

PART III

Reception



# 11 Hungarian nationalism and the reception of Bartók's music, 1904–1940

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## Mixed reception: an introduction

With the premiere of his ambitious symphonic poem *Kossuth* (1903) in Budapest on 13 January 1904, twenty-two-year-old Béla Bartók seemed to have instantly achieved the status of a national icon. For weeks to come critics in no less than seventeen publications would echo the applause that had brought Bartók to the stage some dozen times.

Yet such unbridled enthusiasm hardly typified Bartók's reception in Hungary during his lifetime. For most of his career he was as frequently castigated by Hungarians as embraced. Even more painfully, Hungary's most prestigious musical organizations, the Opera and the Philharmonic Society, often simply ignored him. As was the case with a number of composers of his generation, a troubled relationship with the public was almost guaranteed by Bartók's allegiance to the difficult aesthetics of modernism. In Hungary, however, where musical style was often explicitly bound to the expression of *magyarság* (Hungarianness), the progressive (hence implicitly cosmopolitan) political stance Bartók's music was taken to represent erected further barriers to acceptance. Accordingly, reactions to Bartók's music in Hungary during his lifetime were heavily laced with social criticism, while his reception in Western Europe reflected more generic concerns about modern music. Bartók's Hungarian reception serves to remind us that not only his music, but modernist art in general – despite its appeals to abstraction and universality – carried culturally specific social messages that depended for their decoding on the contexts in which they were received.

## 1904: patriot

Bartók's success with *Kossuth* is easy to understand given the strongly nationalistic and anti-Austrian mood of turn-of-the-century Budapest. Replete with a caricature of the Austrian national anthem 'Gott erhalte' to represent the invasion of the Austrian army, Bartók's depiction of the suppressed Hungarian War of Independence (1848–49) and its leader Lajos Kossuth served as a battle cry for the Hungarian audience. On that

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evening, applauding Bartók's musical re-enactment of the events of 1848–49 was tantamount to joining a rally for Hungarian independence from Habsburg rule.

The Hungarian reception of *Kossuth* was a glorious windfall; Bartók's mother was so overcome by the raves in the press that in her euphoria she could barely teach her classes.<sup>1</sup> But this success would burden Bartók with the expectation that he continue as a 'national' composer. With the benefit of hindsight one can discern tendencies in the Hungarian reaction to *Kossuth* that would become a pattern: listeners judged the artistic value of Bartók's music largely by its perceived political stance; they recognized his work only after it had been accepted abroad; and they resisted the complexity of his musical style.

Most Hungarian critics valued *Kossuth* for its relationship with an established nationalist tradition. When the critic of *Zenevilág* [Music-World] wrote that 'the *Kossuth* Symphony is the greatest cultural achievement in the history of Hungarian music since *Bánk Bán*,<sup>2</sup> he recognized Bartók as the inheritor of the nationalist tradition of Ferenc Erkel (1810–93), the most important composer to have voiced Hungarian national sentiments in opera. In *Bánk Bán* (first performance 1861) Erkel had resorted to the familiar operatic ploy of expressing outrage over a contemporary political condition – the mid-nineteenth-century oppression of Hungary by Austria – through the foil of a similar injustice several centuries earlier. In *Kossuth* Bartók employed an analogous strategy to align himself with the latest clamour for independence.

*Kossuth* and *Bánk Bán* carried the same revolutionary message, which explains why the first performance of Erkel's work was delayed by the censor, and why several Austrians occupying key positions in the Philharmonic had boycotted rehearsals for *Kossuth* and nearly sabotaged its premiere. But, for all the incendiary bluster, by focusing on the Hungarian Independence Movement in his first publicly performed orchestral work, Bartók had adopted a tried and true formula for success in Hungary.

