

## BOOK REVIEW

**Nicolò Palazzetti** (2021). *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, ISBN: 978-1-78327-620-2)

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“There are two Bartóks,” says Nicolò Palazzetti, in the Conclusion to this bold, revisionist book: the one who died in New York in 1945, and the “mythical Bartók,” born from those exiled ashes. Palazzetti’s book is ultimately about the moralisation and politicisation since 1945 of the second Bartók. But its basis lies in evidentiary revision, through its tracing of the first Bartók’s many, largely overlooked dealings with Italy over some four decades, as well as the surprisingly early establishment of his strong musical legacy there across several generations of Italian composers. This, then, is a book of some complexity, that attempts to weave together strands of biography, reception history, and cultural memorialisation, as well as more technical musical and political analysis. *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making* is largely successful in its explication of the two Bartóks, although some readers may not welcome Palazzetti’s unvarnished revision of the inherited “beacon of freedom” portrait of Bartók. Others will undoubtedly want more discussion of the multi-themed intentions of this book, that are clearly set out in its crisp Introduction and the opening paragraphs of each chapter. A few readers may even balk at his representation of a congruence between Bartók’s inter-wars modernist directions and Mussolini’s own tenets of Italian modernisation across these same years.

Palazzetti’s book is divided into six substantial chapters, the first five of which pursue a loosely chronological path from 1911, when Bartók first visited Italy professionally and his First Suite, op. 3, was performed there, to 1956, at the end of the posthumous “Bartók Wave” decade of Italian (indeed, world-wide) popularity. Bartók’s own concerts, other early performances of his music, and his growing aesthetic sympathy with Italian music – contemporary and baroque – are recurring themes across these chapters. The sixth chapter addresses wider questions of Bartók’s early influence upon Italian composition (including of Casella, Dallapiccola, Turchi, and Maderna), with a case study of the influence of Bartók’s “night music.”

The growing conditions for, and then staged emergence of, the Bartók myth are depicted in the book’s Introduction and Conclusion (with particular reference to the triumphal return in 1988 of Bartók’s body for reburial in Budapest), as well as at many key points within the chronological chapters. Through the book, then, the myth-building contributions of several leading Italian “thought leaders” are traced: composer-pianist Alfredo Casella (1920s), seeing in Bartók an emerging synthesis of folk and avant-garde qualities; music critic Guido Gatti (1930), modelling him as something of a fascist “new man”; conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni (1939),

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presenting him as a musical realist; musicologist Luigi Rognoni (1942), emphasizing the “coherence of Bartók’s moral world”; and culminating in an article by the master myth-maker, and real-life wartime partisan, Massimo Mila, with his “Béla Bartók: Comrade and Great Musician” (1947), in the Communist Party’s newspaper, *L’Unita*. This progression of thought leads, in Palazzetti’s analysis, to Italy’s early consolidation of a fully-fledged mythical Bartók, in the post-war years of democratic rebirth. In death, this mythical Bartók conveniently presented to a younger generation of the 1950s as a “free man,” demonstrating how to compose beyond the constraints of specific techniques or poetics. This trend led, for instance, to the diagnosis of “acute bartókitis” in 1952 in work of the young Franco Donatoni.

A central paradox, highlighted by Palazzetti, is how it was possible for a full staging of Aurél Millos’s balletic choreography of Bartók’s dissonant *Miraculous Mandarin*, op. 19, to take place at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala in October 1942. This performance occurred just nine months before Mussolini was deposed, sending the country then into two years of civil war and foreign occupations. But the paradox is two-fold, for Palazzetti uses this startling mid-war performance as the key exhibit in his depiction of how Bartók, by then exiled in America, could so rapidly pivot from being consonant with the last gasps of fascist modernism to being a model of post-war partisan-driven “new values,” indeed, by the time of its repetition, in Rome, on 2 December 1945 (just days before *Mandarin*’s stage premiere in Budapest). Casella, keen to expunge his own close collaboration with Mussolini’s regime, encouraged this rapid transformation of the just-dead Bartók into being, as Palazzetti represents, a martyr of freedom and a moral hero. This enthusiasm, coupled with a strong dose of public amnesia towards the fascist and civil-war years, paved the way for Mila’s compelling articulation of the Bartók myth in 1947. Bartók was carried along in the slip-stream of the Italian *Resistenza*, as a prime generator of the new democracy.

As this more mythical, “Italian” Bartók was fleshed out, above all in 1947 by Mila, other currents of Bartók interpretation were swirling elsewhere. These included (mainly) French claims, as dialectically articulated by René Leibowitz in October 1947, that Bartók was a weaker, “compromised” musician caught between the stronger figures of contemporary music, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Bartók was perceived as weak, largely because of his music’s tonal, folk base. Further east, from 1947/48 and onwards, the more draconian tenets of socialist realism condemned musical formalism in the emerging Soviet bloc. In Hungary, for example, Bartók’s output was rapidly split in two, with the more accessible, folkloristic pieces being prescribed, while his more overtly formalist works were proscribed. Palazzetti well sketches how, amid these many currents, the cry in Italy at this time was for a “new music” for a “new public.” Casella’s student, Roman Vlad, for instance, in 1947 saw Bartók in terms of new-music stylistics: he was laying down a centrist, “third way” between the chromatic Schoenberg and more diatonic Stravinsky. But there were several third (or middle) ways (or roads) proposed for Bartók in these fluid, post-War years. The Italian formulation, with its pre-War roots, is different from the more geo-political “third road,” briefly hoped for Hungary, as well as Bartók’s legacy, in 1945–1948 by such scholars as Ujfalussy and Mihály. Indeed, this Hungarian hope for a “third road” between West and East is the starting point for Danielle Fosler-Lussier’s study of *Music Divided: Bartók’s Legacy in Cold War Culture* (2007). The Italian “third way” is distinct, also, from János Kárpáti’s later placement of Bartók in a middle, “synthesizing” role between Schoenbergian and Stravinskian poles, in rejection of Leibowitz’s “compromised” claim against him.

