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Prosody and Interpretation

*Elements of prosody and their implication in the performance of
certain compositions for voice and piano by*

Béla Bartók

Theses of DLA dissertation

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2023

Introduction

We are often faced with situations in which we seem to recognise music that we have never heard before, or quite the opposite: tunes that we know sound strange and foreign for some reason. What are the meaningful or instinctual elements affecting us, helping our attunement to a song or instrumental piece, and to what extent can they be delineated? Through my cooperation with soloists, pupils, students, choirs and their conductors, it is in the prosodic features that I seek and I seem to find the majority of those defining traits that determine, in one way or another, the influence music has on me either as a listener or a contributing performer.

It is as if Bartók's music, with its melodic turns, harmonies and dissonances, called to me in my mother tongue. His oeuvre has been extensively studied, examined and analysed from various points of view, ever new elements, layers and meanings have been discovered in his works, his message resounds even today. It is difficult to add anything new to this vast area, to grasp those intangible characteristics which tell us that his music is Hungarian in its universality. However, my personal and professional motivation/impulse compels me to attempt to seize one small segment of the oeuvre and to examine the interrelationship between prosody and interpretation in a number of Bartók's works written for voice and piano.

The analysis of the whole body of work is far beyond the scope of this research, and the great number of original pieces makes selection unavoidable. This has led me to an inevitable self-restraint: to keep my research within the framework of only a handful of Bartók's pieces, mainly his folksong arrangements, and also, to touch only tangentially upon Kodály Zoltán's vital and extensively researched oeuvre in this area when tackling the questions related to our musical mother tongue.

The subject of the study

The focus of my research is Bartók's folksong arrangements. During my investigation, I have tackled issues related to prosody, and I also analysed certain works deemed relevant by comparing the graphics of the musical score and the recordings of various artists.

My hypothesis was that the elements of prosody determine the framework of the performance, awareness of it facilitates the interpretation of the piece and enhances its authenticity. The inherent limits of the graphic representation of the score cannot record every element of the performance, and as the examples from Bartók that I have analysed show, following the score rigidly does not allow for expressing the spirit of the piece, the characteristics of the language. The analysis of the recordings in which Bartók himself accompanies the folksong arrangements reveals that the performance is deeply determined by the natural prosody of the lyrics. From this originates the basic principle of the practical application of my research: for an erudite interpretation of the works, it is indispensable to know them not only from the musical, but also from a linguistic, phraseological and prosodic point of view.

For the study of prosodic elements I have analysed Bartók's vocal pieces with piano arrangement. In my paper, I will present the detailed analysis of the following works and their interpretations with the help of authentic archive and contemporary recordings: *BB 42 Hungarian Folksongs* (1906, Series 1); *BB 97 Five Hungarian Folk Tunes* (1928/1970); *BB 47 Eight Hungarian Folksongs* (1922), in further analyses I will refer to the following works: *BB 4 BB 43 Hungarian Folksongs* (Series 2, 1906–1907); *BB 71 Five Songs op.15* (1916), and I will also enclose short excerpts from the following scores: *Bb 72 Five Songs on Poems by Endre Ady op.16 no. 1, 2* (1916); *BB 87b Village Scenes* (1924); *BB 98 Twenty Hungarian Folksongs II. no 1* (1929).

Research methods

The above listed pieces are examined from the following points of view: the prosodic elements and the agogic options arising from them, the place and role of long vowel sounds, tempo, voice range, ornaments, dynamics, and the relationship between the vocal and piano parts.

The research approaches the prosodic elements both from their theoretical and practical aspects. In the first part, I expound the notion of prosody. In the second part, I track these elements and their manifestations by comparing the selected scores, archival and contemporary performances, and consequently, alongside the recollections about Bartók's teaching and performance, I draw certain conclusions concerning the possible interpretations of the graphic representation of the score, the

freedom limitations of the live performance. Finally, resulting from the above, I will formulate a few implications for the piano accompanist in terms of interpretation and coaching of future singers.

The structure of the research

In the first part of my dissertation, I will discuss matters related to prosody and I will establish a notional framework that makes it possible to construe the analysis of the selected works from this point of view. Intonation, short and long vowels, syllables, stress, foot – all these concepts open up horizons which might, at first, seem far-fetched from music scores and piano keys, but are still closely linked to the factors which determine the understanding of musical mother tongue and its performance. Besides excerpts from the Hungarian and foreign literature, I will refer to the introductory study in Bartók's *The Hungarian Folk Song* from 1924, Kodály's doctoral dissertation from 1905, and Bárdos Lajos' lecture notes from 1976, entitled *Choir Conducting II. Musical Prosody*.

I have conducted my investigation along the following key questions:

- The definition of prosody in literature and in music
- Meter and its forms in poetry
- Qualitative meter and as it manifests itself in folksongs
- Characteristics of the Hungarian stress and intonation

The definition of prosody from the literary and musical standpoint (*Itzés*, 2015; *Szabó*, 1973; *Szabolcsi-Tóth*, 1965) led me to the question of meter and qualitative meter, a topic particularly relevant for my investigation since, owing to the extraordinary flexibility of the Hungarian language, both are possible in poetry, while qualitative meter particularly thrives in its natural medium, Hungarian folk poetry.

