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Bartók and Chinese Music Culture

by

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It is not by chance that more and more Chinese musicians and music lovers are studying, appreciating, performing and publicizing Bartók’s works. To make them known on such a big scale has become possible in China only in the 12 years since the founding of the People’s Republic. The works of this outstanding Hungarian composer are now often heard on the radio and in concerts. Thousands of music conservatory students draw inspiration from his compositions; those working in the field of musical folklore find in his scientific approach to this subject an example to follow; composers discuss with great interest the successes he achieved with his national idiom and take it for their model... The Chinese people have a deep love for Béla Bartók because he was, first and foremost, a loyal son of the Hungarian people, a great patriot who served his country and his people all his life, with music as his weapon.

In the last century, our national democrats had likened the old China to a “lion that’s been asleep a thousand years.” Half a century ago, the great Chinese writer and thinker, Lu Hsun, sang the praises of Petőfi’s verses of freedom. Now, when Chinese musicians read Bartók’s letters and works in which he said, “Hungary has awakened from her prolonged slumber,” and “I shall devote the best efforts of my life to faithful service on behalf of the Hungarian nation and my Hungarian motherland”; when they hear his Kossuth Symphony, a work which he wrote in his early life, or listen to the last movement of his Concerto for Orchestra, composed during his later years, we all pay our respect to him and feel honoured to be able to look upon ourselves as his fellow-wayfarers.

Needless to say, Bartók’s path of creative development has been long and difficult. This has been the case with every genuine artist of the time who, living in an era still overshadowed by darkness, must needs experience contradictions and suffering before he can see the first ray of the
sun of a new world, but who, looking with infinite passion towards the future, makes every effort to find a way out. Szabolcsi, our honoured Hungarian colleague, having called Bartók the Dante of the 20th century, I would like to quote a few lines from a poem by Chü Yüan, the great Chinese poet of two thousand years ago, as a parallel:

,,Long did I sigh and wipe away my tears,  
To see my people bowed by griefs and fears...  
Remote the eagle spurns the common range,  
nor deigns since time began its way to change...  
The way was long, and wrapped in gloom did seem,  
as I urged on to seek my vanished dream...  
Ascending where celestial heaven blazed,  
on native earth for the last time we gazed;  
my slaves were sad, my steeds all neighed in grief,  
and, gazing back, the earth they would not leave."

In reciting these lines I can't help recalling Bartók's Third Piano Concerto, in which the great musician poured out his last thoughts of his motherland, just as our great Chinese poet would not forget his beloved country till he drew his last breath.

It is true, there are some negative elements in Bartók's compositions. I am reminded here of what Kungsun Ni-tse, a Chinese theoretician of music two thousand years ago and supposedly a disciple of Confucius, said in his book On Music: "Thus, if one has profound feeling, one's composition will be clear; if one's spirit is vigorous, one can perform wonders; and if one achieves harmony, one's brilliance will show. Music must never be false." The fatal weakness of formal aesthetics lies in its "falsity" — in that it becomes false in feeling, thought and content for the sake of form. From the Chinese point of view, to be false is to be "artificial," to dissemble, to be insincere in one's speech. Again, I am reminded of the famous words of Liu Hsieh, the great Chinese literary theoretician who lived from 465 to 520 A. D. He said that literary works should be "written on the impulse of feeling," that one should not "assume false feelings in order to write." To "write on the impulse of feeling," in other words, to achieve perfection of form on the basis of content is the correct path. But to "assume false feelings in order to write," in other words, to seek one-sidedly novel forms just for the sake of form, would inevitably spell the ruin of art. Apparently the negative elements in Bartók's works were, in one way, the natural outcome of his ideological confusion at a certain period and, in another, due to his going astray while looking for new means of expression. However, judging from his

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general tendency and from his works as a whole, this was not his main bent nor a consistently followed path. "To compose on the impulse of feeling" was his principal trend. He remained loyal to his pledge that he would, through his music, "serve the Hungarian people and his country."

Chinese musicians hold Bartók in high esteem. The reason for this lies not only in the fact that his works are replete with patriotic and democratic ideas, but also because he contributed eminently and creatively to the enrichment of musical expression and set us a shining example in musical folklore research. In terms of musical creativity, we Chinese are still rather young and must learn a great deal from the splendid achievements of our predecessors. We have a fine tradition of musical culture dating back several thousand years; we also must carry out research on an unprecedented scale into our musical folklore. Therefore, Bartók's achievements in this respect are of great significance to us Chinese musicians.

