

PART I

**Contexts: political, social and cultural**



# 1 The political and cultural climate in Hungary at the turn of the twentieth century

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Open an introductory music history textbook at the section on Béla Bartók and you will find references to his deep patriotism, his folk-music research, and the relationships between these interests and his compositions. What you will not usually find, despite the weight placed on Bartók's connections to his environment, are many references to the people in that environment other than fellow composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) and the nebulous 'folk' – sometimes only the folk. While Schoenberg is associated with both Berg and Webern, and Stravinsky with Rimsky-Korsakov and Diaghilev, Bartók is usually depicted in English texts as an isolated naïf from the provinces. Since folk art and work influenced by it are often viewed as nostalgic, we could conclude that Bartók was a conservative longing for the past.

The historical record shows us something far more complex. After about 1904, Bartók seems to have thought of himself as much more of a radical than a reactionary. He stopped going to church, attempted to shock wealthy hosts, was called an anarchist by his friends, and railed against misconceptions of the peasantry.<sup>1</sup> The heritage of nineteenth-century Hungary, the political environment of early twentieth-century Budapest, the resulting polarization of intellectual and cultural groups, and the progressive musicians with whom he associated (including prominent Jewish musicians), all had an impact on his views. His symphonic poem, *Kossuth*, of 1903 was the musical culmination of the chauvinist-nationalist views he held in his conservatoire years and immediately thereafter. However, by 1906 and the publication, with Kodály, of *Hungarian Folksongs*, he had shifted towards a more politically radical and aesthetically cosmopolitan stance, and was interested in combining symbols of Hungarian identity with modernist approaches like those of artists in Berlin, Vienna and Paris. Bartók's provincial background was conservative in the way it looked at national and cultural issues, but the literary figures he encountered in Budapest, such as poet Endre Ady (1877–1919) and aesthetician György Lukács (1885–1971), in addition to Kodály and other musical figures, expanded his outlook. (Judit Frigyesi's recent book *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* explores Bartók's literary connections in detail.)<sup>2</sup>

[7] By bringing together the political, cultural and musical issues of the day,

we can paint a picture of the sphere in which Bartók and his colleagues worked and the scope of their challenge to the traditional, conservative notions of Hungarianness and Hungarian music. This portrait will also explore some of the ambiguities of Bartók's place in this sphere. What follows is a survey of issues at the fore in Hungary's political, cultural and musical life during Bartók's early career.

### **Turn-of-the-century Hungary: paradox and possibility**

The Hungary of Bartók's youth was fraught with contradictions. After the landmark 1867 Compromise, it was both a colonial department of the Habsburg Empire, still subject to Vienna's control, and an imperial power in its own right, with broad jurisdiction in local matters over a population which was only half Magyar (ethnic Hungarian).<sup>3</sup> Together, the Compromise and Hungary's Nationalities Law of 1868 provided other ethnic groups (the largest groups were, in alphabetical order, Croats, Germans, Romanians, Ruthenians, Serbs and Slovaks) with civil rights guarantees before the law and in education; these laws followed the liberal principles of the ruling party and earned approval from watchful Western interests. However, these minority groups also had their own national aspirations, which were not taken into consideration in the Compromise nor in the Nationalities Law.<sup>4</sup> Nationality was determined by native language and not blood, so the prominent presence of Jews in society was not reflected in the census at all but was instead absorbed into other groups – mostly the German and majority Magyar categories. Furthermore, although the Liberal Party ruled the country for almost forty years after the Compromise and passed some important laws asserting legal equality for citizens, there was constant tension between the theory and practice of these laws. Some Liberal politicians, such as Ferenc Deák, the chief negotiator of the Compromise, and Sándor Wekerle, the first prime minister not of noble blood (1894–95), pursued civil rights issues such as freedom of religion, universal secret suffrage, and minority rights, considering them crucial to the modernization – the 'Westernization' – of the country. Other Liberal Party leaders considered issues of increasing equality and civil rights far subordinate or even counter to Hungary's more important goal of becoming a truly Magyar nation-state. This priority was due to the dominant role of the Hungarian nobility in local and national politics, from the wealthy magnates that dominated the upper echelons of government down to the middle nobility and impoverished landless gentry who made up most of the county bureaucracy.<sup>5</sup> The nobles considered themselves to embody the Hungarian national ideal, and their hold on power

ultimately led to further entrenchment of conservative Magyar nationalism in the government.

