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# The Two Sonatas for Violin and Piano (1921–1922): Avantgarde Music à la Bartók

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László Somfai (Bartók Archives, Budapest)

In a short autobiography sketched in the year of his death Béla Bartók listed his main works this way: «Six string quartets, 2 Sonatas for Violin and Piano, three stage works, 2 piano concertos» (the Third Piano Concerto was still a plan), «violin concerto; several orchestra[l] works», then added the two scores written in America: Concerto for Orchestra, and the solo violin Sonata. In the draft manuscript (see Fig. 1) originally the list was shorter. Nevertheless, while significant items are missing (e.g. the Sonata for 2 pianos and percussion), in addition to the concertos, Bartók considered the two violin sonatas important enough to insert.

Fig. 1

Main works : Six string quartets, three stage works,  
2 piano concertos, violin concerto;  
several orchestra works; 2 Sonatas for Violin and Piano

Latest works : Concerto for Orchestra (commissioned by the Koussevitzky-Foundation) 1943  
Sonata for Violin alone, written for Y. Menuhin, 1944.

Excerpt from Bartók's one-page autobiography 1945, in facsimile printed c1950 in the Suvini Zerboni edition of Ten Easy Piano Pieces

As an odd event of the postwar reception, I evoke my personal recollections from the late 1960s. Looking for capable performers of the two violin sonatas for the Hungaroton complete recording of Bartók's oeuvre, in Budapest we asked Kornél Zempléni who already recorded solo piano music for the project whether he would play the piano part in the sonatas. In addition to the artist's fear of the difficult part, after a short hesitation he said, «But they do not belong to the fully matured Bartók style, do they?» Paul Griffith in his 1984 Bartók book expressed it in a milder but similar way: «Indeed, the sonatas are less «Bartókian» than, say, the Second Quartet or *The Miraculous Mandarin*.»<sup>1</sup> The fact that leading Bartók analysts like Ernő Lendvai or Elliott Antokoletz hardly ever quoted from these two scores is also characteristic.

1 Paul Griffith, *Bartók* (= The Master Musicians), London 1984, p. 100.

Incidentally, in communist Hungary the two sonatas were on a semi-official list of decadent, forbidden Bartók compositions issued in 1950, thus they did not belong to the repertoire.<sup>2</sup> From those violinists who in the 1920s–30s played both sonatas with the composer, Zoltán Székely lived in America and played only in string quartet; Imre Waldbauer left Hungary and soon died in America; Ede Zathureczky, director of the Budapest Liszt Academy of Music up to 1956, could not keep the tradition alive. After his death (1959 in Bloomington), as a cautious first step, a recording of the Second Sonata came out in Budapest in 1962, played by two Hungarians, without an echo.<sup>3</sup> After all by then there were stimulating LP records on the market, among others with violinists whom Bartók highly appreciated (the First Sonata with Yehudi Menuhin, the Second with Tossy Spivakovsky, regrettably both played with their regular pianist), or the First Sonata with young Robert Mann of the Juilliard Quartet.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1960s the Hungarian-born violin professor in Brussels, André Gertler, also a one-time partner of Bartók, recorded the sonatas, unfortunately with his wife at the piano.<sup>5</sup> By the way the two self-made authorities of the interpretation of Bartók's piano music at that time – Andor Földes and György Sándor – were not at all eager in campaigning for the violin sonatas.

Returning to the story of the complete recording project, next we asked Hungary's leading duo Dénes Kovács and Mihály Bächer to listen to the famous Szigeti-Bartók performance of the Second Sonata recorded on 13 April 1940 in the Library of Congress (Vanguard issued it in 1965)<sup>6</sup> and play the sonatas; their performance was disappointing. Finally Hungaroton invited a young Soviet, Gidon Kremer who recorded the sonatas with a Russian

2 Bartók works banned in the Hungarian Radio in 1950 included (A) Stage works: *The Miraculous Mandarin*; (B) Concert works: Piano Concertos no. 1, no. 2, Concerto for two pianos, percussion and orchestra; (C) Chamber works: String Quartets no. 3, no. 4, no. 5, Violin-piano sonatas no. 1, no. 2; (D) Piano works: 3 Etudes op. 18, Piano Sonata, *Outdoors*; (E) Vocal works: 5 Songs on poems by Endre Ady. Cf. Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music Divided. Bartók's Legacy in Cold War Culture*, Berkeley 2007, pp. 167pp.

3 Tibor Ney and Ernő Szegedi, Qualiton HLP M 1552 (1962).

4 No. 1: Yehudi Menuhin and Adolph Baller, RCA Victor LM 1009; No. 2: Tossy Spivakovsky and Arthur Balsam, Concert Hall Society CHS 39; No. 1: Robert Mann and Leonid Hambro, Bartók Records BRS 922.

