

Zeitschrift: Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft = Annales suisses de musicologie = Annuario Svizzero di musicologia
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Musikforschende Gesellschaft
Band: 27 (2007)

Artikel: Surface musical process versus background structure : two instances of last-minute corrections in Bartók's works
Autor: Frigyesi, Judit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835206>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Surface musical process versus background structure: two instances of last-minute corrections in Bartók's works

Judit Frigyesi (Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel)

Throughout his life, Bartók adhered to the underlying aesthetic principles of Romanticism. He believed that the *raison d'être* of art is to express personal, lived-through experiences and emotions, «the infinite enthusiasm, despair, sorrow, vengeful anger, distorting-sarcastic irony of its creator [...] the governing passions of his life.»¹ Like his modernist contemporaries, he believed that an artwork should be a totally coherent object, which nevertheless condensates in itself the fragmented and heterogeneous emotions evoked by the experiences of life. Integrity should not derive from a superimposed structure. Rather, the artist should descend to a level where differences and contradictions disappear; he should «unearth», so to speak, the essence that underlies all contradictions.²

I devoted several chapters to this issue in my book, explaining how this aesthetic outlook determined Bartók's mature style, use of folk music, choices of techniques and forms, and discussed the inherent problematic of

1 Letter to his wife, Márta Ziegler, Darázs, 4 February 1909, Béla Bartók, Jr., ed., *Bartók Béla családi levelei* [Family letters of Béla Bartók], Budapest: Editio Musica 1981, p. 187.

2 See for instance Hugo von Hofmannsthal's approach: «The poet must accept the multiplicity of reality, and, through the magic medium of language, bring unity and cohesion to modern man. [...] Where others saw conflict or contradiction, the poet would reveal hidden ties and develop them by bringing out their unity through rhythm and sound.» (This quote, from Hofmannsthal's «Der Dichter und Diese Zeit» is translated in Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York: Vantage Books, A Division of Random House, 1/1973, 4/1979, p. 317). György Lukács' approach is similar: «Every great art is the revealing of the empty and fragmented nature of the empirically sensed reality, and the creation of an utopian integrity which has a demanding and obligatory force [on life] [...]. Because the poet came in order to dig out (in form) and by this digging out, to call it by its name, and by this calling awaken to life the essence of soul. He came so that behind his perfectly complete words it became obvious, with mysterious and clear transparency, what cannot be pronounced in any other way, the only real truth: the essence.» («Molnár Ferenc Andornója» [«Andorno» by Ferenc Molnár], in: György Lukács, *Magyar irodalom, magyar kultúra: Válogatott tanulmányok* [Hungarian literature, Hungarian culture: Selected essays], comp. and ed. Ferenc Fehér and Zoltán Kenyeres, Budapest: Gondolat 1970, p. 146 and p. 97.

Bartók's and the modernists' insistence on this aesthetic.³ Consequently, in the following, I do not plan to discuss the conceptual dimension of this problem. I will rather focus on a specific technique, and certain compositional decisions related to it, which seem to be direct manifestations of this aesthetic.

Before explaining this technique, it is necessary to remind the reader that the connection between structure and aesthetic is always a matter of interpretation. It is impossible to demonstrate in an objective manner that the coherence of an artwork is «true», meaning that it emerges from a connecting essence and not merely the display of compositional skill. Nor is it possible to claim that hidden structural connections are the token of real integrity. The insistence of Bartók and his contemporaries on the importance of a certain aesthetic does not ensure that their artworks live up to the ideals they proclaimed. This being said, I nevertheless believe that there is a connection between a specific kind of structural design and the modernist ideology to which coherence meant a deeper essence rather than surface system.

In the following, I will focus on two examples of last-minute changes in Bartók's continuity drafts. In my view, both changes relate to the problem of coherence. In both cases, Bartók struggled with similar questions: (1) to what degree the surface musical process should intensify or weaken the continuity of the auditory experience and (2) to what extent it should reveal hidden structural connections. In these last-minute changes, Bartók seems to have had two basic considerations, one relating to the underlying structure and the other to the auditory effect – the two being in some sense in conflict with one another.

In order to understand these issues, it is necessary to explain a compositional technique that emerged in Bartók's pieces sometime in the 1910s and remained crucial to him for the rest of his life. Beethoven's late quartets, especially the a minor, Op. 132, and the c-sharp minor, Op. 131, were particularly important models for the development of this technique. In a letter written to Stefi Geyer in 1907, Bartók explained that although he had admired the c-sharp minor quartet already as a child, learning the piano arrangement by heart, it was only as a grownup that he had really understood its depth. For Bartók, one of the most moving moments of the work was the *Allegro* theme at the beginning of No. 2. – a seemingly straightforward melody with simple, consonant harmonies. This melody, writes Bartók, is «magically deep, meaning that it paints an inexpressible feeling that a child

3 Judit Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-century Budapest*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1998: chapters 1–3, 5.

could feel at best as charming *grazioso*, but that is infinitely more than that». It is a melody that only those «who suffered a lot» are able to feel.⁴

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the significance of this letter for Bartók's aesthetic orientation at large. What matters for this discussion is the particular compositional idea that elevates this theme from «charming *grazioso*» into something «magically deep». The first part (No. 1.) of Op. 131 is an extended slow introduction in which a short motif is elaborated in a dense, imitative texture (see example 1, No. 1.). After this lengthy polyphonic section, a light-hearted theme (No. 2: «*Allegro molto vivace*») appears *pianissimo* (see example 1, No. 2.). This theme strikes us as if coming from another planet; its pace, texture, character, phrasing, key and meter are in contrast with what had gone on before. Retrospectively, it seems as if the heavy air of the first part – its searching and suffering melodic meandering – would have been only an extended prologue to bring forth this delicate and timid voice. When Bartók said that the emotional depth of this melody was understandable only to those who had suffered, he must have noticed that the dramatic narrative of this movement in fact leads the listener through a polyphonic labyrinth of searching and suffering toward this moment of light.