Moreover, in *Kossuth* Bartók continued his country's musical tradition of combining stock figures from Hungarian-style fiddling or *verbunkos* within a West European harmonic idiom – in this case an idiom identified with the tone poems of Richard Strauss. On the one hand, Strauss, whom Hungarian critics labelled 'ultramodern'<sup>3</sup> and 'the modernest of the moderns',<sup>4</sup> was a controversial choice for Bartók because Budapest remained a conservative bastion of Brahmsian aesthetics. On the other hand, Bartók continued the genre of the symphonic poem from Liszt, while following Brahms or any other composer so closely associated with

Vienna might have compromised his anti-Austrian stance. Nor would anything less daring have served to distinguish the young composer from Ernő Dohnányi (1877–1960) whose Brahmsian D minor Symphony had caused a sensation at its Budapest premiere the previous year.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Bartók's clear indebtedness to Strauss, the fact that in Hungary the symphonic poem was considered less characteristically Germanic than the symphony allowed the critic of the *Budapesti Hírlap* [Budapest News] to read national expression into Bartók's use of form:

[I]n Bartók there is something deliberate and wilful that springs from the depths of artistic conviction. Dohnányi proceeds in the footsteps and forms of the German masters Beethoven and Brahms, in these he produces perhaps a more refined and mature art, but [Bartók] creates form according to Hungarian feeling: wild, luxuriant, rhapsodic, not so sober and symmetrical that it requires the rules of the German symphony.<sup>6</sup>

More important than form in *Kossuth* was Bartók's reliance on widely recognized *verbunkos* figures: front-accented *short*–long rhythms, dotted figures and quick ornaments at ends of beats. These expressions of *magyarság* as well as Bartók's parody of Austria prompted even critics who bemoaned Strauss's modern influence to overlook it in the name of patriotism. While describing *Kossuth* as 'garish cacophony and an endless series of musical atrocities', the critic of *Magyarország* [Hungary] nevertheless concluded his review with a show of forgiveness:

Patriotic feeling and a strong affection for one's own race radiates from this work and that is why Béla Bartók's patriotic artistic attempt pleases us in spite of all its extravagance and exaggeration. We are living in eventful times, we must therefore doubly respect the kind of noble endeavour that has its roots in the soil of patriotism.<sup>7</sup>

The English reaction to the *Kossuth* premiere in Manchester some five weeks later was another story. English critics also objected to the Straussian dissonances, but for them Bartók's patriotism was no saving grace. In Budapest, Bartók's distortion of 'Gott erhalte' had been a particular hit, but in Manchester it was dismissed as cheap and 'laughable'. The work as a whole, English critics agreed, deserved its tepid reception.<sup>8</sup> Yet ironically enough, had it not been for Hans Richter's offer to conduct *Kossuth* in England, the Budapest Philharmonic, a conservative organization with a number of Austrian administrators, might not have given it a hearing.<sup>9</sup> This would not be the last time that a Hungarian audience would be able to hear a work of Bartók's only because it had been championed by someone abroad.

### 1905–1916: traitor

The failure of *Two Pictures* (1910) at its premiere in Budapest on 25 February 1913 demonstrated how little patience Hungarian audiences had for Bartók when he assumed a more cosmopolitan stance. Reviewing the concert for the *Budapesti Hírlap*, Emil Haraszti (1885–1958) described the composer's fall from grace:

It's been about ten years since the Philharmonic presented Béla Bartók's *Kossuth* Symphony. At that time the audience and critics eagerly expected the patriotically dressed young man from Debrecen [*sic*] to become a great Hungarian musician. A few of his later works – for example his Hungarian Suite [Suite No. 1, Op. 3, 1905] – seemed to fulfil this expectation. But then all at once Bartók became the slave of a foreign spirit. His strong, characteristic Hungarian individuality was all but extinguished by the absorbing foreign influence.<sup>10</sup>

The foreign influence to which Haraszti referred was twofold, encompassing Bartók's interest both in modern composers and in the folk music of non-Magyars. According to Haraszti the first movement of *Two Pictures* was a 'pallid copy of Debussy', while the second had 'noisy dynamics that recall Strauss'.<sup>11</sup> Worse than Bartók's imitations of West European composers was his interest in the folk music of neighbouring peoples. How could it be, Haraszti wondered in print, that Bartók, a professor at the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music, had absolutely no interest in Hungarian music? 'He has become the apostle of Czech, Romanian, Slovak and God knows what kind of music, only Hungarian music has been left high and dry'.<sup>12</sup> However inaccurate Haraszti's review, it seems to have reflected the opinion of much of the audience. Despite a claque of cheering admirers, a torrent of boos and hisses prevented Bartók from taking a bow.<sup>13</sup>

