

Bartók, Biography, and the Violin

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ABSTRACT

Biography takes the scant facts of a life that are available to scrutiny, like the waypoints on a journey to be mapped, and attempts to form a coherent narrative from them. That coherence is, to at least some degree, contingent upon the ideological position of the author and as Michael Benton has noted, “the biographical subject is a textual creation as much as a historical recreation.” While fully acknowledging that one cannot “read back” from the works of an author to their life, Benton has described the substance of literary outputs as “quasi-facts” to be set beside “historical facts” and argued that these “can be seen as reflecting some contemporary events or as sublimating some experiences in the writer’s past or mirroring some authorial state of mind.” This article draws on the First Violin Sonata as such a quasi-fact of Bartók’s life to question whether biographical information can or should impact the ways that we understand and perform his music. The article additionally considers whether the content of individual works as mental products may have something tangible to impart about their composer’s personality. Given the broad consensus around the so-called “Five-Factor Model” of personality measurement within the field of psychology, it speculates whether this might offer a tool to refine our portrait of Bartók through analysis of his music.

KEYWORDS

Bartók, biography, personality, Sonata for Violin and Piano no. 1

On 24 March 1922, Bartók performed his new Violin Sonata (BB 84) at the Aeolian Hall in London with the musician who had inspired him to bring it to completion. The radical and modernist British literary magazine, *The New Age*, edited by Alfred Orage, which espoused Fabian Socialism, Nietzschean philosophy and Freudian psychology, published a sympathetic and supportive review of the recital on 6 April, in which it was remarked that:

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Mr. Bartok's Sonata for violin and piano (played by the composer himself and Miss Jelly d'Aranyi) has not a dull moment in it. It is not always easy to follow Mr. Bartok, but there is no reason why it should be. We are living in a period of new ideas and new outlooks, and a composer has a right to the limit of his possibilities, without troubling whether his listeners can follow him. He must necessarily have his eyes fixed on something which always moves ahead of himself, and it is for his listeners to educate their own ears. He is some rungs in advance on the ladder of his own development, and if the public wishes to understand him it must study the rungs of the ladder as he steps off and up. Miss Jelly d'Aranyi played magnificently; indeed, at times her playing was on such a very high level that it seemed possible she might be introducing new beauties even to the composer himself.

The reviewer on this occasion was identified as H. Rootham whose given name of Helen was reduced to an initial, perhaps to disguise her gender in the patriarchal Britain of the time;¹ she was a figure best known as the governess and companion of the eccentric avant-garde English poetess and critic Edith Sitwell. Although Rootham had previously provided some music criticism for *The New Age*, she may have had a particular reason on this occasion to have been interested in the work of a composer from Eastern Europe noted for his enthusiasm for folk music, for two years earlier she had published a collection of her own translations of traditional verse from Yugoslavia: *Kosovo, Heroic Songs of the Serbs*.²

A single tiny point of reference in Bartók's life, this is not one that is included in either my biography of the composer or Malcolm Gillies's excellent *Bartók in Britain*. I found it more recently through *The Modernist Journals Project* of Brown University and The University of Tulsa, a wonderful resource for the scholar in which many such early-twentieth-century anglophone periodicals have been digitised.³ This highlights the essentially cumulative nature of biographical writing, for new material continues to become available, in Bartók's case, more than seven decades after his death. As one instance of this, as recently as September 2017 a hitherto unpublished two-page letter with his signature written in September 1922 to an unidentified recipient, which contains valuable information about the two violin sonatas (BB 84, 85), was up for sale on an American music antiquarian website for \$3,750.

The greater part of a person's life, their thoughts and mundane activities, has and can have no record. Even if the data were available and if one was to devote just a single page of a book to each day in the adult life of a sixty-four-year-old man it would amass to tens of thousands of pages. Biography generally takes such scant facts of a life as are available to scrutiny at any time and attempts to form a comprehensible narrative from them. Of course, some available facts may well be deliberately passed over or indeed be unknown to the author, while others will be placed in the limelight and made a particular centre of attention. And in the absence of data, a biographer has three basic options: to ignore, to infer, or to invent.

Individual biographical facts might be conceived as being like the waypoints on a journey to be mapped by a GPS, in which one can choose a route that is faster, shorter in distance, or, if you are a motorcyclist as I am, twistier and more scenic. The coherence that is achieved by a biography (and this is not to suggest that a biographer should attempt to invest a false consistency

¹It is worth remembering that suffrage had been extended to women in the UK in 1918, and then only to women over 30.

²Helen ROOTHAM, *Kosovo: Heroic Songs of the Serbs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920).

³<https://modjourn.org/advanced-search/> (accessed September 1, 2017).



in their subject's actions) is at least to some degree contingent upon the ideological position of the author and the conscious or unconscious filters he or she applies.

Necessarily, as Michael Benton, a theorist of literary biography has noted, “the biographical subject is a textual creation as much as a historical recreation.”⁴ In that textual creation, Hayden White reminds us,

[N]o given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements*. The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them, and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motivic repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like – in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play.⁵

Biographies of composers tend to follow a myriad of approaches. They may, for instance, focus on particular musical techniques that the composer has invented or developed. Or they may encompass ideological purposes, positing their subject as a hero or villain of some religious, national, social or political cause. At their most elementary they seem to me to serve two primary functions: to describe something of the context in which compositions arose and to help the reader better understand the personality and motivations of the composer. Of course, Bartók's musical life was unusually rich and diverse, for not only was he a composer, but he had simultaneous and imbricated careers as a concert pianist, a piano teacher, and what would now be described as an ethnomusicologist. These four strata collectively provide White's “story elements” and it is the biographer's role to determine which of them should be in principal focus at any given moment.

The documentary evidence from which Bartók's life events and personality can be pieced together arises from many sources that collectively make up the archive; both in the sense of the marvelous physical archive in Budapest and the virtual archive that the Internet has made ever more readily accessible to the scholar. These sources include: reminiscences; letters; reviews; recordings of him speaking and playing; his musicological and journalistic writings; iconography and photographs; his possessions; and his compositions in their various stages of completion from sketch to final manifestation as score and performance.

