


Performance and Reception of Bartók's Violin Music during His First Concert Tour of the United States (1927–1928)

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ABSTRACT

During his first concert tour of the United States (1927–1928) Bartók played primarily his own music in lecture-recitals, orchestra performances, and chamber music concerts in fifteen American cities. Over the course of the tour, he collaborated with violinists Jelly d'Arányi and Joseph Szigeti to present a few of his works for violin and piano to members of musical clubs in New York City and Philadelphia, and before dignitaries at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, D.C. – namely his Sonata for Violin and Piano no. 2 (1922), Hungarian Folk Tunes, for violin and piano (arranged by Joseph Szigeti, 1926), and Romanian Folk Dances for Violin and Piano (arranged by Zoltán Székely, 1925). In Boston and New York, Bartók played on recitals that also included performances of his String Quartets nos. 1 and 2. In this article I document the American reception of Bartók's violin music during his U.S. recitals of early 1928. Music criticism in American newspapers and music journals, as well as detailed program notes from the string quartet performances, have been taken into account to reveal the assessment of Bartók's violin music and string quartets and the characterization of the composer in the American press and concert halls. The reviews have also been considered in comparison to later recordings of the violin and piano works made by Bartók and Szigeti.

KEYWORDS

Bartók, violin music, reception, United States, 1927–1928

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During his first concert tour of the United States (1927–1928), Bartók played primarily his own music in lecture-recitals, orchestra performances, and chamber music concerts in fifteen American cities. Over the course of the tour he collaborated with violinists Jelly Arányi and Joseph Szigeti to present a few of his works for violin and piano to members of musical clubs in Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston and before dignitaries at the Hungarian Embassy in Washington, D.C. – namely his Sonata for Violin and Piano no. 2 (BB 85, 1922), the *Hungarian Folk Tunes* for violin and piano (arranged by Joseph Szigeti in 1926 from the *For Children* (BB 53) series), and the violin and piano arrangements of the *Romanian Folk Dances* (BB 68) by Zoltán Székely (1925). Four of these recitals also featured performances of his String Quartets no. 1 and no. 2 (BB 52, 75). In this paper, I will document the American reception of Bartók's violin music during his U.S. recitals of early 1928. Music criticism in American newspapers and music journals, as well as detailed program notes from the string quartet performances, will be taken into account to show how the American press assessed Bartók's violin music and string quartets and characterized the composer as a concert artist. Bartók's Second String Quartet was more warmly received than his violin and piano works, and audiences and critics never seemed to connect with the Second Sonata for Violin and Piano (BB 85). Critics, program annotators, and other musicians compared Bartók to his contemporaries, and often placed Bartók in a class by himself. Furthermore, the other musicians with whom Bartók performed may have affected the reception of his music.

1. THE SOCIETY FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC – PHILADELPHIA

Bartók's first chamber recital in the United States took place on 1 January 1928 for The Society of Contemporary Music in Philadelphia following performances of his Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra, op. 1 (BB 36b, 1905), with the Philadelphia Orchestra and guest conductor Fritz Reiner, Bartók's former piano pupil at the Academy of Music in Budapest. Reiner had recently finished a successful series of engagements as guest conductor with the orchestra, and in the press coverage preceding Bartók's recital for the Society for Contemporary Music, Philadelphia critic Linton Martin referred to Reiner as a resident expert on Bartók's music, citing his endorsement of Bartók as "the greatest composer of his generation in the world today."¹ Martin further reported Reiner's characterization of Bartók's music as being in a category of its own. When the conductor was asked to compare Bartók to Richard Strauss, Reiner reportedly replied that Bartók was "a representative and exponent of the newer musical thought," which was also different from that of Stravinsky.²

The chamber recital was meant to feature composer-pianist Leo Ornstein, a string quartet made up of members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and violinist Joseph Szigeti in addition to Bartók at the piano. Some of these plans, however, were altered at the last minute. Ornstein gave the world premiere of his Quintet for Piano and Strings with the string players as planned, and the same string players closed the recital with Bartók's Second String Quartet. Szigeti, however, had received another offer for a high-profile performance in Chicago on the same day, and

¹Linton MARTIN, "Themes and Variations," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1 January 1928, B14.