Haraszti's accusation that Bartók lacked interest in Hungarian music was false, but even if Bartók had restricted his inspiration exclusively to Hungarian folk music it is doubtful whether his *Two Pictures* would have received significantly more sympathy at home. While sheet-music publications of *magyar nóták* [folksy Hungarian popular songs] remained the staples of bourgeois Hungarian parlours, a run of only 500 copies of Bartók and Kodály's easy-to-play Hungarian Folksongs for voice and piano (1906) took thirty years to sell out.

This general lack of enthusiasm for Hungarian peasant music in Hungary was due in part to the social implications of Bartók's and Kodály's assertion that the music of Hungarian peasants differed fundamentally from that of urban 'gypsy' bands. By declaring that peasant

music rather than the well-worn clichés of 'gypsy' music should serve as the basis for a new national style, Bartók touched a raw political nerve. Since the early nineteenth century the Hungarian nobility and gentry had claimed themselves to be the sole proprietors of the Hungarian national spirit: their music consisted of *magyar nóták* and dance music in the *verbunkos* style frequently played by gypsies. To suggest that peasants, whom the upper classes did not even consider part of the nation, could hold the key to an authentic Hungarian identity in music was for many at least as unsettling for its social as for its artistic implications.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas the nationalist associations of the 'gypsy'-style inflections in *Kossuth*, and other works written before 1907, had made Bartók's Straussian style acceptable in Hungary, the incorporation of peasant music in *Two Pictures* and his other works of the period did little to make his music palatable. In fact, Bartók's preference for modal or pentatonically based peasant music over 'gypsy music' with its comforting tonal harmonies and familiar rhythmic clichés was often seen as a threat to the traditional concept of the Hungarian nation.

### 1917–1919: a break in the clouds

On 12 May 1917 Bartók was relieved from months of worry and nearly a decade of disappointing reception of his music by the unexpected success that greeted the Hungarian Opera's premiere of his ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1914–17). According to one report, no work had been received with so much enthusiasm at the Opera since its first staging of *Madama Butterfly*.<sup>15</sup> Although it might seem logical to conclude that this performance signalled a significant policy change at the Opera, which had refused to stage *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), in fact it only signalled the beginning of two short seasons of grudging support for Bartók. Two factors allowed the performance to succeed: the only non-Hungarian member of the Opera's conducting staff, the Italian Egisto Tango, tirelessly supported the production by arranging for an unprecedented thirty rehearsals and refusing to be intimidated by resentful members of the orchestra; and Béla Balázs, author of the scenario, resourcefully took over the direction when the Opera's stage director left the production in protest. Thus, for the first time since *Kossuth*, Bartók's orchestral music was heard in a careful and sympathetic rendition. That under the proper conditions Bartók could gain a truly popular success in Hungary suggests the extent to which the country's most prestigious, state-funded musical organizations had been tacitly sabotaging the reception of his music.

Among the reviews of *The Wooden Prince* one could still find the

accusation that in his modernity Bartók had completely abandoned any trace of *magyarság*, but this criticism was rare.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps inspired by the overwhelming audience reaction, even Izor Béldi, notorious for having called for aspirin after the premiere of the Suite No. 2, Op. 4 (1905–07), was moved to proclaim that ‘Bartók will play a major role in Hungarian music drama with great and enduring works’.<sup>17</sup> More significant than Béldi’s parroting of public opinion was one of Antal Molnár’s (1890–1983) earliest writings on Bartók. In this thoughtful review, Molnár made a case for Bartók as a symbol of a progressive ideal to be imitated by Hungarian society.<sup>18</sup> This would become the leading credo of the liberal Hungarian press for years to come – from 1919 to 1935 this thought would be repeated consistently, more often than either the Philharmonic or the Opera would perform Bartók’s music.