What was said about Bartók at the time or in retrospect – by family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, medical practitioners, critics and adversaries – is clearly crucial in forming an understanding of him. Malcolm Gillies's *Bartók Remembered* still provides one of the most useful anglophone anthologies of such writing, but there are numerous references to him within journalistic criticism, many of which probably remain to be discovered, in addition to the writings of those who came across him on a personal or professional level. Necessarily, the image that coalesces from such writing may in part be contradictory and incoherent, reflecting as it does the spectrum of relationships that ranges from a single encounter to a lifetime's familiarity. However, one must exercise some caution in ascribing greater authenticity to the views of those who were apparently closest to a biographical subject, for their memories can be the most

⁴Michael BENTON, “The Aesthetics of Biography – and What it Teaches,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49/1 (2015), 17.

⁵Hayden WHITE, *Tropes of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 84.



coloured by the relationship and consciously or unconsciously mediated by self-censorship or the desire to show the individual in the best possible light.

Given that Bartók did not write an autobiography (beyond producing brief resumés) or keep a detailed journal, letters are necessarily of vital importance to his biographer. The Budapest Bartók Archives' excellent database, *Bartók Correspondence*, published on the Internet in 2015 (unfortunately too late for my study) provides a most helpful and valuable means of navigating roughly nine thousand individual items currently catalogued. Most importantly, it includes references to letters written to, as well as by, the composer, for the conduct of the dialogue and the nature of the language used by both parties tells us much about the relationship between the correspondents and the various identities adopted by them.

As well as the two major collections in Hungarian, *Bartók Béla levelei* [Béla Bartók letters]⁶ and *Bartók Béla családi levelei* [Béla Bartók family letters],⁷ there are collected editions of translations of a minority of them in several European languages including English and German. In 2013 Ferenc Bónis published Bartók's correspondence with Paul Sacher⁸ and as recently as 2016, that with Annie Müller-Widmann⁹ (both in Hungarian and German); and many other discrete groups of letters have been published over the years. Unfortunately, some of these can be virtually inaccessible to the general reader – for example, copies of the *Briefe an Stefi Geyer, 1907–1908*¹⁰ published by the Paul Sacher Stiftung in 1979 are now as rare as hens' teeth.

Such written communication provides the biographer with both direct and indirect information. In terms of the latter, as discourse analysis demonstrates, the ways in which language is used can itself be extremely revealing and even relatively trivial aspects, such as the salutations, offer evidence of the development of a relationship. The extensive sets of letters to Annie Müller-Widmann and Paul Sacher, chronologically viewed, are particularly interesting in this regard, for we find Bartók moving from the formal "Sehr geehrte" to the more informal "Liebe" by his fourth letter to Müller-Widmann, whereas it takes several years to unbutton to this extent with Sacher.

Drawing on material from the Bartók literature, a number of narrative threads can be drawn through the historical facts associated with the composition and early performances of the First Violin Sonata, and two in particular will be considered here. The first concerns a pair of composers and critics who were enthusiasts of Bartók's music – the Englishman Philip Heseltine (better known by his *nom de plume* Peter Warlock, who visited Bartók in Budapest in April 1921) and the Scottish Cecil Gray (later Heseltine's biographer) – and their native Great Britain. The second involves three women: Bartók's first wife Márta, and the violinists Jelly d'Arányi and Mary Dickenson-Auner.

⁶*Bartók Béla levelei* [Béla Bartók letters], ed. by János DEMÉNY (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1976).

⁷*Bartók Béla családi levelei* [Béla Bartók family letters], ed. by Béla BARTÓK, Jr. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981).

⁸*Bartók Béla – Paul Sacher levelezése / Briefwechsel* [Correspondence of Béla Bartók and Paul Sacher] 1936–1940, ed. by Ferenc BÓNIS (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2013).

⁹*Bartók Béla – Annie Müller-Widmann levelezése / Briefwechsel* [Correspondence of Béla Bartók and Annie Müller-Widmann] 1935–1940, ed. by Ferenc BÓNIS (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2016).

¹⁰*Béla Bartók Briefe an Stefi Geyer* [Béla Bartók letters to Stefi Geyer], 1907–1908, transl. by Lajos NYIKOS (Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, 1979).



Several letters help us organise an overall narrative of the inception, composition, and early performance history of the First Violin Sonata. Some of these lie entirely outside Bartók's own correspondence, such as one from Heseltine to Frederick Delius on 20 November 1920, which reports Bartók's apparent material conditions at the time:

I hear from Hertzka [the Director of Universal Edition] and Adila d'Aranyi who has just returned from Budapest that poor Bartók is in very difficult circumstances and scarcely able to keep body and soul together . . . Adila d'Aranyi is most anxious that he should come to England next year and give some concerts – and if a small sum of money could be guaranteed (say £100) he would gladly come: and it would be a great help to him to take back to Hungary a little English money which would, of course, translate into an immense number of Kröner. Hertzka says that Schönberg has been in a similar plight. It is dreadful to think of the very few men of real genius in music at the present day being so harassed by mundane cares of this sort while tenth-rate vulgarian upstarts like Gustav Holst are acclaimed as great composers and imbeciles like Stravinsky crowned as veritable gods.¹¹

The next letter which stood out as being significant in the biographical chain around the Sonata was one written to Bartók's Romanian friend Ioan Bușiția on 8 May 1921, in which, consistent with the conditions described by Heseltine, he complains of the difficulties he has been facing. His family's living expenses, he asserts, are twice his annual salary and he comments that "it is obvious that, in these circumstances, I have no time for composing, even if I were in the right mood for it. But my mood is far from right – and no wonder."¹² Ironically, he remarks, his music is receiving interest abroad, including an extraordinarily positive piece by Heseltine's colleague Cecil Gray in the English periodical *The Sackbut* (of which Heseltine was the editor).

