

# *“I have been hard at work during the summer”*

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It seems to be sheer coincidence that Béla Bartók has become the Hungarian composer we are familiar with today. Following the premature death of his father, who had been the principal of a small school in Nagyszentmiklós (now in Romania), his mother was forced to care for their two children (Béla had a sister, Elza) on her own. The family lived in various cities ruled by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, including Bratislava (Bratislava is the Slovakian name; the Hungarians called it Pozsony). The city was much nearer to Vienna than Budapest and it would have been logical for the talented young musician to continue his studies at the prestigious music academy in Vienna.

However, Bartók and his mother were influenced in their decision to choose Budapest by Bartók's friend Ernő (Ernst) von Dohnányi, who was four years older than him. Although born in Bratislava, Dohnányi attended the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Budapest, studying piano with István Thomán (who was taught by Liszt), and composition with Hans Koessler. Bartók also chose the same professors as his friend.

His association with Zoltán Kodály, who was a year younger but still had a decisive influence on Bartók, was critical during the Budapest years. Bartók, who soon developed a close friendship with Kodály, saw him as a more mature, wiser and more educated version of himself and always turned to him for advice.

The Hungarians devoted an increasing amount of thought to their national identity throughout the early 20th century (it is no wonder that one of Bartók's early orchestral works was dedicated to the memory of the revolutionary leader Lajos Kossuth) and for a while Bartók also took to wearing national dress in order to emphasise his patriotism.

Of far more importance than this, however, was the recognition shared by the two young composers that Hungarian art music was stuck in a deadlock. Bartók and Kodály saw research into genuine Hungarian folk music as the only way forward and explored it at an academic level so that it could be used as a foundation for a new kind of art music.

They were following the example of Béla Vikár (1859–1945), who had already

begun to collect folk songs in 1896 and was probably the first person in Europe to record them on phonograph cylinders. Vikár was the trailblazer; Bartók and Kodály were the founders of ethnomusicology as an academic discipline in Hungary.

Bartók's initial compositions were published by the Hungarian companies Rózsavölgyi and Rozsnyai in Budapest. His first contract with Universal Edition, whose Director, Emil Hertzka, was also Hungarian by birth, was concluded in Vienna in 1918. This was how Bartók's only opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, came to be included in the UE catalogue. For decades, until the fascists seized power in Europe and Bartók emigrated to the USA in 1940, his compositions were the responsibility of the staff at the publishing house in Vienna.

However, Hertzka's name appears in Bartók's letters for the first time in 1901. The later UE Director was still living in Budapest at the time, and the 19-year-old composer told his mother in Bratislava about his attempts to give private lessons to earn money. Hertzka advised him to give 10–12 lessons at the most.

In Bartók's correspondence with his family, Hertzka is not mentioned again until 1918. Bartók's first wife, Márta Ziegler, wrote to her mother-in-law: "And now, take careful note of this: Universal-Edition is holding talks with B. – they want to publish all of his works. They intend to conclude a contract for 6 to 10 years (B. will probably choose ten years); they are undertaking to publish 4 compositions per year. In addition, they would also like to be responsible for all the pieces published by Rózsavölgyi and Rozsnyai. Royalties will be discussed at a later date. I will write about this again later, once the contract has been signed. – B. is so happy, and that's all we want, isn't it? For this not only means that the existing works that have not been published so far will also be published (as B. never composes more than 2 pieces per year, the other 2 will be taken from the existing ones), it also means that Universal will do a lot of advertising for the stage works in order to sell a large number of scores. Hertzka has had plenty of time to think about this since the pantomime which clearly scared him. He is a good business man who never rushes his decisions." (The pantomime referred to was *The Wooden Prince*.)

*Bartók recognised that Hungarian art music was stuck in a  
deadlock.*

In a letter by Bartók's wife from 1920 we learn that Emil Hertzka took the promotion of Bartók's works seriously: "Last week a letter arrived from his publisher, Hertzka, from New York: he says he has interested a number of pianists in Béla's works and they would like to play them. They have reprinted the *Bear Dance* in America."

In 1923, Bartók wrote to his mother that Hertzka intended to hold a "Bartók week" in Vienna, similar to the series of concerts in Berlin that took place in the same year, only he wanted to do it better.

In 1928, Hertzka visited Bartók in Budapest and reported favourably on his new apartment. "We discussed some business affairs as well as my more recent compositions. I have been hard at work during the summer, you see: I have written a piece for violin and piano that lasts about twelve minutes [meaning *Rhapsody No. 1*]; this is the smaller composition. The larger piece is the new string quartet [the fourth], which took a great deal of work; it is nearly finished now. Ditta and I attempted to play the first movement on two pianos. We have had to work hard at it because it is quite difficult."

Bartók paid a visit to UE in 1930. He met Director Hertzka, who had recently returned from America, as well as some other colleagues, including Rudolf S. Hoffmann, who had translated the *20 Hungarian Folk Songs* into German. He was also given some scores to correct, which he dealt with that very same evening.

The only sign that his relationship with Hertzka was not always untroubled is found in a letter written by Bartók to his mother in 1931, in which he remarks that things are "ex lex" between the two of them, but that he is still willing to extend his contract. From other sources we know that there were other reasons for Bartók's dissatisfaction. The score of his Piano Concerto No. 1 was only lithographed rather than engraved and no pocket score was published. It was a time of economic hardship, shortly after the stock market crash in 1929, and UE had to cut costs.

It was nonetheless still an ideal world for Bartók, which ended with Hertzka's death in 1937 and Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938. Bartók was in despair: he was frightened by the political events and worried about the fate of his works in the "Aryanised" publishing house Universal Edition. His

contract with UE came to an end in 1939 and Bartók joined Boosey & Hawkes.

An important chapter in the history of Universal Edition – and equally in the life of Béla Bartók – thus came to an unpleasant end. Just as things could have returned to normal again, at the end of the Second World War, the composer died while still in the United States.