²Ibid.



arranged for Jelly Arányi, the dedicatee of Bartók's First and Second Sonatas for Violin and Piano (BB 84, 85), to play the second sonata in his stead.³ Although Bartók had not appeared onstage with Arányi since December of 1923 following a break between the composer and the violinist,⁴ Arányi happened to be in the United States touring and recording at the time and was one of the few violinists able to play a Bartók sonata at short notice.⁵ In addition to Bartók's sonata, Arányi played Ravel's *Tzigane* (1924), a work also dedicated to her, with pianist Ethel Hobday.⁶

While Ornstein's piece and Arányi's playing drew praise from Philadelphia critics and audience members, the response to Bartók's music was less than complimentary. Ornstein, whose warm reception was bolstered by the audience's recognition of his role as an active contributor to the music scene in Philadelphia, received "a climactic thunderclap of applause."⁷ Furthermore, Arányi "was given a meed of handclapping that brought her back to the stage five times" for her performance of the Ravel piece.⁸ In contrast, more than one writer reported that audience members fled the concert venue – the Academy of Music Foyer – upon hearing Bartók's violin sonata.⁹ One such review, which appeared in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* on 2 January 1928, also stands out for its identification of musical characteristics that the author, and perhaps other audience members, found disturbing.

The piano part is featured by "tone clusters" which give to the uninitiated the impression that the pianist is hunting for a missing and possibly non-existent key. Miss D'Arányi frequently playing in an entirely different key from the piano, was called upon to exhibit every known device of violin virtuosity, including pizzicato, con [sic] legno and occasional taps of her body on the wood of the instrument. Had she consummated her performance by smashing her instrument gloriously over the composer's brow no one would have been much surprised. The work received a reaction which may be termed "polite." The closing string quartet of Bartók, with the composer sitting in the audience, was given a more generous reception, but the audience was much smaller. After the Bartók sonata quite a number of them wandered dazedly out into the cold winter air.¹⁰

While the review is sensational in tone, the analysis is not altogether inaccurate. The work is decidedly difficult for performers and some listeners even today. The piano part does include tone clusters, and, as is the case for many of Bartók's pieces, searching for a tonal center in the classical sense can leave listeners perplexed. Bartók identified the key of the work as C major, but the common harmonic progression that might be expected to lead a listener to that conclusion is largely missing, save for the C-major triad at the end of the second movement. As the author of the aforementioned review points out, moreover, the extended techniques Bartók required of the

³Malcolm GILLIES, "Bartók and the Arányi Sisters," in his *Bartók in Britain: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 142.

⁴GILLIES, "Bartók and the Arányi Sisters," 131–144.

⁵Joseph MACLEOD, *The Sisters d'Arányi* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 140.

⁶Society for Contemporary Music Concert Program, 1 January 1928, Courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives.

⁷N. N., "Contemporary Music," *The Evening Bulletin*, 2 January 1928, 5.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.; Linton MARTIN, "Modern Music has a New Year Party," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2 January 1928, 12.

¹⁰N. N., "Contemporary Music," 5.



violinist were advanced for the time and continue to challenge performers nearly a century later. The observation that there were “occasional taps of [Arányi’s] body on the wood of the instrument,” however, does not seem to have basis in the score.¹¹ Another reviewer, while sharing some of the views of the writer for *The Evening Bulletin*, had a more positive response. In his article for *The Public Ledger*, Samuel L. Laciár focused most of his attention on Ornstein’s quintet and Arányi’s playing. He found the first movements of the programmed Bartók pieces to be similar but asserted that the second movement of the quartet compared favorably to the other works on the program.

Like the sonata, the quartet begins with a movement in a very deliberate pace and of considerable length – and with results no more happy than in the former work. The impression conveyed by the first movement was one of rather aimless wandering, although every device of composition and every resource of tone color and tonal placement possible to the string quartet were used with a sure hand. The second movement, however, a real Scherzo in all but the form and marked *Allegro molto capriccioso* [sic] was a gem and one of the finest movements of the concert.¹²

Laciár’s positive assessment of Bartók’s Second String Quartet is worth noting as it reflects the typical audience reaction to this piece, which was more consistently appreciated than Bartók’s other violin music performed during the tour.