Five months later, a letter from Márta to Bartók's mother and his Aunt Irma written on 19 October 1921 casts his apparent attitude towards composition in these dark times into a rather different light. She tells them how she "nearly jumped out of her skin" when Bartók told her on her birthday that he had started to write a violin sonata for Jelly d'Arányi, bringing to an end a period in which he appeared to have given up all thoughts of composition. Since finishing the draft short score of *The Miraculous Mandarin* (BB 82) in 1919 he had, of course, completed only the *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* (BB 83), in 1920. Bartók wrote to Calvocoressi on 20 October, the day following Márta's letter, telling him that "I had the opportunity to play chamber music with Miss Arányi for the first time. I thought she was an excellent violinist, so I would very gladly play with her in public . . . Yes. I am even composing a sonata for violin and piano, which I would like to play with Miss Arányi for the first time. I hope I will finish this work in a few weeks."¹³

Bartók's relationship with the d'Arányi sisters (Adila, Hortense Emilia – or Titi as she was commonly known – and Jelly) stretched back as far as 1902 when he taught Titi the piano at her home in Budapest, while he was still a student. It was at this stage that he appears to have developed an infatuation for Adila, sending her numerous postcards including one consisting of a duo for violins (BB 26a) composed for her as a retrograde canon. According to the sisters'

¹¹*The Collected Letters of Peter Warlock (Philip Heseltine)*, ed. by Barry SMITH (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), vol. 3, 334.

¹²*Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. by János DEMÉNY (Budapest: Corvina Press, 1971), 153.

¹³Adrienne GOMBOCZ and László SOMFAI, "Bartók's Briefe an Calvocoressi [Bartók letters to Calvocoressi] (1914–1930)," *Studia Musicologica* 24 (1982), 199–231 (207), translated by the author.



biographer Joseph Macleod, relying on Jelly and Adila's testimony late in their lives, Bartók visited their house nearly every day for five years during this period.¹⁴ The girls settled in England in 1913, Adila marrying the US-born international lawyer Alexander Fachiri and Titi tying the knot with Ralph Hawtrey, the economist and former member of the elite intellectual group, the Cambridge Apostles, in 1915. Jelly, in particular, had achieved considerable acclaim in Britain as a violinist by 1919, as is illustrated by Alfred Kalisch's comment in the *Musical Times* of December of that year that "she has been hailed by some critics as among the greatest players of the day."¹⁵

Members of the d'Arányi family vacationed in Hungary in 1921 and it was during this holiday that Jelly visited Bartók and played with him seriously for the first time, on 4 October. Macleod comments that she had playfully encouraged him to write a sonata for her during a meal at the Gellért Hotel, and observes that Bartók wrote to Jelly on 9 November to tell her that he had completed the opening two movements of the Sonata, paraphrasing his comments that "he had written it entirely for her" and "if she couldn't or didn't want to play it, then he would never play it."

An English translation of part of the letter that is published in a Sotheby's catalogue for an auction held on 15–16 May 1967 shows a bifurcation in the evidence trail, given that the sketches for the Sonata in the *Black Pocket-Book*,¹⁶ as László Somfai has convincingly argued, probably dated back to August 1920.¹⁷ In the Sotheby's excerpt of his letter to Jelly, Bartók writes:

Do you know what the news is? Movements 1 and 2 of your violin sonata are already available, completely finished, even 1/3 of the third. The "mesmerizing" was successful! (Do you remember you used this expression in the Gellért Hotel: you wanted to mesmerize me to write something for the violin.) Yet you do not appear to be such a skilled hypnotist. However, your violin playing has indeed impressed me so much that I decided on that Tuesday when we last played together: I will attempt this, for me, unusual combination of instruments at any price. For a long time, I had the notion that I could write for such a combination only if both instruments always had separate themes – this notion has now taken definite form so that already the next day the plan and the main themes for all three movements were ready. When we said goodbye on Thursday, I could have mentioned it. I wanted very much to do so but I did not dare, I did not know whether after such a long silence – 2 years – which has been imposed on me I could still compose. Very soon it appeared that I was still able to – and how! . . . I compose this sonata for you – and I dedicate it to you (if you accept) . . .¹⁸

¹⁴Joseph MACLEOD, *The Sisters d'Aranyi* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969).

¹⁵Alfred KALISCH, "London Concerts," *The Musical Times* 60/922 (1919), 694.

¹⁶Bartók Béla fekete zsebkönyve. Vázlatok 1907–1922. Az eredeti kézirat faksimile kiadása Somfai László utószavával / *Black Pocket-Book (Sketches 1907–1922). Facsimile edition of the manuscript with a commentary by László Somfai* (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1987).

¹⁷László SOMFAI, "The Two Sonatas for Violin and Piano (1921–1922): Avantgarde Music à la Bartók," "Béla Bartók La décennie 1915–1925, Colloque Genève et Lausanne, 1–2 décembre 2006," *Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 27 (2007), 87–104. "Written between the desk and the piano": Dating Béla Bartók's sketches," ed. by Patricia HALL and Friedemann SALLIS, *A Handbook to Twentieth-Century Musical Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 114–130.

¹⁸*Sotheby and Co: Catalogue of Valuable Printed Books, Music Autograph Letters and Historical Documents*, 15–16 May 1967, 112.



And in what may be paraphrase by Macleod derived from the complete letter or his own invention, he asserts that “while writing it [Bartók] kept imagining with what *élan* she would play the *allegro* first movement, how beautiful her *cantilena* would be in the *adagio*, and with what *fuoco barbaro* she would play the exotic dance rhythms of the third movement.”¹⁹ Was Bartók being uncharacteristically economical with the truth in his suggestion that the score was conceived for her alone rather than her being the stimulus to complete a project already begun? Does this suggest a greater degree of flexibility in his personality than has sometimes been attributed to him, in his willingness to flatter her ego?

Here we discover a further frustration for the biographer, for I have only been able to access the letters alluded to by Macleod, dated 7 December 1921 and 2 February 1922, through the Sotheby’s catalogue where very brief extracts are quoted from items placed on sale as “The property of a Lady.” This is a pity for what we can see of both offer tantalising insights into the relationship between Bartók and Jelly and his awareness of the difficulty of the first movement in particular, including an offer to simplify the four-string arpeggios “if absolutely necessary.”

