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Bartok Quartet #2

The probing intensity of Bartok's music is not necessarily what one would have expected from a man who was relatively quiet and somewhat awkward. Having been a sickly child and therefore often sequestered and isolated from his peers, he retained into adulthood a sense of social unease and introversion. Deeply uncomfortable with any sort of pretension or display, as a composer he found it of paramount importance to search for a voice that was earnestly sincere and relevant. The pivotal musical encounter for Bartok proved to be the discovery of his native Hungarian peasant music. Bartok said of this music:

Peasant music actually is nothing but the outcome of changes wrought by a natural force whose operation is unconscious in men who are not influenced by urban culture. The melodies are therefore the embodiment of an artistic perfection of the highest order. A melody of this kind is a classic example of the expression of a musical thought in its most conceivably concise form, with the avoidance of all that is superfluous.

Bartok's work as an ethnomusicologist became extremely important to him, and he spent much time traveling from village to village living among the native people and recording their singing on the then new and revolutionary Edison wax cylinder. He felt more at ease in these communities, with their lack of artifice and sense of direct communication, than he did at home. In equal parts a man of the head and of the heart, Bartok both had a visceral, emotional response to the music he heard and spent long hours transcribing and cataloguing it, getting to know the intricacies of its grammar and rhetoric in a more scientific spirit. For Bartok folk music was not to be an exotic accent, but rather a chosen language in which he could directly express himself, as French was later in life for Samuel Beckett. He spoke of his relationship with the peasant music: "It is a matter of absorbing the means of musical expression hidden in them [the peasant melodies], just as the most subtle possibilities of any language may be assimilated. It is necessary for the composer to command this musical language so completely that it becomes the natural expression of his musical ideas."

Nor was it lost on Bartok the process by which longer musical improvisations unfolded. The peasant music was self-generating, longer structures spun out from progressive variations of ideas that gradually morphed from one form to another. This is very much the same process encountered in the Second String Quartet.

Bartok wrote his Second Quartet in the midst of World War I, during years of horrible strife and privation. For Bartok, in particular, the closing of Hungarian borders meant an abrupt change in lifestyle; it put an end to his ethnomusicological expeditions and forced a period of reflection and consolidation. The work represents a new development in the composer's style and has a sense both of concentration and of unerring dramatic drive throughout its three movements. The progression of the piece is that of a classical tragedy, Shakespearean in scope and weight. Not only does the work drive toward a devastating end, but that motion is preordained, present in germinal form from the very first moment. Bartok's friend and colleague Zoltan Kodaly remarks on this organic unity in his commentary on the work:

What emerges from the successive movements is not a series of different moods, but the continual evolution of a single, coherent, spiritual process. The impression conveyed by the work as a whole, though it is from the musical point of view formally perfect, is that of a spontaneous experience.

All the important motivic material of the piece is present in the opening melody. Just as it has always been, from the time of the Greeks, a protagonist's fatal flaw that governs the inevitable flow toward tragic ends, so it is the potentialities and instabilities of this theme that propel all that is to unfold. The feeling of the piece is that of continual development. Whenever Bartok returns to earlier ideas they are inevitably transformed, approaching the moment of their most unadorned truth.

There is a richness of parallels between this quartet and Shakespeare's King Lear. On a large scale, we can consider the opening theme of the work as representative of Lear, himself, with all his complications and self-delusions, ripe for transformation through the forces of fate and consequence. There are elements of pride and bluster in some of the early transformations of this theme, and of obsession and uncertainty. In the second movement we can imagine Lear in the storm, exposed to the raw, primitive elements that strip away the artificial pretensions of anthropocentric society. (Much of this movement is underlined by a wild drumbeat inspired by the native music of the Biskra region of Algeria.) There is in the middle section, as well, room for the role of the Fool, whose jokes also expose great truths. The arrival of the third movement feels post-apocalyptic, with textures more cold and barren than sensual, alternating between dispassionate music and more human wailing. It is as in Lear where the King is forced to recognize the gravity of what he has done and its consequences in his own losses, both of position and in the death of his children, most notably his youngest daughter and greatest love, Cordelia. The opening theme reappears, almost unrecognizable, wiser and more sober. It is also transformed into a falling line, initially traded between the violins, that has

the shape and affect of a traditional folk lament. Underpinning this in the lower instruments is a figure that reappears obsessively and keeps coming to rest on a minor third (important throughout the piece). It is this minor third which ultimately, lonely and unadorned, ends the tragic journey of the piece with two hollow punctuating strokes. It is almost as if we hear Lear's final words of the play (first Folio), devastated yet brutally aware: Look there. Look there.