2. THE HUNGARIAN LEGATION – WASHINGTON, D.C.

Following the concert, which is only mentioned in passing in the extant correspondence, Bartók set out on a cross-country train journey to Los Angeles, where he began a run of lecture-recitals before the Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Denver, Kansas City, and Saint Paul chapters of the Pro-Musica Society.¹³ He then stopped in Cincinnati to rehearse his First Piano Concerto (BB 91) with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra before continuing to Washington, D.C. His performance in Washington was the first of three collaborations on the tour with the violinist Joseph Szigeti. The recital with Szigeti, which was presented to Minister and Countess Széchenyi and two hundred guests at the Hungarian Legation, included a more varied program than most of the recitals on Bartók’s tour.¹⁴ Together Bartók and Szigeti played Bartók’s *Romanian Folk Dances*, arranged for violin and piano by Zoltán Székely. Additionally, Bartók performed a set of his own piano pieces, a Chopin nocturne, and two Kodály pieces. In the final section of the recital Szigeti performed works by Szymanowski, Françoise, Dvořák, and Hubay, accompanied by Ignace Strasfogel. The meagre press coverage of the event included a brief announcement in the Society pages of *The Washington Post* in which Bartók was mistakenly identified as “Mlle.”¹⁵ While the notice in the same paper corrected this mistake the following day, no commentary on the music or performances was given. That there were no printed

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Samuel L. LACIAR, “Ornstein Quintet in World Premiere,” *The Public Ledger*, 2 January 1928, 5.

¹³Sarah LUCAS, “Béla Bartók and the Pro-Musica Society: A Chronicle of Piano Recitals in Eleven American Cities during his 1927–1928 Tour,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Missouri, 2012).

¹⁴Christine Q. OWEN, “Society: Entertainments keep Society Busy,” *The Washington Post*, 5 February 1928, S3.

¹⁵N. N., “Capital Society Events,” *The Washington Post*, 4 February 1928, 7.



reviews is not unusual for diplomatic events. The apparent lack of press interest in the performance may stem from the abundance of recitals and concerts given for dignitaries at embassies each week in Washington, D.C. The public did not have access to such performances, and the focus of the event was likely more diplomatic or social than musical.

3. NEW YORK PRO-MUSICA SOCIETY

Bartók's recital for the New York chapter of the Pro-Musica Society the following day, however, was presented for an audience made up entirely of musicians and music patrons. In most of Bartók's performances before chapters of the Pro-Musica Society, the composer began with a lecture on Hungarian folk music and its use in modern art music composition, which he read in English. A version of this talk, "The Folksongs of Hungary," was later published in the *Pro-Musica Quarterly*.¹⁶ Following his lecture, Bartók played a selection of his own and Kodály's solo piano music. There were, however, three exceptions to the standard program. In Denver, Bartók's "Six Hungarian Folksongs," probably a selection from *Eight Hungarian Folk Songs* (BB 47, 1907–1917), featuring singer Blanche Da Costa, were added.¹⁷ In Detroit, the new Piano Sonata (BB 88, 1926) was removed from the program at the last moment because of concerns about its reception and was replaced by Bartók's Sonatina (BB 69, 1915), perhaps an additional Kodály piece from Op. 3, and one of the *Two Romanian Dances* (BB 56, 1909–1910), most probably no. 1.¹⁸ In New York, where the deviations from the standard program were most pronounced, Bartók shared the stage with violinist Joseph Szigeti.¹⁹

The New York Pro-Musica Society recital, which was held in the Gallo Theater on 5 February 1928, Bartók retained only one piece from his usual Pro-Musica program – his new piano sonata of 1926. The items Bartók performed with Szigeti included Bartók's Sonata for Violin and Piano no. 2 (1922), *Hungarian Folk Tunes* for violin and piano (1926), and *Romanian Folk Dances* for violin and piano (1925). Bartók and Szigeti also played Schubert's Duo in A Major. Although the Duo seems out of place on an otherwise all-Bartók program, it, like the Mozart Sonata programmed in Washington D.C., was a piece Bartók and Szigeti had performed at their sonata evening in Budapest the previous April.²⁰ Both musicians had a number of separate engagements in America during Bartók's first tour and rehearsal time together was likely scarce. In this light, the inclusion of a piece on which the two had previously collaborated seems a less puzzling choice. The programming of the Duo, however, did not go unnoticed by the press. *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes expressed bewilderment at

¹⁶Béla BARTÓK, "The Folksongs of Hungary," *The Pro-Musica Quarterly* 7/1 (October 1928), 28–35.