I will demonstrate poetic meter through the analysis of the hexameters from an excerpt from Homer's *Odyssey* (in Gábor Devecseri's translation). I will recount the Hungarian terminology of the antique metric feet dating from the age of language

reforms (*Fogarasi*, 1843) and I will exemplify their presence in Hungarian poetry with the analysis of fragments from Vörösmarty Mihály¹ and Fazekas Mihály².

In his study *A magyar nemzeti versidomról (About the Hungarian Poetic Form)*, János Arany argues against Fogarasi's views and states that metric poetry does not match the Hungarian language perfectly, and instead, he believes that the main feature of our language was the cluster of syllables grouped around a stressed syllable, similar to the folk(sy) tunes arranged into beats (*Arany*, 1856). According to Kodály, the lengthened and sharp rhythms frequently observed on Hungarian folk songs do not have any connection with meter and its antique terminology. He believes that the rhythm of our language requires the qualitative meter, the unit of which is the beat determined by the number of syllables following the initial stressed syllable. (*Kodály*, 1905). Bartók expresses a similar thought: "*it is a well-known fact that the versification of the Hungarian peasant songs is the so-called Hungarian stressed meter, which has its foundation in the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables.*" (*Bartók*, 1924).

In the first, theoretical part of my dissertation, I considered it important to include an examination and an exemplification of the so-called suprasegmental features of prosody, which have a crucial role both from the linguistic and the musical point of view, and the understanding of which can have a major role in the interpretation of the musical pieces. As Lajos Bárdos puts it: stress, height, duration, dissonance, dynamics, tone of voice, register, harmony, and picturesque, are the elements which can play a role to emphasise the dovetailing of lyrics and melody. (*Bárdos*, 1976).

In the second part of my research, I examined a number of Bartók's folk song arrangements. The analysis of the works reveals the multi-level practical realisation of Bartók and Kodály's self-imposed mission: a) to preserve of the folksong treasure as carefully and as exactly as possible; b) to make this treasure available and approachable through arrangements that are simple to read and perform; c) to move towards a more complex understanding and interpretation in the later works.

¹ Vörösmarty Mihály: Zalán futása – részlet. <https://mek.oszk.hu/01100/01122/html/zalan01.htm> letöltés: 2023.07.02.

² Fazekas Mihály: Lúdas Matyi – részlet. <https://mek.oszk.hu/00600/00648/00648.htm> letöltés: 2023.07.02.

My research has been supported by several pillars. The first one is the comparison of the notations of the folksongs with the variants in the musical scores.

The second pillar is represented by the analysis of the performances found on various sound carriers. A few folksong arrangements are available on archive recordings featuring the renowned artists of the era Mária Basilides and Mihály Székelyhidi with the piano accompaniment of Béla Bartók. The archive recordings are interesting not only because they preserve Bartók's playing the piano, but also because his personal contribution validates the subject interpretation of the singer. In my research, I have compared these reference recordings with later interpretations in the Bartók complete editions considered to be authentic.

The third pillar is the visual representation of the recordings, which, through the use of the Sonic Visualiser (SV) software, opened a new dimension for my research. SV is a cross-platform, open source, free computer application for viewing, analysing and annotating musical soundfiles. Its properties make it suitable for archiving tasks, musicology research or digital signal processing. With its help, I have managed to visually represent those sonic nuances, rhythmic and agogical elements which we take for granted during listening to music and rather feel than understand. Visualisation spreads out the musical piece like a map and makes it possible to spatially examine music frozen in time. In my research, I have used the features suitable for annotation to analyse and visually represent the selected soundfiles in terms of the deviations in pulsation (slowing down, speeding up, stops, etc.). As an expansion of the visual representation, I have made videos of a few of the analyses, which can be directly watched during the digital reading of the dissertation and can also be found on the DVD attachment to the hard copy.

Conclusions

In my study I have attempted to answer and structure several practical, performance-related questions that have arisen during my long activity as a teacher of piano and piano accompanist, in the hope that it will help address the prosodic and interpretive problems of vocal works with piano accompaniment.

The included analyses are not an end in themselves, they do not serve the goal of adding another study to the already vast Bartók heritage, instead they try to grasp

the time-determined musical material conceptually and visually, to raise awareness of the role of prosodic elements in the context of interpretation and perception.

The visualisation of the sound recordings, the comparison of various interpretations contributed to the realisation of a number of practical insights: the piano accompanist and the singer must be thoroughly acquainted with the musical material during the preparation stage; a lyrics-based approach will greatly contribute to solving questions related to rhythm, dynamics and phrasing; the preparation to exacting standards guarantees the freedom required for an inspired interpretation.

In his every manifestation, Bartók proved to be extremely minute, exacting and exigent whether it was the notation of folk songs, the editing of scores, the publication of the definitive works of piano literature or his own compositions, or as a performer and a teacher. His perfectionism was an expression of his humility towards music. At the same time, a conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of the archive recordings is that when he contributed to the performance of his own compositions as a collaborative pianist, his instrumental performance was characterised by flexible adaptation to produce natural prosodic solutions.

The analyses and comparisons have proved my working hypothesis that performances true to the score can be overridden by prosodic elements during a live performance, opening new dimensions that cannot be recorded by conventional signs, but we feel and know that they belong to the essence of music.

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