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Bartók after Catastrophe

Reading Bartók through Adorno in the post-war era

The image of ‘Adorno’s Bartók’ is drawn principally drawn from the, relatively few, notes Adorno made on his work in the 1920s, especially, in the English language at least, as mediated through Max Paddison’s account, where Bartók’s ‘folkloristic’ materials are deployed in ways which remain progressive, dialectically poised between irony and interiority. Yet to take this as wholly paradigmatic relies on a conception of Adorno’s thought as essentially singular and unchanging. While the same issues assuredly concern Adorno throughout his career, the post-war period—the period after ‘the German catastrophe’, as Meinecke has it—saw Adorno’s aesthetic position in flux, because of the unprecedented historical situation, in part—intertwined with the new encounters Adorno had made in the United States—but also modulated by his encounter, on returning to Germany, with a new music for which his existing aesthetic apparatus had not (and could not have) prepared him.¹

It is the case, then, that this sort of eternal, Platonic version of Adornian thought marginalises Adorno’s personal relationship with the world, which seems to me to be of particular significance both in the early intertwining of Bartók with Hindemith in Adorno’s thought, especially since Adorno “remained a lifelong admirer of Bartók’s music and was in personal contact with the composer in the United States during the 1940s. Of Hindemith he became more critical”.² It almost seems, from Paddison’s account at least, as if one might consider the Bartók-Hindemith relationship in Adorno’s writing to be akin to a ‘failed’ version of the dialectic which would find its ‘authentic’ form in the Schoenberg-Stravinsky dyad. But, on the personal level, it is hard not to wonder whether the distaste for Hindemith might also have been inflected by a equal or greater distaste for his publishers: Ludwig and Willy Strecker who ran Schott had gained a reputation, especially in Leftist circles, for having embraced the commercial opportunities afforded by the rise of Nazism with

¹ Meinecke’s term was coined in the title of his *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* (Wiesbaden: Erhard Brackhaus, 1946).

² Max Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1993]), 23.

enthusiasm.³ Nevertheless, as Paddison rightly notes, the central concepts which preoccupied Adorno in the 1920s and 1930s—summarised by Paddison as “nature, history, second nature, and what [Adorno] calls ‘the rupture between self and forms’—are emergent in his then-current reading of Lukács and Benjamin, deployed in his contemporaneous examinations of Bartók (and Hindemith, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg and Webern), but also “need also to be viewed from the perspective of his later work (especially *Ästhetische Theorie*) in relation to the idea that works of art have a ‘truth content’.”⁴

By the time of the *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, Bartók had been relegated to a footnote, even if an intriguing one in the light of the relationship between nature and ‘second nature’ as sublimated in the operations of Western capitalism. Already in 1925, in the case of ‘folk music’, “‘folk’ is identified with ‘nature’, with ‘community’ (*Gemeinschaft*), and with the ‘collectivity’, an identification which, so Adorno argues, now belongs to a heroic, mythical past.”⁵ Yet by the publication of the *Philosophie* at the end of the 1940s, because the increasing rationalisation of life through industrialisation was not, so Adorno asserted, the dominant ether of Eastern Europe, folk music remained viable musical material, to be used “critically by Bartók [...] for radical and progressive ends.”⁶ In short—and whatever the reasons—in Bartók’s music the use of ‘folkloristic’ materials does not represent a ‘retreat’ into a mythical, ‘natural’ past and, having avoided co-option by authoritarian regimes, did not conceal the contemporary world’s alienated, fragmented reality, in favour of the false unities of the ‘natural community’ (*Naturgemeinschaft*).⁷ Indeed, what Bartók’s music does, so Adorno proposes, is precisely ‘to evoke the image of a non-existent “objective” society or [...] of a *Gemeinschaft*’, but to do so in a way that *recognises* its non-existence in reality, thus, in the most positive reading, making evident its alienation through its temporal or spatial displacement into a reality in which it has no ‘authentic’ place and, as such, is necessarily turned inwards.⁸ This is achieved, in Bartók’s music, via a rupture analogous, if not identical to, the one between ‘self and

³ See Kim H. Kowalke, ‘Music Publishing and the Nazis: Schott, Universal Edition, and their Composers’, in Michael H. Kater and Albrecht Riethmüller (eds.), *Music and Nazism: Art under Tyranny, 1933–1945* (Laaber: Laaber, 2003).

⁴ Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music*, 21–22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

forms’ so important to Adorno in this period. In the music of the Second Viennese School this rupture might be characterised as “the split between the expressive needs of composers and the reified character of the handed-down traditional forms and genres.”⁹ Here, three types of material deployed by Bartók—and Adorno suggests that just three are in play—function to critique extant Western formal types: declamatory rhapsody critiques sonata form; song-like monody critiques the adagio; *czardas* critiques rondo-scherzo.¹⁰ The conflict between form and self (here sublimated into ‘folkloristic’ elements) reveals both the pastness of the ‘natural community’ and the ‘dead forms’ of the Western tradition. The fusion in Bartók may well be seamless at the sensual level, but precisely that fusion leaves both parts unresolved. The result, as Paddison summarises it is “a new and integrated musical language which does not in the process hide the fractured character of its elements.”¹¹

