**Infernal Bartók**  
Malcolm Gillies

During the 1950s the Hungarian-born violinist Adila Fachiri came across a few yellowing sheets of manuscript music. They were headed “In memory of 23 November 1902” and were a musical recollection of a happy family party that Adila and her family, the Arányis, had shared with a shy Budapest music student called Béla Bartók. On 6 July 1955 at one of her last Wigmore Hall recitals in London Fachiri gave the much-delayed première of this late-adolescent party piece. A youthful Donald Mitchell recorded for *The Musical Times* that it was “a spotless *morceau de salon*, the perfect stuff of a guessing game. Strauss might come to mind, and even Mendelssohn, but Bartók never.”

How is it that the mild-mannered Bartók of 1902 could be so different from the Bartók who was branded a “barbarian” by the French press in 1910? Who inspired the headline “Is it music?” in London’s *Daily Mail* in 1923? And whose music was summarized as “piquant and cacophonous” by *Time* magazine on his death in 1945?

The *Infernal Dance: Inside the World of Béla Bartók* series of concerts exposes works written by Bartók as early as 1903 (the symphonic poem *Kossuth*) and as late as 1945 (Piano Concerto No. 3). There are the stage works, which all originate in the 1910s, two very different works from the 1920s (*Dance Suite*, Piano Concerto No. 1), and two mellow fruits of his final years of exile in America (*Concerto for Orchestra* and his concluding piano concerto). Five of the series’ works come from the ‘golden’ decade of Bartók’s compositional maturity, the 1930s. Yet each is written for different resources and in radically different forms: the *Cantata Profana* (1930), Piano Concerto No. 2 (1930-31), the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936), Violin Concerto No. 2 (1937-8) and his *Contrasts* (1938), a quasi-improvisational trio commissioned by Benny Goodman.

As you listen to these concerts I am sure you will find yourself wondering why one piece sounds more radical or more conservative than the next. Why do his works from the 1940s sound so innocuous, even pleasant, compared with some works from the 1910s and 1920s, which seem so angry? And why do his pieces sometimes remind you of works by other composers, particularly contemporaries such as Stravinsky, Debussy, or his compatriot Zoltán Kodály (a landmark work by each of whom is included in the series)?
Over 2011 the *Infernal Dance* series reviews a substantial chunk of Bartók's musical output. It deliberately juxtaposes pieces that will sometimes make you wonder, like Donald Mitchell back in 1955, whether you are really hearing the same composer at all. If you followed the Philharmonia Orchestra's *City of Dreams: Vienna 1900-1935* series in 2009 you will start to see similar trends: the inroad of modernism over these early decades of the twentieth century, and various influences that come from beyond music altogether, from the broader arts or even driven by cataclysmic historical events.

Perhaps the hardest concept to grasp is how Bartók, through his explorations into folk music, was propelled into writing those ‘infernal’ pieces that gained him such notoriety with the critics. Were there actually two or more Bartóks? The nice Bartók who wrote more or less enjoyable settings of the folksongs he had collected; and the nasty Bartók who seemed to want to rattle and bang at the cage door of music history?

Just after his death, as a newly communist Hungary came under the shadow of socialist realist doctrines of art, that is exactly what happened. The compositional legacy of the recently departed Bartók was dismembered. The various Bartóks were identified and separated. For in 1948 musical modernism was condemned by the Soviet Communist Party in Moscow because of its “bourgeois influence”, “formalism” and “abstraction”; in short, for its “decadence”. What was needed was music which reflected the happy reality of life in socialist states, which “organically linked with the people and their folk music and folksong – all this combined with a high degree of professional mastery” (Andrei Zhdanov, 1948). The Party in each new Eastern European satellite rapidly followed suit with a revision of musical valuations.

By 1950 Bartók’s output had effectively been divided into three categories. As Danielle Fosler-Lussier has recently elaborated in her book *Music Divided* (University of California Press, 2007), there were banned works, works to be performed only rarely, and fully approved works.

To distribute the works in this *Infernal Dance* series across these classes:

**Banned:** *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Piano Concerto No. 1, Piano Concerto No. 2;
Rarely to be performed: *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle, The Wooden Prince, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Cantata Profana, Contrasts;*

Fully approved: Violin Concerto No. 2, *Concerto for Orchestra,* Piano Concerto No. 3, *Dance Suite.* (In 1950 noone even recalled Bartók’s early work *Kossuth* but it would surely have been approved.)

