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Bartók Quartet #1

For the young Béla Bartók, the period of 1906-1909 marked a time of enormous change, experimentation and turmoil.

At the beginning of this period, he might fairly be described as a disciple and admirer of the German composer Richard Strauss. By its end he was conversant with the works of Debussy, thanks to his friend Zoltán Kodály, and had embarked on his career as one of the earliest ethnomusicologists, collecting and recording folk music in his notebooks and on Thomas Edison's wax cylinder. Folk music was also becoming a central force in Bartók's own compositions, whether in the form of direct quotations or more obliquely. In later years, his own ideal as a composer would be to absorb the spirit of folk music so internally that his writing would simply carry its essence, rather than alluding to it artificially on the surface; he hoped to construct the edifice of his own music on the foundation of the basic expressive truths that he perceived in these melodies. Over the years, he was to range all over eastern Europe and as far as Algeria in his quest to collect and catalogue folk tunes.

In his personal life, too, Bartók was experiencing upheaval. He rejected the Roman Catholicism of his upbringing and proclaimed himself an atheist, a state of belief that he was to profess for several years. At the same time, he was passionately in love with the talented young violinist Stefi Geyer, a pupil of Jenő Hubay. He wrote her long letters in which he railed against Roman Catholicism and the middle class; Catholic and middle-class herself, she may not have responded well to his point of view. In the end, his love was unrequited, and the Violin Concerto that he had written for her was locked away in a drawer and not published until

after the composer's death. It was 1908; within a year of their parting, Bartók married another girl.

In the meantime he had composed his first String Quartet. It is arguably his first masterpiece as well, and depicts vividly the warring impulses and influences from this time in the composer's life. In a letter to Geyer, he described the first movement as a "funeral dirge"; the opening motif, shared between the violins, is a melody from the Concerto he wrote for her, and so this movement may symbolize the death of that passion. It is a movement written certainly from a full heart and a large soul, pensive and grieving; the music is suffused throughout with a sense of yearning and loss. The rhythmic cadence and the harmonic feeling still carry a flavor of Germanic Romanticism, as do the two monumental climaxes.

It is a truism that youth will recover more quickly from a blow than advanced age. Certainly, as the last sad notes of the first movement are fading in the violins, there is already evidence of new life in the viola and the cello. Moving seamlessly into the second movement, we are lifted by a gentle *accelerando* to a new state of grace, a lilting, dancing world that is miles distant from the heavy burden of the previous one. It is probably not meaningful to say that the music of this movement feels "more like Bartók"; but it is hard now to hear the imprint of a Strauss or a Bruckner. Twisting and twirling from lighter textures to darker ones, now singing airily, now stamping with great force, turning easily from major and minor harmonies to completely atonal ones, and back again: before our eyes a composer is finding a voice, integrating seemingly disparate influences into a taut and compelling narrative.

The second movement reaches an ethereal and quiet ending, only to be interrupted by silliness: a noisy tableau that evokes three mischievous children (the upper strings)

taunting a grumpy old man (the cello). Once this brief encounter has played itself out, we are ushered into the third movement proper. This is energetic music with a sometimes rustic flavor, evoking the feeling of a peasant dance. Although there is plenty of tension and urgency in the air, the prevailing mood is one of high jinks and good humor. We hear, too, the influence of the folk music that Bartók was beginning to catalogue: the two climactic passages of the movement, set in a broader tempo, feature a melody very much like the pentatonic Magyar folk songs he had collected that year. The composer was still quite a few years away from the period when he would aspire to subsume the folk idiom into his creative bloodstream; this is still the music of a man visiting the countryside, fascinated by the exotic otherness of the folk melodies he encounters. But at the same time, we can feel that he is hooked. Under the quaintness, the humor and charm that sometimes verges on the precious, there is an authentic response: the composer of these rhythms, these textures and these intervals has just begun to dent the surface, and will be digging ever deeper in future works.

Note by Misha Amory