

Bartók: The String Quartets

An International Colloquium Organized by the Budapest Bartók Archives in Association with the Bartók World Competition at the Liszt Academy (Bartók Hall, Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities October 29, 2021)

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FOREWORD

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IN MEMORY OF JÁNOS KÁRPÁTI

According to a November 16, 1935 letter of the concert manager Gaston Verhuyck-Coulon the Belgian Pro Arte ensemble “plans to present your [i.e., Bartók’s] complete quartet oeuvre just as they do with the Beethoven quartets.” The idea to compare and place side by side Bartók’s string quartets (as a quasi-eminent “set” of works) with what was undoubtedly regarded as the greatest representatives of the genre (and also considered ground-breaking in the emergence of a modernist individualism) was, however sensational, nothing new to the composer. As early as 1920, he had been happy to read the British musical writer Cecil Gray’s discussion of his First String Quartet in relation to Beethoven. As Bartók remarked in a letter to his mother in early 1921:

In general: he [i.e., Gray] finds affinity not with Schönberg, Debussy, etc. but directly with Beethoven. (It has so far been only Zoltán [i.e., Kodály], who dared point out such parallels between

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Beethoven and me in his introduction to the Second String Quartet published in *Nyugat* [the periodical "West"]).

Bartók was, of course, quite well aware of the prestige of these works and when he completed his last string quartet, the Sixth, in 1939 at a tragic moment of farewell to his mother, who died during the composition, and also to Europe, now engaged in a hopeless world war, his concentrated references to Beethoven's music seem to be intentional: One need only to mention the dramatic birth of the main theme at the beginning of the first movement, following the ritornello.

"Beethoven and Bartók," and even "Bartókian" ideas adumbrated in Beethoven, were János Kárpáti's particularly cherished topic of research. But the analysis of Bartók's string quartets, both in general and in detail, is greatly indebted to and linked with Professor Kárpáti's name. His early doctoral dissertation offered the first monographic analysis of all six works and the discussion of a number of crucial approaches to Bartók's music more generally, such as the folk music influence or the influence of his contemporaries, especially Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Kárpáti's later revised and expanded monograph, which covers almost the complete chamber music, has made his name internationally indispensable through English and Japanese translations. His passing in March 2021 also added to the topicality of our concentration on the string quartet oeuvre now. The conference held on October 29, 2021 was dedicated to his memory.

I have to confess that when planning this event I had something more large-scale in mind. That the pandemic, that thwarted many endeavours, made the organization of such an international event, held live, an almost insurmountable challenge, is no surprise to anybody present. I hope, however, that later on there will be some chance to realize my earlier plans in a fuller form. At the same time, I am greatly indebted to our two presenters from Italy and France who were willing to undertake the adventurous trip to Budapest in the present uncertain times. I hope that they will be rewarded by their involvement in this conference and the string quartet competition, as well as by the opportunity to visit a beautiful autumnal Budapest. I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Bartók Archives who readily consented to present some of their most recent findings during the preparation of the critical edition of all six string quartets. This fantastic but enormous work, which has recently occupied several of us, is in fact the most important motivation behind the conference (both the hoped-for one and the gladly realized one) which is luckily timed to accompany this year's edition of the Bartók World Competition at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music devoted to the string quartets.

Since my colleagues working on the critical edition are most immediately occupied with questions of sources, philology and hard editorial decisions, it is quite natural that two of the contributions coming from the Archives reveal aspects of source study. These include, by the way, some of the most exciting and intriguing new discoveries about this seminal group of works. But for such a contribution to a conference with limited (even if now somewhat more generously allocated) time-frames only some carefully selected examples might be presented. They should stand for a foretaste of the whole two-volume edition that should be published within a year's time. It is due to the enormous challenge of understanding and correctly interpreting the often extremely complex compositional sources, especially sketches and drafts, that I am particularly glad that we could invite to the conference François Delécluse, who devoted his doctoral research to the evolution of the Debussy String Quartet, an epoch-making work in itself and an unquestionably important one for Bartók. His contribution, at the same



time, draws upon what has become the most recent and ever more dominant approach to sketch study first in literature and now also in musicology, *critique génétique*. Two papers by my colleagues at the Bartók Archives also demonstrate special approaches to sketch study in what might aptly be called the “Somfai school of Bartók philology.” Zsombor Németh, Professor Somfai’s co-editor of the string quartet volumes, presents a detailed investigation of a single movement, which was initially discussed by Professor Somfai himself in earlier publications. Yusuke Nakahara, who has become our main music score expert and has been involved in preparing most of the scholarly transcriptions from compositional sources, provides new insights into and hypotheses about the evolution of compositional sources based on a meticulous separation of the different layers of notation, a method that has become a central concern in our work in the Bartók critical edition series.

I am, furthermore, particularly glad that Gianmario Borio, who kindly involved me in an ongoing e-mail discussion of questions of form in Bartók’s Fourth and Fifth String Quartets accepted my invitation to speak here about his ideas before a larger audience. I do hope that his thoughts will elicit further reactions. I should also mention, however, how glad I am that Professor Somfai, former head of the Budapest Bartók Archives and founding editor of the *Bartók Complete Critical Edition* series, accepted my invitation at relatively short notice (due mainly to the difficulties of organization) despite the fact that he is currently devoting most of his energy to completing another major project, the *Béla Bartók Thematic Catalogue*.

János Kárpáti was very much in favor of studying and analyzing the work in its *final form* (*Fassung letzter Hand*), even if in certain cases he was equally glad to refer to earlier forms based on other scholars’ research. It is now, I think, ever more obvious that as much as a musical composition threatens to remain abstract on paper without a consideration of its different actual performances and as much as it cannot be interpreted without taking into consideration its recipients, the audiences of different periods, musicians and even the composer’s descendants, the knowledge of the composer as creator (a far from infallible but still inspired one) and of the creation itself, the occasional composition, without research into its genesis, is less than satisfactory. Our knowledge will be enormously increased and enriched by an effort to interpret the compositional history itself, and especially both its circumstances and musical sources. I would not deny that Professor Kárpáti was well justified – both theoretically and methodologically – in positing the finished and published form of the work in the centre of his interest. Still, I am sure, he would be among the very first to not only welcome but also thoroughly study the new edition and its critical commentary. Despite his generally different scholarly approach, he, as a music librarian, was one of those who could appreciate most fully the importance of philological work. And he was also one of those who showed the highest esteem for Bartók, as the artist and scholar on the one hand, and as the man on the other, a view we in the Archives certainly share.

