Interpreting Bartok: a Creative Process

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INTERPRETING BARTOK: A CREATIVE PROCESS

by

Tricia Bogdan

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I. Artist Statement

*Question:* How does one create an authentic interpretation of Bela Bartok’s viola concerto?

*Introduction:*

I am working within the formal field of musicology and also within the field of ethnomusicology. My goal is to perform Bartok’s viola concerto, first movement, in the most authentic way possible. To do this, I will research Bartok’s life, compositions, influences, and closely related composers. My extensive research will create a historical context for this piece, as well as taking into consideration past interpretations through recordings. I will be self monitoring my practicing as a way to evaluate this process. This kind of research is necessary to understand the original compositional intentions to create a cohesive performance for the artist as well as the audience.

This piece falls into the broad genre of Classical music. The form is a concerto, which emphasizes the importance of the solo viola accompanied by an orchestra. However, my performance will not include a full orchestra, or a piano reduction. For this reason, the overall form of the concerto is not as relevant. This is for practical reasons, not interpretational reasons.

The reason I chose this piece is because it is one of the leading concertos in the viola repertoire, and the historical ambiguity surrounding it caught my attention, too. I will be using the Boosey and Hawkes edition, published in 1945. It was picked by my private teacher, Brian Quincey. He will have a major influence in forming my interpretation.

II. Creative Product

My creative product was intangible. Music itself is uncatchable. As such, my senior recital was my creative product. Performing this viola concerto live was the only way to test my
own interpretation. A musician’s recital is the ultimate test of performance—it is a vulnerable and exposed position, all eyes are on you. Pressure and adrenaline are built up for months, weeks, days, and hours before the house lights go out. All the hours of practice and preparation come down to one chance on stage.

The essence of my recital was captured in a video recording, but the actual product was myself in that time and space, an irreplicable moment. There is an atmosphere that is impossible to catch in a video, an electricity between the audience and whoever is in the spotlight. This research provided an appropriate background and understanding of the piece and composer. It could not provide an interpretation of the music, but it served as a starting point. I used a practice log to track my work independent of the research and my lessons with Brian Quincey. I also used three different recordings to assess past performances/interpretations done by professional musicians. Both logs will be included in the Creative Process Narrative, section IV, of this thesis. While all of these contributed to a cohesive performance of Bartok’s viola concerto, it is important to note that this process may be used to interpret any piece.

Regardless of composer or piece, this process may be used by any musician. One would only need to follow in my footsteps, creating a historical context for the composer and piece as well as looking into past recordings and being self aware of practice habits. In solo performance, it is up to the musician to do all the background work. Overall, my private teacher still provided the musical interpretation, but my internalization of his teachings and my work with him still influenced my interpretation in an unquantifiable way.
This thesis serves as an outline for all musicians who wish to perform their pieces to the utmost accuracy, as the composer intended, but it could also be used by any performer looking to deepen their performance experience.

**III. Historical Context**

To delve into the concerto, it was necessary to understand Bartok’s writing and history. This was the last piece he ever wrote. All the music he wrote somehow led to this final composition, his last words, in a sense. Bartok was also considered a major composer of his time. There is an abundance of information on his life which helped me understand how he viewed music. To do this accurately, I dived into Bartok’s past from the beginning of his life, to the very end. The following background on Bartok’s life, the concerto, and the 20th century as an era, constitutes the preparation for my official performance.

*Bartok’s Life:*

Bela Viktor Janos Bartok was born March 25, 1881 in the Torontal district of Hungary. Torontal has been part of Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Romania depending on the time in history. Bela Bartok’s father was also named Bela and his mother’s name was Paula. He had one sister, who’s name was Elza Bartok. The elder Mr. Bartok was the director of a government agricultural school which taught modern farming methods. Mr. Bartok also played piano and cello. He died in 1888 when Bela Viktor Janos Bartok was only seven years old. Not much is known about Bartok’s early life. His mother, Paula Bartok, wrote an account of his early years in 1922. According to Stevens (1993), her writings and Bartok’s own accounts are the only sources for his early years.
Bela Bartok was born a healthy baby but soon suffered early sickness that impacted his early development. He was treated for various illnesses such as pneumonia, eczema, and smallpox. He was also diagnosed with a bronchial condition that caused a curved spine. While his medical problems did not influence his musical interests, it did interrupt his daily life from time to time. He showed interest in music at an early age. His nurse and mother would sing and play piano. On his fifth birthday, his mother gave him his first piano lesson. By April 25 of the same year, Bela Bartok could play complex duets with his mom. Then when he was about seven years old, they determined he had perfect pitch (Stevens, 1993).