Example 1

Nº1. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo.

Nº2. Allegro molto vivace. in tempo

The themes of No. 1. and No. 2. from Beethoven's *String Quartet* in c-sharp minor, Op. 131.

4 Letter to Stefi Geyer, from Csík county on July 27, 1907 in: *Béla Bartók's Briefe an Stefi Geyer, 1907–1908*, Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung 1979.

Bartók must have noticed also that in spite of the fact that virtually all the musical parameters of these themes are different, they are somehow connected. It is difficult, at first, to pinpoint whence that feeling comes. If, however, we take a closer look at the melodies, we discover several micro-elements that might be responsible for their affinity: Both themes are structured around minor seconds, both are circular, begin with an upbeat, and continue with an elongated dotted-rhythm pattern. The source of a feeling of integrity here is not something precise and measurable. These themes are not variants of one another, nor does any element recur precisely. What connects these themes is an amalgam of resemblances: similar *micro-elements* and melody-generating *aspects*.

It appears that this piece, together with Liszt's b-minor sonata, gave the impetus to Bartók to devise what gradually became a characteristic technique of his personal style. One could describe this technique as the de-composition and re-assemblage of micro-elements and/or structural aspects. In the course of a piece or movement, certain aspects or elements, which in themselves are so abstract and/or minimal that they no longer carry any contextual meaning – e.g. certain intervals, melodic motions and contours, rhythmic and pitch-organizational ideas – recur consistently in different combinations.

Coherence in Bartók's musical language is normally seen as primarily relating to the pitch content of the composition, its source being the recurrence of small tonal formations («tonal cells»)⁵ I believe that tonal cells are indeed strong cohesion-creating elements in Bartók's works, but would argue that there are a number of other connecting micro-patterns that are no less important, such as aspects/elements of the motivic language, melodic contour, rhythmic patterns, orchestration and texture.

Furthermore, I do not regard Bartók's language to be a closed system. In the analytical literature of pitch relationships, Bartók appears to be a composer whose main goal was to create structure through the use of interrelated elements. I conceive of the coherence of Bartók's music in a different manner.

In his works, the listeners experience a sequence of contrasting events in the surface musical process, while at the same time they *sense* the integrity of the musical language. As in the case of the Beethoven quartet, the source

5 Among the best known of such theories and analyses are: Elliott Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók: A Study of Tonality and Progression in Twentieth-Century Music*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1984; Milton Babbitt, «The String Quartets of Bartók», in: *The Musical Quarterly* 35 (1949), pp. 377–385; Allen Forte, «Bartók's «Serial» Composition», in: *The Musical Quarterly* (46) 1960), pp. 233–245; George Perle, «Symmetrical Foundations in the String Quartets of Béla Bartók», in: *The Music Review* 16 (1955), pp. 300–312; Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1992.

of this impression of «somewhat the same» is not easy to identify. What creates this feeling of coherence in Bartók's works is less the presence of one underlying and fully closed system than a constantly changing combination of a set of *micro-elements, aspects and systems*. In conceptualizing Bartók's techniques, I found neither the model of «growth from one cell» – in the sense of Goethe's description of the organic art work through the metaphor of the tree – nor the idea of a mathematically perfect and completely structured system really helpful. It seems more meaningful to look for the analogue to Bartók's music in the open models of the natural world – such as the conglomeration of certain plant species in a given geographical area or the gesture-language of a person. Both models epitomize an open system of free assemblages that are at the same time coherent and heterogeneous. For instance, we feel that the gesture-language of a person is somehow coherent, yet it would be senseless to say that it evolved from one basic gesture-cell and form a perfect and closed system. It is rather that individuals develop a collection of elementary gestures (gesture-tendencies/possibilities) which they use in a somewhat arbitrary manner – «arbitrary» meaning here that the precise form and sequence of gestures at any given moment are not completely planned and structured. Yet the whole strikes us as coherent because it consists of re-assemblages of elements of a basic «gesture-pool».

Obviously, an artwork is more structured than the everyday gestures of a person. But there is a similarity. In Bartók's style, as in the case of gesture-language, re-assemblage of elements and systems occurs, forming multiple systems. Re-assemblage should not be thought of as a process. As far as I know, there is no evidence that Bartók would have sketched the micro-elements of a theme and worked out a plan for their various combinations. It seems rather that conceptual de-composition/re-assemblage was his ingrained attitude toward musical material, something he perfected through his pre-occupation with folk music. In his folk song transcriptions and analyses, Bartók was focusing on minimal and abstract elements, constantly separating and re-connecting details of melody, scale, ornamentation and rhythm.

In the actual composition, Bartók had to make decisions as to what degree two aspects of structure should be made audible (sometimes at the expense of one another): the contrast between the subsequent and often unexpectedly emerging assemblages in the surface material and coherence of the hidden background micro-elements. Looking at Bartók's drafts, one can see him constantly struggling with this problem.

In the following, I would like to give two examples of such decisions. My first example concerns the transition leading into the *Più andante* of the *Prima Parte* of the *Third String Quartet*. (Example 2 contains the first three pages of the score: The *Più andante* section begins at r.n. 4 at the end of the second

Example 2 (cont.)

