

Bartók's Most Daring Concept of a Palindromic Structure: The Sonata-Form Opening Movement of the Fifth Quartet

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ABSTRACT

In movement I of String Quartet no. 5 *inversion* shapes of the themes are recapitulated in reverse order – probably the most daring concept of a palindromic structure of a sonata-form movement in Bartók's realm. After all, for him a strict *hin und zurück* form with strong thematic characters was unthinkable. Already the strategy of this opening movement involved danger. If Theme I after a transition leads to Theme II, which leads to Theme III, as a dramatic series of actions, how could the reverse order of these themes be “natural”? To minimize the danger, in this movement Bartók reconsidered the usual dramaturgy of the exposition. Instead of a continuous growth of the musical “scenes” welded together, he presented three thematic blocks very much different in character, heavily punctuated by fragments of the first theme. Therefore, dramatic contrast rather than organic development is the key term, and so the reverse order of the thematic blocks in the recapitulation is less artificial.

KEYWORDS

Béla Bartók, String Quartet no. 5, sonata form, Kolisch Quartet

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1. INTRODUCTION

The music examples will present full facsimile pages from Bartók's autograph draft score,¹ to show the formation of a masterpiece. In this way we witness the birth of ideas; one can see what was more or less ready after Bartók's thinking and working at the piano, when he went to his desk to put the draft score on paper. But we also witness what was a problem for him, or what should be deleted on a second thought. As to the live presentation of this paper at the October 29, 1921 Budapest conference "Bartók: The String Quartets," instead of the rich variety of high-quality modern stereo recordings of Bartók's six quartets, the music examples quoted from an old mono recording played in 1941 by Rudolf Kolisch with his partners Khuner, Lehner, and Benar Heifetz;² after all Bartók discussed his notation of this score with Kolisch, who then played the world premiere of the Fifth Quartet and soon recorded it in a way, that the composer liked. As a third preliminary remark, I would take the venture to point out that in so many outstanding essays and hard-core analyses of Bartók's Fifth written by the classics of the Hungarian Bartók literature (among others those by György Kroó, János Kárpáti, and Tibor Tallián)³ as well as by the authors of often-quoted dissertations in German and English, straightforward critical views were not plainly expressed, e.g. the opinion that due to his stubborn experimentation Bartók with this movement indeed reached a point where he felt he should rather stop; that in his next scores he must look for other strategies, other narratives of a sonata-form first movement. Why? What according to him was wrong with this masterpiece?

2. BARTÓK'S SONATA-FORM CONCEPT

In contrast to his contemporary genius Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók was very much conscious of the traditions of the basic genres of instrumental music. In the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* Stravinsky without hesitation offered a highly original but provocatively unconventional composition for the podium: a masterpiece which is a gem in a mixed program of his own music or in a varied twentieth-century chamber music context but would not work similarly in a typical string quartet abonnement concert, say between Mozart and a late Beethoven. In contrast to him, Bartók respected the traditions. Also based on his own pianistic concert experiences, he accepted – I would say, he even hoped – that in this genre, string quartet, his work, mostly the only "modern" score of the evening, would indeed be presented in a mixed-program between or after beloved classical items. Therefore, the multi-movement frame, and even the length and the narrative of the individual movements, should effectively match the classical or romantic masterworks of the evening. For him quite naturally the question of length involved the

¹Estate Béla Bartók 71FSS1, deposited in the Paul-Sacher-Stiftung (photocopy in Budapest Bartók Archives).

²Recorded in 1941 by the Kolisch Quartet (Rudolf Kolisch, Felix Khuner, Jascha Veikssi, Stefan Auber; the last two were new members who did not play in the premiere in Washington, D.C.), Biddulph Recordings (issued 1995) LAB 107.

³György KROÓ, *A Guide to Bartók* (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1974), 172; János KÁRPÁTI, *Bartók's Chamber Music* (New York: Stuyvesant, 1994), 365; Tibor TALLIÁN, *Béla Bartók: The Man and His Work* (Budapest: Corvina, 1981), 185.



choice of form. And if it was an opening movement, unless he experimented with an irregular overall-structure (typically with an attacca form, as in the Third Quartet), in a fast or at least *Moderato*, substantially long opening movement, obviously it had to be some kind of a sonata form.