Chinese musicians are confronted with the most urgent task of carrying forward our musical traditions and introducing innovations in creative work. We are against nihilist attitudes towards the traditions of China's national musical heritage. At the same time, we cannot become slaves to these traditions and refuse to advance. It is not our aim simply to take over these traditions; in carrying on the traditions we seek to "weed through the old to let the new emerge," to introduce innovations in our creative work and, on the basis of our national traditions, to build an entirely new musical culture that is socialist and at the same time national.

In this sense we feel it is of positive significance for us to study Bartók.

Bartók's creative efforts during his lifetime fall roughly into three periods, which, if I may use Chinese locutions, can be called:

1. the period of "learning from the ancients";
2. the period of "creating his own idiom"; and
3. the period of "creating his own idiom on the basis of learning from the ancients."

It is not hard to see what deep influence such predecessors as Liszt and Brahms had on Bartók's early works. This was the period when he was "learning from the ancients," a stage no master can by-pass in his early development. Thenceforth, we see Bartók seeking media and modes of expression of his own; in his energetic effort to apply innovations and experiments we sometimes even see him falling into the bog of...
formalism. But step by step he came closer to his goal, till in the end he found what he had been so eagerly longing and striving for. A well-known Chinese poet, Yuan Mei (1716—1797), made this famous statement: “In one’s everyday life one cannot remain oblivious of the ancients, but one must not think of them even for a single moment when one begins to write.” What he meant is that one must draw upon the experiences of one’s predecessors, but one should not allow oneself to be restricted by their limitations when it comes to creative activity. Chinese painters, poets and musicians always stress “changes,” by which they mean innovations based on tradition. Early in the fifth century, the Chinese theoretician of literature, Liu Hsieh, whom I mentioned before, said that only by being “versed in making changes” could a writer or artist “see a boundless vista open before him and find an inexhaustible spring of wisdom to drink from,” that for this reason “he must read broadly and concentrate on certain subjects before he can go farther afield and gain a deep understanding of things through cogitation.”

We Chinese musicians study with great interest what Bartók achieved in carrying forward the musical traditions of his country and in his musical creations. From the development of his harmonization in re-arranging folk songs we can see how Bartók tried incessantly to innovate and experiment, basing himself on traditions, and how he combined ancient musical folklore with modern musical expression. By this method he gradually arrived at a style that was all his own.

The re-arrangement of Twenty Hungarian Folk Songs by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály in 1906 marked the beginning of their great efforts in this direction. In these songs they manifestly used chiefly traditional harmonies which, it must be admitted, were quite simple and even crude. Nevertheless, it is already obvious that Bartók did his best to adapt his harmony to the characteristics of folk melodies, that he was trying to find a new harmonic language suited to the content of the folk songs, instead of merely concerning himself with the harmonization of folk melodies.

Shortly afterwards, in his Gyermeknek written in 1908—09, it became evident that Bartók was reaching maturity in his striving for this new harmonic language. One of the features of his harmony is the creative use of the major-minor system of harmonization. His harmonic language is at once rich and succinct, and imbued with strong national flavour. Characteristic is the distinctive role he gave to modulations and his introduction of chromatic harmonies.

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During the years 1914—17, Bartók wrote his *Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs*, a work which shows that the composer had attained greater maturity through his experiments in seeking an harmonic language suited to folk music, and that he had already initially found a style of his own. The first song of this collection is a case in point, since Bartók employed here many chords with complex functions for the melancholic melody; through an intense harmonic language in the form of augmented suspensions, he lent the music an air of solemnity.

Similarly, in his *Eight Hungarian Folk Songs*, written in 1907—17 and based on pentatonic melodies that sound like Chinese folk music, Bartók gave the harmonic language a stronger pentatonic flavour, in keeping with the characteristics of these melodies, and made harmonization subordinate to the words of the songs. For instance, in the second song of this collection, which tells the story of a girl being forced to marry a murderer, the composer used chromatic harmonies to describe her complex inner feelings. For the fifth song, a rather jolly melody, he used the clear, rhythmical movements of triads. It is by no means a coincidence that the Chinese musicians study this collection of songs with immense interest and learn much from it.

