

Bartók and his World

Peter Laki ed.

Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, in conjunction with The Bard Music Festival, 1995. ISBN PB 0 691 00633 4. \$35.95. pp. ix + 314. Also available in hardback.

The Music Festival mounted annually by Bard College of Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, featured Bartók in 1995. Under the direction of musicologist, conductor and college president, Leon Botstein, the Festival brought together a wide range of leading artists and scholars to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Bartók's death in New York. *Bartók and his World* was issued in conjunction with this Festival.

Given the nature of existing Bartók scholarship—rambling over half a dozen languages and methodological sub-disciplines in an uncoordinated, occasionally even incoherent way—Peter Laki's book set out with a sensible purpose: 'to familiarize readers of English with a Bartók usually hidden from them by the language barrier', and thereby to contribute to the future synthesis of 'a new overall picture...waiting to be put together' (p.vii). *Bartók and his World*, through its seven essays and collections of writings by and about Bartók, does contribute well to that contextual familiarisation, although the quality of its contributions varies greatly.

The stars of this volume are two recent American Ph.D.s, Carl Leafstedt of Harvard and David E. Schneider of Berkeley. Their essays stand as testaments to the rigours of the best of American doctoral training in musicology. Both have conducted extensive research in Hungary, and have here produced revisionist studies of importance. Leafstedt's essay on 'Bluebeard as Theater' reassesses the influences upon the librettist of Bartók's opera, Béla Balázs, showing that Balázs was as much, if not more, conditioned by German romantic drama as French symbolism. Balázs was, in Leafstedt's claim, much influenced by the philosophy behind the plays of the early-mid nineteenth-century Friedrich Hebbel, on whom Balázs had written a doctoral thesis just two years before penning his *Bluebeard*. Leafstedt also issues a corrective to the often-stated influence of Maurice Maeterlinck upon Balázs, pointing out that Maeterlinck's *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* was of little influence upon Balázs. It was, rather, Maeterlinck's plays of the early 1890s which were the 'stylistic predecessors' of *Bluebeard*. From Leafstedt emerges a fresh and compelling reading of the drama's

two characters, Bluebeard and Judith, or even three characters, since the castle itself was listed as a *dramatis persona* in the first published version of Balázs's play.

David E. Schneider's meticulous study of the Bartók-Stravinsky connection is somewhat more cautiously couched than Leafstedt's. His examination of 'Respect, competition, influence, and the Hungarian reaction to modernism in the 1920s' begins with the undeniable truth that the connection was one-sided. Bartók's attitude to Stravinsky waxed and waned, while, for Stravinsky, Bartók was a talented 'nobody' headed in a wrong artistic direction. Schneider has ransacked the Bartók and Stravinsky literature to produce a detailed chronological account of Bartók's growing respect for Stravinsky until about 1920 and then years of doubt until 1926, when the hearing of Stravinsky's Piano Concerto seems to have inspired the outpourings of Bartók's 'piano' year. Two important interviews relating to Bartók's connection with Stravinsky are included in the documents at the back of the volume in translations by Schneider and Klára Móricz.

Schneider's ensuing examination of passages from Bartók's first two piano concertos and passages of Stravinsky's music is adept, but ultimately not as convincing as his historical survey. The deeper motives for Bartók's modellings or borrowings are neatly avoided until Schneider's final paragraph, where he quotes Bartók's Harvard Lectures and reference to Stravinsky's 'right to incorporate into his music any music he believes to be fit or appropriate for his purposes' (p.196). I had hoped this might prompt Schneider to an extended address of the word 'influence' found in his title. But such was not to be. That is certainly a 'hot' topic at the moment, and Schneider prefers an oblique peroration: 'Given the intimate connection between Stravinsky's work and Bartók's first two piano concertos, however, this passage [from the Harvard Lectures] might also be read as the Hungarian composer's justification for his own debt to a most inspirational model, Igor Stravinsky.' (pp.196-97)

