

György Szabados

The „living“ Bartók (Model offered by Bartók?)

The so-called „model of thinking offered by Bartók“ as substance and concept is one of the new reference values in the present time of our culture. Verbal and written discussions about its determining presence and about the frequent reference to the spirituality revealed in it will go on for a long time, however, I mean the phenomenon cannot be specified today in its full extent regarding its prominent position and above all, its characteristics.

Myself, I met this “model” in this sense quite late when we consider its effect upon the relevant literature; actually I was confronted with it through a belated realization. Because this characteristic feature (also as substance) had an impact on me not only from the outside as a cultural heritage (although even as such), but mainly through a channel coming originally from deep inside, being a familiar sphere, maybe as an inner aptitude since the time of my earliest infancy. Since I was born within this handed-down Middle-European, and first of all Hungarian culture, and I am living within it; as my mother was engaged with the vocal pedagogy of Kodály and Jenő Ádám, I felt a distance between the atmosphere of the so-called European art music and our music world. Therefore, when I talk about the relationship of a universal, although special range of culture, way of vision and taste – namely the Hungarian – linked to this phenomenon called “model”, it is merely a kind of selection from observed effects, lectures and experiences. I don't feel yet disposed over the necessary distance to give a definition, however I think that a rational path would not necessarily lead to the secret of the phenomena.

Though the expression “living Bartók” provides help for the definition: to be living means that someone has the capability of reviving, to keep others alive (while our time is agony itself); since life runs away from where continuity is lacking. The living presence of Bartók's spirit and power is therefore presently of extraordinary importance; our people, while slowly giving themselves up, starts regaining consciousness without guidance.

The “living” Bartók? What does the depth of this phrase suggest? Which can be those definable, touchable, simple, basic formulas in reflection and in practice hidden within the depth of Bartók's music and in its organism, on the roots of which stands, and on the trunk of which grows a culture, which doesn't want to give itself up because it wouldn't be able to surrender? What makes this music and its world so absolutely uniform behind the dissecting systems of the general European music forms? And why is it so familiar for us in its universality? We could find many examples for all this when searching in the folk music tradition and when analyzing this music. Many have researched and analyzed this music, dozens of books have been written about it. Here I want to treat only that and no more, what I wish to point out; and this will not be a small point.

In the first place an idea arises, which Sándor Karácsony articulated as follows: *The Hungarian taste is “primitive” in its form and objective in its content.* (I consider taste as the most extraordinary, deep, preserving and creating factor of a culture, of an identity.) When I read the first time Karácsony's book, I didn't engross myself in his thoughts about Bartók's music and its musical reality in spite of his references to the new Hungarian music. The reason was probably the following: I considered it obvious because he had referred to it when treating the Hungarian way of thinking. Karácsony set down the above-quoted phrase in his basic and incontestable work, “The Hungarian Way of Thinking” (*A magyar észjárás*). I consider this statement as a core message of very high spirituality, characterizing the essence of the “model” as well. This seemingly condemning, however axiomatic statement is in fact an exaltation representing a point of departure, and at the same time a point of arrival, in connection with the Hungarian mentality and so in its sound world too. This phrase examines and investigates from a position almost outside of space and time, from the sphere of permanence; functioning as a measure for quality, sublimity and particularity. It is good to implement it in music too.

What does the word „primitive“ mean here? Certainly not that something is merely dumb. And also not that something is simple in the common sense, although it means this too. Simplicity here means uniqueness, core-essence, a feature of sublime aura, and a certain mental reference; the characteristic and criterion of the purest and most essential revealing of the content, of the avoidance of frills. We must be aware of the fact that this is true at every level of manifestation in the created world. This is the basic requirement for all creatures created by Creation, be it a root or a leaf, a cell or an organism, but it applies even for a brick or a building, for life or time, for a sound or a work of music. This means the most elementary, complete and direct formal realization of the idea of Creation, being the closest to the divine creation; a pure and necessary appearance in form, worthy of the Creation; not more and not less. Partly, this is the criterion of the objectivity too. Therefore, the word “primitive” implies here a positive, almost holy characteristic and content; it has in fact a superhuman qualification. It refers to the original unity of the divine, the natural and the human elements, which unity is hardly noticeable in today's “arts” produced more or less at industrial scale. However, it is an uncontested criterion in the world of the Hungarian perspective.

When discussing thoughts about music and talking about this “primitive and objective” form and content, I have to refer again to an essential analysis, which we can define as music philosophy, written by Hamvas. Few people know of

Hamvas' books and sporadically published essays (an unparalleled stupidity of our public life) because very few read them. Thus, Hamvas comes to basic conclusions regarding basic questions, and so in subjects like what „music“ means, what are the basic criteria of music regarded as human phenomenon in the perception, which is that human sound phenomenon, which can be perceived and considered as music.

