

Béla Bartók as I knew him

Jenő Takács

I saw Bartók for the first time on 7 August 1922 at the celebration in Salzburg to mark the foundation of the International Society for Contemporary Music. He was playing the piano part of his first violin sonata, accompanying Mary Dickenson-Auner, a likeable violinist who came from Ireland and was living in Vienna with her husband.

She lived to a great age and only died a few years ago. The sonata is one of his best works and I was bowled over by it. I wanted to play it as well, but it was still only available as a manuscript. In the years that followed I began to play Bartók's works at my concerts: in Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia and later in Germany.

I received help and encouragement in this from Paul Weingarten, my teacher at the Music Academy. He used to play Bartók's music at his own concerts as well. As time passed, I also began to exchange a few letters with Bartók, in which he gave me some advice. It was, however, a long time before I met him personally, in July 1926, when on the day after I took my final examination in Vienna I treated myself to a trip to Budapest by boat.

The day of my visit to Bartók had already been arranged long ago by letter. There was no such thing as coincidence in Bartók's world; everything had to happen according to plan. He abhorred unpunctuality, considering it an unforgivable sin.

Bartók opened the door himself. In those days, he was residing at Szilágyi Dezső square, on the mezzanine floor of a house of rented apartments. Two of the rooms were very dark, which was why the Bartóks moved out, as Béla Bartók jun. told me in 1977. Bartók was 45 at the time. Still a highly controversial figure among audiences, he was highly respected by music experts, who considered him to be the "composer of the composers". In terms of physical appearance, he was rather small (great composers are often small!) and delicate; his hair was fine and brilliant white and he was very thin but seemed altogether youthful owing to the healthy, fresh colour in his face. He showed me into a room that was decorated with colourful peasant handicraft and was furnished with carved wooden furniture. Bartók invited me to sit down, and then there was a pause. This pause seemed very long; it was as if he was waiting for me to say something first. I no longer remember how our

discussion started after this rather embarrassing pause. It was only later that I realised that this type of situation was not at all unusual for Bartók; it was actually typical of him. It took years for his behaviour towards me to change, but then it changed dramatically. We actually found it almost impossible to end the interesting conversations we had!



Jenő Takács (1902–2005)

I would like to mention one interesting experience. In two of three articles recollecting Bartók – incidentally, one was by H. H. Stuckenschmidt – the authors wrote about Bartók’s expressive, eloquent “blue” eyes that had particularly impressed them. I hesitated for a moment myself when I read that. His eyes were actually dark brown, you can see that in the photos, and with an expression of intensity that I have rarely seen in other people. His eyes seemed to “speak”, seemed to say everything without a need to change his facial expression. The rest of his face often remained fixed in one position, almost like a mask. At times, however, he would also stare into space, as if his surroundings were non-existent. This happened particularly when he was tired and overworked or if he had been ill. He found lengthy concert tours very tiring. His senses were incredibly acute and it was not just his sense of hearing: he saw, felt, smelled and felt everything much sooner than other people. His hands were likewise interesting, being almost too strong and tense for his fragile figure; they were muscular pianist’s hands. He was always dressed very properly, somewhat professorially, not inelegantly, unassumingly; he usually wore suits made of a dark fabric with a waistcoat to which he attached his watch. This watch was also frequently used as a

metronome. He was a clock-watcher, and this was the only way in which he could manage his gigantic workload. A secretary was out of the question for financial reasons. At a time when other people had long since moved on to wearing the modern, thick, horn-rimmed spectacles, Bartók continued to favour the “pince-nez”, a hangover from the turn of the century. They made him look rather old-fashioned. These details seemed unimportant to him, however, and his whole appearance was so fascinating, to a certain extent “transcendental” and “other-worldly”, that even people who had no idea who he was treated him with the greatest respect. Was it his genius shining through?

In Vienna, where I also held lectures, I was invited on several occasions by Franz Werfel and Mrs Alma (Mahler) to join them for some stimulating Sunday afternoon discussions at their mansion on Hohe Warte. It was here that I saw the Bergs again as well, although sadly for the last time because Alban Berg died shortly afterwards, on 24 December 1935.

The next time I met Bartók, it was in his little study in the magnificent building at the Academy of Sciences at the Chain Bridge in Budapest. As he had finally been freed from the burden of teaching in 1936, he was able to devote himself wholeheartedly to his research, transcribing the folk songs collected by him and others from the phonograph cylinders. We chatted together during his break and he drank coffee from a thermos flask.

His senses were fantastic, and it was not just his sense of hearing.

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In the spring of 1937, I left Cairo for good. After a lengthy stay on the island of Rhodes and in Florence, I spent the summer as usual at Grundlsee. On the way there, I visited the Werfels at their house in Breitenstein am Semmering, where I had the opportunity to view the Kokoschka frescos, which I believe were later destroyed.