The musical score is divided into three systems, each with four staves (treble and bass clef for the first two, and two staves for the second two instruments).

System 1: The tempo marking *poco rit.* is above the first staff, and *Tempo l.* is above the second staff. Dynamic markings include *più p.* (multiple instances) and *pp* (multiple instances). The key signature has one sharp (F#).

System 2: A measure rest with the number **3** is at the beginning. The first staff has a *mf* dynamic. The tempo marking *Sostenuto* with a quarter note equal to 60 ($\text{♩} = 60$) is above the first staff. The dynamic *ff* appears in the first staff of the second system. The marking *G.P.* (Grave) is written in the right margin of the second, third, and fourth staves.

System 3: A measure rest with the number **4** is at the beginning. The tempo marking *Più andante* with a quarter note equal to 70 ($\text{♩} = 70$) is above the first staff. The marking *con sord.* (con sordina) is written in the first staff. The marking *sul ponticello.* (sul ponticello) is written in the first staff. The dynamic *pp* appears in the first staff. The marking *con sord.* is written in the first staff.

Example 2 (cont.)

Measures 1-4 of Example 2 (cont.). The score is in 3/4 time and D major. It features a piano (p) accompaniment with a steady eighth-note bass line and a treble part with eighth-note chords. The melody in the treble part includes triplets and a fermata. Roman numerals II and IV are indicated above the treble staff in measures 3 and 4 respectively.

Measures 5-8 of Example 2 (cont.). Measure 5 is marked with a box containing the number 5. The piano part continues with a steady eighth-note bass line. The treble part features a melody with triplets and a crescendo (cresc.) marking in measure 8. Dynamics include *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *p* (piano).

Measures 9-12 of Example 2 (cont.). The section begins with the instruction "Tempo I." and "in modo ordinario". The tempo changes to 3/4 time. The piano part features a steady eighth-note bass line. The treble part features a melody with eighth-note chords. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and "senza sord." (senza sordina).

Measures 13-16 of Example 2 (cont.). Measure 13 is marked with a box containing the number 6. The piano part features a steady eighth-note bass line. The treble part features a melody with eighth-note chords. Dynamics include *più f* (più forte) and *ff* (fortissimo). Roman numerals II, III, and IV are indicated above the treble staff in measures 14, 15, and 16 respectively.

page). The *Più andante* represents a complete contrast to the character and material of the preceding sections. The thematic basis for the *Prima Parte* is a three-note root-motif (a melodic ascent by fourths followed by a descent by thirds). Interestingly, at its first appearance (in measures 6–7, in the first violin) it immediately occurs in a variant form, with the addition of an ornamental note (G – C – D-sharp ornament – A). This three-note root-motif is present also in the *Più andante*: it constitutes the background *ostinato* played on the cello and the viola. Apart from this connection, however, the material of the *Più andante* strikes us as entirely new. Unlike in the previous sections, the leading motives (played by the violins) are not continuous, large-gap melodic gestures, but noise-like patterns. They encompass a small ambit, their rhythm is extremely fast (sixteenth and thirty-second-notes), they are discontinuous and scattered (separated by rests), emphasize dotted rhythms and note repetition, and are played *pianissimo* and *sul ponticello*. All of these characteristics are in contrast with what had gone on so far. Unlike in the previous sections, the music here is directional, meaning that the repetition and transposition of motives leads to a point of climax (first at Tempo I after r.n. 5, and then again at r.n. 6).

The first section of the movement (from m. 6 until r.n. 3) and the section of the *Più andante* (r.n. 4–5) correspond to two Bartókian compositional types. The first could be called the «forest-labyrinth type»; the second, the «night-music type». These two night-forest images are complementary. The first – characterized by circular melodies, a lack of strong beats and metric feel, polyphonic texture, and continuity – is somewhat directionless and tragic, while the other – based on the superposition of continuous background sound and «noise motifs» – is more neutral. This latter type is not necessarily positive, but it is more open – potentially encompassing various characters and atmospheres. These types can be identified in numerous other compositions, as for instance in the first and third movements of *Music for Strings, Percussions, and Celesta*.⁶

But although the *Più andante* introduces a new theme, new atmosphere and type, and also a change in the speed of the surface narrative (this section is developmental, proceeding rapidly toward a climax, while the preceding ones were static), it is actually the re-assemblage of micro-elements that appear in the first ten measures of the piece. The only entirely new element here is the note repetition of the first melodic motive. As mentioned above, the viola-cello *ostinato* derives from the three-note root-motive. The idea of

6 There is consensus about the existence of these Bartókian musical types in the Bartók literature and they are mentioned in virtually all Bartók studies, from the earliest ones by Edwin von Nüll and Szabolcsi, to basic works by Antokoletz, Somfai, Kroó, Újfalussy, Gillies, and so on.

the dotted rhythm of the second motive of the violins (first appearance: m. 3 after r.n. 4) derives from the D-sharp – A motion in the first appearance of the theme and from its echoes in the cello (mm. 6-9). Moreover, the pitch content of the two noise patterns (violins in mm. 2-3 after r.n. 4) is identical with the pitches of the first melodic motives of the composition (first violin, mm. 2-4): A sharp – B sharp – A – G – G sharp – B (natural). (Incidentally, the introduction also anticipates the pitches of the three-note root-motive: B sharp = C – A – G).