¹⁷"Pro Musica Denver Chapter Presents Béla Bartók," 21 January 1928, Recital Program, Courtesy of the Denver Public Library Fine Arts Department.

¹⁸Sarah LUCAS, "The Reception of Bartók's Piano Sonata (1926) during His First American Tour (1927–1928)," unpublished paper presented at the University of Iowa Jakobsen Conference, April 2013.

¹⁹Concert program. "Third Concert Pro Musica: Béla Bartók Composer-Pianist and Joseph Szigeti Violinist in Joint Recital," 5 February 1928, Recital Program, MSS 54, The E. Robert Schmitz Papers in the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library of Yale University, Courtesy of the Yale University Library.

²⁰"Szigeti József és Bartók Béla Szonátaestje," 10 April 1927, Recital Program, Courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives.



the inclusion of the Schubert piece and considered it a “gratuitous interpolation” which, nevertheless, “gave the audience some melody to cherish.”²¹

Downes’s review was one of two that appeared in major New York newspapers following the recital. The other was contributed by Lawrence Gilman. Downes and Gilman were united in their praise for Szigeti’s violin playing, but only Downes remarked positively on Bartók’s performance. In his description of the Piano Sonata, Gilman wrote that Bartók “smote the keyboard as if he had a secret grudge against it.”²² Both critics lamented a lack of contrast in Bartók’s music – Gilman’s comments pointed to the “uneventfulness” of Bartók’s music overall,²³ while Downes felt that the violin sonata would have benefited from a greater variety of tone color.²⁴ There was very little coverage of the American tour performances of the *Hungarian Folk Tunes* and *Romanian Folk Dances* for violin and piano, but Downes applauded these pieces for “the national and wholly characteristic features of the melodies, and the simple, appropriate harmonizations which did not err on the side of extravagance or forced ingenuity.”²⁵ It is possible that the critics viewed the folk music arrangements as somehow less serious or original than Bartók’s other works, and therefore devoted more of their reviews to the Sonata for Piano and Second Sonata for Violin and Piano. They may have also felt uncomfortable writing about compositions based on folk tunes about which they had little prior knowledge. In any case, these pieces did not receive negative attention in the press.

4. THE BOHEMIANS (NEW YORK MUSICIANS’ CLUB)

Bartók’s and Szigeti’s third and final collaboration of the tour was a recital for the musicians’ club The Bohemians at the Harvard Club in New York City. Both musicians had participated in the activities of the group at least once before, as they were guests of the club at a dinner on Bartók’s first evening in America on 18 December.²⁶ The first set on their program was a reprisal of the Bartók violin and piano works they had performed for the Pro-Musica Society. The second part featured The New World String Quartet in a performance of Bartók’s Second String Quartet. Bartók ended the program with solo piano pieces, most likely a selection of those he performed for the Pro-Musica Society.²⁷ While it appears the performance was not reviewed, The New World String Quartet’s performance of the Second String Quartet two weeks prior at The New School for Social Research had received a favorable review in the *New York Times*. In it, Olin Downes remarked that of all the works on the program, which also included Milhaud’s Sixth Quartet and Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for Quartet, Bartók’s work was “perhaps the richest

²¹Olin DOWNES, “Music: Pro-Musica Society,” *The New York Times*, 6 February 1928, 12.

²²Lawrence GILMAN, “New Music by Bartók; and a New Bruennhilde in ‘Goetterdaemmerung,’” *The New York Herald Tribune*, 6 February 1928.

²³Lawrence GILMAN, “New Music by Bartók.”

²⁴Olin DOWNES, “Music: Pro-Musica Society,” 12.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶N. N., “Dinner an Ovation to Mme. Sembrich,” *The New York Times*, 19 December 1927, 31.