5 André Gertler and Diana Andersen, Supraphon SUA 10650.

6 Vanguard VRS 1131; in the context of the 1981 complete recordings reedited, cf. László Somfai, Zoltán Kocsis, János Sebestyén (ed.) [LP:] *Centenary Edition of Bartók's Records (Complete)*, Vol. 1: *Bartók at the Piano 1920–1945*. Hungaroton, 1981, LPX 12326–33; [on CD:] *Bartók at the Piano 1920–1945. Gramophone records, piano rolls, live recordings*. Hungaroton HCD, 1991, 12326–32.

pianist.<sup>7</sup> When it came out in 1973 it was no more a sensation. Among others a Salzburg performance of the First Sonata played by David Oistrakh and Sviatoslav Richter was on the market:<sup>8</sup> ultimately two great instrumentalists of equal rank interpreted the diagonally opposite styles of the two parts. Too bad that no Bartók pianist of great format went on a pilgrimage to Banff, Canada, where old Zoltán Székely lived after the Hungarian String Quartet was dissolved; even in 1981 he was capable to play the sonatas.<sup>9</sup> Another symptom: the older generation of interpreters did not use the Szigeti-Bartók performance as a vital document. It was only the young generation (among the Hungarian pianists Zoltán Kocsis and András Schiff) who studied this recording as a unique guide to understand the intended meaning of the printed notation of the piano part.

These bits of information probably demonstrate that after Bartók's death the reception of the two sonatas was full of controversy. From the interpretation point of view the prohibition of the sonatas in Hungary in the 1950s was harmful, just as the retirement of key actors.<sup>10</sup> Ambitious younger violinists recorded the sonatas with their regular accompanist partners. The composer's personal participation in the rendition could not easily be replaced. Few pianists recognized that the piano part was much more directly fitted to Bartók's specific style than the violin part to Jelly Arányi's; this is indeed a vulnerable side of the two sonatas.

Musicology prior to the 1970s did not give much help to the musicians and the intelligent reader. On the new-music scene the hard-liner Schoenberg followers marked Bartók's violin sonatas positively (this went back to young Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno's reviews in the 1920s in Frankfurt),<sup>11</sup> because here the Hungarian composer achieved a bold and radical new chromatic language, this was the opinion of René Leibowitz<sup>12</sup> around 1946 and of Pierre Boulez<sup>13</sup> too. Halsey Stevens in the first significant English

7 Gidon Kremer and Jury Smirnov, Hungaroton SLPX 11655.

8 A Melodiya recording of the live performance by Oistrakh and Richter came out under several labels (CBS M 36712, etc.).

9 I was present in 1981 in Banff when Székely played the Second Sonata in concert with pianist Isobel Moore.

10 It is worthy of note that in later years Jelly Arányi did not keep the two Bartók sonatas on her regular program; that Szigeti played only the Second with Bartók; that, beyond Jelly, only Waldbauer and Székely performed both sonatas several times with Bartók.

11 A collected edition cf. János Breuer, «Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno: Texte über Béla Bartók [1922–1933]», in: *SM* 23 (1981), pp. 397–425.

12 «La musique de Béla Bartók» in: *L'Arche* 2/12 (1945–1946), pp. 125–128, or «Béla Bartók ou la possibilité du compromis dans la musique contemporaine», in: *Les Temps modernes* 3/25 (1947), pp. 705–734.

13 Cf. Boulez's Bartók entry in: *Encyclopédie de la Musique*, Paris 1958, p. 350.

book on Bartók (Stevens 1953, pp. 205–211 – see the Selected Literature on the Two Sonatas) gave a fair cataloguing of stylistic phenomena in the two sonatas, but György Kroó's fine essay in his Hungarian Bartók guide (Kroó 1971, pp. 106–114) surpassed everything written before; however, stylistic observations without music examples are mostly ignored in the English language musicology. János Kárpáti's chapter in his Hungarian book on Bartók's chamber music (Kárpáti 1976, pp. 272–295) finally produced an analytical description of the sonatas with new ideas, with music examples, yet an English version of the book came out only in 1994. In the meantime the Hungarian and the English literature on the violin sonatas ramified.

In this paper I will focus on two problems: (1) Bartók's motivation in writing sonatas in 1921 and 1922; and (2) what the sketches tell us about his concepts.