After Bartok’s dad died in 1888, Paula Bartok settled her family in Pozsony in 1894. Prior to 1894 Paula and her family lived in various places all over the country. They lived in places such as Nagyszentmiklos, Nagyszollos, and Carpatho-Ruthenia. Young Bela continued to learn the piano in every place he lived. Carpatho-Ruthenia became part of Czechoslovakia and then part of the Soviet Union. The increasing political unrest will become significant later on in Bartok’s life (Stevens, 1993). As he grew up, piano and languages are what he was most interested in. He dabbled in languages such as Magyar, German, Latin, English, French, Slovak, Romanian, Italian, Spanish, and Turkish. He intended to travel to those countries (Suchoff, 2001). His interests in languages contributed to his interests in traveling.

When it was time for Bela to begin his schooling, it was clear to his mother that music would play an important role in his education. As he grew older he started to catch attention and ended up receiving a full tuition offer in Poszony, a city which would become a central hub for musicians of the 19th century. In the 1820s, Paula Bartok knew it was a great city to educate her
son. In 1892 Bartok made his first public appearance and by 1896, at fifteen years old, he was performing in venues all over the city (Stevens, 1993).

In December of 1898, Bela decided to attend the Budapest Royal Academy of Music. Unfortunately, Bartok’s health impeded his education. He became ill and was not able to play piano for a long time. This setback postponed his admission to the Royal Academy. He continued to compose but was unable to practice piano. His bronchial infection worsened and Paula moved her son to a different town. He lived with family and was free to study on his own with medical assistance (Stevens, 1993). During his recovery, Bartok studied Wagner and Liszt in depth (Suchoff, 2001). He became fascinated with the size of the orchestration and Liszt’s writing technique. As Bartok’s health improved he began to travel again. He visited St. Johann bei Herberstein, Graz, and Radegund, then returned to finished school at the Royal Academy (Stevens, 1993). These short visits were only the beginning of Bartok’s many excursions.

When he was 20 years old, Bartok performed his first concert at the academy and received outstanding reviews. Everyone thought he would go into performance as a career. Yet, Bartok himself longed to be a composer. At this time it had been two years since Bartok completed a composition, a great disappoint to himself. He consistently struggled to write what he considered a good piece. When Bartok started to study Strauss, he felt a shift in his writing skills. This shift was parallel to the country’s rise in nationalism. The leading composers of the time were continually trying to integrate Hungarian aspects in their European training. Bartok finished his education in Budapest and began his transition from talented student to respected artist (Stevens, 1993).
After Budapest, he traveled to Paris, Transylvania, and Transdanubia to study their music. His interest in peasant music only increased from then on. He began to collaborate with Zoltan Kodaly and it was the beginning of a long and respectful friendship. During his travels, he began using ethnology to study peasants and their music. The more time he spent in rural areas the more he fell in love with their music and way of life. This is a very important event in Bartok’s life. In Transylvanian, Bartok discovered the pentatonic scale which most of Hungarian folk music is based upon (Gilles, 1993). Shortly after his return, he finished “Three Hungarian Folksongs,” “Four Slovak Folksongs,” and “Second Suite, Op. 4” for piano.

When Bartok returned from spending an extended period of time with different peasants, he realized he shared this passion with Kodaly. Together, they attempted to revive that kind of music (Suchoff, 2001). However, their efforts were met with expenses they could not afford. In 1907, Bartok accepted a teaching position back at the Royal Academy to make up for the financial pitfalls (Stevens, 1993).

Two years after he began teaching, Kodaly was offered the position to teach composition at the Academy. Combined, the two men were the most influential teachers there, and their time there was not wasted. Their collaborations paid off and their compositions gained respect throughout the community. Shortly after accepting his teaching position, two sisters entered his studio. The youngest of the two was Marta Ziegler, who eventually became his wife. Multiple compositions were dedicated to her before their marriage. Each piece depicted a wide range of emotions from love and lust to anger and frustration when they would fight (Stevens, 1993).

The fruits of Bartok’s relationship with Marta Ziegler were clearly demonstrated in his compositions, and it is clear that Marta became Bartok’s muse (Suchoff, 2001). The first
dedication to Marta was in 1908, a piece titled “Portrait of Girl” from the Seven Sketches op.9. But it is Bartok’s Dance Suite that demonstrates her influence. This relationship marked a new period of Bartok’s life. Not only did he complete many unfinished compositions, he stopped idolizing Strauss and Liszt. His sudden wave of finished compositions that included his first string quartet, fourteen bagatelles, a violin concerto, and so on marked a new chapter in Bartok’s composition.

