

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
The Influence of Bach, Beethoven and Debussy on Béla Bartók's
Compositional Techniques

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Author Note

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Béla Bartók was a Hungarian pianist, teacher and collector of Eastern European and Middle Eastern folk music as well as being considered one of the greatest composers of the 20th century. With Bartók, as with virtually every composer, a lineage of influence can be traced of predecessors that inspired, provoked and propelled the composer. While this might be considered a continuation of tradition, Bartók transformed these influences into something uniquely personal.¹ Grout writes, “Bartók’s ideal was to express, in twentieth-century terms’ Bach’s texture of contrapuntal fullness, Beethoven’s art of thematic development, and Debussy’s discovery of the sonorous (as distinct from the functional) value of chords.”² When speaking to Serge Moreux, Bartok states, “Again and again I ask myself: Can one make a synthesis of these three (that is Bach, Beethoven, and Debussy) and make it a living one for the moderns?”³ Through research and scholarship, I intend to make the argument that indeed, Bartók was influenced by Bach, Beethoven, and Debussy in his compositional process expanding on each of these composers’ particular compositional techniques.

Almost every composer of the nineteenth century regarded Beethoven as a leader in the composition of romantic music, but his influence had suffered in the twentieth century due to the extreme reaction against the music of the romantic era. In an essay authored by Bartók, he states, “At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a turning point in the history of modern music. The excesses of the Romanticists began to be unbearable for many. There were composers who felt...this road does not lead us anywhere; there is no other solution but a

¹ Barbara Nissman, *Bartók and the Piano : A Performer's View*. Lanham, Md. : Oxford: Scarecrow, 2002, 199.

² Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*. 3d Ed. / with Claude V. Palisca.. ed. New York: Norton, 1980. 687

³ Todd Crow. *Bartók Studies*. Detroit Reprints in Music. Detroit, Mich: Information Coordinators, 1976. 93

complete break with the nineteenth century.”⁴ However, Bartók owed and admitted a direct allegiance to Beethoven. Bartok, speaking in his own words, presented his general feelings towards Beethoven saying “In my youth, my ideal of beauty was not so much the art of Bach or of Mozart as that of Beethoven.”⁵

An important method of Beethoven’s compositional technique is his expansive and imaginative treatment of short, elemental motivic ideas. On Bartok’s choice of thematic material, Stevens remarks that “Bartok’s themes are...chosen for their motivic richness and the possibilities of fragmentation and recombination...the methods are clearly Beethovenian.”⁶ At the opening of the first movement of *Beethoven’s String Quartet, op. 132*, the composer utilizes a short, four-note theme consisting of two sets of minor 2nds within a contour of a diminished 7th {fig. 1}. Within these two intervals lie the thematic, transitional, and development aspects of the entire movement {fig. 2a – 2c}.⁷ In Bartok’s string quartets, there lies similar motivic material. In the opening of his *String Quartet No. 4*, Bartók uses a four-note opening consisting of two sets of minor 2nd intervals within a contour of a diminished 7th {fig. 3}. Bartok uses this same double minor 2nd motif in the first 2 bars of string quartet no. 3 {fig. 4}. Throughout the Third Quartet, Bartók pulls development material from these intervallic elements.⁸

The structural designs of Beethoven’s late string quartets stem from the development of small motivic ideas. Through melodic contour, rhythm and/or intervallic relationships,

⁴ Béla Bartók, 'The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music', *Essays*, ed. Suchoff, 340

⁵ Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967 rev. ed.) 231-32

⁶ Stevens, 1967, 261

⁷ Frank Spinosa, *Beethoven And Bartok: A Comparative Study Of Motivic Techniques In The Later Beethoven Quartets And The Six String Quartets Of Bela Bartok* (Illinois: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1969), 30-31

⁸ Spinosa, 1969, 120-121

Beethoven uses these small motivic ideas resulting in a line of motivic-thematic generation in which there is continuous phrase development throughout the movements and even the entire quartet at times. Stevens remarks on Bartók's motivic design stating, "Characteristic throughout [the Bartók six quartets] is the motivic work—the construction of entire movements or of entire works from minute musical fragments, constantly varied, extended, transformed...[Bartók's] motives, frequently of two or three notes only, are in continuous state of regeneration. They grow organically; they proliferate; the evolutionary process is kinetic."⁹ The small motive used in the development of and construction of entire movements or whole works was common to both composers.