In this respect he suggests two simple and understandable basic requirements, which are criteria for content and form at the same time.

One of his statements is that a sound phenomenon, which can pass for music in the world of man, must have an „*elementary amplitude*“ (I mean this is a basic requirement for every sound phenomenon being a form of expression in cosmic sense), and it has to be an „*inarticulate roaring*“, being the elementary sound of pain of the cosmic existence; roaring, the primordial music of man's expulsion, which is present in all of us, even if hidden but with an elementary impact and with the wish to burst out. And since music is nothing else than the creatures' expression about fate – and this is more than a prosaic, dry message – so while immersing into Creation, music bears and creates the gestural and stylistic amplitude of their expression about fate. The *elementary amplitude* means thus, that its measure is above the material and the *inarticulate roaring* means the minimality, referring to the fact that it conveys fateful feelings. Already the most „simple“ human music, as opposed to noise, must evince this „roaring“; and the joy expressed in music gets a sense only when counterbalanced against this elementary pain. The more basic, evidently, and universally simple something is, the more noble it is at the same time. This is the content behind the word primitive, among others. Therefore, Karácsony's phrase is sublime, and that is why it is such a safe foundation.

But what does it mean here: „objective“? This is a more difficult question, since every artistic expression is naturally subjective.

Indeed it is. But man is not independent either. Nothing existing exists independently. Everything is connected with everything, maintaining, reviving, singing and motivating each other mutually. Exactly this is, the deep knowledge about it, this holistic view, which makes the Hungarian thinking so prone to objectivity. Additionally, the preserving presence of the all-embracing Creation as a timeless force and; what could be independent from that? (While the noise made by man is already as big as it has never been on the Earth.)

Seriousness in today's general flippancy, in the middle of decay's life form and frame of mind, not only the pleasure of existence but the understanding of existence too; this existential seriousness (sometimes stifled in fits of laughter) is the spiritual keel weight of artistic objectivity, but even of the speciality of a culture or of an artistic work. And it is the keel weight of each life's difficult tasks, which is at the same time the measure for the worthy form, fitting to it. And since music is always manifesting (logos) and hugging in love, the closest connection of these two (objective content and (worthy) primitive form) and their unity is especially decisive. Finally, it is unity that carries and creates identity. This unity is the foundation of a culture and of a mentality engendering culture; this unity is her essence and only value of her appearance.

We call it like this, as if it would be a natural phenomenon; the content (the objective part), the eternal, having an otherworldly aura, attached to the absolute, and the form (the primitive part), is provisory, worldly-temporal, the interpretation, the mirror. This means at the same time – and especially in the Hungarian view of things, and Karácsony refers first of all to this – that no unnecessary, exaggerating tool or effect serving an end in itself is allowed in the „execution“, in the appearance's beauty and dignity because that would be a sign of decadence, of weakness, of mitigation, or of doubt about the statement. Separation from the objective content is equal to an end in itself, and to forsake; the emerging danger of death and agony. This brilliant sentence by Sándor Karácsony is more than a „medical report“ about the phenomenon-nature of a culture, of the Hungarian culture, of the Hungarian mentality, and so of a sovereign musicality, but moreover, I mean that it is their living fundamental formula – behind, beneath and above the richness of the ornamental characteristics.

Or regarding our subject, let me explain more concretely: in Bartók's music the driving force of dark powers, of the decaying, demonic modern world, already void of light and of sacrality represents eternal objectivity on the one hand, and on the other hand there is the stubborn attitude of fidelity and hope, in which the creating primordial reason safeguarded in the depth of soul, the completeness and brightness, and the common hymn of faith, are searching for and finding their awakening and breakthrough; the restoration of their reign in the holy process of suffering, descent into hell, and redemption. This is a painful, burning act. Its sound image, identification and revealing could be „objective“, real, and true only then (because otherwise not possible) when its form is „primitive“ - not more and not less - however still so complicated, so cataclysmatic, so soul-stirring, and strong that it is really able to escort us on this path of purification until the end. Because only then could it meet the universal and elementary holy requirement for primitiveness within the given space and time, in this transmuting age being heavily burdened with spiritual sins till today.