²⁷Walter L. BOGERT, letter to the members of The Bohemians, 16 January 1928. Courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives (BA-N: 2049/218; kept with program bills).



and the most pregnant ... on this occasion.”²⁸ After drawing attention to the “folk-consciousness” of the music, Downes, surprisingly made the case for identifying Bartók’s Second String Quartet as “romantic” and praised its expressivity.

This folk-element, and conciousness [sic], highly alembicated and intensified in expression, is the fundamental quality of the quartet. Some would call such music a reaction against romanticism or the romantic sentiment. “Romantic” in the field of art is a word of varied and changing meanings. If to be very personal, and idiomatic and picturesque, is to be romantic, this quartet, in spite of a certain starkness and astringency, must come under that heading. It is far, indeed, from the opus one which Mr. Bartók, rather pathetically, presented a New York Philharmonic audience on the occasion of his American debut. This Second Quartet is the mature and virile Bartók, conscious that he has found himself, that he has firm ground beneath him, prompt, ready, fearless in the application to his ideas of his own harmonic [language] and his own style. The interest of the music was enhanced by the sensitive acoustics of the little hall, the informality of the gathering, the seriousness of the audience.²⁹

Interestingly, Downes’s argument for the Romantic character of the quartet contrasts markedly with his general observation that Bartók’s music is “opposed to romanticism.”³⁰ Although he took advantage of the opportunity to disparage, once again, Bartók’s Rhapsody, op. 1,³¹ Downes gave a more positive review of Bartók’s Second String Quartet than he had of other Bartók pieces following the composer’s American debut with the New York Philharmonic and his performance with Joseph Szigeti for the Pro-Musica Society. Additionally, the positive comparison of Bartók’s Second Quartet to the Milhaud and Stravinsky pieces on the program seems especially significant in contrast to program notes at a later concert on the tour whose author evaluated Bartók’s compositions as inferior to Stravinsky’s in general.

5. EDDY BROWN QUARTET – NEW YORK CITY

On 16 February 1928 Bartók performed on two recitals – a morning program with the Eddy Brown Quartet at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in New York City and a later recital with the Burgin Quartet for the Chamber Music Club in Boston. While Bartók did not report difficulties resulting from scheduling performances in two cities in one day, the arrangement may not have been part of Bartók’s original tour schedule. *The New York Herald Tribune* announced that Bartók would perform on an Eddy Brown Quartet concert on 9 February,³² but later advertised that the recital was postponed until 16 February as Bartók was “unable to appear.”³³ The change

²⁸Olin DOWNES, “New World String Quartet,” *The New York Times*, 28 January 1928, 14.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Olin DOWNES, “Music: Toscanini Thrills His Audience. Pro-Musica Society,” *The New York Times*, 6 February 1928, 12.

³¹Ibid.

³²N. N., “Bartók Plays With Eddy Brown Quartet on Thursday, Feb. 9,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 January 1928, Section VII, 9.

³³Ibid.



allowed Bartók to return to Cincinnati on 7 February for further rehearsals of the First Piano Concerto with the Cincinnati Symphony in preparation for the work's American premiere at Carnegie Hall on 13 February.³⁴ The additional rehearsal time was especially important, as problems with the score and lack of rehearsal time had caused the work to be replaced on his previous appearances as soloist with the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

In any case, the all-Bartók program with the Eddy Brown Quartet included solo piano works, the First String Quartet, and "Five Hungarian Folk Songs," probably a selection from *Eight Hungarian Folk Songs* once again, sung this time probably by Crystal Waters.³⁵ The program notes were likely written by the cellist of the quartet, Lajos Shuk, who was trained at the Academy of Music in Budapest. He focused mainly on the first movement of Bartók's First String Quartet, one section of which he described as "a diabolic play of Faustian characters and colors."³⁶ Shuk supplied the audience with a brief biography of the composer and a works list, stating that Bartók was one of the three most important living composers of the time, equaled by Schoenberg and Stravinsky. His assessment of Bartók's personality as an artist is representative of that made in many announcements and reviews of Bartók's U.S. tour performances.