Nevertheless, though Paddison rightly observes that the fullest consideration Adorno gives to Bartók is in his pre-war writings, it is not the case that Bartók does not appear in the post-war texts. The Bartók who appears here is tarred with the criticism of a certain ‘stabilization of music’, a notion which recurs regularly in Adorno’s writing, even though the essay which gave rise to it was not published until after Adorno’s death. In essence it is concerned with a certain sort of reification of that which has *already been* New Music. As Adorno stresses, “[t]he concept of New Music is incompatible with an affirmative sound, the confirmation of what is, even if this were beloved ‘Being’ itself.”¹² Precisely the *integration* of Bartók’s music has come to concern Adorno. The reification—or normalisation—of the sounds of the New Music make it, after all, just like the old music and, worse from Adorno’s perspective, disguise a falling back into what *has been*. In the case of Bartók, Adorno is damning:

[E]ven Béla Bartók [...] began at a certain point to separate himself from his own past. In a speech given in New York, he explained that a composer like him, whose roots were in folk music, could ultimately not do without tonality—an astounding statement for the Bartók who unhesitatingly resisted all populist temptations and chose exile and poverty when the shadow of Fascism passed over Europe. In fact his later works, like the [Second] Violin Concerto, actually count as traditional music,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38–41.

¹² T.W. Adorno, ‘The Aging of the New Music’, in *idem, Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002 [1955]), 181–202 (181).

though indeed they are not cramped and narrow resurrections of a distant past, but almost unabashed continuations of Brahms: they are late, posthumous masterpieces, certainly, but domesticated, no longer heralds of the threateningly eruptive, the ungrasped. This development of his work has a peculiar retrospective effect. In its light many of his most radical compositions, like the First Violin Sonata, appear much more harmless than their sound and harmonies. What once seemed like a prairie fire ultimately reveals itself as a Czardas, so that even the rather obvious piano composition *Im Freien* sounds today like dried-out Debussy, a sort of corroded mood music: Bartók's guardian angel is Liszt's *Mazeppa*.¹³

What I would like to propose here—if only tentatively—is that, though Adorno is assuredly on the right track, what is in play in Bartók's music suggests a more complex set of dialectics than Adorno anticipated, bound as he often was—if only on the lower level of thinking—to his division between self and forms, between material and form. As Adorno insisted: “[I]n the aesthetic refraction of passion subjectivity becomes conscious of itself as nature and abandons the illusion that it is autonomous mind [*Geist*].”¹⁴ In the case of Bartók, that division does not seem to me to be wrong. On the contrary, it seems to me to sense the right issue, but to miss an important possibility.

I suggest, instead, that Bartók pursues and maintains a dual, if not triple, dialectic, that there is, in Bartók's music, both a material *and* a formal dialectic, functioning in tandem. Indeed, Adorno himself hints at just this possibility in his description of the way in which he hears the formal archetypes of Western art music enfolded in the possibilities of the *czardas*, the rhapsody, and the lyrical monody. Yet, for Adorno, it seems that he insists that it is on the level of ‘folkloristic’ material that these formal archetypes are critiqued and revealed for the dead forms that they are. It is for this reason that, when Bartók confesses that he could never abandon tonality *in toto*, in turn Adorno must abandon Bartók. By contrast, it is my contention that the formal possibilities of the *czardas* exhibit a dialectical relationship with, as Adorno has it, the rondo-scherzo. Indeed, as Paddison observes: “Bartók's attempted solution was to retreat into himself, into the material of his folk-music collecting, where he ‘researched what in reality there remained left over’, *as form*.”¹⁵ Moreover, that the *czardas is a czardas* nevertheless *is* revealed by the presence of the ‘appropriate’ musical materials, but that they, in turn, are truly in dialogue with tonal materials,

¹³ *Ibid*, 184.

¹⁴ *Idem*, ‘Fantasia sopra *Carmen*’, in *idem*, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998 [1955]), 53–64 (63).

¹⁵ Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 40. My italics.

with which they are, finally, irreconcilable. The apparently comforting possible resolution Adorno hears between form and materials, viewed thus, then turns to irony. The ‘failure’ as Adorno sees it of Bartók to abandon tonality—which for Adorno means that Bartók’s music must be, in the final analysis, reactionary—is founded on the way in which the use of tonality allows the dead forms of Western art music to persist unchallenged, because for Adorno the functional dialectic is between form and material (the ‘self’ of the artist), where a rupture must be found which reveals modern alienation. In Bartók, however, it seems to me that both form and self are ruptured from the outset: the rupture is not *between*, but *within* form and material. That this tetrad of elements is always present turns the comforting nostalgia Adorno hears in Bartók’s tonal materials into alienated melancholy or, better, into nostalgia ‘proper’, a nostalgia which reveals itself as impossible, fractured, broken. The reconciliation with the past which Adorno finds so problematic after the catastrophe of the Second World War, remains posited in Bartók not simply as an impossible dream but more: the desire for it, and its unfulfillability, becomes, just as Adorno demands a truly new New Music must, “something actually distressing and confused.”¹⁶

¹⁶ T.W. Adorno, ‘The Aging of the New Music’, 181.