On the other hand, the traditional recapitulation of a sonata form worried him. In his reply to Denijs Dille's questions in 1937 Bartók clearly formulated:

You know, by the way, that I like technical elaboration very much, that I never present the same musical thought twice in the same way, and that I never repeat a section identically – which explains my great love for variation and the transformation of themes.⁴

Of course the truth of this statement is richly documented in dozens of his scores, but the concept of the sonata-form opening movement of the Fifth Quartet and its successful realization went far beyond this: up to a point where Bartók indeed felt that here he had to stop, if next time on the same route he wished to avoid repeating himself, which would have been atypical for Bartók's concept of writing new music in one of the most prestigious genres of instrumental music.

3. SONATA-FORM REVISION IN THE FIFTH QUARTET

One feature of the opening movement of his Fifth Quartet undoubtedly involved risk. According to his master plan, as Bartók pointed out: "The sequence of tonalities of the single sections produce the whole-tone scale." He wrote this in French and German in his explanatory text for the impresario of the Pro Arte Quartet to help forthcoming authors of program notes (see [Facsimiles 1, 2](#), and [Plate 1](#)).⁵ This is quite a laconic statement, precise as far as the segmentation and surprisingly unorthodox choice of tonalities in sections of the sonata form are concerned, but a little uncommunicative. In addition, the adaptation of the sonata-form terminology does not really fit in this case. For instance, to pick up the most obvious irregularity, a "lyrical theme" in the opening movement of the Fifth (according to Bartók the "second theme") is not between the primary theme and a (non-existing) closing theme but it ends the exposition. György Ligeti's description in his introductory text to the pocket score⁶ correctly marks the three sections simply as "first subject, second subject, third subject."

Back to Bartók's description: in the first *N.B.* footnote he emphasized that in the recapitulation the themes return "in reversed order and in inversion" (NB: A note-by-note "hin und zurück" form in a monumental sonata-form movement was certainly unthinkable for him.) In the second footnote Bartók points out that "the sequence of tonalities of the single sections

⁴Here I quote László Vikárius's translation from the original: Denijs DILLE, "Interview with Béla Bartók (1937)," *Hungarian Heritage* 7/1–2 (2006), 15.

⁵For the fair copy in French see Jacque LENOIR, "A propos de quelques documents du Fonds Gaston Verhuyck," *Studia Musicologica* 35/1–3 (1993–1994), 155–180.

⁶*Philharmonia Scores*, no. 167.



Cher M.,

vous me demandez une chose bien ~~de~~ difficile et encore d'urgence!
 Donner l'analyse de mon quatuor c'est une affaire bien compliquée
 à cause des termes techniques français qui souvent me manquent.

Mais, j'essaierai tout de même ^{de} la faire, voici:

Le plan de tonalité des 5 mouvements de l'œuvre est le suivant:

I. sib, II. do# III. re, IV. sol V. sib.

Le plan de structure est le suivant:

I. II Scherz. trio Scherzo IV V

(II est une variation libre du II. m.)

I. et II. ont des rapports communs au point de vue de la tonalité.

Le I. mouvement est en "forme de sonate":

Sonate est:

— A — A-B — B — [36] — [37] — C — D

thème principal I. thème II. thème III.

en Sib en Do en Re

Partie d'enchaînement

D — F G — A

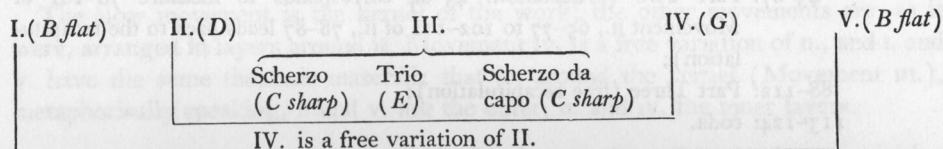
Développement recapitulation en ~~ton~~ en inversion et en plus inverse:

c. à d. consistant de: G — H (thème II. en inversion), H — I (partie d'enchaînement en inversion)

en Fa# en La b

Facsimile 1. Bartók's analysis, the original French version (Budapest Bartók Archives, BA-N 3905)

Plan of the tonalities and structure of the work:



I. and V. have common features concerning tonality

Movement I.: sonata form

1 – A	+	A – B	B – 36	+	37 – C	C – D
1st theme	+	appendix to 1st theme	transitional section	+	allusion to to 1st theme	2nd theme
(in <i>B flat</i>)				(in <i>C</i>)		(in <i>D</i>)
exposition						

D – F = development; leading to F – G (1st theme in inversion).
(in *E*)

G – J = recapitulation, in reversed order and in inversion, composed of:

G – H (2nd theme in inversion) (in <i>F sharp</i>)	H – I (transitional section in inversion) (in <i>A flat</i>)	I – J (1st theme in inversion) (in <i>B flat</i>)
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J to the end: coda.

N.B.—(1) The sequence of tonalities of the single sections produce the whole-tone scale. (2) The first theme has two principal degrees: *B flat* (tonic) and *E* (dominant-like); the beginning, middle part, and end of the movement produce the following tonalities: *B flat*, *E*, and *B flat*. We could also designate F as the beginning of the recapitulation, I as the beginning of the coda.

Plate 1. Bartók's analysis, the English translation⁷

produce the whole-tone scale.”⁸ This statement points to one of the risks of the Bartókian revision of sonata form in the opening *Allegro* of the Fifth Quartet, because for the sake of the natural flow and cohesion of the exposition (and the recapitulation) either the themes, one after the other, should modulate a major second upwards between their beginning and end in the exposition (and downwards in the recapitulation), which is not the case, or the stepwise ascending (and in the recapitulation descending) thematic plateaus should somehow be connected with transitory sections – which was Bartók's choice. Nevertheless, due to the reverse order, combined with the inversion of the themes, in the recapitulation even the experienced

⁷English translation in *Béla Bartók Essays*, selected and ed. by Benjamin SUCHOFF (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 414.

⁸“Die Tonartenreihenfolge der einzelnen Teile ergibt die Ganztonskala.”





Facsimile 3. The first page of the autograph draft (Bartók Estate, New York, deposited in the Paul-Sacher-Stiftung, Basel; photocopy in Bartók Archives Budapest)



listener of chamber music concerts may easily lose the thread in following the narrative. The changed sequence of themes is not “natural” but rather surprising, somehow even artificial, and why in actual fact? – one could ask. Well, Bartók would probably be happy: “I never repeat a section identically – which explains my great love for variation and the transformation of themes,” as he stated. Soon we will return to the dilemma of using the *inversion* form of themes, but first a few words about the position of the “II. [Zweites] Thema in Re” within the exposition.

In contrast to the basically traditional proportions of the Exposition/Development/Recapitulation/and Coda in this circa 7-min-long sonata-form opening movement, the length, and to an even greater extent the presentation of the “second theme” (according to Bartók’s disputable terminology), i.e. the placement of a lyrical theme at the very end of the exposition – in D, and at the beginning of the recapitulation in F# – are highly irregular. Of course in his written explanation it was Bartók’s intention to borrow the terminology of the well-known sonata form, his “transitional section” could rightly be called second theme or subject (as György Ligeti labelled it in his already-mentioned introductory text). Note, however, that compared to Bartók’s French and German terminology in his quoted text, in the printed score and parts of the Fifth Quartet the composer very objectively and precisely marked the beginnings of sections of the form: with capital *A B C* etc. letters in circles at the beginning of a new section of the form – this is an unambiguous analysis, and so better than his written text –, while the mechanical boxed measure numbers 5, 10, 15, etc. merely assist the performer at rehearsal. – As an addition to the study of the compositional process, the crossings, replacements, and insertions of the autograph draft score clearly show where did Bartók hesitate, what did he crossed as a second thought (e.g. already on the first page, see [Facsimile 3](#)), or replaced with inserted measures (often on the opposite page, see [Facsimiles 4 and 5](#)). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that in the autograph draft score there are also discarded pages. One of these contains the first version of the lyrical theme; on another (see [Facsimile 6](#)) are found variant forms to the second theme, i.e. the transitional section, in inversion.