His life reminds us of the greatest in art, in its ascetic restraint, hermit-like seclusion, shunning the public and publicity. Bartók always lived solely for his art, wrote alone and unafraid, for his own satisfaction, never figuring with the commercial possib[i]lities of his works. That is why his art stands alone in its austerity and severe logic. He never compromised and never mingled, therefore his art is in a class by itself and does not remind us of the work of anyone else.

Shuk further emphasized Bartók's originality in his explanation of the First String Quartet, noting that it "shows a perfectly formed individuality . . . it is practically free from all influences."³⁷ He concluded by comparing the difficulty of Bartók's first two works of the genre to "the stone of the alchemists, or the perpetuum mobile of engineering, an unsolvable problem for quartet players."³⁸

³⁴Béla BARTÓK, Jr., *Apám életének krónikája* [Chronicle of my father's life] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981), 258.

³⁵There was some confusion on the name of the singer. While a *New York Times* announcement ("Musical Programs of Week Before Lent," 12 February 1928) and the program note list Crystal Waters, Béla BARTÓK, Jr.'s chronicle indicates on the basis of some report of the concert known to him that the singer may have been Mária Sámson.

³⁶Eddy Brown Quartet, 16 February 1928, Recital Program, Courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives.

³⁷Eddy Brown Quartet.

³⁸Eddy Brown Quartet. Shuk was not the only quartet member with ties to Budapest. Eddy Brown was an American violinist who studied with Hubay at the Budapest Academy of Music as a child. It is possible that Bartók knew Brown, as he was teaching piano at the Academy when Brown was a student. When Bartók was living in the United States, he and Brown were in contact regarding a possible broadcast on the New York classical radio station WQXR, where Brown served as the music director, in 1942. Eddy Brown, letter to Béla Bartók, 27 March 1942, Courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives. It seems that the proposed broadcast did not take place.



6. CHAMBER MUSIC CLUB – THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES, BOSTON

Bartók next traveled to Boston to perform for the Boston Chamber Music Club at the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Fig. 1). His concert for the Boston Chamber Music Club featured his own compositions along with a selection of pieces by his compatriot Kodály, all performed by Bartók and the Burgin String Quartet.³⁹ The composer accompanied cellist Jean Bedetti in a performance of Kodály's Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 4, and then played a solo piano set which included Kodály's "Epitaph" and *Allegro vivace* from op. 3, as well as his own Piano Sonata and other pieces from his standard Pro-Musica program. The Burgin Quartet, made up of violinists Richard Burgin and Robert Gundersen, violist Jean Lefranc, and cellist Jean Bedetti – all string players from the Boston Symphony – concluded the recital with a