### 1920s: a radical vision for the nation

As a member of the alliance that had been defeated in the First World War, Hungary at once gained its independence from Austria and, at the peace treaty signed at Trianon in 1920, lost two-thirds of its territory. The thrust of Hungarian nationalism changed from separatism to irredentism, the goal of which was to regain Transylvania and the part of Slovakia that had belonged to Hungary before the war. In post-Trianon Hungary, Bartók shone as a beacon of internationalism for his openness to modern West European influences and to the folk music of all the peoples of the former Hungary. We know of the symbolic importance of Bartók’s work primarily from the music criticism of Aladár Tóth (1898–1968), Antal Molnár and Sándor Jemnitz (1890–1963), three of the most respected writers on music in Hungary between the world wars. For them and for a small but significant circle of artists and intellectuals, Bartók’s music came to represent an enlightened, multi-ethnic vision of a modern nation capable of holding its own among the great European cultures and even surpassing them through a synthesis of Eastern peasant culture and Western sophistication. These idealistic critics saw Bartók’s music as a means of uplifting Hungarian society by teaching it about itself; and, by advocating the notion of Bartók’s music as an embodiment of an idealized Hungarian culture, they hoped to help bring that culture into being.

A regular feature of Tóth’s annual commentaries on the Budapest concert season for the progressive journal *Nyugat* [West] were his laments over ‘popular taste’ and his chastisement of the country’s premiere musical organizations for their neglect of Bartók. As he put it in spring



1923: 'It is totally unacceptable that the Philharmonic Society indifferently turns its back on the greatest Hungarian composer: on Béla Bartók . . . We demand that [the Philharmonic] not serve 'popular taste' in its work, but educate and direct its public'.<sup>19</sup> The Philharmonic Society and the Opera, the most frequent objects of Tóth's attacks, were upper-crust institutions. Accusing them of betraying their patriotic mission to 'educate and direct the public' by pandering to common taste, Tóth implicitly condemned the members of middle- and upper-class society who saw music as entertainment rather than as moral edification. More was at stake for Tóth, who believed that an understanding of Bartók's music would lead the audience out of what he saw as a superficial appreciation of art and guide them to a more modern understanding of *magyarság*.

Although the country's musical establishments were notoriously conservative, the neglect of Bartók in Hungary throughout much of the 1920s was not solely due to his status as a modernist composer. Already in the 1910s there had been years in which his orchestral music had been heard less frequently in Budapest than Stravinsky's, and this was sometimes true in the twenties as well. Thus when János Hammerschlag described *The Wooden Prince* in 1917, he compared it to the music of Stravinsky, with which he seems to have expected his Budapest audience to be familiar.<sup>20</sup> In 1926 the Budapest Philharmonic acknowledged Stravinsky's celebrity throughout Europe by mounting an entire evening of his works, something no Hungarian orchestra had yet done for Bartók. The tendency for the Opera and Philharmonic to promote foreign contemporaries over Bartók (the Philharmonic especially favoured Respighi in the twenties) demonstrated Hungary's sense of cultural inferiority, the assumption that imported goods, especially from the West, were superior to domestic products. But it also reflected the fact that these composers posed no particular political challenge in Hungary, while Bartók's music, for many, represented an uncomfortably novel conception of *magyarság*.

However new and uncomfortable it may have been, Bartók's *magyarság* did, nevertheless, allow Hungarian critics to hail him over Stravinsky. Reviewing the Hungarian premiere of Bartók's First Piano Concerto (1926), Tóth tied its barbarism to an expression of nationality, which also enabled a defence of Bartók against the threat of Stravinsky's 'neoclassical' style: 'Stravinsky's barbarism was merely a backdrop that he abandoned when he approached the refined concentration of French neoclassicism. The more "classical" Bartók is, however, the more . . . complicated, the more "barbaric", all the more "Asia"'.<sup>21</sup> Here, scare quotes around the words barbaric and Asia help signal that Tóth was not merely invoking *The Rite of Spring*. For Hungarians the words 'barbaric' and 'Asia' would have

conjured up images of the ancient Magyar tribes of the central Asian steppe, suggesting that Bartók's brutally percussive style was inherently Hungarian. When Antal Molnár argued that the inherent humanity of folk music 'raise[d] Bartók's Concerto above the phenomenon of fashionable "neoclassicism";<sup>22</sup> he was arguing, like Tóth, that Bartók's modernism was deeply rooted in his native soil.