These elements/aspects are at once connecting, separating and synthesizing. In the auditory experience, it is difficult to make the connection between the noise motive of the *Più andante* and the ornamenting dotted-rhythm pattern of the three-note root-motif (mm. 6-7). The dotted-rhythm and its double echo are a memorable aspect of the first thematic statement which, however, quickly fades away, leaving us with a sense that something has been abandoned without having completed its due course of development. When the dotted rhythm pattern reappears in the *Più andante*, we sense, probably only subconsciously, that this pattern is the realization of an earlier idea, a line of thought that was left unfinished and is now picked up again.

At first sight, the connection between the *ostinato* and the three-note root-motive seems obvious: the three-note motive had been woven into every material since the beginning and so the *Più andante* seems to be merely another stage in this quasi monothematic development. But this is not the case. Until now, the root-motive appeared in constant variation; in fact, the very essence of this motive was its constant changing. Throughout the transformations, its intervallic structure, length and style had changed, and yet one could still feel the similarity between its variants. The cohesion among the variant forms was due less to the pitch content than to the contour and the character of the melodic idea: a gesture-like, expressive motion upward, then downward. For instance, in the opening viola motive of the section at r.n. 3, the motif is lengthened into five notes. To this the first violin responds by expanding, in addition, the motive's intervallic structure: Instead of the ascending fourth and descending third, this motive opens with an ascending fifth and descending fourth. And yet, it is not at all difficult to hear this motive as the direct derivative of the three-note root-motive.

After this flow of melodic-intervallic variations, in the *Più andante*, the three-note motive returns in its original form – except that now, for the first time, it has a non-expressive character. The motif here is «cleansed» of all complexities, continuations, intensifications, alterations and fragmentations: The hitherto expressive gesture-like motive becomes a neutral background noise, a sound-surface. So while in its pitch content and rhythm the motive returned to its origin, so to speak, in its character it is completely transfor-

med. This transformation is at the same time unexpected and anticipated. Subconsciously, we have been waiting all along to hear a clear and unambiguous statement of the main motive. So far all the motivic presentations impressed as variants, or else appeared as weak statements (‘weak’ meaning, for instance, an inner voice in a polyphonic texture, like the second violin’s entry in m. 7, or the viola’s at r.n. 1). The first strong thematic statement occurs with the *sostenuto* chords two measures before the *Più andante*. The *ostinato* then picks up this statement, but blurs its clarity by superposing two versions in tritone transposition. In this sense, the *sostenuto* chords have a dual function: They articulate a caesura in the form but at the same time they are the concluding moment in a line of transformations, stating, for the first time, the original form of the root-motive.

But there is another hidden plan. A closer look at the score reveals that the subsequent recurrences of the three-note root-motive form a chain of ascending fourth transpositions. In example 2, half-circles mark the beginnings of each occurrence – they could be listed in the order of ascending fourth transpositions as follows: G – A – C/B sharp (m. 2-3: violin I), C – D – F (mm. 9-10: violin I), F/E sharp – G/F double sharp – B flat/A sharp (m. 4-5 violin I, and partial recurrence – only F – G prominently – in mm. 9-11: violin I), A sharp – C – D sharp (r.n. 1 + 1: viola), D sharp – E sharp – G sharp (mm. 7-8: violin II), G sharp – E sharp – C sharp (mm. 7-8: cello – partial: G sharp is missing), C sharp – D sharp – F sharp (Tempo I = r.n. 3 with upbeat: viola). During the first continuous section (until r.n. 3), all the transpositions until the tritone transposition have been presented. The section at Tempo I = r.n. 3 opens with the tritone transposition (with upbeat: viola) and concludes in the *sostenuto* chords that present the motive in the original tonality G – C – A (together with the forth transposition in parallel motion: D – G – E). The *ostinato* of the *piu andante*, then, brings these transpositions together placing the original form in the cello and the tritone transposition in the viola. The circle has been closed.

The *sostenuto* chords are of crucial structural importance in these processes. They close the circle of gesture-like variations and that of transpositions stating the three-note motif in the basic form and in the original tonality: It is the first unambiguous thematic statement. This concluding-synthesizing moment prepares the ground for the strikingly different atmosphere of the *Più andante*.

Considering this plan, it comes as a surprise to discover that these chords and the following measure of rest were added by Bartók at the last stage of the composition, inserted on the margin into an otherwise fully written continuity draft (Estate Béla Bartók 60 FSS 1, page 1).

If we reconstruct in our mind the original version (one in which the section beginning at r.n. 3 continues, without the interruption of the *soste-*

nuto chords, into the *Più andante*) we arrive at a rather different, although in my view, equally strong musical narrative. In this original scenario, the first part of the *Prima parte* contains two grand developmental waves. Until r.n. 3 there is a polyphonically conceived, essentially non-developing, meandering, somewhat directionless first section («forest labyrinth»). From r.n. 3 the music is energetic and turbulent. This section begins with a tornado-like circular pattern, jumping up and down, covering a large ambit over constant tremolo in *forte*. The circling repetitive gesturing gradually collapses – the melody descends to the lower register. The last notes of this descent (in m. 5 after r.n. 3) flow naturally, with minimal pitch changes, into the *ostinato* of the *Più andante*. This *ostinato* sounds for a measure, after which, superposed on it, enter the noise-like dotted-rhythm motives, which then become intensified leading to an outcry. The stages of this second narrative could be described as a logical sequence of events: turbulent circling – falling down – frightening night forest – intensification of forest sounds – outcry/climax.