The Liberal ideal was overshadowed not only by nationalist ideals but also by class prejudice in an extremely hierarchical society. The government practised economic *laissez-faire* that allowed tremendous growth in some cities, but such keystones of liberalism as universal secret suffrage and freedom of religion, which might cause a loss of control over the masses, were never fully embraced. The wide latitude Hungary granted its county officials, as well as the administrative authority maintained by the Roman Catholic Church through to 1895, allowed ample opportunity for abuse. For example, the threat of legal reprisal encouraged many peasants to ‘volunteer’ to work for officials, just as they would have had they still been serfs. Poet and journalist Endre Ady raged against the continued poor living conditions and abuse of peasants’ rights in several newspaper articles.<sup>6</sup> Bartók commented during his folksong collecting trips on the resentment the peasants felt for the gentry administrators.

In the sphere of religion, before the passage of the 1894–95 secularization law, the Catholic Church held a great deal of influence in its role as keeper of the official records of births, deaths and marriages. In this role it could legally decide the religion of children of mixed Protestant–Catholic or Orthodox–Catholic marriages, and it effectively banned marriages between Jews and Christians, despite the official emancipation of the Jews in 1867. A 1907 school reform law made elementary education free, greatly increasing rates of literacy in the younger generations; but to receive funding, schools had to teach a certain number of hours in Hungarian, use certain approved textbooks and implement ‘programmes inculcating an “exemplary patriotic attitude”’.<sup>7</sup> These requirements opened the reform law to complaints from ethnic minorities within Hungary and to criticism from Western European observers as well. Furthermore, religious denominations were so often divided along ethnic lines that denomination and ethnicity were sometimes assumed to be equivalent. For this reason, oppression of religious as well as ethnic minorities was aided, indeed encouraged, by many powerful members of the Magyar Nation.

At the same time as the countryside was governed in a quasi-feudal manner, the capital city of Budapest – created by the merging of Pest, Buda and Óbuda in 1873 – was growing and modernizing at lightning pace. Large-scale milling of Hungary’s grain crops, agricultural support industries and printing, among other industries, mushroomed.<sup>8</sup> Budapest developed an electric tram around the Körút (Ring-street) and the first underground rail system in continental Europe, going under the newly redesigned Sugár Avenue, sometimes called the ‘Champs Elysées of Budapest’. By the 1890s this grand thoroughfare had been renamed

Andrássy Avenue after Count Gyula Andrássy, the first Hungarian prime minister. The new underground line began near the fashionable shopping district of Váci Street near the Danube, and its stops included the opera house, opened in 1884; the music academy at Vörösmarty Street, founded by Franz Liszt in 1875; and the splendid Heroes' Square monument celebrating the millennium of the arrival of the Magyar tribes in the Carpathian Basin. This monument also formed a gateway to the City Park (Városliget), home of a spa, a zoo and Gundel's Restaurant, where elegant visitors would come to experience the chef's famous blending of French and Hungarian cuisine. The underground line was but one sign of the city's success and modernity. Although Hungary as a whole lost about 1.2 million inhabitants to emigration (mostly to the United States) in the period 1869 to 1910, Budapest was booming faster than any city in Europe, with migrants streaming in from the depressed countryside. As World War I approached, the population of the capital was nearing one million (not counting suburbs) and Budapest was Europe's sixth largest city.

In a country that had no indigenous entrepreneurial middle class, non-Hungarians – Germans and especially Jews – were the driving force behind Hungary's economic growth of the late nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, Jews were only about 5 per cent of the population overall, but they made up 54 per cent of the country's businessmen, 43 per cent of its bankers and lenders, 12.5 per cent of its industrialists, 49 per cent of its doctors, and 45 per cent of its lawyers. In 1900, there were sixteen Jewish members of Parliament and two dozen Jewish professors at Budapest's universities. This success and the freedom that Hungary's generally liberal policies allowed in the cities inspired patriotic loyalty in this population. Hungarian Jews spoke a number of languages at the beginning of the nineteenth century, especially German and Yiddish, but as the century progressed, more and more of them adopted Hungarian as their native language. Many Magyarized their names and/or converted to Christianity. The wealthiest, such as the banker father of philosopher-aesthete György Lukács and the physician grandfather of writer Anna Lesznai, bought – or were granted – titles and/or estates, and even adopted some of the manners of the nobility.<sup>9</sup> Some prominent Jewish citizens felt that 'Those who had been homeless for millennia found a home on Hungarian soil'.<sup>10</sup> As the father of Bartók's librettist Béla Balázs (born Herbert Bauer) said to his son on his deathbed, they felt it their duty 'to root [themselves] firmly within the soil of the Hungarian homeland'.<sup>11</sup> And interestingly, the high property requirements for suffrage, preserved in large part to keep out ethnic minorities, empowered the new Jewish banking barons, though not, of course, the masses of Jews; meanwhile many of the socially 'superior' Magyar gentry had civil service jobs but no voting rights.