The use of motivic fragments as ostinato figures is another example of Beethoven's influence on Bartók. In *Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, op. 95*, the first five notes of the opening bar in mov. I {fig. 5} reoccur frequently as an ostinato in the Violin II, Viola and Cello parts throughout the movement {fig. 6a & b}. The same technique is found in the op. 132 of Beethoven using the minor 2nd motive found in figure 1 from mov. 5 as an ostinato later in the movement {fig. 7}.¹⁰ This same type of motivic use can be found in Bartók's *Fourth String Quartet* when the material found in the cello part in m. 7 of mov. I {fig. 8} can be found in the inner voices played in m. 59 as an ostinato {fig. 9}. *The Fifth String Quartet* of Bartók provides another example of this with the opening statement of a half-step intervallic relationship in mov. IV which is expanded into an ostinato figure for the cello and viola {fig. 10 a & b}.¹¹

⁹ Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967 rev. ed.) 173

¹⁰ Frank Spinosa, *Beethoven And Bartok: A Comparative Study Of Motivic Techniques In The Later Beethoven Quartets And The Six String Quartets Of Bela Bartok* (Illinois: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1969), 193

¹¹ Spinosa, 1969, 194

There is compelling evidence aside from that of thematic development which suggests Beethoven's influence on Bartók. Bartók's *Third Piano Concerto* draws many similarities to Beethoven's *String Quartet in A minor, op. 132*. In the second movement of the Third Piano Concerto, Bartók material is very similar to Beethoven's Op. 132 Moto Adagio movement {fig. 11a & b}.¹² Bónis writes about this relationship stating, "Bartók adopts not only the motive but, also, the method of construction, contrasting chorale-like homophonic parts with imitative ones."¹³ Another example of Beethoven's influence can be seen in the opening of Bartók's *Sixth String Quartet*. The similarities are striking when compared to the opening of Beethoven's *String Quartet, Op. 133*. Both pieces start on G, last for ten measures with a fermata separating the first ten measures from the next entrance. This is followed by two statements of the subject but are diminutions of the subject as it appears at the beginning {fig. 12a & b}.¹⁴

Several pieces of evidence suggest Bartók was influenced by the work of Beethoven. Through motivic development and similarities in composition, as well as from Bartók's own words, a picture is painted of a composer who admired his predecessor and used his compositional output to forge a meaningful path toward finding his own voice. Claude Debussy was a later influence on Bartók. Of Debussy, Bartók states, "Debussy's great service to music was to reawaken among all musicians an awareness of harmony and its possibilities. In that he was just as important as Beethoven who revealed to us the meaning of progressive form, and as Bach who showed us the transcendent significance of counterpoint."¹⁵

¹² Mark A. Radice, "Bartók's Parodies of Beethoven: The Relationship Between Opp. 131, 132 and 133 and Bartók's Sixth String Quartet and Third Piano Concerto," *Music Review* 42 (1981): 255.

¹³ Ferenc Bónis, "Quotations in Bartók's Music. A Contribution to Bartók's Psychology of Composition," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 5, no. 1/4 (1963): 369.

¹⁴ Radice, 1981, 256.

¹⁵ Serge Moreux, Béla Bartók. Paris: Richard-Masse, 1955.