Also admirably serving Laki's intention for the volume is Vera Lampert's study of Bartók's connection with Melchior Lengyel, the writer of the plot of the

pantomime *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Lampert provides considerable previously unpublished material and new information about Lengyel's *pantomime grotesque*. Likewise, Laki's own chapter on 'The gallows and the altar: poetic criticism and critical poetry about Bartók in Hungary' presents much valuable quotation from the rich tradition of Hungarian Bartók criticism and eulogy. A selection of poems inspired by Bartók is also included in the volume's final section. His concluding reading of Bartók's current Hungarian situation is, however, worrying: 'Maybe the gallows have finally been removed from beside the altar.' Laki may be right about this—as far as Hungary is concerned—but I would hope that the altar might also one day be removed, as it poses as much of a barrier to insightful interpretation of Bartók's music and personality as the gallows once did.

Sitting outside the contextual concerns of the other essays is László Somfai's 'Why is a Bartók thematic catalog sorely needed?' His contribution consists of a sample entry for *Allegro barbaro* from Somfai's catalogue, the evolving 'house manual' of the editors of the Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition, prefaced by several pages of introduction to the ideas behind this Bartókian *Gesamtausgabe*. It is vintage Somfai: accurate, comprehensive and matter-of-fact observations of someone whose lifework has been directed towards the scholarly documentation of Bartók's working processes and the production of authoritative editions of his compositions.

The least satisfactory essays in the volume came, surprisingly, from Tibor Tallián and Leon Botstein. Tallián's essay on 'Bartók's reception in America, 1940-1945' was a translation of a lecture presented in Budapest in 1985. Despite the very considerable scholarship relating to this topic over the last decade, and the opening up of much Bartók correspondence unavailable to Tallián in 1985, the essay was presented unrevised. Tallián might claim his essay as just a few 'marginalia on the last five years of Bartók's life' (p.101), but it amounts to much more than that. Tallián provides a powerful restatement of many long-standing Hungarian prejudices and obsessions about Bartók's "treatment" in wartime America. These are views which the last decade appeared largely to have put aside as Hungarian scholars have come better to understand the *American* context of their favoured son, in particular the effect of the war upon so many aspects of American daily life and so many of the Americans with whom Bartók dealt. Certainly Bartók did find it hard to adjust to life in America and living there after Pearl Harbor was often not easy for an "enemy alien". But Tallián's interpretations are simplistic and compre-

hend little of the circumstances and purposes of Bartók's American critics. His assumption that Bartók's concert career was over in January 1943 (or even 1942) is also misleading. Bartók did, in fact, continue to gain offers of performances until the final month of his life, and frequently accepted them although later cancelled for a complex variety of reasons. It was only in mid-July 1945, for instance, that he decided that he had to cancel a performance of the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion scheduled for 8 September 1945, within three weeks of his death. Bartók clearly did not think he had abandoned his concert career.

That brings us to the largest essay in the volume: Leon Botstein's 'Out of Hungary: Bartók, modernism, and the cultural politics of twentieth-century music'. Botstein attempts a cultural overview of the Hungary of the younger Bartók. This is often brilliantly done, when Botstein is addressing broad questions of modernism and music, but not when addressing questions of Bartók's modernism and the concepts behind Bartók's music. I guess we all have our own personal "Bartóks", dependent upon our own knowledge of his life and understanding of his music. Botstein's "Bartók", then, came across to me as curious, because Bartók seems to be placed in a falsely rich artistic and intellectual context. Botstein's long excursion into turn-of-the-century Hungarian art and architecture (pp.25-37) serves to correct the notion that Bartók and Kodály were the first to see how folk tradition could challenge national art, but provides scant evidence of the degree to which Bartók knew of or cared about these developments. So, too, in the consideration of Bartók and the philosophers (pp.46-50), the dangers of false context or false inference are real. What did the pragmatic Bartók know about or care for in the ideas of Lukács and Karl Mannheim? The distance which Bartók held from nearly all of his artistic and intellectual Hungarian contemporaries cannot be overstressed in our own age, so keen on 'contextualising'; indeed, this very distance can provide a key to Bartók's profound originality and highly novel musical solutions. Botstein's concluding pages set out a life-long project for Bartók—'to represent, through music, a Hungarian identity at odds with the nineteenth-century construct and adequate to modernity' (p.50)—and then outlines five distinct phases as Bartók pursued the objectives of this project. Botstein's years of change occur at 1905, 1920, 1930 and 1940. Such fresh overviews are to be welcomed, but this one does not grow naturally out of Botstein's essay, with its firm focus on the younger Bartók. It requires an entire additional essay of justification if it is to be a