On 29 December 1921 Bartók wrote separate letters to Cecil Gray (in French) and Philip Heseltine (in English) to tell them of his forthcoming visit to England. He advised Heseltine of the performances of *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* (BB 62) and *The Wooden Prince* (BB 74) that were to take place in Frankfurt in May, and remarked that “[a] French critic, Mr Calvocoressi, who lives in London now and Mrs Fachiri [Adila d’Arányi] and her sisters try to get some engagements for me. I hope they will succeed. On this occasion I shall bring a new work, composed in the last two months, with me: a sonata for piano and violine [sic], and shall try to play it.”²⁰

Given the fact that he apparently composed the Sonata specifically for Jelly, it was surprising perhaps that she did not give the first performance of the work, that responsibility falling to the Irish violinist and composer Mary Dickenson-Auner, on 8 February 1922 in the Mittleren Konzerthausaal in Vienna.²¹ And herein lies something of a mystery – the essence of a good story. Born in 1880 in Dublin, Mary Dickenson moved to Germany when she was three and spent her early years there before returning to the UK in her late teens. She studied the violin with Émile Sauret at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and subsequently with Otakar Ševčík in Prague. Moving to Vienna in 1910 she married a diplomat called Michael Auner in 1913 and during the period from 1916–1920 lived in Holland with her sister. She became a member of Schoenberg’s Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen founded in 1918, though as a composer was much more conservative in style than those of the Second Viennese School. Despite her role in the premiere of the First Violin Sonata, she has been something of a bit player in Bartók biography, rarely getting more than a perfunctory mention if at all, Halsey Stevens, for instance, not alluding to her.

In Mary Dickenson-Auner’s unpublished autobiography, *Mein Musikleben* [My music life], as cited by Margarethe Engelhardt-Krajanek, she explains that she had obtained the manuscript of the Sonata from a Hungarian girlfriend (whom she does not name and may or may not have been Jelly), and “decided” to give its premiere in Vienna, “naturally with Bartók’s permission.”

¹⁹MACLEOD, *The Sisters d’Aranyi*, 136.

²⁰“Vier Briefe Bartóks an Philip Heseltine [Four letters by Bartók to Philip Heseltine],” *Documenta Bartókiana*, vol. 5 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977), 141.

²¹See Announcements in the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* 56/34 (3 February 1922), 8.



This is partially corroborated by a comment from Bartók in a letter to Universal Edition on 22 January 1922, where he notes that the Sonata was to be first performed by “Mrs Mary Auner and Steuermann” in Vienna on 8 February. In his reply on 15 February Emil Hertzka responded that although he could not attend the performance because of illness “I have it reported to me that it has made a very strong impression.”²² This demonstrates that Bartók’s publisher took no part in the arrangement of the concert and it was organised on a more informal basis.²³ The manuscript score was one of two draft copies and thus not the one used by Jelly in her preparation.²⁴ Beyond this, I have been unable to track down any correspondence between Jelly, Mary and Bartók, or indeed any other evidence, which provides a rationale for the premiere taking place as it did. Perhaps, as László Somfai suggests, Bartók simply did not regard it as the work’s first performance – that would come with his and Jelly’s performance in London.²⁵ However, it remains a biographical lacuna, a small but interesting enigma that can either be ignored or bridged by inference or invention.

Her pianist, Eduard Steuermann, was a close associate of Schoenberg’s who had played in the premiere of *Pierrot Lunaire*, and according to Dickenson-Auner the pair rehearsed for three weeks, suggesting that she must have received the score sometime in early January 1922. The duo struggled with the technical difficulties and were unsure how the audience would react to, in her words, a very atonal work which placed great demands on the listener. She comments that in the course of the performance of the first two movements there was increasing audience engagement, and the third with its “stirring rhythm into which we put our whole personality finally sparked enthusiasm.”

The reviews, she attests, were very good, and “Bartók expressed his satisfaction in writing.” And here again we find a biographical gap, for I have not been able to unearth any note from Bartók to Dickenson-Auner, and correspondence with her biographer failed to reveal any evidence, Dr. Engelhardt-Krajanek commenting that if there had been any correspondence with Béla Bartók or Jelly d’Arányi it probably was lost during the Second World War.²⁶ In a similar vein, Jenő Takács observed that Dickenson-Auner “had a nice house in Neuwaldegg and told me about Bartók’s visit to her,” but he was equally unable to obtain any corroboration about this meeting.²⁷

Among the positive reviews for the concert was one which appeared in the *Bécsi Magyar Újság* [Hungarian journal in Vienna] on 10 February, which says more about the piece than its performers. A further response was by the composer and former student of Schoenberg, Egon Wellesz. We find him writing in his “Letter from Vienna,” in the *Musical News and Herald* of 4 March 1922, that:

²²I would like to thank László Vikárius for drawing my attention to these letters.

²³I would like to thank László Vikárius for helping me with this information (private correspondence).

²⁴László SOMFAI, “Bartók’s Violin and Piano Sonatas nos 1–2: Compositional Process,” unpublished keynote address, “Bartók and the Violin” Musicological Symposium, Bartók World Competition and Festival 2017, 15 September 2017, Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. For the published version of the lecture, see in this volume, 25–54.

²⁵SOMFAI, “Bartók’s Violin and Piano Sonatas Nos 1–2: Compositional Process,” 27.

²⁶Private email.

²⁷Jenő TAKÁCS, *Erinnerungen an Béla Bartók* (Vienna, Munich: Ludwig Doblinger, 1982), 64.



Another most agreeable composition has been performed lately, that is the Violin Sonata by Bela Bartok, played by the Irish violinist living in Vienna, Miss Mary Dickenson, and accompanied by the excellent pianist Edward Steuermann. This composition has greatness, like everything else that Bartok has written, but I am not sure whether the violin sonata is so successful as his previous works.

The first movement is an allegro appassionato with a long drawn out lyrical middle section. The second movement is an adagio beginning with a great cantilene for violin solo, afterwards accompanied by simple and quiet chords on the piano. The third movement is a typical Bartok, that is, a composition of exceedingly vivacious and stirring rhythm, the themes of which are Hungarian popular melodies. The Sonata presents great technical difficulties both for the violinist and the accompanist.