This section has a dream-like narrative inasmuch as the musical materials evolve coherently from one another while at the same time the characters and atmospheres change rapidly – very much like images in a dream. When Bartók decided to insert the *sostenuto* chords, he destroyed the continuous drive of this second section that originally led in one breadth from the turbulent passages through the night-music-like suspension to climax (beginning of the section at r.n. 3 until the end of r.n. 6).

It may seem that Bartók's decision to insert the *sostenuto* chords were in order to make the structural logic stronger and clearer. Nevertheless, I don't think that this was Bartók's primary concern. As we have seen, structurally, the *Più andante* is a re-assemblage of elements from the introduction; it is at the same time contrast, transformation and synthesis. Its function is multiple also in the emotional narrative: It continues the sequence of turbulent images and atmospheres, but it also brings a distinctly new atmosphere – the night-music type. It seems that Bartók's decision had to do more, or perhaps exclusively, with this latter circumstance: He had to decide whether and how to set apart the *Più andante* from the preceding sections. He had to decide whether he wanted his listeners hear more the unbroken continuity of a dream-like turbulent progression or the contrast of the different musical types.

Bartók decided to highlight the contrast, and in this way, he could also create a moment of articulation in the large-scale form.⁷ It is significant,

7 The *sostenuto* chords and the following measure-long rest have been seen as a point of caesura akin to what would mark the end of a transition section in the sonata form, creating the kind of suspension that is typical immediately before the occurrence of the second theme. Indeed, the *Più andante* has been traditionally referred to as the «second theme»

nevertheless, that once this decision was made, he composed this moment of articulation – the three *sostenuto* chords – in a manner that at the same time it made the hidden background structures stronger and more transparent.

My second example, «The Night's Music» (No. 4 in the series *Out of Doors*, 1926) presents a different situation, which however, relates also to the issue of coherence and contrast. Whereas the *Third String Quartet*, like Bartók's string quartets in general, has been regarded to be the primary example for the utmost coherence of Bartók's mature style, «The Night's Music» has been praised mostly for its power to evoke an atmosphere. It had impressed scholars and listeners alike as a nocturnal picture in which, to quote Halsey Stevens, «Bartók brought into play his extraordinary sensitivity to the sound of nature [...] devising [...] a music of an intensely personal character which nevertheless recreates for the listener an atmosphere incapable of misinterpretation.»⁸

The piece opens with a tableau of night sounds – twittering, chirping, and croaking of nocturnal creatures (see example 3). This is followed first by a song-like theme (see example 4: *Un poco più andante*), which repeats, and then by a dance melody imitating the style of a peasant flute (see example 5), which also repeats in varied form; finally, the song-theme and flute melody return together in a polyphonic setting. Between these themes, the night noises reappear. The piece ends with the sounds of the night interwoven with fragments of the flute melody. (In the following, I will use the words «song» and «flute melody» to refer to the two themes).

These three materials – «night music», «song» and «flute-melody» – are often viewed as being the representations of different human conditions. The night section captures the state of uninvolved listening – nature is presented here as an environment outside of the realm of human emotions. The song is a procession-like, slow moving, sad melody – in some interpretations, the expression of «Bartók's loneliness». The second theme, however, is a recognizable folk-type with a model in peasant music – in some interpretations, the expression of «the voice of the community». The conclusion of the piece

while the turbulent section from r.n. 3 is often thought of as the «transition section.» See especially: János Kárpáti, *Bartók's String Quartets*, Budapest: Corvian 1975. In my article «Bartók's view of musical tradition: What is integrated in what?» (in: *The Past in the Present*, ed. László Dobszay, Budapest: Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music 2003, pp. 461–472), I argue against this interpretation in spite of the fact that the combination *sostenuto* chords + rest evoke of a traditional pre-second-theme «formal gesture».

8 Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1953, pp. 135–7.

Example 3

IV

KLÄNGE DER NACHT
AZ ÉJSZAKA ZENÉJE / MUSIQUES NOCTURNES
THE NIGHT'S MUSIC

Lento, $\text{♩} = 72 - 69$

m.s. pp

pp

m.s.

p

m.s.

1)

2)

The beginning of Bartók's «The Night's Music» – the noises of the night

Example 3 (cont.)

The musical score consists of four systems, each with a piano staff (top) and a mezzo-soprano (m.s.) staff (bottom). The piano staves feature complex rhythmic patterns, often marked with *poco sf* (poco sforzando) and dynamic markings. The m.s. staves provide harmonic support with sustained notes and chords. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The time signature is 4/4. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and articulation marks. The first system shows a piano staff with a *poco sf* marking and a m.s. staff with a *m.s.* marking. The second system features a piano staff with a *poco sf* marking and a m.s. staff with a *m.s.* marking. The third system shows a piano staff with a *poco sf* marking and a m.s. staff with a *m.s.* marking. The fourth system features a piano staff with a *poco sf* marking and a m.s. staff with a *m.s.* marking.

Example 4

Un poco più andante, $\text{♩} = 76$
p dolce

p

m.s. pp

p dolce

pp

m.s.

Tempo I.

m.d.

The «song» theme from «The Night's Music»

Example 5



Excerpt from Bartók's continuity draft PB 56PS1 with crossed out transition introducing first, and a second-interval-cluster note-repetition transition, abandoned in the final version, to the second appearance of the flute melody (with kind permission of Peter Bartók)

– the superposition of the two themes and then, the merging of the flute melody with the sounds of the night – strike many as an almost pantheistic resolution: The distance between nature and the human world is eliminated. As Tibor Tallián summarized: «[The Night's Music] describes three levels: indication of life beyond personality (nature sounds and noises), a choral-like song of loneliness, and the playing of a peasant flute heard in the distance under the skies.»⁹

These and other interpretations rest on one cardinal point: The night music, the song and the flute melody each belong to different worlds. The *Prima parte* of the *Third String Quartet* impresses even the uninitiated listener with its integrity: The presence of the three-note motif is audible throughout.