Many of Bartók’s chamber works were also banned outright, including his String Quartets Nos 3-5, the two violin sonatas and his Piano Sonata of 1926. It was only in 1955-6, as Hungary inched towards its catastrophic revolution, that the ban on modernist works started to be undermined. Surprisingly, given the Cold War tensions of the time, it was the *Concerto for Orchestra,* which Bartók had composed in exile in capitalist America, that gained most ready acceptance during these grim Cold War years, because of its folksy tunefulness. *The Miraculous Mandarin* was the most condemned not just because of its bourgeois, expressionist style but also because of its overtly sexual content. But Bartók seems to have pleased noone with his adults-only pantomime. It was equally condemned by the political right (“immoral”), the political left (“formalist”) and the Catholic Church (“dirty”).

This three-part classification of Bartók’s works is useful. I suspect that it tallies with the experiences of many concert-goers at symphony concerts today. Bartók’s “approved” works are pleasant, have recognizable tunes and are even reminiscent of earlier styles in musical history. Piano Concerto No. 3 has, indeed, been described both as Mozartian and Beethovenian, while the Violin Concerto No. 2 showed how you could even write twelve-tone tunes *à la Schoenberg* but do it ever so nicely!

The ‘rarely to be performed’ works present a sliding scale of challenges to musical comprehension and sometimes even to stylistic acceptance. The third movement of the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,* for instance, is intriguing but unnerving. Most of the traditional reference points of music are missing or obscured. Somehow, we are within a glass prism playing some sort of musical chess game. But we are unsure how we got there, or exactly what it means.

And then there are the ‘banned’ works, where Bartók’s dissonance, formal innovation, rhythmic ingenuity or instrumental innovation – or all of these, even all at once – become
very hard to handle. Our psychic security as listeners is threatened because our ears tell us that just too few of the rules of ‘classical’ music are any longer in operation. We are in insufficient control of our listening experience. When we start to hear the tooting of car horns in *The Miraculous Mandarin* or when Bartók starts splitting the musical ‘atom’, the semitone, into quarter tones in this same work, then we have to let go of that musical inheritance of previous ages and try to construct a new rule book!

Of course, the dictates of post-war socialist realism had their mirror image in another, contemporary set of musical values. Many of the more progressive Western musicians in that early Cold War decade saw precisely Bartók’s ‘banned’ works as the real thing: if musical history is ultimately about progress, then these were the works to be promoted, as in them Bartók really was pushing at the musical frontiers. In this interpretation, the more tuneful final-period Bartók was a compromised figure, who had pulled back from the logic of his own innovations of the 1910s and the 1920s, “retreating into romantic security”, the potential for which the theorist Theodor Adorno saw as early as 1929. In 1947 one critic René Leibowitz even detected a tinge of “moral weakness”, a disquieting “lack of purity”, and accused poor, dead Bartók of not having the courage to cross the “threshold of a new world”.

These radically conflicting evaluations of Bartók’s oeuvre highlight the importance of understanding Bartók’s approach to folk music, for that is the central and fixed element across all the works and all the styles of his maturity. All of Bartók’s compositions after about 1906 have some debt to, or connection with, folk music.

First, there are the arrangements of actual folk dances or folksongs, which Bartók wrote throughout his life, even into his final American years. They parallel what he called his “original compositions”. Until 1921 he even distinguished his arrangements from his original compositions by giving an opus number to the latter, but not to the former. The *Romanian Folk Dances* (1915), perhaps Bartók’s most performed work and without opus designation, is one such arrangement. The tunes are presented as transcribed, and Bartók gives them simple, sometimes even romantic, harmonizations.

In 1941, in a review of the connection between his compositions and folk music, Bartók identified three different approaches to folk arrangement: where the folk melody is mounted like a jewel (as in the *Romanian Folk Dances*); where the folk melody and
accompaniment are almost equal in importance; and where the melody is “only to be regarded as a kind of motto” for further creative development. For Bartók this was the cross-over point with his “original compositions”. The folk element becomes a spur for creative explorations, sometimes quite radical ones. Bartók’s *Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* for piano (1920) show this inspirational power of the original folk melodies in full force. And, for that reason, Bartók recognized the work as an “original composition”, with opus number.

Bartók’s ‘banned’ works, in particular, progress one step further in this sublimation of original folk sources. Even the ‘motto’ function is now removed. No discernible folk source is left. As Bartók goes on to describe: “the influence of folk music . . . appears more or less in the general spirit of the style . . . [and] in many cases themes or turns of phrases are deliberate or subconscious imitations of folk melodies or phrases”. For the socialist realists around 1950, as for many listeners today, the more deeply Bartók sublimates his folk sources the more challenge these works present.