And a brief report in *Musikblätter des Anbruch* published in May 1922 was also distinctly favourable in tone, noting that

[i]n February a new Violin Sonata by Béla Bartók was performed in Vienna by the violinist Mary Dickenson-Auner and the pianist Eduard Steuermann. The work proved to be one of the strongest and most original creations of the Hungarian composer and produced a sustained response. At the first performance in London, the work was so well received that the newspapers were occupied with long articles [about it].²⁸

The London performances by Jelly and Bartók, at a private recital in Hyde Park Terrace on 14 March and a public concert in the Aeolian Hall on 24 March are, as indicated by Wellesz, well documented. Overall, the response was broadly positive if somewhat mixed, though Jelly's technique and musicianship was widely praised in line with Helen Rootham's comments cited at the beginning of this paper. I will not rehearse in any detail the impact that performing with Jelly and staying with her family members in London had on Bartók, but it seems to have been very significant for him. He wrote to Titi on 2 April from Paris (where he would play the Sonata at Le Vieux Colombier on 8 April) telling her he had been so choked with emotion that he could barely speak. "Believe me," he remarked "these three weeks were one of the most beautiful times in my life."²⁹

In August 1922, Bartók advised Calvocoressi that

[i]f I were to play violin and piano music in England, I would prefer to do so with Miss Arányi, since I could scarcely find another equivalent violinist. For example, my 1st violin sonata was played again badly in Salzburg (though not as scandalously badly as in Frankfurt).³⁰

²⁸<http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno-plus?aid=mab&datum=1922&page=130&size=45&qid=E21YPDZNG4EMARK140V7X9HBIQCAQL> "Im Februar wurde in Wien eine neue Violinsonate von Béla Bartók durch die Geigerin Mary Dickenson-Auner und den Pianisten Eduard Steuermann zur Uraufführung gebracht. Das Werk erwies sich als eines der stärksten und originellsten Schöpfungen des ungarischen Komponisten und erzielte eine nachhaltige Wirkung. Dasselbe Werk fand bei seiner Erstaufführung in London so große Beachtung, daß sich die Zeitungen in längeren Artikeln damit beschäftigten."

²⁹Adrienne GOMBOCZ and László VIKÁRIUS, "Twenty-Five Bartók Letters to the Arányi Sisters, Wilhelmine Creel and Other Correspondents: Recently Acquired Autograph Letters in the Bartók Archives," *Studia Musicologica* 43 (2002), 169.

³⁰GOMBOCZ and SOMFAI, "Bartóks Briefe an Calvocoressi (1914–1930)," 215–216. Bartók is referring to a performance by Adolf Rebner and himself in Frankfurt am Main on 24 April 1922. Translation from the German-language original by Cooper.



In writing this, he was apparently making reference to the performance of the Sonata he gave himself with Mary Dickenson-Auner on 7 August 1922 at the Internationale Kammermusik Aufführungen in Salzburg. Bartók's negative judgement appears to be confirmed by a brief review in the 8 August edition of the newspaper *Salzburger Wacht* [Salzburg watch], in which the anonymous critic commented that "[a] completely conclusive judgement is prevented by the circumstance that Mary Dickenson-Auner, as an interpreter, did not appear to suffice in everything."³¹

It is at this point that I would like to move away from the chain of data that I have consciously selected to create a biographical narrative around the genesis and early dissemination of the First Violin Sonata in order to focus on some of the psychological issues that are germane to the story being elaborated. The changes in the psychic state of an individual over time can be likened to a graph of currency fluctuations or of resting heart rates through which a trendline can be drawn, smoothing out the individual perturbations. From the multiple rises and falls in mood that characterise the real internal life of the subject, the biographer will often extrapolate a single mental state or a small group of them to characterise a period of time. It is difficult to avoid adopting a narrative of Bartók's depression and frustration about his material conditions and his apparent inability to compose new and original music being turned to a more positive mood through the composition and performance of the First Sonata, a perhaps too simplistic biographical trope of triumph over adversity.

So, while we may be more or less confident about the major events of a life, particularly where trustworthy documentary evidence is readily available (and we have already noted gaps in the story) if one intention of biographical writing is to reveal the personality of its subject in all his or her complexity, this can rarely be achieved from such data alone. Naturally, as well as the historical facts we have what in the literary sphere Benton has described as "quasi-facts," namely the substance of authorial outputs themselves. While fully acknowledging that one cannot "read back" from the works of an author to their life, Benton has argued that such "quasi-facts" should be set beside "historical facts," arguing that they "can be seen as reflecting some contemporary events or as sublimating some experiences in the writer's past or mirroring some authorial state of mind."³²

Before considering some of the quasi-facts of the First Sonata, I would like to focus briefly on the issue of how Bartók's personality has been perceived by his commentators. In the postlude to my study of Bartók I questioned what manner of person he was, remarking that "[f]or some he was cold, remote, lacking emotional intelligence, mathematical, detached, unfriendly, pedantic, caustic and humourless; for others who managed to pierce his outer shell and come close to him he was warm, friendly, passionate, good humoured, caring and engaged."³³ Surprisingly, Philip Heseltine found him in April 1921, during that period when he seemed entirely incapable of composing new works, to be "one of the most lovable personalities I have ever met."³⁴

³¹*Salzburger Wacht*, 8 August 1922, 5. <http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=sbw&datum=19220808&seite=5&zoom=33&query=%22mary%22%2B%22dickenson-auner%22&ref=anno-search> (accessed 21 August 2017). Translation from the German-language original by Cooper.

³²Michael BENTON, "The Aesthetics of Biography – and What it Teaches," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49/ (2015), 7–8.

³³David COOPER, *Béla Bartók* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 375.

³⁴Letter to Frederick Delius, 21 April 1921. SMITH, *The Collected Letters of Peter Warlock*, 692.



Zoltán Kodály, one of his closest acquaintances who had known him since his early twenties, employed the personality theory of the German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer in his description of “Bartók the Man.”³⁵ Kretschmer argued that there were two important (but not necessarily unique) personality types, the schizothyme and the cyclothyme which found their extreme pathological manifestations in schizophrenia on one side and manic-depression on the other. The schizothyme type displayed a group of behaviours that in broad terms might be deemed as “introverted,” while those of the cyclothyme might loosely be regarded as “extravert.” Kretschmer extended his theory to include body types, the thinner leptosomatic (or ectomorph) like Bartók being more inclined to the schizothyme temperament, the stouter pyknic (or endomorph) to the cyclothyme.