The ironies of this situation were reflected by the physical division of Budapest. The royal castle on the hill acted as a symbol of Buda's glorious feudal and national past, and of the continuing rule of the Habsburgs. Across the river, though, Pest, formerly a German-Jewish merchants' city, looked to a more cosmopolitan future. This side of the river was growing at a much faster rate, and the manufacturing and financial sectors that provided the economic engine for the city's growth and success were in Pest. Parliament moved from an older site on Castle Hill to an ornate new building on the Pest riverbank in 1896, and the new St Stephen's Basilica was completed in Pest in 1905. By 1900, five out of six residents of Budapest lived on the Pest side of the river, along with most of the industry; 21.5 per cent of the city's population and about 40 per cent of its voters were Jewish. Though many of the city's ethnically diverse inhabitants still preferred another language (especially German), an increasing percentage spoke Hungarian.<sup>12</sup>

The period after the Compromise of 1867 brought great prosperity to the city and to some of the people, but towards the turn of the century and just after, tensions resulting from economic inequities and social shifts increased. The agrarian nobility spent more and more time in the Casinos (clubs), cafés and night spots of Pest because nowhere else in Hungary could one enjoy more glittering entertainments; but they were reminded everywhere of the economic success of the new capitalists. (The Casinos were an exception, since they were heavily segregated.) To a nation that so idealized its tribal roots, considered itself a unified, agrarian society, and prided itself on its ancient and nearly impenetrable Asiatic language, modern, cosmopolitan and industrial Pest still seemed uneasily 'foreign'. Bartók and Kodály perceived this 'foreignness' as a significant problem for the city's musical life. There was increasing tension in Hungary over whether it should look to an idealized Magyar past for its model, or instead should reinvent itself as a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan society.

The 1896 Millennium Exhibition in Pest's City Park reflects this tension. The Magyar elite was especially swept up in this event, which celebrated the conquest of the Carpathian Basin by the eight Hungarian tribes migrating west from Asia in the year 896. To evoke Hungary's medieval and Baroque magnificence, those that could afford them wore elaborate 'dress Hungarian' uniforms which evoked the clothing of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hungarian nobility. Grand works of art were commissioned to celebrate the conquest, including the Heroes' Square monument, a centrepiece of the Exhibition, with its towering central sculpture of Árpád and the other Magyar chieftains that founded the Hungarian state. But some of these art works also show those who were conquered: the ancestors of the 'nationalities', Slavs and Romanians. Of the historical



**Figure 1.1** Detail from Árpád Feszty's panoramic 'The Arrival of the Conquering Magyars' (1896). Notice not only the triumphant conquering chieftains but also the littered bodies of the conquered.

paintings featured by the Exhibition, Árpád Feszty's enormous (120 metres long and 15 metres high) panorama entitled 'The Arrival of the Conquering Magyars' shows this most spectacularly (see Fig. 1.1). The Exhibition at some level also celebrated the oppression of the 'nationalities', who were understandably not as enthusiastic about this Exhibition.

A few items from the Exhibition catalogue almost acknowledge the different meanings of the celebration to different ethnic groups. The catalogue's author praises the 'idyllic simplicity' of 'Nationality Street at the Exhibition', where each 'nationality' seems to have been represented by only one house, and states that this exhibit reflects 'the ardent desire of the nation, that the different races inhabiting this country may always live in peace and harmony side by side, united in the love of the common fatherland'.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, though, Magyar peasants are showcased by representative dwellings from several different regions in 'Exhibition Village' – the title itself a veiled reminder that the Magyars are the real centre of this nation. Here, instead of 'idyllic simplicity', the author describes how this village 'gives a lively idea of the habits, dresses, mode of living etc. of the Hungarian [Magyar] people [in different parts of the country] ... permit-



ting to draw [sic] some favourable inferences for our future life as a nation'.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to a wilfully naïve and biased depiction of the 'nationality' situation and the aggrandizement of a partly mythological Magyar history, the Millennium Exhibition included monuments to Hungary's rapid modernization: pavilions of mining, milling, printing, hygiene, railways, commerce and others. The meteorological institute's pavilion, in the shape of a medieval castle but containing 'all the auxiliaries and instruments which . . . modern society demands',<sup>15</sup> embodied the Exhibition's schizophrenia between old and new and demonstrated the country's ambivalence about its direction.