While Bartók's apologists in Budapest praised the First Piano Concerto for what they considered its uniquely Hungarian synthesis of the ancient and the modern, foreign critics found the same features unconvincing. Although Bartók quoted no folk music in the work, Frankfurt reviewer Theodor W. Adorno dismissed the First Concerto as a throwback to 'naive folklorism' in which 'national themes are adorned with dissonances'.<sup>23</sup> A Dutch critic blamed its lukewarm reception in Rotterdam on what he regarded an unsuccessful combination of aesthetics:

We cannot condemn the audience in its judgement . . . In his Piano Concerto [Bartók] made use of lessons from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and even *Petrushka* but his mentality is different; his tools are not in agreement with his temperament, which is still Romantic. So there is a gulf between the mode of expression and the content; for this reason the piece is not convincing.<sup>24</sup>

Tóth's and Molnár's criticism notwithstanding, most of the Hungarian audience appears to have shared the negative opinion of the foreign critics. According to a report in the *Budapesti Hírlap*: 'The public at tonight's premiere [of Bartók's First Piano Concerto] was perplexed. They did not understand the piece, they scolded, belittled, mocked it . . . With few exceptions, even [Bartók's] supporters voiced only banal commonplaces'.<sup>25</sup>

The 1920s saw the emergence of Bartók as a major international force in contemporary music, with performances of his First Violin Sonata (1921) in France and England in 1921, and the Dance Suite (1923) at the ISCM concert in Prague in 1925 and throughout Germany during the 1925–26 season. In 1928 Philadelphia's Musical Fund Society awarded its first prize to the Third String Quartet (1927). Yet Bartók was increasingly frustrated by his treatment at home, typified by the Hungarian Opera's refusal to produce *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–19) or to revive his other dramatic works.

### 1930s: homecoming

By 6 May 1930 Bartók had grown so weary of his shabby reception in Hungary that he refused to give concerts in Budapest for nearly four years:<sup>26</sup>

I do not, I cannot play my own works in Budapest . . . Of course, neither is there any sense in my playing my own works abroad, but I do it regardless of how people behave towards us [me]. I have nothing to do with them. But in Budapest I expect something different from what I receive – and I am not able to endure this in any other way than by withdrawing completely.<sup>27</sup>

While Bartók maintained that he was received equally poorly in Budapest and abroad, in the first half of the 1930s the Hungarian 'indifference' to his achievements was so pointed as to border on official censorship. Even Bartók's return to the Budapest concert stage in January 1934 marked only a partial recovery from his disillusionment earlier in the decade for he continued to refuse to play his own recent compositions in public there until May 1937.

A telling example of the gap between Bartók's high world renown (not necessarily equated with popularity) and his relative neglect in Hungary in the early 1930s was the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, 25 March 1931. While the French government awarded Bartók the Legion of Honour, the Hungarian government let the occasion pass. The Hungarian Opera, however, did offer a greeting of sorts – two days after Bartók's birthday it announced the cancellation of what was to have been the Hungarian premiere of *The Miraculous Mandarin*.<sup>28</sup> Appalled by the official neglect and mistreatment Bartók had been suffering, Sándor Jemnitz published a long tribute to the composer in the leftist paper *Népszava* [People's Word]. Jemnitz claimed that Bartók was ignored in Hungary for political reasons – more specifically, because he refused to pander to public sentiment by exploiting the power of 'pathetic-patriotic terminology' (read: 'gypsy music') to stir up irredentist nationalism.<sup>29</sup>