As he continued to revisit Liszt and Strauss, Kodaly introduced him to the works by French impressionistic composer, Claude Debussy. Bartok was struck by the presence of Hungarian peasant music in Debussy’s works. After discovering Debussy, Bartok revisited works by Mozart, Scarlatti, Haydn, Bach, Chopin, and Couperin. Eventually, Bartok became more interested in the music of Slovakia and Russia because of Kodaly but still valued the older classical composition techniques. Bartok worked on his own editions of Haydn, Schubert, and Schumann piano works.

Throughout this period of compositional study, Bartok continued to experiment with dissonant intervals, such as the tritone. His music was becoming farther and farther removed from what was considered conventional music at the time (Suchoff, 1993). Even the Royal Academy considered his music “too contemporary,” (Stevens, 45) to publish. Unfortunately, Bartok’s disregard for the standard of music at that time had negative repercussions, and as he continued to write music that was “too contemporary,” fewer and fewer people were willing to perform his music or attend his concerts (Stevens, 1993).

The political unrest in Hungary had reached a tipping point as many parts of the country were at the disposal of Austria-Hungary, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria, a group
of countries related to World War I known as the Central Powers. The country's efforts were concentrated on the war which impacted Bartok’s plans to travel. Although disappointed that he could no longer travel to Africa as he had planned, Bartok was excited at the prospect of spending more time with his wife and son. That year, Bartok spent quality time with his family and was able to finish many of his pieces. For example, he finished his instructive edition of Bach’s *Anna Magdalena* while *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* premiered in 1918 (Gilles, 1993) with clear influences of Strauss, Debussy, and Liszt. So much of the music at the end of the opera closely resembled Debussy’s style, that Bartok rewrote it out of embarrassment (Antokoletz, 2000).

When the war had come to a close, Hungary was still an economic mess (Stevens, 1993). As Bartok channeled the economic instability of his country into his music, he realized society was not ready for his realism. *The Miraculous Mandarin* was the product. It was his commentary on Hungary’s political and social state. Therefore, it was banned for its plot and musical ideas in various places in Europe for over a span of about ten years (Suchoff, 2001).

In 1919, Bartok’s health had declined yet again, and he took leave from teaching at the Royal Academy, but the administrative state of the academy was just as precarious as his health. Many other composers at the school were awaiting disciplinary action and had considered fleeing Hungary (Stevens, 1993).

Bartok’s performing career had reached an international scale. This was because performing in Hungary had become increasingly difficult. It was only natural to perform in Europe and America. However, Bartok was still able to teach at the Royal Academy. And, for
the second time in his life, a girl much younger than he, entered his studio with irresistible charm and musical ability. Marta and Bela divorced and he married Ditta Pasztory (Suchoff, 2001).

In 1927, Bartok made his premiere in the United States. He performed all over from New York to Los Angeles. However, he presented himself as a concert pianist, rather than a composer. But little by little, he made an impression in the American music scene. When he returned to Hungary, he retired from his teaching position at the Royal Academy (Stevens, 1993). By 1937, the Reich Music Chamber began to question the “aryanism” of his music. The Reich Music Chamber sought to promote good “German” music, which mostly consisted of music similar to German composers like Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, and Haydn. At this time, composers such as Hindemith and Schoenberg had already fled the country. Bartok, however, insisted on his music being free of political assertions.

While he survived the investigation, by March of 1938, Hitler had entered Vienna. Bartok could no longer avoid leaving his home country. He knew it would be futile trying to continue writing in Hungary while political tensions increased (Suchoff, 2001). Soon after this realization, the Viennese publishing company he usually worked with was taken control of by the Nazis, making it incredibly difficult for Bartok to publish his music. He and Kodaly were eventually approached by the British publishers, Boosey and Hawkes, where he agreed to publish his music. Ultimately, Boosey and Hawkes attained all rights to publish Bartok’s music. Shortly after his new relationship with Boosey and Hawkes was established, it was suggested to him that he move to the United States. However, his mother was still in Hungary, and until her death in 1939, he refused to leave Europe (Stevens, 1993). Before Bartok’s hosted his final concert in Hungary, he finished one of his most well known pieces, *Mikrokosmos* (Gilles, 1993).
Ditta and Bela Bartok finally arranged travel plans to leave Europe for the United States. Peter Bartok, his son from his first marriage, had also arranged plans to meet in the States. While they were unable to keep in contact for an extended period of time, Peter finally arrived and reunited with his father. While this was joyous for Bela Bartok, his health had become an increasing concern. January 21 of 1943 was Bartok’s last performance. His health had come to significantly hinder his ability to perform. Not only was his physical health declining, but his faith in humanity started to decrease as well. There was no end insight for the war in Europe and Bartok was distraught at the thought of his country and society so close to destruction (Stevens, 1993).

