type? We might read Kurtág’s use of this material for the moment of corporeal death as exactly that opinion. The fact that the Bulgarian rhythmic pattern emerges audibly once again at the moment in the text that the spirit frees itself from the body – as shown in Ex. 5 – suggests, again, that the Bulgarian Rhythm is to be associated with the body. Here it becomes audible again – but it is fragmented; torn, as it were, by the rift opening up as the ‘spirit’ departs. Even in ‘Confession’, the rhythmic type reappears when

¹² Ibid., p. 183.

Bornemisza re-engages with the physical process of writing, a process which had been interrupted by his being plagued by temptation.

Even within the context of *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, I have been selective about what I've discussed here. I have not, for instance, been able to address the fan-shaped pitch distribution of pitches which is a part of its every appearance. Moreover, there is potentially another reading of this rhythmic pattern which, in my desire to look at local, Hungarian matters, I have sidelined. That is the broader category of additive rhythm, and in particular the additive rhythms used by Messiaen. Kurtág attended Messiaen's analysis classes in Paris in 1957–8 and his sketches of the time evidence experimentation with additive and symmetrical rhythmic patterns that do not, by any means, necessarily refer to Bulgarian patterns.¹³

Kurtág's Bulgarian Rhythm is not, therefore, innocent of other types with which it might be compared. Nor is it an unmediated response to Bartók even on a local level: the Bulgarian Rhythm type was already inscribed in post-war music and other referential significance could be brought in. It is certainly impossible to ascribe a single, predominant signification for Bulgarian Rhythm in general; it remains, however, a useful and sophisticated conceptual 'meeting point' between Bartók and the post-war repertoires. Within *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*, its presence allows for a musical reading of the body's disintegration and its rebirth, to accompany that expressed in the text.

¹³ Kurtág Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. See sketches for 'Stück' for piano (1957).