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Piano Plus One

Footscray, Vic.: Red House Editions, 1995. The Duos Series 1. ISBN 0 646 23578 8. \$35.00. pp.68.

Guitar Plus One

Footscray, Vic.: Red House Editions, 1995. The Duos Series 2. ISBN 0 646 23579 6. \$35.00. pp.60.

The two publications reviewed here represent the beginning of what could prove to be a long, and certainly an interesting, series of volumes of contemporary instrumental miniatures. The ethos of the first two in the series, as outlined in the preface to *Piano Plus One*, is to place each volume's principal instrument in unusual duo combinations, and simultaneously to further musical relations between Australia and other countries by juxtaposing local works with those from a single other nation in each volume.

While the country paired with Australia in each volume may seem arbitrarily chosen, the choices are by no means inappropriate or unsuccessful. They provide Australians with a very useful introduction to the music of (mostly young) composers from overseas. This is especially the case for *Piano Plus One*, as contemporary Korean music in general is probably not as well known here as music from Germany, featured in *Guitar Plus One*, and Holland, to be found in the forthcoming piano duo book *Four Hands*.

The presentation is excellent, with high-quality typesetting and printing on durable paper in A4 format. Both *Guitar Plus One* and *Piano Plus One* contain performance notes, as well as short biographies of each composer. Each piece has been carefully presented and even the most complex scores are clearly and precisely laid out. Given that both volumes are quite affordable, it would be advisable for the aspiring performer of any of these works to buy two copies, as no separate 'part' is produced and, as with much contemporary music, both instrumentalists need a full score anyway.

In terms of creating unusual duo combinations, *Piano Plus One* is perhaps only partially successful. The more unusual partners are bass flute, trombone and percussion. Others are clarinet, oboe and violin, all fairly standard partners, while one work calls for any stringed instrument. One must acknowledge, however, the difficulty of finding an instrument which hasn't been paired with the piano!

There are nine works altogether in *Piano Plus One*, four from Australia and five by Koreans. Although some diversity of style and language is present, the works are, with one exception, a congruous selection of contemporary music, and one can easily imagine a concert programme or recording of the volume's contents.

Piano Plus One opens with Bonu Koo's *Adieu Senior* (1993) with oboe, an approachable piece which combines passages of driving rhythm and aggressive articulation with opportunities for lyricism, especially for the wind instrument. Some similarities to *Adieu Senior* are seen in the rhythms of Sunshee Cho's quasi-minimalist *Rain V* (also 1993) with percussion. The piece is dominated by almost constant quavers with irregular accents, which are played initially on the principal percussion instrument, the traditional Korean *tadumi* (a granite block covered with folded cotton cloth and struck with long wooden beaters). The piano takes up the rhythmic figure in an oscillating pitch pattern focussed on E^b. Somewhat surprisingly in a volume of contemporary works, *Rain V* is one of only two pieces which require the pianist to leave the keyboard (the other is *White Wall*, also with percussion);

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convincing blueprint for interpretative revision of Bartók's output.

Bartók and his World is well and accurately produced, with good illustrations and reliable musical examples. The selections of letters, interviews, obituaries and recollections are mostly well translated, although the editorial notes are only adequate and con-

tain a fair sprinkling of errors. Two seminal texts, on Bartók's change in style by Edwin von der Nüll and Theodor Adorno's review of the Third String Quartet, are also included and will prove valuable sources for scholars.

Malcolm Gillies