Debussy's music was brought to the attention of Bartók at the instigation of Zoltán Kodály in 1907. Both Bartók and Debussy were fascinated by music outside the immediate European heritage: folk music, plainchant, the music of the Renaissance masters and Javanese music.¹⁶ There is mixed scholarship on the impact that Debussy had on Bartók's writing. Cross believes that although there are many points of contact between the musical languages of both composers including pentatonicism, modality and occasional whole-tone passages, "Bartók used these devices in an entirely personal manner and are not at all infused with Debussy's style as one would expect if they had been primarily the outcome of a study of his music."¹⁷ Nissman believes that the *Four Dirges, op. 9A* by Bartók "are pure Debussy, reflecting the French composer's unique approach to color and his individual concept of time and space."¹⁸ Nissman's scholarship on these two composers is where an attempt to make some connections between these two composers will start.

Indeed, when listened to side by side, the *Four Dirgis (Quatre nénies), op. 9A* of Bartók resembles the mood and aesthetic of Debussy's *Clair de lune* {fig. 13}. Nissman states, "from the first chords of the opening dirge, evoking memories of *Clair de lune*, Debussy's presence is overwhelming...there is no doubt that the impressionist's canvas was the model for these soundscapes and inspired the pianistic color and pedal effects by the performer."¹⁹ This piece reveals significant connections with Debussy's work, both with the use of a French title and

¹⁶ Anthony Cross, "Portrait of Debussy. 2: Debussy and Bartók," *The Musical Times* 108, no. 1488 (1967): 126-127. doi:10.2307/953925.

¹⁷ Cross, 1967, 127

¹⁸ Barbara Nissman, *Bartók and the Piano : A Performer's View*. Lanham, Md.: Oxford: Scarecrow, 2002, 200.

¹⁹ Nissman, 2002, 206

with the prominent use of pentatonic formations.²⁰ In several pieces from *Mikrokosmos*, the influence of Debussy is present as seen in *Divided Arpeggios* (143) which shows Debussy's color and pedaling technique from his *Twelve Etudes* of 1915 as well as *Minor Seconds, Major Sevenths* (144) which employs parallel chords reminiscent of Debussy's 'Pagodes' of *Estampes*. In Bartók's *Out of Doors* for piano, the impressionist fourth piece, *Musique Nocturnes*, incorporates several stylistic features of Debussy's Preludes for piano {fig. 14a & b}.²¹ Bartók's stylistic compositional qualities shifted after the introduction of Debussy's music in 1907. Whether this shift was specifically Debussy driven or whether it was the fact that both composers happen to cross paths musically with their interest in Hungarian peasant music, it is clear that Bartók appreciated Debussy's importance in composition and that Bartók's own compositions reflected that appreciation.

The influence of Debussy and Beethoven had a tangible effect on Bartók during different stages of his compositional output. Nissman states, "Whereas Liszt gave Bartók the necessary tools with which to craft his trade, Bach, Beethoven, and Debussy provided him with the musical models."²² In regard to the influence of J. S. Bach on Bartók, there is less scholarship on the influence of Bach on Bartók's compositional style than that of Beethoven and Debussy. Bartók, who had spoken about Bach in an interview from 1925, expresses that the music of J.S. Bach was to become a more and more favored point of reference that gradually emerged for Bartók. Referring to his chosen [influence] model in his comments by letter on Percy Grainger's

²⁰ Elliot Antokoletz, *The Music of Béla Bartók: A study of Tonality and Progression in Twentieth-Century Music*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984, 3

²¹ Benjamin Suchoff, *Béla Bartók : Life and Work*, Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2001, 106

²² Barbara Nissman, *Bartók and the Piano : A Performer's View*. Lanham, Md.: Oxford: Scarecrow, 2002, 200.

article "Melody versus Rhythm" published in the *Musical News*, Bartók writes,

"[...]I feel an equal justification for both kinds [Rhythm and Melody] and I consider the most perfect musical work that in which both kinds are blended. And this work, insofar as my knowledge and consciousness goes, is that of J. S. Bach."