Using Kretschmer’s categorisation, Kodály acknowledges how Bartók *might* be categorised as a typical schizothyme, singling out a series of the attributes of this type that in his opinion he had demonstrated at one time or other: “fragile, fine, sensitive, cool, severe, withdrawn;” “fanatical, pedantic, unyielding, persevering, systematic;” “restless, precipitate, hesitating, awkward, aristocratic, contrived, angular;” “self-contained, reserved;” “idealist, reformer, revolutionary, systematic, organiser, self-willed, crotchety, dissatisfied, restrained, mistrustful, lonely, unsociable;” and “ingenious, lively, susceptible, energetic, inhibited.” However, in a salutary warning to those who would attempt to adopt such psychological approaches, Kodály comments that “even if it is true that these qualities emerged at times, man is not so simple a phenomenon that his eternal secret can be solved by a label with a few lines on it.”³⁶ Kretschmer’s model, like his now rather disturbing analysis of the “man of genius,” has long been superseded and Kodály’s reference to it can be taken to offer a further moral to the would-be biographer – the scientific and cultural understanding on which we base our judgements and express our views may alter dramatically in the years following publication.³⁷

Currently the so-called Five-Factor Personality Model has been widely accepted for psychometric testing (though not itself without criticism). This five-dimensional model is built on the work of a number of earlier researchers, including Fiske, Eysenck, Tupes and Christal, Norman, and Cattell; and its development was summarised by Digman in 1990.³⁸ The five factors of personality structure employed in the model are now commonly labelled as: Openness to Experience (encompassing fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas and values); Conscientiousness (embracing competence, order, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline and deliberation); Extraversion (comprising warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking and positive emotions); Agreeableness (containing trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty and tender-mindedness) and Natural Reactions or Neuroticism (involving anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness and vulnerability).³⁹ Each is scored on a continuous scale running from the most negative expression of the trait to the most positive one, and collectively they can be seen to offer some objective measure of an individual’s personality.

³⁵Zoltán KODÁLY, “Béla Bartók the Man,” in *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, ed. by Ferenc BÓNIS (Budapest: Corvina, 1974), 97–98.

³⁶KODÁLY, “Béla Bartók the Man,” 98.

³⁷Ernst KRETSCHMER, *The Psychology of Men of Genius*, trans. by R. B. CATTELL (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co Ltd; New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1931).

³⁸John M. DIGMAN, “Personality Structure: Emergence of the Five-Factor Model,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 41 (1990), 417–440.

³⁹See Robert R. McCRAE and Oliver P. JOHN, “An Introduction to the Five-Factor Model and its Applications,” *Journal of Personality* 60/2 (1992), 178–179.



As a kind of parlour game without any attempt at scientific rigour, a small number of Bartók scholars were invited to score him as best they could from their prior knowledge using a standard test employing the Five-Factor Model. It should be made clear that the intention here was not to attempt to describe or analyse Bartók's personality as such, but to offer a more objective means of comparing our *perceptions* of it, perceptions which will have been at least in part driven by descriptions such as that of Kodály. The distributions of scores were then examined across each of the dimensions to determine if there were obvious commonalities or significant divergences.

There was a measure of agreement from this tiny but expert sample that he scored very highly indeed on openness to experience (that is, he was imaginative, open-minded and experimental); and similarly highly on conscientiousness (he was disciplined, efficient and well organised); but low or very low on agreeableness (he was hard-headed, sceptical, competitive and proud). Greater disparity was found in the extraversion parameter (namely being reserved, formal, serious, and quiet), with the majority of the sample rating him at the most negative value on the scale, the rest somewhat higher but still well within the third decile. The most significant disagreement was on the natural reactions parameter where a high score indicates that the subject experiences negative emotional reactions and feelings of anxiety and is prone to worry; this showed a much greater disparity in judgements and a large standard deviation.

So, what does this reveal? First of all, that any methodology must be considered flawed if it presumes that personality is entirely fixed and inflexible and that one can make a single judgement that is valid for an entire lifetime. In terms of "natural reactions" in particular, material and physical conditions are likely to have a very significant impact and thus, for instance, if a judgement is made which particularly focuses on Bartók's final years, or indeed the period leading to the composition of the First Violin Sonata, it is likely to be significantly skewed. Secondly, although the sample size was far too small to draw conclusions with any degree of confidence, a general consensus emerged that Bartók was very open to new experiences, was highly conscientious, was deeply introverted and displayed a marked tendency against agreeableness in his social relations.

In his 1996 study of the impact of personality on musicianship, *The Musical Temperament*, Anthony E. Kemp reported both his own much more rigorous research and that of other music psychologists. Kemp compared groups of composers, performers, and non-musicians, finding the musicians generally tending to demonstrate a range of personality traits that significantly differentiated them from population norms, composers showing a similar if more elevated difference than performers. In particular, composers exhibited greater aloofness, dominance, expediency, sensitivity, imagination, naïveté, self-sufficiency and lack of discipline, and tended to be more radical. Allowing for the fact that he was both a composer and a performer, for most of these traits (though not the lack of discipline), there would seem to be a fair degree of consistency with the judgements of Bartók's personality already described.

In the summary of his chapter on composers, Kemp argues that their "creative disposition can be described in similar terms to that of creative types in other fields: a unique combination of introversion, independence, sensitivity, imagination, and radicalism" and that all these attributes are displayed at high levels.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he notes that:

⁴⁰Anthony E. KEMP, *The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of Musicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 216.



Musical works reveal how the composer's craft largely comprises the synthesis and analysis of fragmentary musical ideas. In adopting these contrasting and complementary processes composers bring creative order to chaos, ambiguities, and conflicts within them This kind of stance supports the frequently articulated view that to get to know a composer, one should start with his or her music. Composers' works frequently reveal considerable insights about their personalities and perceptual styles, and can open up windows on their internal worlds and psychological needs.

How then might we approach Bartók's works, and in particular the First Violin Sonata, as quasi-facts of his life? I would suggest that it is at this point that biography and analysis have the potential to merge.