Palazzetti concludes his chapter, “Resistance and Democracy, 1943–1947,” by summarizing a process of conversion and adaptation: “the Bartókian synthesis between modernism and folk



sources, which had been celebrated during the fascist years, was recovered and re-used to serve the causes of anti-fascism and freedom, as well as to honour the regeneration of the national community as a whole.” (pp. 137–138). The following “Bartók Wave” would only bring about a further coalescence between the myth of Bartók and the impetus for national rebirth in Italy. Palazzetti warns his readers of the need to understand the complexity of Bartók’s evolving Italian interpretation, and not to look too much to more polarised accounts arising from Cold War studies.

Another persistent revisionist theme in *Béla Bartók in Italy*’s earlier chapters is the need for differentiation between Bartók’s responses to Nazism and his responses to Italian fascism, and reciprocally their changing attitudes over the years to him and his music. Palazzetti takes a fresh look at the evidence, reviewing such often-quoted incidents as Bartók’s quarrel over fees for relayed radio broadcasts into Germany or Italy (concluding it was a remunerative rather than ideological issue), or whether Bartók, or these regimes, ever sought to ban his own or others’ performances of his works (concluding apparently not, even during wartime). As he shows, there is from late 1937 a hardening hostility on Bartók’s part to Nazi Germany. This is crystallized with the Austrian *Anschluss*, and subsequent Nazification of his publisher, Universal Edition, in 1938. Meanwhile, however, he finds Bartók was, at least publicly, “nearly inscrutable” or “more ambivalent” to Italian fascism even into 1940. In several places Palazzetti considers the strong diplomatic initiatives between Hungary, under the right-wing inter-wars regency of Admiral Miklós Horthy, some of which were not unhelpful to Bartók’s Italian engagements. This is not to suggest that Bartók was a happy fellow-traveller with any of these three authoritarian regimes. One nerve-wracking circumstance of Bartók’s that Palazzetti could have mentioned more was that in 1940, not wanting to traverse (recently expanded) Germany, Bartók needed to feel secure in transiting several times through Italy. For his exploratory visit to America in April–May 1940, he left by ship from Naples, and returned via Genoa, at a time when Italy had not yet joined the War and Hungary itself was still a non-belligerent state. In October 1940, matters were more problematic, as his ship left from Lisbon, so Bartók and his wife needed to travel there via Yugoslavia, Italy, Switzerland, Vichy France, and Spain. By this time Italy was, of course, a committed combatant alongside the Germans, and Hungary was about to sign the Berlin Pact.

From a documentary viewpoint one of the most important features of this book is its long Appendix, which lists some 230 performances, including radio broadcasts, of Bartók’s music that took place in Italy between 1911 and 1950. Bartók himself participated in over twenty of these performances. This valuable documentation builds on more recent researches by Virág Büky and Maria Grazia Sità, published in Italian, and painstaking pioneering work by János Demény as far back as the 1950s, published in Hungarian. (The list’s accuracy is generally high, although its claim of a world première of five or all six of the “Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm” from *Mikrokosmos* during the Bartóks’ Italian tour of December 1939 is misplaced; even the new Bartók critical edition volumes of *Mikrokosmos*, published in 2020, leave some confusions about programme details of this last tour.) Unfortunately, Palazzetti’s list cuts off fairly early in the years of the “Bartók Wave,” the focus of Chapter 5, so making the last half-dozen years of its coverage somewhat less overtly data-driven. Most surprising, to me, in this long list, is that nearly sixty of these 230 performances (including eight involving Bartók) took place in the years 1939–1945, with only 1944 unrepresented. This list achieves the same sense of surprise that János Breuer elicited with his revisionist “Bartók im Dritten Reich” study (published in *Studia*



*Musicologica*, 1995), with its detailed account of actual and planned performances of Bartók's works in Germany across every year from 1933 to 1945. Palazzetti's listing of Italian concerts across the war and immediately post-war years parallels the rapid evolution of the distinctively Italian Bartók myth, but, along with it, the development of a strengthening Bartókian legacy among Italian composers. The culminating music analytic example of the book, a fifteen-page pitch and formal analysis of Bruno Maderna's First String Quartet (1943), which Palazzetti provocatively headlines "Bartók at the Battlefront," well underscores these side-by-side developments.

*Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making* is a valuable, revisionist book, as much for its enrichment of understanding of the Italian side of the first Bartók, as for its careful injection of political and moral dimensions into the evaluation of the second Bartók's reception. The book points out gaps, omissions and occasional collective amnesias in the extensive Bartók literature. Its half-dozen themes point the way towards several fertile fields for more intensive studies. A comprehensive account of Bartók in Germany, as well as Bartók and Germany, is still awaited, despite some useful preliminary studies by such scholars as Breuer and Hunkemöller. Palazzetti's sixth chapter, "Bartók's Influence on Italian Composers" is an enticing "taster" to a more definitive review of Bartók's legacy across at least three generations of Italian composers, a topic that barely gains more than a footnote in many recent studies. Palazzetti's myth-making sub-title, however, suggests that a systematic tracking of the Bartók myth between the 1950s, where Palazzetti's book bows out, and the 1980s, when Bartók's body was returned to his homeland, and then on to the present day, is timely. In our age of fake news, algorithmic monitoring and populist governments, myth-making is big business. Musical heroes, even the long-dead Bartók, are not immune from its infections.