This statement unmistakably shows what great importance Bartók assigned to the problem itself of a universal musical language that he, by then, seems to have exclusively acknowledged in J. S. Bach's music.²³ With Bartók's contribution to piano pedagogy with his edition of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, in so far as Bartók's knowledge and understanding of Bach's compositional output, he was certainly well versed in the music of J. S. Bach.

The first example of Bach's influence on Bartók's compositional technique can be seen in the composers' two-part canon writing. In Bach's chorale prelude, *Wir Christenleut*, the effect of the two-part canon is that of a hazy and indefinite tonality. In context, the canon at the opening of Bartók's *First Quartet* seems like that of Bach {fig. 15a & b}.²⁴ Next, the opening bars of Bartók's *Cantata Profana* for double mixed chorus, tenor and baritone soloists, and orchestra, written in 1930, were inspired by the beginning portion of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* {fig. 16a & b}.²⁵ Bartók was recognized as a master of the art of formal construction and a master of the art of counterpoint.²⁶ J.S. Bach was the supreme master of counterpoint and was widely respected in the field of the formal construction of form. Certainly, with this in mind, Bach's influence on Bartók was important to the composer.

²³ László Vikárius, "Béla Bartók's "Cantata Profana" (1930): A Reading of the Sources." *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 35, no. 1/3 (1993): 301

²⁴ Bernard Rands, "The Use of Canon in Bartók's Quartets," *The Music Review* 18 (1957): 185.

²⁵ Benjamin Suchoff, "Béla Bartók: The Master Musician," *Music Educators Journal* 68, no. 2 (1981): 37.

²⁶ Robin Hawthorne, "The Fugal Technique of Béla Bartók," *The Music Review* 10 (1949): 277

Counterpoint made its emphatic appearance in Bartók's compositional output as a reaction to the neoclassical tendency in 1926.²⁷ In Bartók's *Nine Little Piano Pieces*, Book I is comprised of a series of four contrapuntal exercises á la Bach, titled the *Four Dialogues*. These Dialogues, specifically the first canon {fig. 17}, can be compared to Bach's two- and three-part inventions. In Bartók's monumental piano work *Mikrokosmos*, there exists one clear piece of evidence suggesting Bach's influence on Bartók. As the title implies, *Hommage á J. S. Bach*, no. 79, adheres to many attributes of the music of J. S. Bach, composed in a clear contrapuntal style and reminiscent of the little preludes of Bach. Finally, Seiber suggests that Bartók's increased interest in Bach, which began in the 1920's, culminated in his *Sonata for Solo Violin* which shows clear evidence of Bach's influence on the composer. He states, "indeed it is difficult to imagine anyone writing a Solo Violin Sonata today without being conscious of the great example of Bach."²⁸ Bartok's whole career is a longing for counterpoint...his study of Bach helped him although it could not make up for the lack of a regular, carefully graded training in counterpoint.²⁹

With Bach, Debussy and Beethoven, Bartók found masters of particular compositional techniques which he exploited in his own way to create a canvas all his own, transforming his influences into something uniquely personal. Whether the counterpoint techniques he was so admired for came strictly from Bach, the thematic development techniques strictly from Beethoven or the use of pentatonic, modal and whole-tone formations found in his music

²⁷ László Vikárius, "Bartók's Late Adventures with 'Kontrapunkt'," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47, no. 3/4 (2006): 400.

²⁸ Mátyás Seiber, "Béla Bartók's Chamber Music." *Tempo*, no. 13 (1949): 30.

²⁹ László Vikárius, "Bartók's Late Adventures with 'Kontrapunkt'," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47, no. 3/4 (2006): 410.

strictly from Debussy is in the eye of the beholder. Through scholarship in this essay, a convincing argument has been made to suggest that all three of these composers had some influence on Bartók. From Bartók himself

“I must state that all my music is determined by instinct and sensibility; no one need ask me why I wrote this or that or did something in this rather than in that way. I could not give any explanation other than I felt this way, or I wrote it down this way...this attitude does not mean that I composed without set plans and without sufficient control. The plans were concerned with the spirit of the new work...all more or less instinctively felt.”³⁰

The metaphor of dwarfs ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ expresses the true meaning of what it is to be a composer...discovering truth by building on previous discoveries. Béla Bartók found that truth and now his shoulders are the shoulders of a giant.