In August 1937, I managed to finish the score of my Tarantella for piano and orchestra at Grundlsee. At the end of September, I was already able to play the work for Radio Wien, conducted by Max Schönherr. A week later there was a performance on Hungarian radio which was conducted by Ludwig Rajter. This piece was a huge success from the very start. While I was still in Budapest, a letter arrived from Gustav Oláh, the Director of the Royal Opera in Budapest, who was impressed by the Tarantella and asked me to compose a ballet. He offered me the adaptation of a novella by Théophile Gautier, *One of Cleopatra's Nights*, as a libretto. Several sketches were produced in great haste, which then led to the execution of this plan. However, three years were to pass before it was completed. The work was premiered in May 1940 with the title *Nilusi Legenda*, having been choreographed by Gyula Harangozó, who was also the choreographer of Bartók's ballet *The Wooden Prince*.

In the autumn of 1937, I also received an invitation to go on a concert tour to the United States of America. The situation in Austria was becoming ever more threatening. The Nazis had already attempted several putsches in the summer of 1937. Many people had already left the country "just in case" and there was a sense of outright panic in Vienna. The Werfels left their beautiful house and took up accommodation in a hotel on Wiedner Hauptstraße, where I visited them frequently. I left Vienna for America on 12 March 1938 and spent a day in Cologne. It was on precisely this day that Hitler's troops marched into Austria. By the time I embarked my ship some days later, the first Austrian refugees were already on board. I spent around four months in America and gave several concerts, including in New York and Philadelphia.

It seemed almost imprudent to return to Europe, but I was unwilling to give up on my plans. I initially remained in Paris for some time and journeyed to Varengeville in Normandy, together with Stefan Zweig's family. Zweig was already in England by then. When I continued my travels into Italy, my Austrian passport aroused the suspicion of the fascist border guards. Finally, I made my careful way across Hungary to Siegendorf in Burgenland, which had already been incorporated into the German Reich. In September 1938, the risk of war was so immense that I felt a strong urge to return to America. The so-called Munich Agreement at least granted a last-minute reprieve. As all my friends in Vienna were opposed to the Nazis, it felt as though the city was in mourning. There was nothing but people in despair, waiting to leave.

In order to escape the influence of the Third Reich, I settled in Paris in January 1939. However, even there I was barely able to find peace. Paris was full of Austrian emigrants in those days: I met Alma Maria Mahler-Werfel almost every day whilst lunching in a restaurant near Park Monceau; Franz Werfel was working on a novel in a little hotel in Versailles and emigrants

from Prague soon began to arrive as well. In the salons of Paris to which I had access, as in France as a whole, they seemed unaware of the impending danger from Hitler's Germany. That was my impression, anyway. In the small salon of Mrs Friederike Zweig-Winternitz, Austrian musicians and literati gathered and played chamber music.

The ingenious Austrian author Joseph Roth lived opposite my little hotel in Rue de Tournon; an incorrigible alcoholic, he would spend the entire day in a haze in the back room of the little bistro.

Posters soon began to appear in the streets, announcing a concert to be given by the Bartóks. I had known that this would happen: Bartók loved Paris more than anywhere else and it was the city in which he felt most at ease. The first concert was held on 27 February 1939 in Salle Gaveau. Conducted by Hermann Scherchen, the Bartóks first played Mozart's double concerto, followed by Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion after the interval. There had been a loyal group of Bartók enthusiasts in Paris for years and he enjoyed a corresponding amount of success. When I entered the green room during the interval, Bartók greeted me immediately with the question: "Emigrant?"

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The next concert was held in a theatre on 3 March. Only invited guests were admitted because it was organised by French radio. Bartók was supposed to play his Piano Concerto No. 2, conducted by Ernest Ansermet, and it was an event that the whole of Paris had been waiting for with bated breath. However, as can happen sometimes, the orchestral parts did not arrive on time from Vienna and Bartók decided to play some solo pieces so as not to have to cancel the concert. He chose some pieces from the Mikrokosmos that had not yet been published. I was sitting in a loge with the venerable French composer and critic, Florent Schmitt, as well as Darius Milhaud and the