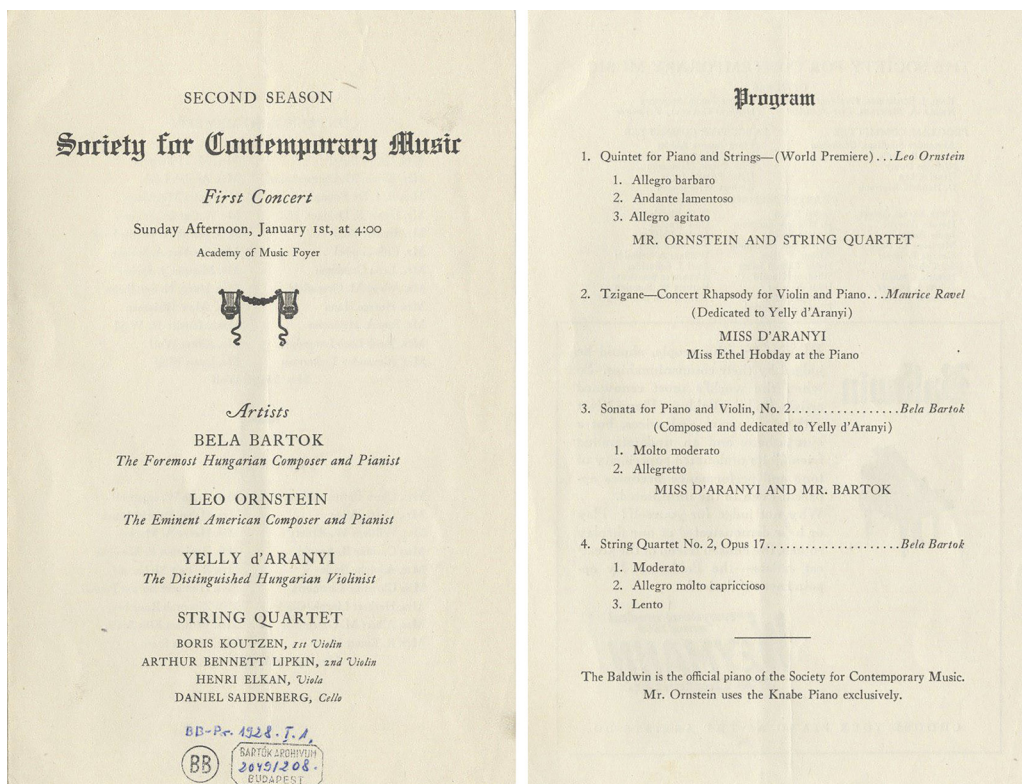


Fig. 1a and b. Philadelphia Society for Contemporary Music Concert Program, 1 January 1928, courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives

³⁹The Chamber Music Club does not seem to be related to The Boston Chamber Music Society, which was established in 1982 and remains active today.



performance of Bartók's Second String Quartet. The unattributed program notes briefly summarize Bartók's training and collecting of folk music with Kodály, but only describe one piece on the program – Bartók's Second String Quartet. The author noted the quartet's generally positive reception, but added that it "has perhaps a confusing variety of styles."⁴⁰ The writer continued by excusing this variety on the grounds that the work "is musically so direct, so sincere," but compares Bartók to Stravinsky, stating that Bartók "seems to be a man without theories or a need to justify himself. His language is far less perfect than Stravinsky's, and he does not seem so well coordinated, but he has a warmth which amply makes up for this."⁴¹ Bartók had contributed numerous articles on compositional techniques to journals in the 1920s, but the annotator was likely unaware of these. Additionally, in the aforementioned lecture Bartók read before each of his recitals for the Pro-Musica Society, he explained his ideas for the incorporation of folk music elements into his own compositional style. The writer almost certainly did not have the benefit of hearing one of these lectures since none was ever given in Boston. Bartók was exposed to numerous comparisons to his contemporaries, but it seems a bit odd for a program annotator to engage in such comparisons in a note for a program on which the composer himself would participate. Bartók's later writings on his own compositional methods, however, may be relevant in connection with the annotator's comment on his purported lack of theories. In 1943 Bartók wrote for the third of his Harvard Lectures:

I never created new theories in advance, I hated such ideas. I had, of course, a very definite feeling about certain directions to take, but at the time of the work I did not care about the designations which would apply to those directions or to their sources. This attitude does not mean that I composed without . . . set plans and without sufficient control.⁴²

While Bartók's own commentary may confirm the program note author's assertion, the composer states that although he did not create theories in advance of composing, his compositional process was a strategic one. In any case, the remainder of the program note is devoted to brief descriptions of each of the quartet's three movements with limited explanatory value – the first movement was summed up in one sentence on its form (Fig. 2).

Bartók's appearance for the Chamber Music Society seems to have gone unnoticed in the Boston press. An article published ten days after the recital in the *Boston Globe* calling for the establishment of a chamber music club in Boston may explain why the concert was overlooked.

Aside from the Symphony concerts Boston has not in these days many opportunities of hearing important modern works. There are, to be sure, the private subscription concerts of the Boston Flute Players' Club, given on Sunday afternoons . . . They cover the whole range of chamber music and include ancient as well as modern works. But these concerts are not accessible to the general public, though guest tickets may often be procured. New York, Chicago and Philadelphia have each one or more societies devoted to the performance [sic] of modern chamber music, which give public

⁴⁰"Chamber Music Club, 1927–1928, Fifth Concert," Concert Program, Courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Béla BARTÓK, "Harvard Lectures," in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. by Benjamin SUCHOFF (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 376.