### **Debates about Hungarian culture**

While the Magyar establishment presented a fairly one-sided picture of the past and present of Hungary within the Exhibition, the many factions of Hungarian society – Magyar and otherwise – carried on active debates over the direction the future should take. Much of this discourse was conducted in the press. Increased literacy provided the incentive for a dramatic increase in the printing industry, which became one of the largest industries in Hungary at the time of the Millennium Exhibition. Reams of newspapers, journals, books and monographs were devoted to the questions of nationalism and the 'nationalities', the most pressing issues of the day. Contributors to this river of ink included not just professional journalists, but also politicians. Baron Dezső Bánffy, the Liberal Party prime minister from 1895 to 1899, published his views in a number of articles, plus the book *Hungarian Nationality Politics*, which came out in 1903. Bánffy was an 'iron-fisted former high *ispán*'<sup>16</sup> from Transylvania who shows the degree to which the label 'Liberal' was stretched. Echoing the refrain 'for the establishment of a unified Magyar nation-state' countless times, this book touches on some of the favourite issues of Bánffy's premiership, such as the Magyarization of place names and personal names and the importance of education in Hungarian that emphasizes Hungarian patriotism. Bánffy also argued for the importance of putting loyalty to the Hungarian national idea above loyalty to religious denomination and the equation of chauvinism with patriotism, in addition to claiming that it was absurd even to try to follow the equal rights provisions of the Nationalities Law of 1868.

Though Bánffy's book came out well after he left office, similar ideas continued through ensuing governments as they sought to keep the minorities, peasantry and working classes in check. Member of Parliament

Ernő Baloghy was another nobleman-politician who fumed over what he saw as the destructive effect of the petty ‘nationalities’ on the progress of the noble Magyar nation and its culture; he published his arguments in the monograph *Magyar Culture and the Nationalities* in 1908. He based his ‘humanistic’ claims for the elevation of Magyar culture and the suppression of that of the ‘nationalities’ on the obvious superiority of Magyars and the need for the ‘brotherly protection of the Magyars’ in raising the ‘nationalities’ to their level.<sup>17</sup>

After discussing the deficiencies of each ‘nationality’ in turn, Baloghy attacks the suspicious ‘pseudo-humanism’ of the progressives which would promote the development of the cultures of all the different ‘nationalities’, and which asserts that ‘the nationalities’ individuality is suppressed here in Hungary’ through Hungarian government actions. Baloghy dismisses this claim as ‘not only nonsensical, but also dangerous’: the society would break down into various small groups with their different languages, weakening the stronger Magyar group and thereby the state as well, so that ‘completely certainly, another powerful nation would gobble us up into them, together with the small groups’.<sup>18</sup>

Others, however, such as the social-democrat sociologist (and sometime government official) Oszkár Jászi, the radical journalist Ignotus, and firebrand poet Endre Ady, sometimes called the ‘voice of his generation’, railed against reactionary tracts such as these. According to progressives and leftists, chauvinism was the mask used by the powerful, especially the big landowners, to avoid basic reforms such as universal suffrage, land reform and ordinary human rights. They also published their arguments, whether in newspapers; periodicals such as the social sciences journal *Huszadik Század* [Twentieth Century], which Jászi edited beginning in 1907, and the literary journal *Nyugat* [West], founded and edited by Ignotus (born Hugo Veigelsberg); monographs like Jászi’s 1908 *The Reform of Voting Rights and the Future of the Hungarians*; or literary works, such as Ady’s collections of poems and stories.

While *Nyugat* was probably best known for the literature it published, including many of Ady’s writings, it also included articles on cultural issues such as the nationality question and the definition of ‘Hungarianness’. These tended to the radical side, which drew criticism, eventually compelling Ignotus to write a response ‘About *Nyugat*’s Un-Hungariannesses’.<sup>19</sup> Ignotus also responded to Baloghy’s 254-page diatribe in *Nyugat*:

Each and every person has individual needs, interests and ambitions, and without the freedom and satisfaction of these they do not prosper, nor can the society prosper. The nationalities, the races and denominations . . . enhance the amalgam with different contributions, from which the new Hungarian people must be created . . . Unfortunately, . . . industry, trade and

the accompanying urban life have been considered foreign in character . . . [According to this view,] in language, literature, art, we should experience [only] the specifically folk-like as completely Hungarian . . .

It would be worthwhile to assemble into a mosaic some of what they have called not Hungarian in the last ten years . . . Budapest is not Hungarian. The centralization of administration is not Hungarian. The stock exchange is not Hungarian. Socialism is not Hungarian . . . The Secession and Symbolism are not Hungarian. It is not Hungarian to leave the [religious] denominations out of education . . . Irony is not Hungarian . . . Universal suffrage is not Hungarian. And above all: that which our conditions do not [already] grant us is not Hungarian. . . Things of this sort can often be read, still more often heard . . .