The psychologists Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer have reviewed various psychological aspects of the use of natural language, arguing that "the words people use in their daily lives can reveal important aspects of their social and psychological worlds."⁴¹ The team noted that there was a discernible shift in the language that people used when going through periods of personal and shared emotional upheaval and that this was marked particularly by the increased use of emotion words and personal pronouns. At the same time, they remind us that "In natural speech we generally use intonation, facial expression, or other nonverbal cues to convey how we feel."⁴²

While music as a communicative system can be deemed to have both syntactical and semiotic elements its codes are in the main inherently nonverbal. However, the density and nature of the Italian expression marks used in the highly rhapsodic first movement of a sonata which emerged from the desire to create a new style are revealing in their own right, suggesting the presence of a deeply expressive underlying narrative that juxtaposes points of high passion and agitation with those of calmness and tranquillity, and a balance of extroversion and introversion. I list here some, but by no means all, of these terms in their order of appearance: *allegro appassionato*, *agitato*, *calmandosi*, *tranquillo*, *molto espr. ed appassionato*, *vivo appassionato*, *meno lento ma sempre molto tranquillo*, *risvegliandosi*, *molto espr.* (Fig. 14), *senza alcuna espressione* (Fig. 15+1), *risoluto*, *agitato*, *tranquillo*, and *vivo appassionato*. Of these, *risvegliandosi*, which literally means "awakening" or figuratively "reviving," a by no means common musical expression, seems to stand out as having a particularly important symbolic significance for Bartók.

Indeed, the use of this specific Italian term recalls something of the mood and content of the third of the set of Ady Songs, op. 16 (BB 72), "Az ágyam hívogat" [My bed is calling me] the text literally translating into English as:

I lay down. Oh, my bed,
Oh, my bed, last year,
Last year you were different.
You were different: dream-place,
Dream-place, strength-well,
Strength-well, kiss-pub,
Kiss-pub, happiness,

⁴¹James W. PENNEBAKER, Matthias R. MEHL, and Kate G. NIEDERHOFFER, "Psychological Aspects of Natural Language Use: Our Words, Our Selves," *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (2003), 547.

⁴²PENNEBAKER et al., "Psychological Aspects of Natural Language Use," 571.



Happiness. What have you become?
 What have you become? Coffin,
 Coffin. Every day,
 Every day you're closing better,
 Closing better. Laying down,
 Laying down terrified,
 Terrified wake up,
 Wake up terrified,
 Terrified I wake up.
 To wake up, to look around,
 To look around, to feel,
 To feel, to realize,
 To realize, to notice,
 To notice, to hide,
 To hide, to look out,
 To look out, to get out,
 To get out, to want,
 To want, to feel sad,
 [To feel sad, to determine,]
 To determine, to break down,
 [To break down, to feel ashamed,];
 To feel ashamed. Oh, my bed,
 Oh, my bed, my coffin,
 My coffin, you're calling me,
 You're calling me. I lay down.⁴³

The first movement of the Sonata reveals several thematic correspondences with both the op. 16 and op. 15 (BB 71) song sets. Though they have rather different tonal organisation, the contour of the opening overlapping arpeggiations in the piano at the beginning of the movement ([Example 1](#)) can be compared with those that begin “Egyedül a tengerrel” [Alone by the Sea], the fourth song of the Ady set, which tells of the loneliness of the poet in the departure of his love who has left behind a flower that he now embraces, its perfume rising like a kiss ([Example 2](#)). When this figure returns in the reprise at Fig. 20 ([Example 3](#)), it has been elaborated into an impressionistic texture, an equivalent if much more complex passage to that which accompanies Ady's reference to the flower's scent (“Parfümje szálldos csókosan körül” [Still, the room treasures her body's fragrance⁴⁴]) in “Egyedül a tengerrel” [Alone by the Sea] ([Example 4](#)). As an aside it is also of interest to compare this with an idea from the second movement of Ernest Bloch's First Violin Sonata, completed in 1920 ([Example 5](#)). In the letter written in French alluded to above, Bartók had suggested that he and Jelly might perform this work.

⁴³Translated by Gergely HUBAI. The lines in square brackets are not set by Bartók.

⁴⁴Translated by Thomas Ország-Land.



Allegro appassionato. (♩ = 72-80)

Violino.

Allegro appassionato. (♩ = 72-80)

Piano.

p *mf*

Lea. *Lea. *Lea. *

Example 1. First Violin Sonata, mov. I, b. 1

Andante
(♩ = 120-116)

Example 2. Five Songs, op. 16, "Alone by the Sea," b. 1

20 Tranquillo
(♩ = 80)

pp *ma sempre espressivo*

Tranquillo
(♩ = 80)

ppp *ppp*

p Lea. *Lea. *Lea. *Lea. *Lea. *

Example 3. First Violin Sonata, mov. I, the reprise of the first idea from Fig. 20



Molto sostenuto. $(\text{♩} = 76)$ **Più andante.** $(\text{♩} = 92)$

Par - füm - je száll - dos

csó - ko - san kő - rül

pp *dolcissimo*

poco cresc.

poco rit.

Detailed description: This musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is 'Molto sostenuto' with a quarter note equal to 76 beats. The piano part is marked 'pp' and 'dolcissimo', featuring a complex texture with triplets and sixteenth-note patterns. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with the tempo changing to 'Più andante' (quarter note = 92 beats). The piano part includes a 'poco cresc.' marking and a 'poco rit.' marking. The lyrics are in Hungarian: 'Par - füm - je száll - dos' and 'csó - ko - san kő - rül'.

Example 4. Five Songs, op. 16, “Alone by the Sea,” bb. 19-20

10

mf *cresc.*

p

f

sempre animando e crescendo

mf *molto staccato*

ppp

Detailed description: This musical score is for a violin and piano piece. It begins with a circled number '10' in the top left. The first system shows a violin line starting with a 'cresc.' marking and a piano accompaniment marked 'p'. The second system continues the violin line, which becomes 'sempre animando e crescendo', and the piano accompaniment, which is marked 'mf molto staccato'. The piece concludes with a 'ppp' marking and a circled number '6' at the bottom right.