Oblivious to the political implications of Bartók's preference for peasant music over Hungarian 'gypsy'-style music, foreign critics in the 1930s were often simply relieved that the folk elements in Bartók's music sometimes made him more accessible than other modernists. An all-Bartók concert on 29 February 1932 in Glasgow featuring a number of folk-music transcriptions garnered three rave reviews all reporting an enthusiastic public. The critic Montague Smith wrote that Bartók's use of folk music made him 'less abstract than Schönberg [*sic*] and less dry and cunning than Stravinsky; [and] more human than either one'.<sup>30</sup>

So, while Bartók could wryly observe that instead of being awarded the Legion of Honour he would have preferred more performances of his music in Paris, his relation to foreign musical institutions never hit the low point it had reached in Hungary by the early thirties.<sup>31</sup> 'I unfortunately have no influence' at home, he grumbled to a German acquaintance in spring 1934: 'my relations with our Opera are very bad, with Hubay [director of the Music Academy] utterly bad, with Dohnányi

[conductor of the Philharmonic] very chilly, with the government quite bad, and I am on the verge of having a quarrel with the Radio, though we have never been on particularly friendly terms'.<sup>32</sup>

Although it would take several years for Bartók to recover from the blows dealt his pride by Hungarian indifference, his position did begin to improve slowly a few months after he penned this unhappy letter. The first sign was the government's approval, dated 27 July 1934, of his petition to transfer from his position of professor of piano at the Music Academy to that of folk-music researcher at the Academy of Sciences. While his solitary work transcribing Hungarian folk music might at first seem to be a symbol of withdrawal, it was in fact a harbinger of other forms of government funding that soon followed. In January 1935 the Opera unveiled a new production of *The Wooden Prince*, in which the choreography was informed by Hungarian folk dance;<sup>33</sup> and on 16 May 1935 Bartók was elected to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – the first musician ever admitted to that select body. The 1936–37 season saw a new production of *Bluebeard's Castle*, which, after a conspicuous absence of seventeen years, joined *The Wooden Prince* in a double-bill. Autumn 1936 also saw the belated but well-received Hungarian premiere of *Cantata profana* (1930), and on 10 December of that year, a Hungarian orchestra finally presented an all-Bartók programme in Pest. At this concert, Bartók ended his moratorium on playing his own works in Budapest with a performance of the Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra Op. 1 (1904). By spring 1937 the sense that he was better appreciated even wooed Bartók back to performing his more recent compositions. Aladár Tóth, always quick to blame Hungarians for neglecting Bartók, was forced to admit: 'We have perhaps never felt the power of Bartók's music to be so redeeming, so liberating as this year, when our great composer's works have been performed by ever greater numbers of our singers and musicians'.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the sheer increase in the number of performances, there was a change in the attitude of the Hungarian audience towards Bartók's music. Reviewing the all-Bartók orchestral programme, Tóth observed:

The biggest, epoch-making achievement of Thursday's Bartók concert is that Bartók's voice was understood by the portion of the Hungarian middle class whose politics, school, societal upbringing and 'social' taste had until now artificially kept it away from the truly life-providing geniuses of living *magyarság* – from Ady, Babits, Móricz, Kodály and most importantly . . . from Bartók . . . This programme did not only include Bartók's 'more easily understood' youthful works . . . but the *Two Pictures* and Bartók's 'most revolutionary', most difficult, dense masterwork, the *Cantata profana*. And lo! the first hearing of this masterwork immediately,

deeply and completely captivated Hungarian ears and hearts that had been nurtured for so long only by gypsy music, [*magyar*] *nóták* and hit tunes from operettas . . .<sup>35</sup>

What had changed? For one thing, Hungarian nationalism had. Throughout the 1930s Hungarians were developing new expressions for their cultural identity in response to growing nationalism in Germany. Ironically for Bartók, a government initiative begun by fascist Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös in 1934 led to increased budgetary support of projects related to folk culture, ranging from the scientifically oriented research of Bartók and Kodály and a group of sociologists known as *falukutatók* [village researchers], to an organization of tourist-oriented 'folk ensembles' called the *Gyöngyösbokréta* [Pearly Bouquet]. While so-called gypsy music never lost its patriotic associations, peasant music was now officially allocated a place in the nationalist scheme. Although Bartók always distanced himself from right-wing politics, under these conditions, as both a well-known expert in folk music and the only widely recognized composer representing Hungary abroad, Bartók himself emerged as an emblem of *magyarság* for a larger segment of society at home.