And here is the dilemma. How should we refer to the quality which gives every happiness to our culture, if we have to brand all the terms of this happiness as dangerous, looking at the same culture? And is this condemnation of inevitable manifestations of assimilation a stimulation to assimilation?<sup>20</sup>

The vastly different interpretations of Hungary's cultural situation led to increasing conflict over the necessary solution to its problems. As Ignotus illustrates, any progressive solution was liable to be labelled as anti-Hungarian by the chauvinists. As Jews, Ignotus and Jászai were particularly vulnerable to this label. Though some assimilated Jews could be more chauvinistically nationalist than many Magyars, radicals were labelled Jewish just as capitalists were.

That not all radicals were Jewish is demonstrated by Ady, who came from a family of impoverished Magyar nobility. In addition to moody symbolist poems, he wrote articles questioning the current atmosphere of Hungarian society, reviews praising Jászai's works, short stories which implicitly criticized ethnic bigotry, and political tracts in verse form, such as 'The Magyar Jacobin Song':

Why can't a thousand faint desires  
Turn into one powerful will at last?  
For Hungarian, Romanian, or Slav,  
Our sorrows have always been one.

For our shame, our suffering  
Has been akin for over a thousand years.  
Why can't we meet boldly  
On the barricades of the spirit?

...

When will we unite?  
When will we say something of importance,  
We, the oppressed, the broken down,  
Magyar and not Magyar?<sup>21</sup>

As Balogh and Bánffy did, Ady urges unity; but rather than urging the assimilation of the minority nationalities into the grand successful Magyar race, Ady's tone is one of revolution: all the downtrodden, whether of the Nation or of the 'nationalities', should revolt against an oppressive power structure.

### **Bartók's Hungarian culture**

Bartók's family reflected some of the ethnic diversity of the country. His mother, Paula Voit Bartók, was ethnically German, though she spoke Hungarian fluently; his father, Béla Sr., considered himself thoroughly Hungarian, though his mother was from a (Roman Catholic) Serbian family. Their oldest child, Béla Jr., was born on 25 March 1881, in the town of Nagyszentmiklós, on the south-eastern fringe of the Hungarian plain, an area which is now in Romania. The composer's father was a professional, the director of a school of agriculture who founded a journal on the topic. As Tibor Tallián points out, though, 'professional distinction hardly ever led to greater social prestige . . . in provincial Hungary'. Tallián describes how the senior Bartók assumed some of the social airs of the petty nobility [gentry]: he 'created for himself – arbitrarily, as far as is known – a gentry rank with the title *Szuhafői* . . . even design[ing] a coat of arms'.<sup>22</sup> His contradictory professional and social ambitions reflect the contradictions of the time. His composer son was also drawn at times to the family's presumed noble rank: he signed his adolescent manuscripts with the name 'Béla von Bartók', and his second marriage in 1923 was 'concluded . . . under the title *szuhafői Bartók Béla* (Béla Bartók of *Szuhafő*)'.<sup>23</sup>

After Béla Sr. died in 1888, Paula Bartók moved the family around the fringes of the country for five years until she found a permanent job at the teacher training college in Pozsony (now Bratislava), a previous capital of Habsburg Hungary with large German and Slovak, as well as Hungarian, populations. In Pozsony, Bartók studied with László Erkel, son of the 'founder of Hungarian opera', Ferenc Erkel. He also became acquainted with composer and pianist Ernő Dohnányi, who preceded Bartók both as organist at the Pozsony grammar school and as a student at the Academy of Music in Budapest. After Bartók's years in the hinterlands, Dohnányi was the first pianist that Bartók got to know who was more proficient than he was, even at such a young age.<sup>24</sup> This is but one indication of how far the musical culture of Budapest and Pozsony stood above that of the small towns Bartók had lived in during the previous five years.

Although Bartók's musical upbringing was purely German, parts of his background leaned towards Hungarian nationalism. In the year of the

Millennium Exhibition, one of his uncles, Béla Voit, sent him a fragment of the sword-hilt that he had carried as a first lieutenant in the 1848 Hungarian Revolution against the Habsburgs, an event that had gathered enormous nationalist symbolism in the intervening years. Bartók and his mother travelled to Budapest to visit the Exhibition.<sup>25</sup> His musical world also had some nationalist flavour to it: his first public concert in Pozsony was on the occasion of the Millennium celebration of 1896, and he played in a concert in 1898 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution. He turned down a scholarship to the Hochschule der Musik in Vienna to attend the Academy of Music in Budapest, probably at least in part because of his nationalist leanings.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Budapest also proved too German for Bartók's tastes. Bartók and Kodály, who both arrived in Budapest from the countryside just before the turn of the century, were frustrated by the extent to which German was still the language of culture, particularly musical culture. Many prominent musicians in Budapest, including many of the Academy's faculty (e.g. János Koessler (born Hans, 1853–1926), their composition teacher) barely spoke Hungarian, and German was the preferred language of most of the predominantly German and Jewish audience as well. Bartók himself was fluent in German, but as German was the language of Austria, the oppressor, it was considered a hindrance to Hungary's development and its hope for eventual independence. (Even French was more acceptable since France did not rule over Hungary, and French cultural influence was sometimes sought as an alternative to German influence.<sup>27</sup>) Kodály expressed his disapproval of the prevalence of German when he said in a 1932 lecture that 'Knowing German was not the prerequisite for playing classical music, but the fact that this had been entrusted to Germans had grave consequences for the development of Hungarian music.'<sup>28</sup>