And from where did Bartók draw this all pervasive folk influence? His main concentration as an ethnomusicologist was with Hungarian, Slovak and Romanian folk music, and he produced multi-volume, analytical collections of each of these. So, it is not surprising that he would recognize these three ethnic musics as most influential upon his style as a composer. But he was occasionally influenced by Arabic, Serbo-Croatian and Turkish folk music, having produced one research volume on each. In a deleted line to his 1941 review he even confessed to “American influences (I mean, of course, the jazz)

As the degree of sublimation of these various folk sources increased, the degree of sureness about the origins of particular melodic or rhythmic characteristics decreases. These characteristics merge into the “general spirit of the style” that was, from around 1907-8 insecurely, and then from around 1918 much more securely and distinctively, Bartókian.

Folk influence and indebtedness is only half of the story, however. Although Bartók once said that his happiest days were those spent in the villages of central Europe collecting folksongs, he did not ‘go native’ or seek to deny the mainstream of Western music. Rather, Bartók’s ear was always cocked to the latest musical trends in Western Europe and North America. Igor Stravinsky was a huge influence, or sometimes catalyst, upon his
compositional directions, not just with his pre-War ballets that culminated in *The Rite of Spring* but also in his neo-classical works of the inter-war years. *The Miraculous Mandarin* and the first two piano concertos both have strong Stravinskyan connections.

Claude Debussy was an early model for Bartók as he tried to create impressionist-like textures in his own works in the period of 1908-12. The techniques of Debussy are heard not just in Bartók’s musical techniques of this time, but also in the way he sought a more natural form of Hungarian word-setting and sharper delineation of dramatic characters. The connection with Debussy is most evident in Bartók’s opera, *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* (1911), but also is heard in two orchestral works not being performed in this *Infernal Dance* series: *Two Pictures* (1910) and *Four Pieces* (1912). As late as 1920 Bartók is found dedicating one of his piano *Improvisations* “to the memory of Claude Debussy”.

Although Bartók stated that he never wrote atonal music, considering it antithetical to the folk basis to all his art, nonetheless he did follow the evolving career of Arnold Schoenberg with keen interest. In the period of 1918-22 he did definitely veer towards atonality. Indeed, his subsequent veering back to more settled tonality and adoption of a more baroque or neo-classical style is what many in the European avant-garde considered regrettable. The innovations of the Polish composer Karol Szymanowski, particularly in aspects of string technique and the creation of a north African, or Arabic, sound world, did also interest Bartók in the early 1920s, as can be heard in the orchestration of his *The Miraculous Mandarin* (completed in 1924) and also in his two violin sonatas of 1921-2.

Among Hungarian compatriots Bartók’s closest compositional companions were Ernő Dohnányi and Zoltán Kodály. Dohnányi influenced him early on, indeed was coaching Bartók over the summer of 1903 when he completed the writing of *Kossuth*, and helped him gain that work’s early performance in Manchester. Later on, their paths frequently crossed. Indeed, it was Dohnányi for whom Melchior Lengyel had intended the libretto of *The Miraculous Mandarin*, rather than Bartók.

Kodály, however, was personally much closer to Bartók. Their common interests in folk music collection and analysis as well as the contemporary currents of composition led them to the closest form of “mutual influence”, both as ethnomusicologists and composers. Their collaboration lasted for thirty-four years. It was to Kodály that Bartók would turn first for musical guidance, sometimes for competitive challenge. But they had sufficient
differences of focus: Kodály remained much more strictly concerned with Hungarian culture while Bartók was more gregarious; Kodály became increasingly involved in national musical education while Bartók retained a much greater involvement in musical performance; Kodály was the more trained scholar while Bartók was more the all-round practical musician. Most appropriately, this *Infernal Dance* series includes one of Kodály's best known orchestral works, *Dances of Galánta* (1933).

"Let us say something of the composer, too.
You can see him on stage, in tails
And in the street, with his hat off,
Walking in the morning sun.

He is as thin as a fish bone,
As white as a lily,
But if he sits down at the piano
He turns into a dragon,
Rattles, cries, and sometimes barks,
So that the sky becomes dark, and the walls of the houses crumble."
*Béla Bartók*, by Lajos Kassák, trans. Peter Laki

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Malcolm Gillies is the Philharmonia Orchestra's consultant to the *Bartók: Infernal Dance* project. He features on a number of online videos about the series. See www.philharmonia.co.uk/bartok.