

Introduction

AMANDA BAYLEY

Béla Bartók's compositional output defies straightforward categorization. He is often bracketed with Hindemith and Stravinsky as a composer of non-serial music during the first half of the twentieth century, rather than with the twelve-tone composers of the Second Viennese School. Yet what sets him apart from all these composers is his interest in folk music and the assimilation of folk- and art-music influences in his works. His lifelong commitment to folk music, not just its collection and transcription but also its analysis and systematic classification, is unsurpassed.

This book brings together many leading exponents in Bartók research and endeavours to provide a concise yet comprehensive insight into current thoughts and ideas surrounding the historical, cultural and musical appreciation of his works. Even fifty-five years after the composer's death important documents continue to be translated from Hungarian to English, some of which challenge long-standing interpretations of cultural and political issues surrounding the music. The diversity of approaches to Bartók research is demonstrated in this volume through historical, performance-orientated and analytical perspectives within the organization of material into three main sections: 'Contexts', 'Profiles of the music' and 'Reception'.

For Bartók there were a great many political and social issues that underlay his musical philosophy. Lynn Hooker opens the first section of this book with a presentation of the political, social and cultural circumstances that surrounded Bartók in Hungary from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. This extends to include the eminent musicians and literary scholars with whom the composer shared some important affinities during this rapidly changing modern world.

A major contribution to the shaping of Bartók's artistic aesthetic was his folk-music research, the extent and significance of which are explained by Stephen Erdely. A map showing the places corresponding to the years that Bartók collected folksongs is accompanied by interesting accounts of his experiences and observations that influenced his investigation of musical folklore as a scientific discipline. Since his engagement with folk music is a recurrent theme of the book his folksong-collecting expeditions and publications are listed alongside his own compositions in the

[1]

Chronology. A list of his folk-music studies, which were not all published in Bartók's lifetime, are cited as edited collections within the bibliography.

The second and largest part of the book examines Bartók's compositions grouped according to musical genre. Changing trends in his musical style are demonstrated in relation to the cultural and national issues elucidated in the first section: David Cooper pursues the contradictions and challenges that the composer faced by considering the changing emphasis of nationalist and modernist ideas throughout his orchestral music. Further conflicts are revealed in Bartók's increasingly complex development of folk material within the vocal repertoire: Rachel Beckles Willson shows how he combines the rustic nature of folksong with the Western art-music idiom.

In order that genuine folk music might reach as wide an audience as possible Bartók made many arrangements of folk melodies for instruments as well as for voice, most of which are for his own instrument, the piano. As concert pianist and piano teacher he was in an ideal position to convey the firm ideas he had about the interpretation of his own works as well as those of Classical composers, and Victoria Fischer shows how he developed his notation to support these ideas. Other contributors, including Susan Bradshaw on the piano recital repertoire and chamber music, also take Bartók's notation as a starting point to explain stylistic changes in the music and to understand the Austro-Hungarian tradition Bartók inherited in the context of other contemporary developments. Even though the piano was his own instrument it is questionable whether he adapted folk music in its most intimate or innovative way for this medium. The new ways he found for prescribing folk elements for stringed instruments, discussed in the violin works by Peter Laki and in the String Quartets and string orchestra pieces by Amanda Bayley, are arguably more adventurous than the piano works and, perhaps, come closest to the real folk sounds he was trying to imitate.

Very little help is available for understanding the composer at work since Bartók was a private man who never liked to reveal details about his compositional processes. Carl Leafstedt portrays this side of Bartók's character through his analysis of the theme of loneliness in the stage works and in relation to literary contemporaries. Two contributors, Nicky Losseff and Peter Laki, also consider the solitary figure of Bartók as composer and performer. From different perspectives they interpret the image of 'Self' and 'Other' in, respectively, the Piano Concertos, and the works for violin and piano.

Changes that have taken place in Bartók reception throughout the twentieth century are dealt with in the last section of the book. The fact that his music could not be neatly categorized by critics as atonal, serial or

even entirely nationalist (since the breadth of his folksong studies made him more of an internationalist) led to a number of strong criticisms of him. The problem for many of his contemporary critics was that he was neither a modernist nor a nationalist, because he did not exploit chromaticism to the extreme of serialism, and because his fascination with the folk music of many countries was so diverse that, in their eyes, he rejected his native Hungarianness. David E. Schneider reviews the intelligentsia's thoughts on Bartók in Europe during the composer's lifetime, especially concerning the definition of nationalism, while Malcolm Gillies details Bartók's uncomfortable lifestyle and controversial reception in America from 1940 until his death in 1945.

The importance of Bartók's music as a model for future composers was hotly contested in the immediate post-war years among Hungarian composers and musicians. Danielle Fosler-Lussier assesses the influence of both Communist and non-Communist political propaganda in determining the subsequent popularity of his music, showing how international influences contributed to Bartók's eventual celebration as a national composer.

Controversy has also governed the interpretation of Bartók's music from an analytical viewpoint. As a result of his music fitting no neat, single category, predetermined analytical techniques cannot be attributed to it. Consequently a variety of analytical responses has emerged across Europe and the United States which Ivan F. Waldbauer surveys, focusing specifically on pitch organization.

Bartók's contribution to twentieth-century music has not only been in composition and ethnomusicology. The release of recordings of his own playing has more recently fuelled debates on performance practice in twentieth-century music. With consideration of advances in recording technology throughout the twentieth century, Vera Lampert evaluates performances of Bartók's instrumental music – including his own – and examines some of the issues of interpretation and performance touched upon by other contributors.

The culmination of different approaches of the individual authors together with the variety of sources examined, some hitherto unexplored, defines this book as a new synthesis of the circumstances surrounding Bartók's life, developments in his music and changes in its reception. However the composer is perceived, and regardless of labels attached to his music, his continuing status as an influential figure within twentieth-century music is assured.