Perhaps the most important by-product of Bartók's reconciliation with Hungary in the late 1930s was a slight softening and renewed 'magyarization' of his compositional style. The clearest example of this change is the Violin Concerto (1937–38), which Bartók wrote for his friend Zoltán Székely, a Hungarian violinist living in Holland. In this work, Bartók returns not only to *verbunkos* gestures, the mainstay of Hungarian Romanticism, but also to a more Romantic approach to tonality. Although Székely was unable to play the work in Hungary before the war, he did give six performances of it in Holland (1939–40). At the premiere Dutch critics familiar with such gritty works as the two Piano Concertos, Sonatas for Violin and Piano, and Fourth and Fifth String Quartets, made the Violin Concerto's surprising accessibility the subject of their reviews. While they consistently praised the work, they also wondered out loud whether Bartók's new style should be judged as progress or regression, strength or weakness.<sup>36</sup> Camouflaged in these reviews are the first hints of the charge of artistic compromise that would for a time dominate the discourse about Bartók after World War II.<sup>37</sup>

To those unaware of its Hungarian subtext, Bartók's rapprochement with the society he had struggled within and against could indeed sound like a retreat from the ideals that had both made his work difficult for most audiences to love and secured a place for him among the highest echelon of modernist composers. But inside Hungary the notion of compromise in connection with Bartók's life and work was unthinkable in the late 1930s.

Even Béla Bangha, a Jesuit priest who in 1937 accused Bartók and Kodály of corrupting the nation's youth with their dissonant folksong arrangements, never invoked the idea of artistic compromise.<sup>38</sup>

### 1940: farewell

Certainly the most potent symbol of Bartók's moral integrity was his decision to leave Hungary for the United States in 1940. Writing about Bartók's farewell concert to a standing-room-only crowd of the country's leading musicians and intellectuals at the Music Academy on 8 October 1940, Sándor Jemnitz, instead of commenting on either the quality of Bartók's playing or his compositions, addressed the question: 'what does it mean that a great master *lives among us* . . .? He concludes: 'This is not the time for details, when with tearful eyes we bid farewell to the whole thing – to Béla Bartók living among us. Those who ardently applauded him took a stand next to these symbols: the crystalline purity of human and artistic character'.<sup>39</sup> Had Aladár Tóth not already fled to Sweden to protect his Jewish wife, pianist Annie Fischer, he might have expressed the symbolism of Bartók's last appearance in Hungary even more eloquently. But it is clear that while Jemnitz's review is an extreme case befitting an extreme circumstance, ever since *Kossuth* Bartók's reception in Hungary was governed as much by what he was seen to represent as it was by the sound of his music.

It is ironic that Bartók's late-found peace with Hungary, his spiritual homecoming as it were, should have come so soon before his physical departure. Grimmer still was the fact that his belated reconciliation was due in part to the same government policies that ultimately forced him to leave. In addition to all the horrors that came with being allied to Nazi Germany, the Hungarian government, whose recognition of folk culture had seemed a positive step only a few years before, had quickly learned to exploit it. By 1940, folk music had begun to be enlisted in the propaganda war that supported Hungarian irredentism and helped propel Hungary into World War II.<sup>40</sup> In the past, Bartók had faced adversity at home by withdrawing from the public arena; now his symbolic power had become too great to allow him the anonymity he would have needed to survive in a hostile environment.

Despite his many successes and failures throughout Europe, only in Hungary was Bartók's reception so deeply and consistently tied to social questions often considered beyond the scope of abstract artistic expres-

sion. It is a testimony to the strength of Hungary's need for symbols of *magyarság* that Bartók, who for much of his life aggressively challenged his country's self-image, should have become, in his countrymen's eyes, a reflection of it as well.