### 1. *Bartók's sonatas in 1921 and 1922*

The First and the Second were not the first violin sonatas written by Bartók. His two unpublished juvenile sonatas have absolutely no relevance to the mature ones.<sup>14</sup> Even the lengthy three-movement sonata from 1903,<sup>15</sup> kept in a romantic style before Bartók became familiar with Max Reger's violin sonatas, belongs to the past. Perhaps significant is though that already in 1903 Bartók thought of a dialoguing texture between the solo violin and the piano in the slow movement even if the theme in 1903 was the same, an idea that he carried out in a much bolder form in the slow movement of the First Sonata with independent, instrument-idiomatic themes for the violin and the piano.

When detecting the motivation for writing a sonata for violin and piano in 1921, it seems to be evident that practical considerations of the composer dominated and these preceded the appearance and inspiration of Jelly Arányi, dedicatee of both sonatas. With the end of World War One and the isolation from the new music scene, in poverty in Hungary, Bartók very much depended on concerts abroad. At his 8 March 1920 concert in Berlin, organized by Hermann Scherchen, the large-format compositions were not his own works but the Sonata for Violoncello and Piano by Kodály, and Ravel's

14 C minor Sonata *Zongora és hegedű számára* [for piano and violin], op. 5, 1895, BB6; A major *Sonate für Klavier und Violine*, op. 17, 1897, BB10, cf. Denijs Dille, *Thematisches Verzeichnis der Jugendwerke Béla Bartóks 1890–1904*, Budapest 1974, pp. 82–84, 88–90; László Somfai, *Composition, Concept, and Autograph Sources*, Berkeley 1996, p. 299.

15 *Sonate pour piano et violon*, 1903, BB28, I. Allegro moderato, II. Andante, III. Vivace, performed but not published in Bartók's lifetime.

Trio. To introduce him in a symphonic program with a piano concerto could of course have been the best choice, yet Bartók only had the old Rhapsody op. 1. In the early 1920s for presenting himself as a pianist-composer at his best, a large-format chamber music piece promised the second-best solution, and for the partner instrument violin was an obvious choice.

Fig. 2

Bartók plays contemporary music	Bartók works on the First Sonata
1920 March, Berlin: Kodály, Sonata for Violoncello and Piano Ravel, Trio 1921 March, Budapest: Ravel, Trio 1921 April, Budapest: (Schoenberg, <i>Drei Klavierstücke</i> , 1–2) (Stravinsky, <i>Piano Rag Music</i> , etc.) Debussy, Sonata for Violin and Piano	1920 summer: <b>sketches</b> (six pages)
<i>24 Sept.– 4 Oct. 1921: Jelly Arányi in Budapest</i>	
1921 Sept. (with Jelly Arányi), and Nov. (with Zoltán Székely), Budapest: Szymanowski, <i>Trois Mythes</i>	1921 Oct.–Dec.: <b>draft manuscript</b> Mov. I finished 26 Oct. Mov. III finished 12 Dec.

#### Chronology of the composition of the First Sonata

Bartók dated the First Sonata «1921., X.–XII.» (from October to December). In fact the elaboration of the composition happened after Bartók became familiar with Jelly Arányi's<sup>16</sup> mature violin playing in Budapest between September 24 and October 4, 1921 (see Fig. 2) – a shocking experience about the sensational violin playing and no less the full-grown female personality of somebody whom Bartók used to know as a little girl, the young sister of Adila, another outstanding violinist of the Arányi family.<sup>17</sup> There are two narratives of how Jelly's sudden appearance electrified Bartók's creative imagination. The one is Bartók's own words in an almost love-letter to Jelly written in Hungarian 9 Nov. 1921<sup>18</sup>, full of romantic exaggeration:

16 Arányi was the original family name when the sisters lived in Hungary and so is the spelling in the modern Bartók literature. However, Jelly preferred to write her name as d'Arányi and so did it appear on contemporary English, French, etc., programs and on the title page of Bartók's two sonatas: *composées pour M<sup>lle</sup> Jelly d'Arányi*.

17 Joseph MacLeod, *The Sisters d'Arányi*, London 1969, pp. 139ff; Malcolm Gillies, *Bartók in Britain*, Oxford 1989, see the chapter «Bartók and the Arányi Sisters», pp. 131ff.

18 Cf. the Sotheby 15/16 May 1967 auction catalogue, p. 112. The original Hungarian text is unavailable, the translation is not authenticated.

«Your violin playing has indeed impressed me so much that I decided on that Tuesday [4 Oct.] when we last played together: I will attempt this, for me, unusual combination only if both instruments always had separate themes – this notion has taken definite form so that already the next day the plan & the main themes for all three movements were ready.»