Bartók's letters from 1901 and 1902 contain a number of complaints about the use of German at social gatherings or the prevalence of German speakers, including a substantial number of Jews, in musical circles. He had close relationships with at least two Jewish musicians: his piano teacher, former Liszt pupil István Thomán; and Emma Gruber, later Mrs. Zoltán Kodály, who was a fine pianist, a composer and a patron of musicians through her salon and her generosity. Through them, Bartók began to interact with the most prominent musicians in the city, including the Music Academy faculty and others. But still, in his zeal for things Hungarian and his ideological problems with German, he was not above an occasional anti-Semitic remark or slur against Germans who continued to speak mostly in that language.<sup>29</sup>

His discomfort with the predominance of German in Budapest's musical life was one factor in his sharp turn in 1903 towards chauvinist

nationalism – the unapologetically reactionary style of rhetoric espoused by the opposition Independence Party of Ferenc Kossuth, the son of the leader of the 1848 Revolution, Lajos Kossuth. Bartók wrote long letters to his mother in support of the use of Hungarian command words in the Imperial army, the pet issue of the Independence Party in that year. He used stationery bearing the mottoes ‘God bless the Magyars’ (the first line of Hungary’s national anthem) or sometimes ‘Down with the Habsburgs’, and he took issue with the casual attitude of friends and family towards patriotism and language. He tried to conduct a ‘forced Magyarization’ campaign on his family: his mother’s sister Irma Voit, who had kept house for the family after Paula Bartók returned to work, hardly spoke Hungarian, but Bartók would write and speak to her only in Hungarian; he also pushed for his sister to be called Böske, the Hungarian diminutive for Elizabeth, instead of Elza, the German nickname she had always used. Thomán and Gruber tried in vain to talk Bartók out of wearing a ‘dress Hungarian’ suit, the chauvinists’ chosen fashion symbol, for his final recital as a student.<sup>30</sup>

He also wore this suit for performances of *Kossuth*, his rich, Strauss-inspired symphonic poem which celebrated Lajos Kossuth’s leadership of the 1848 War of Independence. The piece provoked quite a response: though some Austrian members of the Philharmonic (which premiered the piece on 13 January 1904) reportedly protested against the work’s travesty of the Austrian anthem, ‘Gott erhalte’, Hungarian musicians and critics raved, praising the piece as filled with ‘genuine Hungarianness’ and hailing Bartók as ‘the first really Hungarian symphonic composer’. Though many critics had problems with some harmonically adventurous aspects of the piece, put down as ‘Straussisms’, these were forgiven because of the nationalist programme. Most simply did not understand, or wish to understand, his more unconventional harmonies; they seem to have excused them only because the programme appealed so strongly to nationalist sentiment and the emotional sweep of the piece overall was so captivating.<sup>31</sup>

After *Kossuth*, as Bartók’s ear drew him towards ever more daring sound combinations, his most appreciative listeners in Hungary continued to be Thomán, Gruber, and those in their circle – cosmopolitan Budapest intelligentsia, many of them German or Jewish. Though this class frequently embraced Hungarian culture, including folk and peasant culture, they distinguished between the bombast of chauvinist nationalism and what was seen as the more authentic expression that came directly from the people. Visual artists and writers found inspiration in folk materials just as Bartók, Kodály, and some of their colleagues found inspiration in the folksongs they collected among the peasantry.

Bartók and Kodály's *Hungarian Folksongs*, published in late 1906, presented twenty of the many tunes collected in their previous two years of research, set to their own untraditional harmonies. Though they had moral and some financial support from friends for this endeavour, the volume drew a resounding note of indifference from the general public.<sup>32</sup> This was one of a series of events in which Bartók's newer works were rejected by the public or by established performing organizations. Some critics attacked his increasingly radical musical tendencies not just as 'not beautiful', but also as 'not Hungarian', as they had criticized other artists who were interested in avant-garde developments from elsewhere in Europe. Bartók's sympathies shifted naturally towards those in the city who shared his enthusiasm about these developments, and about his and Kodály's way of looking at Hungarian folksong, including some colleagues at the Academy of Music and at Emma Gruber's salon. Among these progressive artists, Bartók would also find support for his growing disillusion with chauvinism.