³⁰ Barbara Nissman, *Bartók and the Piano : A Performer's View*. Lanham, Md.: Oxford: Scarecrow, 2002, 1.

FIGURES – Music Examples

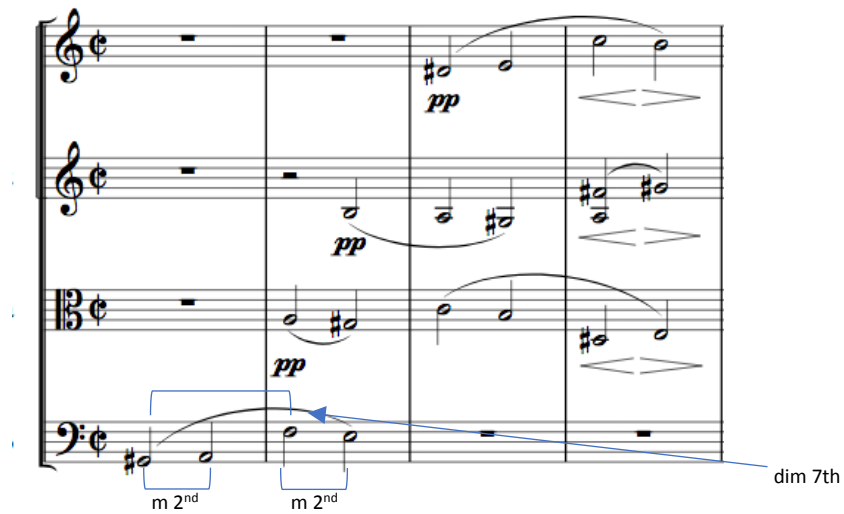


Fig. 1 – Beethoven *String Quartet, Op. 32, mov. I*, mm. 1-4.



Fig. 2a – Beethoven *String Quartet, Op. 132, mov. I*, mm. 9-10. {violin I treble clef}

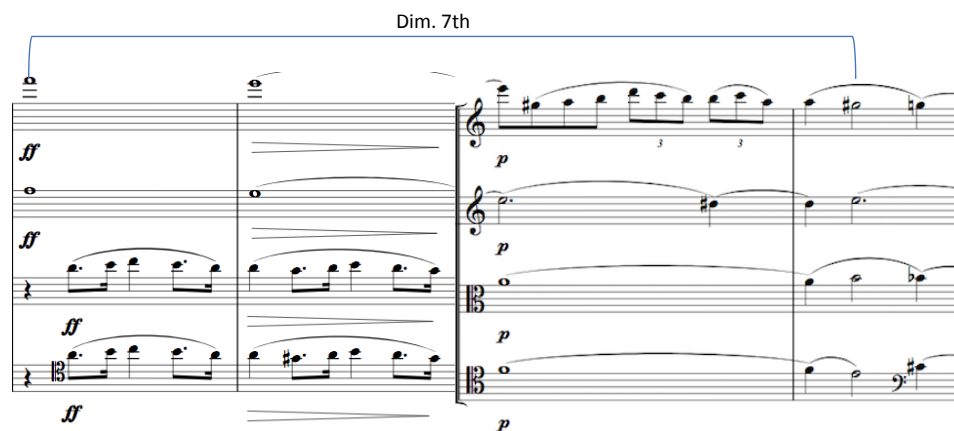


Fig. 2b – Beethoven *String Quartet, Op. 132, mov. I*, mm. 247-250. {Standard String quartet clefs}

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Fig. 2c – Beethoven *String Quartet, Op. 132, mov. IV*, mm. 40-44. {treble clef}Fig. 3 – Bartok *String Quartet No. 4, mov. I*, mm. 1-2.Fig. 4 – Bartok *String Quartet No. 3, mov. I*, mm. 1-2 The interval between the two notes in the cello and the interval between the viola and the violin II consist of two minor 2nd



Fig. 5 – Beethoven *String Quartet, Op. 95*, mov. I, m. 1.