Writing for violin and piano was of course not an «unusual combination» for Bartók; the revelation of how «next day» he outlined the three-movement plan and the main themes is an exaggeration; we will see that the sketches tell another story. A second narrative seems to be much more credible. As a birthday present to his wife Márta Ziegler, Bartók showed her the violin sonata on which he was working as Márta wrote it to Mama Bartók (19 Oct. 1921 Hungarian letter of Bartók's wife Márta to Bartók's mother)<sup>19</sup>:

«I'm so grateful to Jelly Arányi whose wonderful playing on the violin has caused this (as he says) long-dormant [*régen szunnyadó*] plan to spring out of Béla.»

Bartók's basic concept that the violin and the piano should present separate, instrumentally idiomatic themes<sup>20</sup> goes back to the stage of the «long-dormant plan», before Miss Arányi appeared in Budapest. In a recent study (see Somfai 2004) I discussed in detail what Bartók's Black sketchbook<sup>21</sup> tells us about the assumed date and sequence of the six-page-long sketch material of the First Sonata. The sketches that outline the opening of Movements I, III and II (in this sequence), with some follow-up passages, in all probability were written in 1920, i.e. more than a year before the actual composition of the draft score started, during Bartók's summer holidays in his sister's house in Kertmeg puszta, Hungary. Here Bartók composed without the regular improvisation at the piano in his soundproof studio, therefore he wrote down the already crystallized ideas not on normal music paper but in a pocket sketchbook. In the sketches the violin and piano themes in all three movements are independent, opposite in character, just as in the

19 Béla Bartók Jr. (ed.), *Bartók Béla családi levelei* [Béla Bartók's family letters], Budapest 1981, p. 325.

20 Gisella Selden-Goth who 1906–1908 received private lessons in composition from Bartók, in her recollections claims that during the teaching Bartók explained to her: «the music written for each instrument should be thematically independent – for example, in a duosonata the violin and piano should work out completely different thematic material» (*Musical Courier* 152/4, Oct 1955, p. 14, cf. also Malcolm Gillies, *Bartók Remembered*, London 1990, p. 49). Her recollections are too colorful to be sure that Bartók had indeed said it so around 1906–1908 or she remembered discussions of the same phenomenon from a much later time, e.g. 1923 when she was present at the Berlin performance of the two sonatas.

21 Facsimile edition see Somfai (ed.), *Béla Bartók, Black Pocket-book. Sketches 1907–1922*, Budapest 1987.

finished score. I also emphasize that those measures and passages of the First Sonata in which the alleged direct adoption of particular string techniques (parallel double stopping, up-and-down multiple-stopped pizzicato, etc.) from Szymanowski's *Trois Mythes* and *Notturmo e Tarantella* appear (see details in Wightman 1981, Gillies 1992), pieces that Bartók first heard in Jelly Arányi's performance, are not included in the sketched parts.

The sequence of the crucial events is clear. From the spring months of 1920 Bartók was searching for a new style that would assign his place on the post-war scene. New music, which he analyzed or played publicly, indirectly influenced him. Bartók performed nos. 1–2 from Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke* op. 11 and *Quatre Chants Russes* and *Piano Rag Music* from Stravinsky; in September 1920 he analyzed Stravinsky's *Pribautki* as an eminent example of using folk motives in a basically atonal context. Stravinsky, whom he considered his greatest contemporary, in these pieces was disappointing for him («somewhat dry and empty», «ein verzweifelter Versuch [...] etwas Neues zu bringen, dagegen ist es ganz und gar leer», or, even what he liked best, ««miniature art» only»).<sup>22</sup> Bartók thought about a chamber-music composition, but neither the two-movement Kodály cello sonata, nor the three-movement Debussy violin sonata was his direct model; they meant much more a challenge to create something different of larger format.

His activity in ethnomusicology also influenced this search. With the sudden end of the fieldwork in the disembodied territories of Hungary in the Carpathian basin, now Bartók focused on the classification, close study, and publication of his Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, etc., collections. Such morphological studies inspired bold compositional concepts. *Improvisations* for piano (summer 1920) was one, the First Sonata, specifically the finale, another.

Then in late September 1921 Jelly Arányi appeared in Budapest: they played together, Bartók got new inspirations to the violin part, and he became sure that realizing his «long-dormant» violin and piano sonata plans was indeed a perfect idea. The function of the First Sonata, together with the Second written a year later, was then the representation of pianist-composer Béla Bartók at places where the level of music appreciation was sufficiently high – not in Hungarian country towns, he advised in a letter.<sup>23</sup> Neither the composition of a piano concerto nor the Sonata for two pianos

22 The English quotations from the 7 Feb. 1921 letter to Philip Heseltine (cf. *Documenta Bartókiana Heft 6*, Budapest 1981, p. 141), the German from an unpublished 8 Jan. 1921 letter to Heseltine (Budapest Bartók Archives).