His conversations with Budapest intellectuals would encourage the conclusions he was drawing from his own contacts with peasant musicians in the field, which gradually brought about a shift in his understanding of nationalism as well. He began collecting folksongs from non-Hungarians, the music of the Slovaks from 1906 and that of the Romanians from 1908, to better understand Hungarian songs; but soon he was collecting more songs from these nationalities than from Hungarians. His musical interactions with peasants of all ethnicities further developed his contempt for social pretensions. Where his chauvinist rants once had echoed ex-premier Bánffy, a letter to his wife, Márta Ziegler, dated Christmas Day 1916, seems to echo Ady instead: 'Is it not then a fine thing, to join with the oppressed?! . . . This is the explanation for my Slovak and Romanian sympathies; they are oppressed'.<sup>33</sup>

Bartók reflects on how far he has travelled in a 1907 letter to the young violinist Stefi Geyer, as he recalls the dispute over the 1894–95 secularization law requiring civil marriage and state-kept birth and death records. He remembers his fourteen-year-old self, whose 'deeply feeling heart was filled with profound sadness when a political reform . . . was introduced as an attempt to curtail the authority of the Church'.<sup>34</sup> With the wisdom of age (twenty-six), and in the thick of Budapest life, he could not help condescending towards his earlier point of view, which was all but inevitable for the provincial Catholic schoolboy that he once was. Attempting a precise dating of Bartók's ideological transformation would be impossible, but by the time of this letter, it is clear that he was disillusioned by the conservative nationalism of his conservatoire days. He had many

Jewish friends and associates, and he had also reconsidered his devotion to Catholicism, as he demonstrated by signing Geyer's letter as 'an atheist (who is more honest than a large number of the godly)'.<sup>35</sup> Of course, it is clear from the tone of Bartók's letter that he was attempting to appear even more sophisticated than he was as he wooed Geyer. But it is also clear that he had become more of a cosmopolitan: he was a touring concert pianist who made his home in the centre of Pest, for several years within a few steps of the Music Academy, and he partook of the intellectual ferment of the city (see Fig. 1.2).

From about 1905 to 1908, as Bartók struggled somewhat unsuccessfully to make his way in the Hungarian music scene, he also struggled with philosophical questions about how to transcend the everyday, whether in life or in music. Another letter to Geyer in 1907 demonstrates how he revelled in the physical discomforts of fieldwork as one of the ways to achieve the transcendence he sought: 'I am compelled to accept these many miseries because of the desire to search and discover, and it is better to fulfil this desire through hardship'.<sup>36</sup> This statement echoes ideas in Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*, which Bartók read and marked heavily, including the following:

He . . . who really could participate [in others' fortunes and sufferings] would have to despair of the value of life . . . for mankind has as a whole no goal . . . To feel thus *squandered*, not merely as an individual but as humanity as a whole, in the way we behold the individual fruits of nature squandered, is a feeling beyond all other feeling. – But who is capable of such feeling? Certainly only a poet: and poets always know how to console themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Bartók found that he *could* 'really participate in others' fortunes and sufferings' during folksong collecting trips, which provided a way for him to 'step out from himself', another Nietzschean ideal. For Bartók, as for Nietzsche and others, these sufferings were the way to live life to the fullest extent possible.<sup>38</sup>

Not only Nietzsche's works but also those of Endre Ady were given to Bartók by friends in musical and intellectual circles, and Bartók presumably discussed the works with these friends as well. In 1908, Bartók's 'only friend' – Kodály – gave him a copy of Ady's collection *Blood and Gold* [*Vér és Arany*], which Bartók read voraciously until well after midnight. As he wrote, it was 'as if these poems had sprung from me'.<sup>39</sup> Ady, the lodestar for modernist Hungarian artists of the time, wrote passionately about everything, from the social injustice and prejudice that he saw all around him, whether in prose or in verse (as in the above-quoted 'Magyar Jacobin Song'), to physical and intensely personal experiences of love, with, as Frigyesi puts it, 'an almost biblical simplicity and strength'.<sup>40</sup> Passionate





Figure 1.2 Photograph of the Oktogon, one of Pest's major intersections, c. 1894. From about 1908 to 1911 Bartók had a flat on the fourth floor (European style) of the building marked with an arrow.

love between man and woman is central to many of Ady's poems, as are its corresponding difficulties; in fact 'love becomes the metaphor for life, and on a broader level for cosmic reality'.<sup>41</sup> Ady drew together diverse aspects of life in his poems as Bartók wanted to draw them together in his music: 'had I not been destined for music but for poetry', he wrote, 'I would have written these poems – this is what I felt'.<sup>42</sup>