9 Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók. The Man and His Work*, Trans. Gyula Gulyás, Budapest: Corvina 1988, p. 144. It should be noted that Tallián and others regard the song-theme to be «a choral-like song» or simply «choral». I agree, however, with Jürgen Hunkemöller's view according to which this is not a choral. The song is choral-like inasmuch as it moves in even eighths and quarter notes. But its other characteristics are quite alien to a choral melody. Furthermore, as Hunkemöller points out, a choral melody would have associations with choir/communal singing, and thus with community, which is certainly not the case here. See Jürgen Hunkemöller, «Klänge der Nacht» in der Musik Béla Bartók's», in: *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 60/I (2003), pp. 40–68. For further analyses of this piece, see also: Thierry Chazelle, «En plein air, suite pour piano de Béla Bartók: L'imbrication d'une forme ternaire», in: *Analyse musicale* 7 (April 1987), pp. 56–61; Edwin von der Nüll, «Stilwende» – A Change in Style, Trans. Susan Gillespie, in: *Bartók and his World* (ed. Péter Laki), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1995, pp. 276–277; László Somfai, «Analytical Notes on Bartók's Piano Year of 1926», in: *Studia Musicologica* 26 (1984), pp. 5–58.

This is not the case in «The Night's Music». On the contrary, what strikes the listener is rather the distinctness of these themes.

The first melodic idea that occurred to Bartók in the conception of this composition seems to have been the flute melody – he sketched it at the bottom of an empty music sheet some time in 1926 (page 37 of PB 58PPS1).¹⁰ Bartók notated the complete melody on one staff and added variant versions for certain motives on the staves above and below. In the final piece, he used the variant notated above the staff for the first version, while the fully notated – shorter and most likely the original – melodic idea became the form of the flute melody's second appearance.¹¹

Although it strikes us as a simple folk-melody, the flute theme has a strange modal plan (see example 5). It is composed of scalar and circular motions; melodic jumps occur only when a scalar motif is repeated. The theme begins with the motif G sharp – A sharp – G sharp – F sharp and the first two lines (the first half of the song) bring micro-variations on these notes. This melodic motion points toward an F sharp tonality, which however, does not impress as F sharp major because of the lack of a leading tone, strong fifth degree and triad: What we hear merely is a constant descending motion focusing on the A sharp – G sharp – F sharp descending movement. The third line (opening with the up-beat E – D sharp – C sharp) brings a tonal shift. Although similar in its circular and/or scalar motion, using in fact, transpositions of the motives from the first part of the melody, it re-interprets its tonality suggesting a B-centered – a kind of B Ionian – mode. This is reinforced by the last line, in which the double occurrence of the descending pattern F sharp – E – D sharp – C sharp is the exact transposition of the second line's C sharp – B – A sharp – G sharp. Since this latter pattern pointed toward F sharp as the central note in the first half of the song, its transposition is naturally heard as pointing toward B. But the melody unexpectedly ends on C sharp.

This ending defines the modality formally as C sharp Dorian. However, the tonal effect is quite different. One is left with the impression of having heard delicate melodic fragments hovering in the air: micro-motifs and micro-tonalities that constantly recombine. It is difficult to remember the exact form of this melody, but easy to recall its character and elements. Most

10 Reproduced in László Somfai, *Béla Bartók. Composition, Concepts, and Autographs Sources*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1996, p. 50.

11 At its third appearance, the flute melody functions as a counterpoint to the song somewhat in the fashion of a choral fantasy (at this third appearance, the song indeed takes on a choral-like function). In this version, the first two lines of the flute melody are conflated into one line that does not exceed a major third. The last two lines are somewhat elongated variants of the corresponding lines of the first two versions.

listeners barely notice that it recurs each time in a different version, just as one barely notices that its meter is different each time.¹² The change of the meter and the asymmetrical arrangement of lines at the first appearance of the flute melody go almost unnoticed, because it is not the metric framework that draws our attention but rather the idea of inner variations of short melodic segments that could be elongated and shortened, separated and recombined in various ways.

When exactly Bartók might have thought of the night music scene for the context of this melody is difficult to determine. At any rate, at some stage in the process, he must have realized the affinity of this theme to materials that had appeared in his earlier works associated with the sounds of the night, such as chromatic clusters and slow-moving expressive melody.¹³ For in spite of the fact, that in the surface musical process of «The Night's Music» one notices rather the contrast among materials of the night noises and the two themes, there is a deep connection among them. The melodies and motives all move in a circular motion, they all use intervallic steps (almost never a melodic gap). Each of the themes is composed of micro-elements (which strike as distinct units whether or not they are separated by rests), and constructed of shifting micro-tonalities, which emphasize a major third.

Although completely chromatic, it is impossible to miss the constant presence of a major third sonority in the section depicting the noises of the night (see example 3). The outer notes of the background cluster are F and A; we hear this major-third frame – filled in chromatically – continuously in the background. The repetitive pattern – the croaking-motif – together with its upbeat ornament (B – E flat in the first and D – G flat in the second, transposed version), as well as the arpeggio-motif, outline a minor third.