By 1945, Bartok had reached his final summer. As his energy gradually decreased he focused on this viola concerto, commissioned by William Primrose. Until the very end, on September 26th, Bartok was writing his music.

*Tibor Serly:*

Tibor Serly was Hungarian by nationality, but he spent the majority of his time in the United States. In 1922 he moved to Hungary to attend the Royal Academy. He studied violin with Hubay and composition with Kodaly, through which he became acquainted with Bartok. When Bartok moved to the United States, Serly volunteered to be his translator. Eventually, Bartok allowed Serly to transcribe some of his music, like *Mikrokosmos*.

We know from countless sources that the original manuscript of the viola concerto was left to Tibor Serly, Bartok’s apprentice, when he died. It was up to Serly to put the finishing touches on the piece and publish it—a fact that has raised controversy among many scholars who debate Serly’s interpretation of Bartok’s manuscript notes. Bartok left Serly a manuscript.
However, it was not a neat compilation of papers but rather a conglomeration of music. Many scholars also dispute the state of the manuscript at the time of Bartok’s death. Some claim that the manuscript was finished and only lacked a few details, while others claim it was far from complete. A letter from Bartok to William Primrose does state that he finished a draft and that only the orchestration remained. Two weeks later, he passed away. For my purposes, it is important to assume that Serly’s interpretation was accurate because without that assumption, I would need to look at the original manuscript.

_William Primrose:_

William Primrose commissioned the viola concerto in 1945. He is of Scottish nationality and it is rumored that Bartok wrote a scottish melody into the concerto as a tribute, for the man who commissioned the work. However, according to Maurice (2004) the research and analysis is inconclusive. Regardless, Serly and Primrose worked together to reconstruct the concerto. When Primrose first approached Bartok with the commission, Bela was doubtful of the soloistic opportunities in the instrument. A few days later Bartok heard the premiere of the viola concerto composed by William Walton, and his mind was opened to the opportunity.

The concert premiered with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra with Primrose performing the solo. It was very well received both there and then in New York, two days later (Maurice, 2004).

_Musical Elements of the Concerto:_

Three folk tunes, “The Wife She Brewed It,” “Gin a Body, Meet a Body, Comin’ thro the Rye,” and “Auld Lang Syne,” seem to have a connection with this piece. They are three traditional songs which, according to Maurice (2004), influenced Bartok’s treatment of intervals
and rhythms. For example, the opening bars closely resemble an old traditional Scottish melody (Maurice, 2004).

The first movement is written in sonata form, like many pieces of the Classical Era. Sonata form consists of three main sections: exposition, development, and recapitulation. The exposition introduces melodic ideas. The development plays with those ideas. And finally, the recapitulation is the return of the original ideas. However, Bartok has a tendency to change the recapitulation. Some examples of this are in his fourth string quartet at the end of the first movement, his second piano concerto, and his second violin concerto. In the viola concerto, this occurs near the end of the cadenza; the thematic material continues to develop.

**The 20th Century in Classical music:**

The time period before World War I and immediately following, was a time composers sought to balance new innovations with traditional classic form. A few composers, such as Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, and Anton Weber, along with Bela Bartok, were deemed “modernists” by 21st century historians. Music was being experimented with in a whole new way. Traditionally, music has had a tonal center (Burkholder, 2010).

This total center is more commonly known as a key. Just as in baseball, a piece starts at home, then ventures to other bases to develop melodic material but eventually, will always return to home base. There are 24 keys in total. Every key is derived from the basic C-major scale. There are no changes to the pitches, so if an individual were to sit at the piano and only play the white keys, it would be closely related to C-major. As soon as pitches are altered (i.e. playing black keys on the piano) the key has also changed.
These modernist composers abandoned the idea of writing tonal music and sought to “avoid establishing a tonal center” (Burkholder, 2010). Their styles became “atonal.” This move away from tonality also introduced the twelve-tone method in which the music is based on a “systematic ordering of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale” (Burkholder, 2010).

