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Bartók Quartet no. 3

Béla Bartók's Third String Quartet was written in 1926, when the composer was in his mid-forties. At this point in his life, he was internationally recognized, not just as an important composer but also as one of the earliest serious ethnomusicologists: he collected and catalogued folk music from several Eastern European countries, and even ranged as far as North Africa in his research. To Bartók's thinking, folk music was of more than scientific interest; it was the life-giving seed without which there was no way forward in musical creation. One might contrast him with a late Romantic composer such as Brahms, for whom writing a Hungarian Rhapsody meant to flavor his essentially Brahmsian composition with a light perfume of Hungarian rhythms or harmonies, as a kind of exotic touch. Bartók aimed, on the other hand, to absorb completely the rhythms and contours of the folk melodies he collected, to a point where his own compositions were the natural result. Where for Brahms or Liszt the folk element would be the garnish on top, for Bartók it was the nucleus, the central thing around which he formed his own style and structure.

The Third Quartet is Bartók's shortest quartet. It is the only one written in one continuous movement, consisting of a First Part (slow music), a Second Part (quick), a Recapitulation of the First Part and a Coda. The First Part has the quality of an artist contemplating his materials, turning over in his hands this motif, that rhythm. In writing music of this kind, Bartók seems to hearken back to Beethoven in his late quartets, writing music whose "examined" quality seems to invite the listener into the composer's workshop to watch him at work — self-referential music, music about the (sometimes very difficult) creative act. Such music might run the risk of being overly abstruse, fragmentary, disorienting; but Bartók couches his exercise in such a dazzling array of textures, colors and intensities that the theory behind the writing is utterly transformed. Late in the First Part, after many halting forays, some brilliant, some desolate, some ghostly, the composer finally launches a sustained song in the second violin and viola, lyrical and warm, with gentle droning accompaniment from the outer voices — a first polished attempt out of the scraps and shreds of his laboratory.

Just as we are given this one moment of seeming completeness, the atmosphere dissolves in the space of a few short bars, and we are catapulted into the Second Part, which is in every way different: quick rather than measured, continuous rather than fragmented, moving along scales instead of leaps, confident and single-minded rather than halting and dilatory. The Second Part

also sounds, at least on the surface, closer to folk roots, particularly in its rhythm and its evocation of a stamping dance. Starting teasingly with plucked chords in the cello and viola, the music slowly gathers strength, moving to a terse, dancing melody, passed among the instruments, then repeated more forcefully, inverted, and finally exploding in the second main idea, strongly rhythmic, played fortissimo by the lower voices. These two melodies move through several transformations, with tempi that sometimes press forward, and sometimes fall back; at one point the first melody is transformed into a tense, pianissimo chase, a whispered fugue. Finally the music reaches a peroration of sorts, punctuated by wailing slides, fragmenting gradually in the throes of its crisis.

This fragmentation portends the return of the First Part, ushered in by a short but intense cello passage. In this “Recapitulation”, the slow First Part is transformed almost beyond recognition. The material is the same, but the energy and the pacing are quite different. Earlier, the music was contemplative but curious, filled with an energy to try moving in many possible directions. In this later incarnation, the energy is spent, desolate; appropriately for a recapitulation, the music seems to reminisce, to look brokenly backwards rather than forwards. Then, just when the point of utter stillness is upon us, we are swept by some invisible source of energy into the whirling, ghostly music of the Coda. This final, brief section is a return to the vitality of the Second Part, recapping its materials in a yet more intense and effervescent manner, punctuated by gruff refrains and seismic slides, and culminating in a final salvo of brusque unison gestures, an energetic affirmation of life.

Note by Misha Amory