We find the same phenomenon recur in each of these three themes/materials, namely, that tonality is defined by a small-ambit melodic/pitch idea which is «movable» and/or «changeable», meaning that it occurs in different transpositions (or in the case of the flute melody also: variant versions) highlighting different tonal centers at the different occurrences. The first section depicting the night noises is like a tonal grate: Minor seconds are sprinkled all over within the global chromatic pitch universe. Some motifs

12 At the first appearance, the flute melody's meter alternates between 2/2, 8/16, 5/16, 6/16, 7/16; in its second appearance, the meter is constant 3/8, while its last occurrence is in alternating 5/4, 4/4, and 3/2 following essentially the metric layout of the song on which it is superposed.

13 For instance, these elements could be found in the song «Itt lent a völgyben» (In the Valley), No. 5. of the series *Öt dal* (Five Songs), op. 15. This song contains the antecedent of the chromatic cluster of «The Night's Music» and also an extended melody anticipating the «song of loneliness».

remain stable occurring always on the same pitches (like the background cluster) while others are movable (like the «croaking» repetitive motif).

As if it were a melodically played out version of the third-ambit clusters of the night noises, the song is firmly grounded in the D – E – F sharp major third, which forms its melodic center (see example 4.) The cadential notes of each line within this otherwise diatonically conceived melody, however, slip away. Instead of D – the quasi tonic – the closure is D sharp in the first three lines (notated as E flat in the second and third lines). The second half of the last line, then, is in another tonality altogether. As if Bartók would correct the anticipated D to D sharp in the first three lines, and at the end, the anticipated E to E flat and D to D flat. But the cadence is neither D nor D flat, but unexpectedly: C.

It is precisely this «slipping away» into a new micro-tonality that endows this theme with special beauty. This wrong ending turns the otherwise primitive stepwise diatonic motions into a sad song – as if at the last moment, the melody would suddenly realize that it does not really belong to the world of simple diatonicism, and would return to chromaticism – moving toward the night. But it is precisely this tonal shift at the end of the song that brings the first consonant moment: The final C forms an open fifth with the note G that accompanied it throughout, like a bell in the background.

As in the flute melody, in the night noise section as well as in the song, there is a microscopic rhythmic feel, so to speak: the individual motifs in themselves have clear rhythmic contours (and there is symmetry on the phrase-level in the case of the song and the flute melody). The metric feel, however, is weak. The cluster *ostinato* provides an ongoing meter-less background pulsation, superimposed on which the noises of the night appear altogether outside any metric feel. The feeling of meter is weak also in the song: The opening two quarter upbeat does not strike us as an upbeat at all, nor are the meter changes (4/4 and 5/4) experienced as metric events. Only the background G-note bell guides one about the metric accentuation of the song.

The three materials – night music, song and flute melody – are connected also through their pitch contents in numerous ways, of which I mention here one. F sharp and G were major guiding pitches among the minor seconds of the night music: Besides the pitches of the background cluster, these are the most prominently displayed pitches in the section. The first motive we hear at the beginning of the piece is a *tenuto* F sharp in the middle register, and the second an F sharp – G *staccato* cluster in the upper register: These motifs constantly recur like a kind of tonal signpost throughout the night-music sound. It is not an accident that these pitches open the song – as if the song would «grow» from within the sounds of the night. The pitches of the first line of the song appear as the re-composition (diatonization) of

the three first and prominent motifs of the night noises: the F sharp, the F sharp – G, and the E – F/C sharp – D dotted rhythm patterns. The melodic line of its first two lines and the beginning of the third use these notes – correcting them slightly in order to fit a D major-like diatonic melody.

The flute melody brings, then, another level of diatonization: It corrects the F sharp – G = minor second to F sharp – G sharp = major second and expands it to a major third: F sharp – G sharp – A sharp. The connection cannot be missed: F sharp – G sharp sounds as a pitch-variant ¹⁴ while the major third outline is recognized as something already familiar.

When the song and the flute melody appear, the sounds of the night retreat into the background. The background *ostinato* cluster ceases, but its pitches reappear in a form of chromatic arpeggio inserted, somewhat like a distant reminder, in between the lines of the themes. Both themes get their own harmonization, which are not derived from the night-noise motives. Yet significantly, in both cases these «accompaniments» function as alienating elements. In the case of the song, there is a constant background G-bell that collides with the tonality of the melody. The case of the flute melody is even more striking. Its accompaniment is formed from a series of triads – a completely consonant harmonization in contrast with the harmonic world of the night. But this would-be consonant accompaniment is in a tonality that is different from the tonality of the song and Bartók's notation emphasizes the bi-tonal conception. The song is alien not only to the night noises but also to its own accompaniment.

I believe that Bartók was aware of these hidden connections among the three themes/materials. I have to stress again, that these connections are created primarily not by the exact recurrence of certain immediately perceptible elements in the surface musical material. It is rather that each of these musical materials/themes is built from micro-elements which share some basic characteristics, like the circularity of the melodic motion, certain main pitches, aspects of the rhythmic structure, and so on.

It would not have been difficult for Bartók to highlight the tonal and melodic connections described above by inserting transitional materials. Bartók could have inserted transitional material leading, like a kind of developing variation, from the circular song theme to the circular flute theme. Similarly, there could have been a transitional motive connecting the major third of the background cluster of the night noises to the major third begin-

14 This could be conceived to be a positive «*désaccordage*» or «*mistuning*» («*elhangolás*») in János Kárpáti's terminology. See his «Perfect and mistuned structures in Bartók's music», in: *Studia Musicologica* 36 (Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 1995), pp. 3–4; and his *Bartók's Chamber Music*, Trans. Fred Macnicol and Mária Steiner, Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press 1994).

nings of the song and the flute melody. Most of the noise-motifs could have been smoothly connected to the motifs of the song and the flute melody, since all motifs have a small range and are circular.