23 See Bartók's 31 Dec. 1925 Hungarian letter to Jenő Takács, that such works as his two violin sonatas, the piano *Etudes* and *Improvisations* must not be played in places where «the level of music appreciation is as low as it is in Hungarian country towns», in: János Demény (ed.), *Béla Bartók Letters*, Budapest 1971, p. 168.

Fig. 3



Folio 24v of Bartók's Black sketchbook (Budapest Bartók Archives BH I-206)

and percussion diminished the role of the violin sonatas significantly. His concert programs prove that while the Second Piano Concerto replaced the First in Bartók's own repertoire, the Second Sonata, although according to some recollections Bartók liked it better than the First (besides it was considerably easier for the violinist),<sup>24</sup> had not replaced the First Sonata. Of these two pairs of compositions, in case of the piano concertos we may speak of a corrected concept, while in case of the violin sonatas of alternative concepts.

## 2. Bartók's sketches

The sketches of the two sonatas reveal some of Bartók's special plans but do not evidence others. To the First Sonata on two opposite pages the kernel

24 Bartók thought that the violin part of the Second Sonata was considerably easier than that of the First (see his 30 March 1923 letter to Hortense Arányi, «... a 2. szonáta minden tekintetben jóval könnyebb mint az 1.»). [The 2nd sonata is in every respect much easier than the 1st], cf. Adrienne Gombocz, László Vikárius, «Twenty-Five Bartók Letters to the Arányi Sisters, Wilhelmine Creel and Other Correspondents», in: *SM* 43 (2002), pp. 151–204, see specifically pp. 176–177.

Fig. 4

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation. At the top left, it is labeled 'No. 70'. The notation is written on a grand staff consisting of five staves. The top staff is for the violin, and the bottom four staves are for the piano accompaniment. The music is in a complex, chromatic style with many accidentals and dynamic markings. There are some annotations in the left margin, including 'No. 70.' and 'Violino'. The handwriting is dense and detailed, showing various musical symbols like notes, rests, and clefs.

The opposite page: folio 25r of Bartók's Black sketchbook (Budapest Bartók Archives BH I-206)

of the dramatic contrast comes into sight:<sup>25</sup> the first and the last movements have diagonally opposite characters. At the top of the left-side page (Fig. 3) the 1918 sketches written for *The Miraculous Mandarin* end. In all probability the next, but not in the same year, was the notation of the theme at the top of the opposite page (Fig. 4). This first memo sketch Bartók clearly drafted for violin, but (alone this theme) finally he gave to the piano (it is in the second group of the sonata-form exposition of the first movement, mm. 65–70). Probably the notation of the violin theme of the third movement followed and then the beginning of the first movement in the blank staves of the opposite, left-side page (Fig. 3).

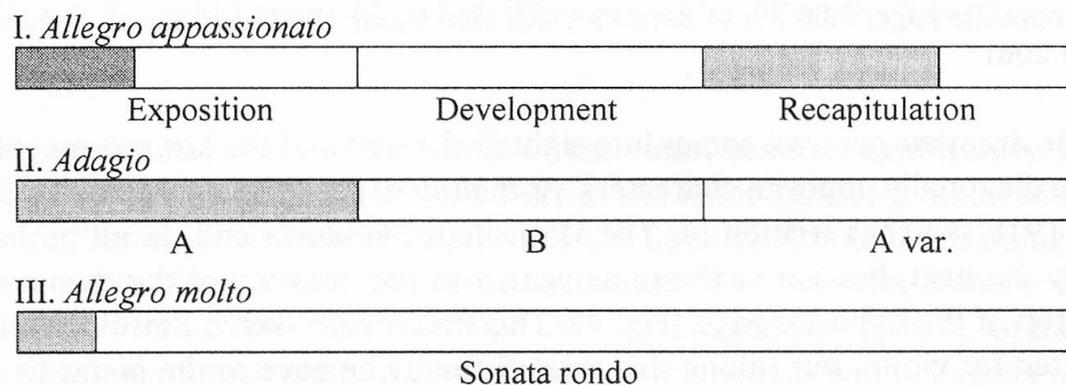
For those who are not familiar with Bartók's sketches and drafts, it may be surprising to what extent the very first written form corresponds to the elaborated form: pitch and tessitura, meter and rhythm are the same; the violin melody has its final character including the ornamentation; the kernel of the harmony on C-sharp in the piano is basically the same. All of this comes from Bartók's working method. Normally he improvised at the piano and

25 In addition to the facsimile edition of the *Black Pocket-book* and Somfai 2004 see also the transcription and discussion of the sketches of the First Sonata in Somfai 1985.

then wrote down already fixed longer sections. Even without the piano and his soundproof studio, he put only matured ideas on the paper. – On the third page the beginning of the slow movement – section A of the ABA<sup>var</sup> ternary form – is outlined; on the fourth page follow-up passages to the previous pages appear. The topography of this fourth page reveals that Bartók worked parallel on ideas to the three movements. The sketches end on two more pages.