A few modernists strayed far from the traditional classic forms, but Bartok, with composers like Stravinsky, were able to rely on their distinctive styles to innovate music. Igor Stravinsky was a Russian composer. He is considered one of the most significant composers of his time. A defining characteristic for modernists was the idea of breaking away from Romantic ideals, the era preceding modernism and neoclassicism. For Bartok, it meant combining his knowledge of eastern folk-music with his knowledge of western technique in composition (Suchoff, 2001). The combination of both styles led to the most notable period of Bartok’s life. It began with his first piano concerto and ended with the viola concerto. In between this period, 1926-1945, he produced works such as his Cantata Profana, String Quartet no. 5 and 6, and the Concerto for Orchestra. There were many other compositions (Suchoff, 2001).

IV. Creative Process Narrative

The following chart is a sample of my practice log. It recorded the days I practiced as well as my days of rest. I chose eight parameters to log as my “focus” for that practice session. It is a record of what I focused on in my process of learning the piece, not a guide of how to learn the piece. The log shows the date, practice parameter, and section of the piece. It records September 2015 to January 2016. My practice sessions are usually around two hours. I found this process very tedious. While practicing is already a large conglomeration of technique and other musical elements, categorizing them in different parameters was almost harder. However, it was
still good to keep track of the process. It required more self awareness than what I have been
used to in the past which made my practicing more structured and less erratic because I knew it
would need to be logged after the fact. This log is more reflective than a log that’s purpose is to
dictate my practicing because practicing is a day-to-day approach based on short-term needs,
rather than long-term goals. For example, solo repertoire priorities can be interfered by other
responsibilities related to orchestra, chamber music, and hired jobs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>focus (parameters: pitch, bowings, articulation, fingerings, shifts, rhythm, memorization, metronome)</th>
<th>section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/20/2015</td>
<td>pitch, articulation, shifts, metronome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/21/2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/22/2015</td>
<td>pitch, articulation, shifts, metronome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/23/2015</td>
<td>pitch, articulation, shifts, metronome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/24/2015</td>
<td>pitch, articulation, shifts, metronome</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10/25/2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/26/2015</td>
<td>pitch, articulation, shifts, metronome</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10/27/2015</td>
<td>pitch, articulation, shifts, metronome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/28/2015</td>
<td>fingerings, bowings</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/29/2015</td>
<td>listening; pitch, metronome, shifts</td>
<td>page 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/30/2015</td>
<td>listening; pitch, metronome, shifts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/31/2015</td>
<td>listening; pitch, metronome, shifts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following chart compares between three different recordings, a listening log. It is less
organized than the previous practice log. The listening log consists of my notes without
parameters. Since music is subjective, it contains my thoughts, opinions, and observations.

Below is a sample of those thoughts and opinions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>William Primrose/New Symphony Orchestra of London</th>
<th>Janos Starker/St. Louis Symphony</th>
<th>Hon-mei xiao/Budapest Philharmonic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perfect tempo; old recording; lacks some luster that Starker has; lots of precision; standard for all other interpretations; may be bias interpretation (?); uses his own cadenza</td>
<td>more mysterious; slower than I usually like; but sped up; cello!; completely different tone; has a sassy essence; also Hungarian; get’s difficult to hear in lower ranges</td>
<td>quickly paced; faster than I prefer; very clear tone;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These recordings helped me decide the pacing of my interpretation. I think recordings are always helpful to understand how each piece of any composition fits together. Usually, I do not listen to recordings. Ironically, I do not enjoy listening to viola music as much as other kinds of recordings. However, I may need to change my approach given that this process was very beneficial. Although my listening process probably will not include a journal. I do highly anticipate active listening.

Overall, I learned a lot about 20th century music and Bartok. All this background research helped me understand the essence of Bartok’s style, too. Everyone’s experience is different. As far as performing the piece, for me, all of that falls away. During an actual performance, even a dry run through, all of my attention is on technique and executing the performance. The history and influences become close to irrelevant.

Understanding the origins of any piece you play is an important part of knowing the piece, and doing proper preparation. There is an aspect of playing in a concert/recital that is completely independent of the preparation leading up to it. It is not as if I forgot everything I learned, but it had been absorbed up to that point. But for me, as soon as I walk on stage, there is a mental shift that can only be associated with performance. There is a moment before a recital when people say to themselves, just enjoy the music.
V. Bibliography