The decision Bartók had to make was precisely whether and to what extent should the hidden connection among these themes be highlighted in the surface musical process. The issue was not how to reveal the connection among the different materials, nor how to keep the connection hidden (there are enough connecting and separating aspect to achieve both aims) but rather the delicate balance between these two possibilities, in order to create a piece in that everything remains distant while at the same time everything is «somehow» connected. One telling example of the kind of decisions Bartók had to make concerns the entry of the flute melody.

In the continuity draft (PB 56PS1, see example 5), the first appearance of the flute melody is preceded by a two-measure long trill on the notes G sharp/A sharp superposed on those forms of the cluster *ostinato* that emphasize subsequently F sharp, G and A. Apparently Bartók thought of a transitional moment that would announce the harmonic and melodic novelty of the flute melody. The note F sharp would have served as a connecting tonal center between the cluster and the song, while the superposition of G sharp/A sharp trill clashing with the G – A of the cluster would have brought into focus the aspect of diatonization, the fact that these chromatic notes are now corrected to fit a diatonic motive. The trill would have served also as transition between noise-like effects and melody, standing midway between the repetitive second-interval-clusters of the croaking motif and the circular motives of the flute melody. But at the end Bartók crossed out the trill and moved the repetitive G sharp notes – the beginning of the flute melody – two measures earlier.

In the continuity draft, the second occurrence of the flute melody begins with a repetitive G sharp – F sharp major second, instead of merely with the repetition of the G sharp note (see the end of the second staff of example 5). This solution would have announced, as it were, the connection between the note repetition of the flute melody and that of the croaking motive. But Bartók abandoned this idea as well in the final version.

These changes, small as they may be, are telling of the kind of questions Bartók had to face in creating the final shape of the piece. At the final stage, he eliminated those sections that would have «explained», so to speak, the connection between the different materials. He wanted to preserve the distinctness of the flute-melody. In the final version, the flute melody strikes as simple, folkloristic, and unproblematic – yet it «does not belong», it hovers «in the distance under the skies», to quote again Tallián.¹⁵

15 See footnote 9.

The type of structural integrity in the above pieces is rather different and Bartók's last-minute corrections reflect this difference. In the case of the *Quartet*, Bartók needed a point of caesura because of the enormous density of the surface process – considerations relating to the auditory effect might have been the main reason for the insertion of the *sostenuto* chords and the following rest. But whatever the reason, the last-minute correction made the hidden structural relationships clearer and the underlying system more complete. In the case of «The Night's Music», the last minute corrections achieved mostly the opposite results: Bartók eliminated those moments that would have served as guiding elements in conceiving the hidden connecting system among the themes. Both corrections relate to the compositional question: How to work with a musical material whose elements are connected to one another by multiple lines both in the surface continuity process and in the hidden «non-audible» structural design. Which level of these connections the composer should make audible and to what degree, in order to achieve, first, balance between continuity and contrast on the surface musical process, and second, an experience in which the listener constantly, even in moments of utmost contrast, senses the integrity of the work.

Abstract

Coherence in Bartók's musical language is normally seen as primarily relating to the pitch content of the composition, its source being the recurrence of small tonal formations («tonal cells»). In this article, I argue, first, that there are a number of other connecting micro-patterns, such as aspects/elements of the motivic language, melodic contour, rhythmic patterns, orchestration and texture, and second, that what creates the feeling of coherence in Bartók's works is less the presence of a fully closed system than a constantly changing combination of a set of micro-elements/aspects. The article illustrates this point by analyzing two instances of last-minute changes in Bartók's compositional process (*Third string quartet*, «The Night's Music»). Both corrections relate to the question: Which connections the composer should make audible and to what degree, in order to achieve, first, balance between continuity and contrast on the surface musical process, and second, an experience in which the listener constantly, even in moments of utmost contrast, senses the integrity of the work.

Zusammenfassung

In der Regel beurteilt man den Zusammenhang in Bartóks musikalischer Sprache vor allem aufgrund jener Ton-Gebilde der Komposition, deren Ursprung in Bezug auf kurze Tonfolgen, die sogenannten «Tonzellen», zu sehen ist. In diesem Artikel wird gezeigt, (1) dass es eine Reihe weiterer Zusammenhang stiftender Mikro-Verfahren gibt, so etwa Aspekte/Elemente der motivischen Arbeit, der melodischen Kontur, der rhythmischen Bausteine, der Orchestration und der Satzweise, und (2) dass die Grundlage für die Wahrnehmung von Zusammenhang in Bartóks Werk eher in einer ständig wechselnden Kombination eines solchen Bestandes an Mikro-Elementen/-Aspekten liegt als in der Präsenz eines geschlossenen Systems. Dies wird hier verdeutlicht durch die Analyse zweier Änderungen, die Bartók in letzter Minute des Kompositionsprozesses vollzogen hat (*Drittes Streichquartett*, «Klänge der Nacht»). Beide Korrekturen hängen mit der Frage zusammen: Welche Beziehungen soll der Komponist hörbar machen und bis zu welchem Grade, um dadurch erstens auf der Oberfläche des musikalischen Prozesses ein Gleichgewicht zwischen Kontinuität und Kontrast zu erreichen und zweitens eine Erfahrung zu erzeugen, bei der die Hörenden ohne Unterbruch und selbst in Augenblicken des grössten Kontrastes die Geschlossenheit des Werks wahrnehmen.