Here it becomes clear that Bartók was seeking varied methods of expression. If we examine the way in which the composer wrote choral re-arrangements of folk songs as exemplified by his *Four Slovak Folk Songs* (1917), we clearly see what vast prospects Bartók opened up and what ample possibilities he created for the harmonization of folk music.

But, as we Chinese are in the habit of saying, where enhancement of his artistic skill is concerned, the artist should, quantitatively speaking, proceed from the few to the many, but aesthetically speaking he should rather stress the few than the many. Bartók’s later works, such as *Forty-four Violin Duets* (1931), furnish proof of this. In this collection, the composer used mainly polyphony, while in his harmony he achieved richness with the utmost economy of means and accompanied simplicity with changes. This signifies that, in his effort to create a specific harmonic language, he had reached the pinnacle of perfection.

I shall not go into greater detail, for I am afraid that what I have said may sound commonplace to my learned colleagues. My aim has been to show how Bartók, in his experimental endeavours to find a harmonic language adapted to folk songs, went through the three stages of “learning from the ancients,” “creating his own idiom” and “creating his own idiom on the basis of learning from the ancients.”

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That Bartók followed this path is evident not only in his re-arrangements of folk music, but also in his own compositions. I do not think I need dwell further upon this subject. But let us have a look at such early works of his as Deux Portraits. Here the influence of his predecessors is unmistakable. Let us also examine the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and other similar works in which the composer blazed new trails. And finally, let us take his Concerto for Orchestra and his Third Piano Concerto wherein he attained maturity in style. This may be regarded as an outline of the path Bartók followed in his compositions. But we can also say that, from the Kossuth Symphony and the Divertimento right up to the Third Piano Concerto, this is the red thread running through all of Bartók’s works.

What is important is that, whether in his experiments with the creation of a specific harmonic language, while he was re-arranging folk songs, or in his own compositions based on the life of the Hungarian people as well as on musical folklore, Bartók, in his general trend, was not a formalist, whose watchword is: “Innovation for innovation’s sake, experiment for experiment’s sake.” All his efforts towards innovation and all his experiments were basically aimed at meeting the needs of the musical content. In the words of the Chinese theoretician of literature, Liu Hsieh, this means “seeking originality without giving up genuineness, striving for brilliance while retaining the essence.” Innovations should start from the content of the works concerned and be based on traditions. Only then can we achieve the “changes” often mentioned by Chinese artists. The great Chinese painter, Shih Tao (1630—1707), said: “By drawing on the experiences of the ancients we use them as instruments to increase our knowledge, while making changes means that we are not hamstrung by these experiences, whatever importance we may attach to them. Those who mechanically copy the ancients are hampered by conventions. That is why those who have superb skills do not follow the rules of others and thus evolve their own most effective rules. We may have rules, but the point is that we must introduce changes, for only then can we free ourselves from the restrictions of such rules.” Again this is what we Chinese mean when we say: “Without square or compass, you cannot draw a square or circle.” Yet once he has mastered the “square and compass” and become capable of making changes based on the experiences of his predecessors, that is to say, creating and innovating without departing from tradition, a great master can reach the height of accomplishment where “he will always be within the limits of reason, whatever he does.”

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Of course, just as we pointed out above, the path followed by Bartók was a tortuous one. We are, therefore, in full agreement with what our respected Hungarian colleague Szabó has said: "We must eliminate from Bartók’s musical heritage, which is soundly rooted among the people, those alien influences that have now become obsolete in expressing the spirit of our time." That is why we have always stood for the principle of critically carrying forward traditions and the cultural heritage.

Our critical attitude towards our cultural heritage stems from the fact that even the heritage containing the best democratic elements still retains something of the past; and only by treating it critically can we take over what is best in it and discard the dross. We would have no point of departure from which to advance, should we refuse to take over the cultural heritage. But we would also not be able to go forward, should we make a fetish of our heritage. A critical attitude towards our heritage serves its better assimilation, and we assimilate it in order to develop it.