Example 5. Bloch, First Violin Sonata, mov. II, 3 bars from Fig. 10



A perhaps more direct motivic relationship is seen in Bartók's setting of Wanda Gleiman's text for "A vágyak éjjele" [Night of Desire], the middle song of the op. 15 set, which expresses a young woman's sexual frustration. The descending arpeggiation $D^2Bb^1-G^1-Eb^1-C^1$ sets the words "vágyak éjjele" [night of desire], arguably an extension of the figure in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* to which Bluebeard's name is frequently sung by Judit (Example 6). It appears in several versions in the song setting the same text: transposed a tone higher to $E^2-C^2-A^1-F^1-D^1$ in bars 13–15 and expanded to $F^2-C\sharp^2-A^1-F^1-D^1$ in bars 33–34. In the sonata, a comparable if subtly different idea makes its first appearance in the passage from Fig. 5 in the violin (marked *ff molto espr. ed appassionato*) with a series of descending broken-chord figures culminating in the pitches $E-D\flat-A\flat-F-D\sharp$, a motif that does not appear in the *Black Pocket-Book* sketches (Example 7). This infiltrates the violin's broken chords in the transition to the muscular idea in the piano from Fig. 7. And it is subsequently heard prominently three bars before Fig. 16 against the reprise of the piano's *marcato* idea (Example 8); in the passage shortly before Fig. 22 (Example 9); and at the cadence point of the movement.

The first movement is additionally marked by Bartók's intention to create a further dichotomy through the use of distinct thematic material in the violin and piano parts (something he alluded to in the letter to Jelly), the former more lyrically disposed, the latter with a strong rhythmic contour. The various oppositions established in the first movement continue to be played out at a higher structural level in the subsequent two movements, with a mainly inward-looking slow movement, and ebullient and confident finale, which as Dickenson-Auner noted, strongly encouraged audience engagement.

These are, of course, only superficial aspects of the music and it should be made clear that there is no intention to suggest or imply an underlying narrative in the Sonata which somehow parallels events in the composer's life. In fact, László Somfai has articulated an overall narrative which "leads from the perplexed world of the ego towards community."⁴⁵ In line with Benton's formulation, it is the sublimation of prior experiences in musical form that is at issue. I would



Example 6. Five Songs, op. 15, "Night of Desire," bb. 4–6



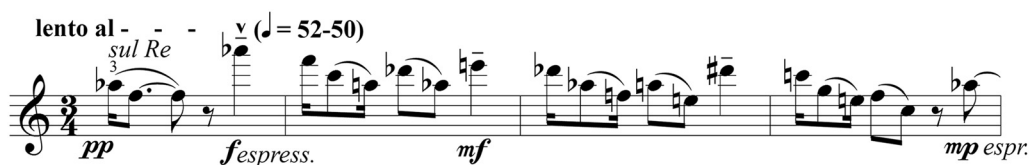
Example 7. First Violin Sonata, mov. I, Figs 6⁻¹: descending arpeggiated idea

⁴⁵SOMFAI, "Written between the desk and the piano," 128.





Example 8. First Violin Sonata, mov. I, Fig. 16⁻³: descending arpeggiated idea



Example 9. First Violin Sonata, mov. I, Fig. 22⁻⁵: descending arpeggiated idea

argue that both on the broadest level of analysis and in the finer detail, those areas of Bartók's personality which scored lowest on the personality factors – extroversion and agreeableness – are to a significant extent mitigated by the evidence of the material of the Sonata, a work which is at times, despite its radical intent, both remarkably extrovert and “agreeable” in spirit, in line with much of his output.

To conclude, I would like to comment very briefly on several parallels between the genesis of the Solo Violin Sonata (BB 124) and the First Violin Sonata from a biographical perspective. The Solo Sonata was also written at a time of physical and material difficulty, in the final years of Bartók's life while he was living in New York. Another young violinist had appeared on the scene, Yehudi Menuhin, the last in a series that had included Ferenc Vecsey, Stefi Geyer, Jelly d'Arányi, Imre Waldbauer, Zoltán Székely and Joseph Szigeti. Menuhin was tested, just as Jelly d'Arányi had been and was found to be excellent. Describing his experience of meeting and playing the First Sonata for Bartók, Menuhin recalled that the composer was:

Seated in an armchair placed uncompromisingly straight on to the piano, with score laid open before him and pencil in his hand . . . There were no civilities. [Adolph] Baller went to the piano, I found a low table, put my violin on it, unpacked, tuned. We started to play. At the end of the first movement Bartók got up – the first slackening of his rigid concentration – and said, “I did not think music could be played like that until long after the composer was dead.”

Composed for the twenty-seven-year-old Menuhin (a similar age to that of Jelly d'Arányi at the time of the genesis of the First Sonata), the Solo Sonata was to be a vehicle for his virtuosity just as the first sonata had been for hers – though he had even eclipsed Jelly in his performance of her sonata.

Given the success of the premiere of the Solo Sonata in Carnegie Hall on 26 November 1944 at which, in the words of *The New York Times* critic Olin Downes “The immense audience accepted the sonata whole, as it were, and applauded it, while Mr Menuhin led the composer back and forth upon the stage to receive the tribute,” the biographer may find it difficult to avoid



being drawn once again to that familiar if arguably too facile trope of the triumph over adversity. And this returns us to one of the fundamental questions for the biographer and his or her reader – can we ever really know another individual's inner life in anything more than a superficial way?

Bartók is well known for the almost invariably serious or even sour expressions he displays in posed photographs. Ferenc Bónis's wonderful *Élet-Képek: Bartók Béla*⁴⁶ contains very many of these with just a few where he seems to be caught off guard, for example where he is relaxing on a deck chair next to Tibor Serly in 1942, smoking a cigarette in profile at Carnegie Hall in 1943, or with his Swiss friends, the Müllers in the late 1930s. However, to see Bartók with a full smile, a grin indeed, in a still from a piece of film taken very late in his life is almost shocking, briefly revealing a largely hidden aspect of his personality. It reminds us that the music, both its surface manifestation and deeper organisational choices, offers the biographer much that is of value in fleshing out the personality that is revealed by the documentary evidence alone.

⁴⁶English edition: Ferenc BÓNIS, *Béla Bartók: Pictures of a Life*, trans. by Judith SOLLOSY (Budapest: Balassi, 2016).