Hungarian composer, Tibor Harsányi, who was living in Paris. The programme consisted of Symphony No. 4 by Albert Roussel, the Four Etudes for Orchestra by Stravinsky and the suite from the ballet *Nobilissima Visione* by Paul Hindemith, all of which are modern orchestral works with a full sound. Then Bartók played his pieces in-between these works! He walked across the large stage in his characteristically careful manner; small and pale, he positioned himself in front of the piano and began to play the pieces from the *Mikrokosmos* with his peculiar, somewhat hard and sharp, but very precise and sober style of performance. The pieces were anything but suitable for this setting, and caused disconcertment among the listeners. We musicians, sitting there in the loge, responded in a similar way. I admit that the music seemed dry to us, lacking in inspiration, as though it had been measured with a ruler. Milhaud said I should advise Bartók not to play these pieces at any future concerts in Paris. Although I was on good, friendly terms with Bartók, I knew him far too well to be able to take on such a delicate task without hurting him. It would have been different if it had been an older work that he wasn't fond of, but this was *Mikrokosmos*, which he had been working on for almost 15 years! Several years passed before I realised how providential it was that I had refrained from getting involved: I was sent the six volumes that had been published in 1940 in America and I immediately settled down to study them. Lo and behold, I discovered that these 153 pieces of increasing difficulty were among Bartók's most ingenious creations. They contain almost all elements of 20th century music, but also much that had already been experienced or was yet to come. In some respects they can be compared with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. I was only too glad that I had not allowed myself to be persuaded by Milhaud to influence Bartók. I would have made an utter disgrace of myself.

Another concert took place on 6 March in the Triton club. The soprano Lise Daniel performed songs by Bartók and the Bartóks played the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* again. One day, the singer Madeleine Gray invited us home for lunch. Apart from the Bartóks, the other people present were Ravel's brother and legal successor and the Castelnuovo-Tedescos. They were in the process of emigrating to America. As Madeleine Gray, a singer of international renown who sang in many different languages, intended to sing Bartók's *Hungarian Folk Songs*, I was supposed to rehearse them with her. A translation into French was out of the question because it would have required the approval of the publishing house Universal Edition, but that was completely out of the question for Bartók because the publisher had been taken over by the Nazis.

In Paris, the Bartóks were living at Hotel Vouillemont in Rue Boissy d'Angelas; I frequently accompanied them back to their hotel, where we

sometimes walked up and down for up to half an hour outside the hotel, engrossed in our discussions. It is interesting to note that I met Bartók's wife for the first time in Paris. Back in Budapest, she had never made an appearance during my visits.

At the beginning of April 1939, I had to travel to Budapest. I had been invited by the President of the Philharmonic, Ernst von Dohnányi, to perform my Tarantella at a gala concert. These concerts were held at the Royal Opera House and were among the highlights of the concert season. A famous conductor from abroad was usually invited, and previous invitees had included Mengelberg, Ansermet and Furtwängler. This time it was Issay Dobrowen, who was then Director of the Oslo Philharmonic Hall. Dobrowen was a favourite of the Budapest audience and came to conduct an opera or a concert almost every year. His concerts would sell out months in advance. On the day before the concert, I was entering the opera house to rehearse with the orchestra when Dobrowen approached me, visibly dismayed, and called: "The concert has been cancelled!" The police had refused to give their permission. It wasn't difficult to see that something was amiss here. What had actually happened? I was told by the Secretary of the Philharmonic Orchestra that the delegation from a "foreign" state had objected to the concert. Well, everybody knew that this foreign state was the German Nazi state; it was opposed to the concert because Dobrowen was of Jewish origin. Needless to say, this objection was completely illegal, particularly because it was based on the assumption that the conductor Dobrowen was a Jew or of Jewish origin. This was not officially announced, however; they kept it covered up like cowards, which did not lessen the scandal in any way. When Bartók heard about it, he phoned me immediately and asked if he could speak with me; I promised him he could do so that very evening. He had to do a radio concert with the violinist Zathureczky and wanted to meet me afterwards at Redoute restaurant on the banks of the Danube. Bartók had planned to perform in a concert with Dobrowen a few weeks later. The hour that we spent together was anything but cheerful.

The pressure of these events and the fact that something like this could happen in a "free" country weighed heavily upon us. Bartók said that under these circumstances it was almost impossible to make plans. The best thing would have been to leave the country, but where could we have gone? Bartók could only continue his work on folklore in Budapest, and he was far from finishing it. He also spoke about his financial situation, which he described as not particularly rosy. Despite my objections, he saw himself compelled to give concerts because his income was insufficient to cover his expenses. I was amazed at that because as far as I could see, Bartók's works were being performed regularly in those days.

After about an hour, at around 11 o'clock in the evening, I drove the Bartóks to their house in the hills surrounding Budapest in my little Ford. It was the last time that I would see Béla Bartók. By May 1940, when my ballet *Nilusi Legenda* was performed in Budapest Opera House, Bartók was already in America. He was also unable to come to my concert with the Philharmonic; he phoned me to say that he was overworked, and I willingly believed him. As he said, he was in the process of dissolving his household and packing his belongings into boxes. He had already taken his manuscripts to Switzerland at an earlier stage. He was also working on the preparations for his farewell concert; merely obtaining the travel documents had necessitated endless visits to the authorities.

War had already broken out around Hungary. And so nothing could prevent him from leaving Hungary and moving to America.



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