What is missing from the sketches entirely? In the sonata-form opening movement among others the full development section with the magic mirror-motion scenes of the piano; the special *ondeggiando* effects and *quasi-trillo* tremolos that Bartók supposedly borrowed from Szymanowski; also the *con impeto* outburst of the violin before the recapitulation in which the peasant-music-like two-note bowing foreshadows the finale. From the second movement Bartók outlined no more than the sublime abstract exposition, from the third movement only the rondo theme of the voluminous sonata-rondo form (see the dark sections in Fig. 5). Significant constituents of the narrative are missing from the sketchbook.

Fig. 5



Existing sketches to the First Sonata

The concept of the First Sonata, as I see it, is simple and straight, and has a deep Bartókian message. An emphatically art-music-style expressive first allegro, bold in its tonal treatment, is opposed by a totally different robust finale, based on rural music inspiration – without actual peasant-music quotations – in the style of fiddle dances mostly from Transylvania (Romanian, Ruthenian, but also Arabic and merged characters, cf. Somfai 2003). The dramatic function of the slow middle movement is that of a transition. Themes of the abstract/sublime exposition, after a bridge of transformation, return in a lively Hungarian embellished version. The multi-movement form thus leads from the perplexed world of ego towards community, a return to nature, to the unspoiled values of a rural community as it were. The finale

itself is the forerunner of Bartók's brotherhood of nations concept of a work, better known in subsequent compositions like the Dance Suite.

At the 8 April 1922 performance of the First Sonata in Henry Prunières's salon in Paris, a great event in Bartók's life at which he presented a major new composition to the elite of contemporary composers («only Schönberg was missing», he wrote to his wife),<sup>26</sup> those who were present recognized the significance of the sonata. According to Bartók,<sup>27</sup> Stravinsky liked the third movement best, Ravel and Poulenc the second and third, Darius Milhaud the first. At a next meeting Stravinsky said «that I'm a «merveilleux» pianist and that I had discovered magnificent new things for the violin (technically speaking), «perhaps I'm a violinist?»». Bartók did not mention any comment by Szymanowski.

I do not claim that the «new things for the violin» could not partly had been inspired by techniques invented by Szymanowski together with his violinist friend Paweł Kochoński, as Szymanowski expert Alistair Wightman argued (Wightman 1981, pp. 159ff) and Malcolm Gillies detailed in his study (Gillies 1992, pp. 139ff). Gillies seriously questioned the stylistic integrity of the First Sonata, interpreted the belated publication and the dropping of the opus number as a possible consequence of Bartók's «embarrassment and guilt towards Szymanowski». Already László Vikárius' elaborate criticism, referring to similar passages in other Bartók scores, pointed out exaggerations in this analysis (Vikárius 1999, pp. 113–130). I am convinced that the reason for Bartók's hesitation was his deteriorated personal contact with Jelly Arányi. Taking the three movements into consideration, the assumed borrowings are simply negligible beside the amount of absolutely individual and novel ideas that the Bartók sonata presents.

Another comment is about the key of the sonata. Paul Wilson scrutinized whether Bartók himself stated that the First Sonata was in C-sharp (Wilson 1993, p. 245). Parallel to Adorno's reviews in Frankfurt, Bartók's close friend Zoltán Kodály also reviewed the two sonatas in two of his «Lettera da Budapest» for *Il Pianoforte*, printed in 1923. In the second review Kodály stressed, and surely had reason to do so, that the Second Sonata was in C, and the First in C-sharp, whether the «atonalisti arrabbiati» liked it or not.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Béla Bartók Jr. and Adrienne Gombocz-Konkoly (ed.), *Bartók Béla családi levelei* [BB's family letters], Budapest 1981, p. 330.

27 *Bartók, Családi*, 330–2, and Aladár Tóth's article, 1922, in translation see «Bartók's Foreign Tour», in: *Bartók and His World*, ed. Péter Laki (Princeton 1995), pp. 282–287.