In order to fulfill this task, the imaginary school of the primitive completeness of the folk music of many peoples was required, which comprises everything and carries eternal content, as well as the analyzing and systemizing, almost brainwashing work with them, and seemingly as an opposition; the improvisative freedom and broadness of, and the engagement for, the creating genius. The process and the event are always the same in this formula. To follow the

eternal laws of the sacred reality and to flare up and to recreate the spring of life, of reason, and of dignity from beneath the autumn decay, the fallen leaves, the winter abandonment, because this is the soul, which revives and gives a chance to man and nation equally. This is the backbone, holding this spirituality. This is the process and life code in Bartók's perspective and musicality. His objectivity interprets - almost endures as a model - this creating and self-redemptive operation with an exact complexity. This is what always captures us in his music: this sounding current, this effectuality, this determination, this way to represent a matter. Only a few know – Tibetan lamas mention it – that the fact being Hungarian is a Brahmanic spiritual quality. Bartók's music and world-view applies this yardstick as a model, maintains it in our circles in an abstract sense, as well as in the sense of a natural principle, without frills, exactly, completely, and simply, and filled with reviving energy. His several works, this already cultic heritage, was born in the spirit of this Brahmanic conception regarding style and contents, besides their music being of historic importance. Moreover, they carry it. Since content here means taste and contemplation, preoccupation with the universality in a godless world, which is only busy with unsettling quantities, sunk in details and contradictions. Is there any heavier and more compact objectivity?

The Brahmanic subjective objectivity has just one precondition, which is that this subject should be completely, endlessly, open and spirit-filled in soul and mind. For Bartók this is the case without doubt. (His nation however slowly drops out of this primordial tradition, which is equal to suicide.) The richness of his talent and the objectivity of his view didn't tolerate any limitation, if at all, only self-limitation. Look at his hidden but strong predisposition for improvisation in a Europe of limiting spirituality (for example Adorno and others). This musician who used to analyze and research through his charisma, and who restored order in space and time, in these dark times for the Spirit, in a materialistic-oriented age, when arrogance, decay, and blinded mind of expropriation constitute the biggest power (as today, the world power); acting as a free prisoner of the wonder of All, and using a primitively objective, comprising gesture emerging from the forgotten depth of civilization: he is building a cathedral in order to give an answer to this history, which pushed its world, its good-natured nation, and its nations into agony; to give an answer to the spirituality that is no longer capable of building a cathedral. This is in its essence a sacral attitude and act in an age when the later (and now present) problems of globalism appear already, although still latent.

Bartók's attitude (together with Kodály's sanctuary) is objective also in this sacral sense; even in the sense of the heathen sacrality, but in the universal, primordial, and perennial sense of sacrality also. Moreover, mainly in this sense; then and there where the self-satisfied European soul, burdened with sins and left on its own mentally and spiritually, and where artistic life has become today merely a finite séance. That is the reason why it is so difficult to understand, to perceive the low-flight and top-flight of Bartók in our flattened time without zenith, because everybody has to acquire himself the key to this lively and imposing cathedral. The path leading to this goal starts in the depth of us and goes beyond the society, which lost its intimacy, farther beyond to a nobler unity of the common existence.

This is also an eternal concern, an eternal reality, a never passing concern for the individual person and for the common existence. And nothing else is the task of the Hungarian phenomenon, the Hungarian culture, the existence, the life of the Hungarian community since eternal times: not to abandon the soul-lifting, soul-maintaining mood and sphere of the great unity of the created world, but to safeguard it, to care for it. That was and should be the only real reason of life for the Hungarian mentality, for the Hungarian man, the timeless and exemplary work for that purpose, for himself, and for the world, in an objective and subjective sense.

While I was busy with Bartók's way of thinking regarding music and the scales behind it, I came to another conclusion, a private assumption resulting from my daily praxis. This fact and the idea recognized within is a tangible example for the extraordinary width and universality of the Hungarian thinking and style, for the double-nature characteristic, resulting from its position between the oriental and occidental point of view. This idea arising from my improvisative praxis seems to be an assumption, however I am deeply convinced about its reality.

The period of the Romantic has gone but we keep working – so was Bartók's answer to a music critic who asked him about the possible ways of the new music. No doubt for Bartók, this was also one of the most important questions at the turn of the 19th-20th century, in the modernizing and globalizing Europe turned upside down after the First World War. Especially in Middle-Europe, and especially in that culture, in the those times, joyfully living Hungarian tradition, which he had been researching himself, and whose traditional, musical, basic formula drew from the pentatonic scale, from the world of Pentatonicism. I mean, the solution, which his answer referred to (still quite hidden), and on whose world he used to work already, was offered by his instrument, the piano and his strong improvisative inclination. So it will be revealed for us the decisive, in practice experienced discovery, arriving and unfolding, which since then constitutes the perceivable practical space and fundamental thinking formula working in Bartók's music, and in the musicality á la Bartók.