Bartók would have been able to discuss these poems and Nietzsche's work not only with Kodály and Gruber, themselves well-read and thoughtful people, but also with writer Béla Balázs (1884–1948), Bartók's librettist for the opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) and the ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1914–17). As he was a close friend of both Kodály (his university room-mate) and the philosopher György Lukács, Balázs linked Bartók to wider cultural circles. Through Balázs, Bartók came into closer contact with other writers and philosophers of Lukács' circle; for example, before *The Wooden Prince* was premiered, Bartók not only attended one of their Sunday meetings but played his ballet for them on the piano.<sup>43</sup> Bartók was first and foremost a musician, and the esoteric philosophical debates of Lukács and Balázs' group were not his forte. But his affinity for some of the basic ideas he found through Nietzsche, Ady, Balázs and Lukács affirmed Bartók's passion for a fully lived life and his efforts to create a uniquely Hungarian modernist musical language.

In his own field of music, we find a vivid picture of how Bartók participated in the everyday cultural life of the city in the memoir of one of the managers of the forward-looking music publisher Rózsavölgyi:

The public would gather around the oval table, talking or studying the new items. In the noon hours the firm's composers and librettists often visited the shop – we viewed them as daily guests. Among the hundreds of names I mention only the most outstanding: Bartók, Kodály, . . . Antal Molnár, Dohnányi, . . . Pongrácz Kacsóh . . .<sup>44</sup>

Some of Bartók's most important musical colleagues were the members of the Waldbauer-Kerpely String Quartet, who came together in 1909 specifically to perform Bartók's and Kodály's first string quartets, and the composers and musicians of the New Hungarian Music Society [Új Magyar Zeneegyesület, abbreviated UMZE] of 1911–12. Bartók was the first president of this Society. The viola player of the Waldbauer Quartet, Antal Molnár, was also a member of UMZE who wrote enthusiastic commentaries on new Hungarian music for various journals, undertook extensive folksong collecting trips, and composed. Another member of the Society was composer Pongrácz Kacsóh, who, as a critic, was one of few who had applauded the harmonic interest in Bartók's *Kossuth*. When established Hungarian orchestras were both unwilling and unable to play avant-garde scores by Hungarians, the New Hungarian Music Society set out to form their own ensemble that would be committed to performing them well, educating the country about music, and broadening the way Budapest audiences thought about music – Hungarian music in particular. Although UMZE was not successful in the long term, the way that Bartók and other musicians rallied around the project is an important instance of Bartók's involvement in Budapest's musical and intellectual activities.<sup>45</sup>

The city of Budapest was a place about which he was somewhat ambivalent. When he was on a collecting trip, he sometimes romanticized the rural life at the expense of the city: from a letter to Emma Gruber, dated 25 November 1906, Bartók writes: 'The smell of the city – I loathe it! I am spending happy hours among my dear peasants'.<sup>46</sup> He often stayed with friends on the outskirts of town, sometimes in the suburb of Rákoskeresztúr where he and his family lived after 1911. Yet even after moving he still spent a great deal of time in the city. His rural collecting trips and family life in the suburbs were only part of a way of life: equally important was the intellectual energy he absorbed from the cultural ferment of Budapest, including its ongoing debates on Hungarian culture. His and Kodály's folk-music research speak to these debates, as do such writings as Bartók's 'On Hungarian Music' (1911), among others. Though

on the surface Bartók often writes from a very ‘scientific’ point of view, his polemical ‘On Hungarian Music’ shows not only his zeal to convince the public of the value of the ‘oldest layer of Hungarian folksong’ which he, Kodály and others had been setting to music. It also demonstrates how the class and ethnic tensions of the time pervaded this project:

We can discover among the songs adapted by the gypsies many melodies borrowed from some Slavonic neighbour, which slipped by chance into Hungarian folk music. The supercilious Magyar lords pay tribute to these songs with the compulsory national enthusiasm. But then they face the recently unearthed, valuable ancient Magyar melodies from Transylvania as strangers, uncomprehending . . . They neither love nor understand this truly Magyar folk music.<sup>47</sup>

This brief passage touches on several of the flash-points of the period: the extent to which Hungarian culture is indebted to that of other ethnicities, the entrenched hypocrisy of ‘compulsory’ national enthusiasm, and the dismissal of lower classes – in this case Transylvanian peasants – by upper classes.

In the charged context of early twentieth-century Hungary, it seems almost inevitable that Bartók should seize on the national idea as central to his work – it was the language through which everything else was discussed during the period. From his family and social connections to the radical statement of his folksong research, all his work was coloured by or spoke to this environment. Understanding the language of this environment gives us insight into both the music and writings of Bartók’s early career.