4. SONATA-FORM REVISION IN OTHER SCORES

It is time to return to the still unanswered question of why Bartók felt that he had to stop after the well-planned – “perfect”? “final”? – sonata-form revision in the Fifth Quartet.⁹ Why did he decide that in his next instrumental compositions (e.g. the sonata-form second movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, or the opening movement of the Violin Concerto; see [Plate 2](#)) he would rather look for other strategies of the sonata-form frame?

It is perhaps not just analytical speculation to point out that in this score, even with the dominating contours of the three themes, Bartók was more “systematic” than in most – if not all – of his opening sonata forms: the horizontal action of the first theme, the vertical-springing characteristics of the second theme, and the undulating *dolce* third theme provide basic, one could say well-planned, “systematic” contrasts. Contrast in rhythm, contrast in texture, and contrast even in string technique – everything is perfectly planned and rigorously realized. But

⁹At this point of the lecture version the complete opening *Allegro* of the Fifth Quartet was presented in the performance of the Kolisch Quartet, with the projection of the autograph draft score, to show how Bartók put down this complicated score, where he hesitated and made revisions, and what was crossed out or inserted as a second thought.



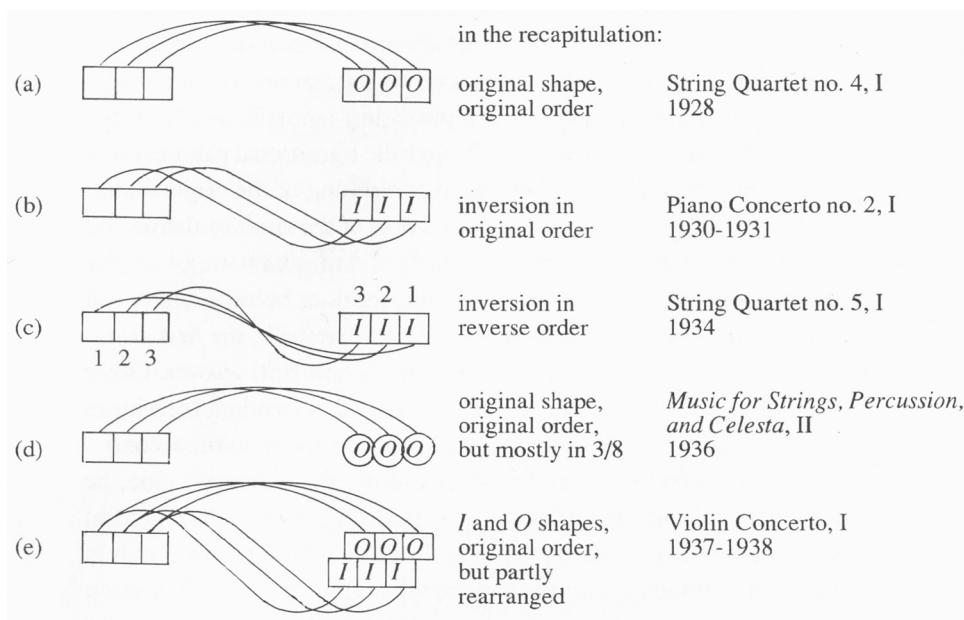


Plate 2. Sonata-form recapitulation strategies by Bartók in 1928–1938

what is important is the intention, that the themes of the movement had to be reduced mostly to a simple shape so that they should not be grotesque when turned upside down in the recapitulation. In my opinion the only risky point is perhaps the inverted return of the second theme, i.e. the return of the transitional section, in which the large intervals in the discant in a detached and wild performance may sound unnecessarily grotesque.¹⁰

Looking back for Bartók, we assume, the one critical feature of this grand-style opening movement could have been the perhaps much too homogeneous rhythmic profile, the homogeneous texture and rigorous elaboration of the thematic blocks in both exposition and recapitulation. Incidentally, as one can see in the draft score, the invention and elaboration of no less long homogeneous blocks in the development section were much easier for him. As in several other sonata-form movements, the typical Bartók “development section” is not so much a fragmentation and elaboration of the exposed themes but a large-scale fantasy or toccata.