28 «La 2<sup>a</sup> Sonata, pur riprendendo un tema della prima, è di carattere affatto diverso. La prima, cupa e tragica, ha qui un contrapposto calmo e sereno, in *do*, da sconcertare gli atonalisti arrabbiati (anche la prima è, del resto, decisamente in *do diesis*)». *Il Pianoforte* 6 (1923), p. 158; see also 3 (1923), p. 80.

The compositional strategy of the Second Sonata, written in the next year, involved several predetermined decisions that here I summarize, although I must add that Bartók himself did not make a statement about such plans. Even his sketches expose elements of the second and third creative steps only (using the old terms): the *dispositio* and *elaboratio*, but not of the *inventio*.

Intentionally as an improved version of the long three-movement form of the First Sonata, in the Second Bartók looked for a more coherent two-movement structure, yet not simply a slow-and-fast Hungarian rhapsody but an attacca form, practically without Hungarian elements, built on conspicuously opposite features:

- Improvisation-like themes vs. dance-like themes (rubato vs. giusto);
- Symbolizing mourning vs. joy, but with recollections of the mourning;
- In form of a slower and a faster movement, but ending with a slow apotheosis.

The influence of instrumental peasant music phenomena, primarily of Romanian origin, is astonishingly rich in features from abstract to realistic and includes such common practices like the fiddler's imitation of bagpipe music (in the development section of the sonata-form second movement, mm. 232ff). The mutual basis for the two contrasting movements was the common pitch-collection of the opening themes (see Fig. 6a and 6b), the heptatonia secunda<sup>29</sup> scale (frequent in Romanian folk music), with poly-modal coloration.

As to the special slow–fast concept of the form, Bartók picked up a Romanian peasant music phenomenon, the only programmatic piece in folk music (his word) that he knew, the two-part «When the shepherd lost his sheep», «When the shepherd found his [lost] sheep», inspired by the most tragic event of a shepherd's life. In folk music the slow piece was often a variant of the so-called *hora lungă* (the long melody).<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon fascinated Bartók ever since in 1912 he discovered this kind of highly ornamented, oriental, improvisation-like melody. He heard similar tunes in Algeria, later in Turkey; he knew that the phenomenon existed in Ukraine, Iraq, and Persia.

29 Lajos Bárdos introduced the term *heptatonia secunda* for the *c d e fsharp g a bflat* (etc.) tone-semitone arrangement in contrast to the *c d e f g a b* (*heptatonia prima*), see «Heptatonia secunda. Egy sajátos hangrendszer Kodály műveiben [Heptatonia secunda. A particular tonal system in Kodály's works], in: *Magyar Zene* 3 (1962), pp. 584–603.

30 Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music, Vol. 1: Instrumental Melodies*, The Hague 1967, pp. 54–56.

Fig. 6a–b



The top of folios 27v and 28r in Bartók's Black sketchbook (Budapest Bartók Archives BH I-206)

Bartók thought that in *hora lungă* he actually discovered a form of Urmusik in the world's folk music.<sup>31</sup>

The improvisation-like quasi *hora lungă* violin theme in the Second Sonata (Fig. 6a) is of course Bartók's composition. He is not imitating folk music, but in an inspired mood, although a modern urban man, feels as if he improvised it. The refined elaboration of the sonorities goes far beyond any peasant music model; fortunately we have an authentic sound document of what kind of a sensitive performance he had in mind (I refer to the 1940 Szigeti/Bartók live performance). The rest of the sketches are mostly follow-up passages to both movements.

In the elaborated two-movement form there is, however, an additional strategy. I do not go into a description and interpretation of the details of the

31 To the recognition of this background of the two-part form of the Second Sonata, independent from each other, I came in 1977 in a Hungarian lecture, and Benjamin Suchoff in his English liner notes in 1981, see Selected Literature.

form of the two movements,<sup>32</sup> but at the end of the first movement (I, mm. 106ff) the *hora lungă*-like theme returns in a higher-level formation, as if it were in a motivic style of peasant dances, and on the last page of the score (II, mm. 517ff) the same thematic material is crystallized in a quasi strophic form, as if Bartók, recreating or mirroring the evolution of folk music in his Second Sonata in miniature, from the improvisation-like Urform now arrived to the developed stanza formation. These are quite surprising ideas in a very Bartókian way of thinking, *avantgarde à la Bartók* that he did not want to expose. It is significant though that the Second Sonata does not end with the fortissimo Dionysian incantation of the stanza. The tempo gradually slows and the robust dynamic calms down to make way for the Apollonian end, a C major conclusion, a pianissimo apotheosis. The effect – or rather the Affekt – forecasts the pianissimo end of the *Cantata profana*.