It is so that the piano - with its own history of development and incorporating almost every tradition – includes two big musical worlds and orders of relations, world-views and systems, and evokes them in its keys, which completes each other to 12 degrees. On the one hand the circular pentatonic world (ancient, traditional, oriental) represented by the black keys, and on the other hand the western, European, linear world, represented by the white keys. Both refer to different emotional relations and have different symbolism, however they complete each other in offer and chance, with emotional and sound contents, inspirations, and relations up to the tritonus*. According to my feeling and view, the "secret", the original model, was born in the course of the improvising practice of the sounding act of these two

worlds, looking for and finding each other, and it is nothing else than the merging of both into One. More exactly, Unity's acoustic interpretation in the instinctive repair of the acoustic completeness, in which procedure the latent Pentatonic composed on the axis of the tonic serve as fixed spokes. Pianists playing improvisative music know exactly, which blessed state it is when they do not play, but the piano plays on them; they experience such an emotional wonder of this musical dimension, where the complete "sound-stock" opens up as a self-forgotten sphere of a more natural and higher spirituality. This is the acoustic appearance, the gleaming through and growing awareness of an order of universal connections in this tissue of unifying yarns, thanks to music's all comprising, all embracing power, while it is always the pentatonic spokes composed on the axis of the tonal way of thinking, which exercise the "background dominance". It is strange that there are always simple answers, such obvious perspectives to everything, which seems impossibly complicated on the surface of the phenomena. This relationship of the black-white keys on the piano was the elementary basis for Bartók's all-musical manifestations, independently, on which of the twelve degrees it was based. This pentaton-modal, eastern-western, archaic and modern way of thinking, developed to a system of 12 degrees has become nowadays a creative view and practice worldwide, but mainly in the world of the improvisative musicality. It is a uniquely "Hungarian" (as Karácsony said) Europeanism experienced in an Asian way, acting as a universal phenomenon continuing and reviving the Hungarian spirit, and filling with content the joyful and more and more wide notion of the "living Bartók".

I am convinced that Bartók wouldn't have been able to carry out this fundamental, musical, psychological, systematic, and stylistic work without his improvisative inclination (and plenty of practice at home), and without its joy and the intimacy of this joy. It wouldn't be burnt through him, fired in him. Because this living and good livable system of relations, not the exact rational logic, is present first of all; the universal impetus of Creation is directly present, which comes from farther and deeper, and leads farther and higher, to the realm of a more complete unity. (Similarly to the Golden Section, implemented so often in his works, it is not a question of mathematics but the matter of a natural feeling for proportions.)

I don't know any musician, any composer creating new, actual music, who wouldn't be effected by this world of Bartók, from this system of relations. Therefore, the opinion of the European and Hungarian music aesthetics claiming that composition and music history cannot follow Bartók's path, is at least doubtful. Since the latest music and musicality, returning to the musical improvisativity as being the most universal, most archaic and most natural musicality, is evolving by following this path, moreover, flies higher and higher and provides a wider and larger place for the encounters of divine freedom and human ingenuity. It is possible that Bartók's music is considered even today as exotic in the industrially justified, importunate, and more and more stale musical world of the self-satisfied Euro-American cult. But this sublime performance, this substantial and timeless musicality and mental-spiritual horizon outlined by him (although for many incomprehensible or burdened with jealousy) should give satisfaction for the Hungarian culture. As Karácsony stated exactly, the Asiatic form of expression of a European content. But in my opinion it goes already beyond modernity; the message of arche in the process of rebirth, which promises and means a spiritual globalism again.

A world can be built on this. Vej Hung wrote in ancient China, "Music creates equality – ceremonies establish differences. The creation of equality develops mutual love; the establishment of differences cares for mutual respect." Bartók's music and the world-view represented in it mean both today. They carry us away and convey us in a wider and deeper love; and this all within the touching ceremony of respect. On the basis of anarchistic views and foundations in the field of laws and public life, it is neither possible to live, nor to unite a nation. Cathedrals have to be built, even when others are no more capable of doing so: the reviving buildings of integrity, and not a patched up, forced together world fetishized on dark secrets behind the scenes.

In an era of this endlessly small-minded, polluted world crumbling away in anxieties, the essence, the beauty, and the wonderful broad-mindedness of the primitive form and objective content can live and stay alive in this deep-rooted and victorious spirituality; in the imperishable secret, in the resurrecting and reanimating force of the tradition, and in the spirit's good reign over the circumstances; in the belief, practice, and self-confidence of the divine freedom and human ingenuity; in caring existence for each other, and in the solution. This is the standing and receptive cathedral whose columns and pillars, and its shrine of insight and courage have been built by Bartók, and this cathedral is standing in perpetuity, and with open gates.

Maybe this is the meaning of "living Bartók".
Maybe this is the eternal model of Bartók.

György Szabados 2007 – 2009 / Based on a lecture held by author on the 25th April, 2007 in Budapest. (Translation Marianne Tharan Autumn 2016)

* Tritone in music theory is strictly defined as a musical interval composed of three adjacent whole tones.