Chamber Music Club

BÉLA BARTÓK

Pianist

RICHARD BURGIN
First Violin

JEAN LEFRANC
Viola

ROBERT GUNDERSEN
Second Violin

JEAN BEDETTI
Violoncello

ZOLTAN KODÁLY Sonata for Violoncello
(1883–) and Piano (Opus 4).

KODÁLY Epitaphie
KODÁLY Allegro vivace (from Opus 3).
BARTÓK Piano Sonata (1926)
(1881–)

Allegro moderato
Sostenuto e pesante
Allegro vivace

BARTÓK Burlesque (a little tipsy).
Nánie.
Bear Dance. (These were all written
Soir à la Campagne. 1908-1910)
Allegro Barbaro.

BARTÓK Second String Quartet (Opus 17).

Moderato
Allegro molto capriccioso
Lento

Bartok is one of the most important composers in Europe today. Entering the Academy at Budapest in 1899, he rapidly developed a great technical mastery as well as a marked individuality. In 1905 he joined forces with Zoltan Kodaly and they started a tour of Hungary to collect the folk-music of the Magyars. In two years they collected about 3000 of these tunes, and have since published several important collections of them.

This Second string quartet was composed during the years 1915-1917, and has been very highly regarded. It has perhaps a confusing variety of styles, but it is musically so direct, so sincere, that one is not troubled by this. He seems to be a man without theories or a need to justify himself. His language is far less perfect than Stravinsky's, and he does not seem so well co-ordinated, but he has a warmth which amply makes up for this.

The first movement, in A minor, is in classic sonata form.

The second, in D minor, has tremendous vigor, of a crude peasant sort which is highly characteristic of Bartok. It moves along at a swift pace which is now and then interrupted by *sostenuto* passages, and towards the middle there is a gradual *allargando*, leading to a section marked *tranquillo*. The final return of the theme is in 3-4 time instead of 2-4, and it ends with a remarkable coda, prestissimo in 6-4 time.

The last movement, in A minor, closes the work very beautifully and completely. An afterglow lingers over the last measures, where the *pizzicato* somehow evokes all that has gone before.

The Baldwin Pianoforte

Fig. 2 “Chamber Music Club of Boston, 1927–1928, Fifth Concert,” Concert Program courtesy of the Budapest Bartók Archives

concerts. Boston ought also to have such an organization if it is to retain and deserve its reputation as a music center of the first rank.⁴³

The writer’s lament of a dearth of local opportunities to hear modern music suggests that the Chamber Music Society was relatively unknown and may explain the lack of reviews of Bartók’s chamber music performance in Boston while his engagements with the Boston Symphony were announced and reviewed in at least two local newspapers.⁴⁴

⁴³N. N., “Modern Music in Boston,” *Daily Boston Globe*, 26 February 1928, 44.

⁴⁴Warren Storey SMITH, “Music of Future by Symphony,” *Boston Post*, February 18, 1928; and “Bartók Soloist at Symphony Concert,” *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1928.



CONCLUSION

Bartók's appearances on recitals including his violin music and string quartets did not attract as much press attention as some of his solo performances on his first tour of the United States, but the extant criticism and program notes show a few important themes. Of his violin music, the Second Sonata for Violin and Piano drew more attention than did the *Hungarian Folk Tunes* for Violin and Piano and *Romanian Folk Dances* for Violin and Piano. Furthermore, Bartók's Second String Quartet enjoyed the most positive reception of his chamber music presented during the tour. Perhaps the performance of the work by noted ensembles familiar to critics and audiences created a more positive environment for its reception. It is also possible that Bartók's writing for string quartet had greater appeal for American audiences than did his writing for other chamber music genres. Not long after his first American tour, Bartók's Third String Quartet (BB 93), completed in 1927, was also successful in the United States, winning a shared prize from the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia in October 1928. The idea of Bartók's music being in a class by itself, mentioned in program notes, reviews, and an interview with Fritz Reiner, was another recurring theme of writers and musicians and therefore one way the distinctive character of Bartók's music was explained. Ultimately, Bartók was presented to the American public as uncompromising in style, and although writers consistently placed him among the best modern composers of their time they did not always support these declarations with complimentary descriptions of Bartók's music and performances.