It is time to try to locate the position of this opening *Allegro* in a broader context, among the neighboring grand instrumental sonata-form movements of Bartók. There is no question that in

¹⁰I would like to share with you one of my revelations about the proper performance of this return. Decades ago in Banff, Canada, at a summer course, one of the master interpreters of Bartók's quartets, Zoltán Székely with great care instructed young musicians how they should play these up-and-down intervals not in an attractive detached style with springing bow but with tenuto notes as far as possible. This way the thematic profile upgraded the role of the transitional section; thus it indeed became a “second subject.” cf. Claude KENNESON, *Székely and Bartók: The Story of a Friendship* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), 406–407.

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71 PSS 1

Estate
Bela Bartok

Facsimile 4. The end of the recapitulation and the beginning of the coda (see the place of insertion from the opposite page)





Facsimile 5. The opposite page in the draft score with insertion, and continuation of the coda



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Estate,
Bela Bartok

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Facsimile 6. A discarded page: two versions of the recapitulation of the transitory theme

1928 in writing the opening sonata-form movement of his Fourth Quartet, the composer basically still accepted the traditional sequence (and shape) of themes in the recapitulation. Two years later in the Second Piano Concerto he made a step forward: in the recapitulation the



themes return in their exposed sequence, i.e. in the original order but in inversion. After this came our case, the Fifth Quartet with the perfect design: in the recapitulation themes in inversion and in reverse order – thus a dead end. In the sonata-form second movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* Bartók had to abandon his approach and look for something no less surprising and refreshing: the themes in the recapitulation return in their original shape and order, but mostly in a rolling $\frac{5}{8}$ meter – the idea of a genius (who would not remember the role of *Proportz* in the old European dance-music tradition?). But to avoid using this model twice, in the first movement of the (so-called “Second”) Violin Concerto Bartók figured out yet another variation: more or less keeping the original order in the recapitulation, but presenting the themes in inverted and original shape alike – again this looks like a dead end. Nevertheless, even during the American years Bartók invented further designs (one need only think of the opening *Allegro* of the Concerto for Orchestra).

5. APPENDIX: IRREGULAR BAR-LINES

As an appendix, a few words about the printed bar-lines and the actual pulsation in the opening *Allegro* of the Fifth Quartet. In his younger years Bartók passionately experimented with

The image is a facsimile of the musical score for the opening of the first movement of Bartók's Fifth Quartet. It features three staves (treble, alto, and bass clef) with various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The tempo is marked 'A' with a quarter note equal to 120. The score includes several measures with irregular bar lines, indicated by dotted lines. Key markings include 'p, leggero', 'mf', 'quasi gliss.', 'sim.', and 'mp'. The time signature changes from 7/8 to 6/8 and back to 7/8. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, some of which are dotted, indicating irregular pulsation.

Facsimile 7. Bartók's dotted bar-lines in mov. I of the Fifth Quartet (with inserted comments)



ALLEGRO Béla Bartók

Violino I ♩ = 138 - 182

Violino II

Viola

Violoncello

Facsimile 8. Listener's impression of bar-lines at the beginning of mov. I of the Fifth Quartet (Bartók Estate, New York, deposited in Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel; photocopy in Bartók Archives Budapest)

changing meter, even with different meters between two instruments or between the two hands in a piano work in order to express independent pulsation between the voices. In this score, but only in a few measures, due to the complicated polymetric situation, like the “appendix to the first theme,” with its additional dotted bar-lines, he adopted precise notation of the actual *guter Taktteil*, the stressed notes in the different voices (see Facsimile 7). But in long sections the meter is unchanged while the music clearly has an irregular pulsation which is indicated only with scattered marcato signs. Or, as already in the middle of the first measure (see Facsimile 8), one encounter a slurred pair of notes among the repeated note figures as if it were the beginning of a new bar. And several times – in spite of the printed bar-lines – longer sections of this opening movement are, so to speak, “in prose,” without a regular pulsation; bar-lines serve only as a technical aid in the appropriate performance. (Note that at the time of the composition of this Bartók score the four musicians on the podium played from parts, not from the score as often today.)

To understand these special features of the *Allegro* of the Fifth Quartet it is not enough to be familiar to some extent with the notation of our composer's five other quartets. Bartók passionately changed and constantly improved his notation, and it is only when one is in



possession of all available sources – manuscripts, corrected editions, composer’s statements, even the recollections of contemporary performers – that significant questions can properly be answered.

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