Fig. 6a – Example of fig. 5 as an ostinato figure played by the viola in op. 95, mov. I. {alto clef}



Fig. 6b – Example of fig. 5 as a quasi-ostinato figure played by the violin II and Viola in op. 95, mov. I. {treble & alto clef}



Fig. 7 – Beethoven *String Quartet, op. 132*, mov. V – an example of the violin II using the material from fig. 1 as an ostinato. Using the interval of a m 2nd. {treble clef}



Fig. 8 – Bartok *Fourth String Quartet, mov. I*. The cello part in m. 7. {bass clef}



Fig. 9 – Bartok *Fourth String Quartet*, mov. I. Material from figure 8 being used as an ostinato figure. {violin I & II treble clef}



Fig. 10a – Bartok *Fifth String Quartet*, mov. IV, m. 1-2. {violin I treble clef}



Fig. 10b – Bartok *Fifth String Quartet*, mov. IV, mm. 64-66 – an ostinato figure expanded out of the material in figure 10a.

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Violin 1
sotto voce
cresc.
p

Violin 2
sotto voce
cresc.
p

Viola
sotto voce
cresc.
p

Cello
sotto voce
cresc.
p

Fig. 11a – Beethoven *String quartet, Op. 132, Molto Adagio.*

Adagio religioso $\text{♩} = 60$

Clarinetto I in Bb
pp

Violini I div.
pp

Violini II
pp

Viola
pp

Violoncelli
pp

Clar. I in Bb
pp

Pf.
p molto espr, legato

Viol. I div.
pp

Viol. II
pp

Viola
pp

Vo.
pp

12
muto in A
20
div.
pp

Fig. 11b – Bartok *Third Piano Concerto, adagio religioso*

Overtura.
Allegro.

Violino I.
Violino II.
Viola.
Violoncello.

meno mosso e moderato.
Allegro.

Fig. 12a – Beethoven *String Quartet, Op. 133*, First several bars of mov. 1.

meno mosso, pesante
ca. 70

Violino I
Violino II
Viola
Violoncello

cresc.
cresc.
cresc.
cresc.

(lungo)
p, leggero
20'

IV.

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Fig. 12b – Bartok *Sixth String Quartet*, First several bars of mov. 1.

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Fig. 13a – Bartok's *Four Dirges*, op. 9A, No. 1. The opening few measures.Fig. 13b – Debussy's *Clair de lune*. The opening few measures.

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Fig. 14a – Excerpt from Bartok's *Musique Nocturnes from Out of Doors*.



Fig. 14b – Excerpt from Debussy's *Piano Preludes, X*.



Fig. 15a – J. S. Bach. Opening of Chorale Prelude 'Wir Christenleut'.

Fig. 15b – Béla Bartók. Opening of *First String Quartet*.

This image shows the opening measures of J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion, specifically the 'Erster Teil' (First Part). It is a large-scale work for choir and instruments. The score is in G major, 4/4 time. The top staff is for the Soprano voice, and the bottom staff is for the Bass voice. The middle staves are for the instruments. The music is marked 'Coro I.H.' and 'Erster Teil.' The tempo is 'Lento'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 16a – J. S. Bach. Opening measures of *St. Matthew Passion*.

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79

Calmo, $\text{♩} = 69$

mf, legato

mp

The musical score for the opening of Bartok's Mikrokosmos, no. 79, is presented in two systems. The first system is marked 'mf, legato' and the second system is marked 'mp'. The tempo is 'Calmo' (69 bpm). The score is in 3/4 time, key of D major, and features a piano introduction with a treble and bass staff. The treble staff has a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the bass staff has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Fig. 18 – Opening of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*, no. 79.

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