For this reason we Chinese musicians have studied Bartók’s scientific research in musical folklore with enormous interest. It is well known that China has an extremely rich and varied folk-music treasury. The fact that China is a land of many nationalities explains why she has such splendid traditions of musical culture. But only after the founding of the People’s Republic of China could we embark upon the work of discovering and assembling our long-standing musical traditions. During the past twelve years, we have set up special research bodies for this purpose, recorded some 50,000 folk songs or pieces of instrumental folk music, and published 421 anthologies of musical folklore. We have discovered ancient musical scores dating back a thousand years. Old scores that had long remained indecipherable have been studied and interpreted for public performance... All these finds are an inexhaustible source for Chinese musicians to draw upon and have also enriched the life of large numbers of music lovers among the Chinese people.

Bartók’s outstanding achievements in using folk music in his compositions are also brilliant examples for Chinese musicians to follow. He did a great deal for the harmonization of the re-arranged folk songs and thus endowed folk music with greater expressiveness. He furthermore enriched the structure and scope of music by using a variety of forms such as the suite (as in Four Slovak Folk Songs), variations (as in the ballad in the sixth of the Fifteen Peasant Songs), as well as through the introduction of new musical forms that borrow their themes from folk songs (as in the sonatinas adapted from Rumanian melodies). All
these are worth our study. But most important are the full-length works that Bartók wrote in the rhythms and melodies characteristic of folk songs, works of an entirely new type that have unity of style and are imbued with rich national flavour. Fine examples of this are the finale of the Concentro for Orchestra and the first movement of the Third Piano Concerto, which were composed in his later years. If the former can be regarded as describing the strong character of the Hungarian people, the latter can be taken as a landscape painting of Rumania. This is something that was accomplished only through intensive study of folk music and full comprehension of its essentials. Here folk music merges with the composer’s creation in a high degree of artistry. This is the classic example of the use to which musical folklore can be put in our compositions.

Mention must also be made here of many of Bartók’s shorter works of the genre-painting type. In this connection I would like to refer again to the Chinese poet Yuan Mei. He advanced the “theory of intuition” which later became an important school in China’s theory of poetry. By “intuition” he meant the description of the artist’s momentary inspiration in a natural and vivid manner, whatever the subject matter and the scope of his imagination, so that naturalness could go hand in hand with a more ornate style and plain talk be combined with profundity.

However, Bartók’s works of the genre-painting type are not a casual, apathetic representation of objective reality, because each and every one of them is filled with overflowing passion. This reminds me of the theory of “merging feeling with the objective world” as expounded by our ancient Chinese poets. As the great Chinese patriot-poet Wang Chuan-shan (1619–1692) put it: “In name, feeling and the objective world are different things, but in essence they are inseparably bound up one with the other. Those who are versed in poetry can achieve a perfect fusion of the two.” This can well be taken as a vivid description of Bartók’s works of the above-mentioned type. I have made it a special point to quote Wang Chuan-shan because, like Bartók he was a great patriot, who cherished an ardent love for all things — a blade of grass, a stone or a word — that concerned his country and his people. Wang Chuan-shan was right when he said: “How can we expect one who cannot depict the objective world to express his feelings?” Were we to strip Bartók’s genre-painting works of the feelings and ideas with which he infused them and talk, one-sidedly and out of context, of their folkloristic significance, we would be making an estimate of his achievement that is far from complete.

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Dear colleagues and respected friends! It is impossible for me to explain fully in this brief address the understanding and appraisal that we Chinese musicians have gained of Béla Bartók, who ranks as one of the greatest composers of our century. But attending this Conference as representative of the Chinese musicians I am reminded of what Bartók himself said: “Whoever really wants the key to this sort of a musician’s life must experience it personally, and this can be done only by coming in direct contact with the peasants. If one wants to thoroughly comprehend the full impact of this kind of music, it is not enough merely to familiarize oneself with the melodies. What is essential is for us to understand the environment wherein such melodies are rooted.” I think that, even to this day, these words of Bartók are still important for us. Moreover, we must not forget that Bartók not only did his utmost in research on Hungarian folk songs but also overcame many difficulties in studying the folk songs of Slovakia, Rumania, Turkey, etc. In these studies, his lofty aim was to promote mutual understanding and friendship among the nations through cultural contacts. I think it may also be said that we are gathered here today exactly for this purpose: to work hard to realize this noble ideal cherished by Bartók. This makes us feel even more deeply honoured and proud that we have a fellowfighter and forerunner of this cause in his person.