\*

As a summary, taking everything into consideration – monographs and Bartók Companion volumes, analytical studies, investigation of influences, and folk-music inspirations – Bartók scholarship provided enough to understand the special nature and role of two the sonatas in the whole oeuvre. Indisputably playing on a longer scale of means with greater freedom than in the more emblematic later Bartók compositions, the sonatas reached a maturity that I like to compare with Schoenberg's and Webern's last scores before the adoption of the strict twelve-tone system.

The two sonatas today present first and foremost a challenge to the performers. Several violinists with imagination are able to live up to Bartók's expectations. The interpretation of the piano part is more problematic. The best live performances I remember were played by András Schiff (the First with Sándor Végh, the Second with Lorand Fenyves). The new generation of Bartók pianists makes a special effort to read the score and listen to the author's performance parallel, as complementary sources. I am convinced that the full recognition of these two difficult scores now depends on their performers and not on their analysts.

32 To this see Somfai, *Béla Bartók. Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources*, Berkeley 1996, pp. 71–74.

*Selected Literature on the Two Sonatas*

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- 2003 László Somfai, «Progressive Music via Peasant Music? Revisiting the Sources of Bartók's Style and Compositional Process», in: László Dobszay (ed.), *The Past in the Present. Paper Read at the IMS Intercongressional Symposium and the 10th Meeting of the Cantus Planus. Budapest & Visegrád, 2000*, Budapest 2003, pp. 499–513.

- 2004 László Somfai, «Written between the desk and the piano»: dating Béla Bartók's sketches», in: Patricia Hall, Friedemann Sallis (ed.), *A Handbook to Twentieth-Century Musical Sketches*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 114–130.
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### Abstract

The reception history of Bartók's two *Sonatas for violin and piano* (no. 1 1921, no. 2 1922) is full of controversy. Owing to the tonally radical approach, the Schoenberg circle (young Adorno; later Leibowitz and Boulez) acknowledged the sonatas; they were banned in Hungary in the postwar communist years; due to the still unsettled harmonic language, several modern analysts (Lendvai, Antokoletz, etc.) avoided a thorough examination of these scores. In case of the *First Sonata* even the stylistic integrity was severely questioned (Gillies). As recent sketch studies proved, already before Bartók met Jelly Arányi (Sept. 1921) he planned a new sonata as a substantial concert piece, performed under his supervision, to show his approach on the postwar modern music scene. The quick addition of a twin sonata was then motivated by her extraordinary violin playing as well as the decision that the composer wished to create a more concise sonata with a different narrative. Bartók's considerations of what kinds of instrumental peasant music should be recreated in his *folklore imaginaire* themes and how such characters could be assimilated in the structural plans of a multi-movement form are crucial constituents of the innovative style.

### Zusammenfassung

Die Rezeptionsgeschichte von Bartók's zwei *Sonaten für Violine und Klavier* (Nr. 1 1921, Nr. 2 1922) ist voller Widersprüche. Da sie tonal zu den radikalen Werken zählen, schätzte sie der Schönberg-Kreis (der junge Adorno, später Leibowitz und Boulez); in der kommunistischen Ära nach dem Krieg wurden sie geächtet; wegen ihrer noch ungefestigten harmonischen Sprache vermieden mehrere moderne Analytiker eine tiefgreifende Untersuchung dieser Partituren (Lendvai, Antokoletz etc.). Im Fall der *Ersten Sonate* wurde gar die stilistische Geschlossenheit ernsthaft in Frage gestellt (Gillies). Wie die jüngste Skizzenforschung belegt, plante Bartók bereits vor dem Zusam-

mentreffen mit der Geigerin Jelly Arány (Sept. 1921) eine neue Sonate als ein gewichtiges Konzertstück, aufgeführt unter seiner Aufsicht, um seinen Zugang zur musikalischen Moderne nach dem Krieg zu demonstrieren. Die schnelle Ergänzung einer Zwillingssonate war dann sowohl durch Aránys ausserordentliches Violinspiel motiviert, wie auch durch den Entschluss des Komponisten, eine gedrängtere Sonate mit einer andern musikalischen Dramaturgie zu schaffen. Bartók's Überlegungen zu den Arten von instrumentaler Bauernmusik, die in den Themen seiner *folklore imaginaire* als einer fiktiven Folklore wieder Verwendung finden sollten, und zur Möglichkeit der Assimilation solcher Charaktere in die Strukturen einer mehrsätzigen Form machen die wesentlichen konstitutiven Elemente seines innovativen Stils aus.

