

Bartók, the Chinese Composer

By Bright Sheng

In a time when the technologies of jet travel, computers, the Internet, television, telephone and fax communications have virtually placed the world at our fingertips, when “world music” (whatever that means) is “in”, it seems out of fashion for composers to even mention the centuries old concept of utilizing folk materials in their works. It seems almost naïve, if not narrow minded, to still explore folk cultures and try to reflect such a study compositionally.

Yet vernacular music has always been an integral part of a composers’ inspiration since the dawn of Western classical music. From the earliest known composed music of the *trouvères* songs of the Middle Ages, the *frottola* songs of the Renaissance, through early composers like Josquin, Monteverdi and Lassus to the twentieth century, nearly every important composer has been greatly influenced by the folk music of their time. And, in one way or another, they have all bowed or paid significant respect to folk music in their works.

Then, at the turn of the twentieth century, there came Béla Bartók. While most of the composers before him used folk materials for various purposes (exoticism, lyricism, nationalism) for their works¹, Bartók is to the contrary. Often, his compositions are manifestations of the true beauty of folk music. In his music we hear “unrefined,” “raw” peasant songs alongside the “high art” classical music, a coexistent quality obvious even in his most lyrical passages. We thus realize that folk music is as beautiful and exciting as “art” music. One does not borrow from the other.

This achievement was not accomplished easily, even for Bartók. Like many composers in similar crisis at the time, Bartók also felt the excesses of the Romanticism unbearable. Though already a highly esteemed musician, he was unsatisfied with his early compositions. Almost by chance, he discovered the peasant music of his native country. Fascinated by it, he soon began the undertaking which turned out to be his passion for life—collecting and classifying thousands of folk songs from Hungary and other countries of the Magyar, Romanian, Slovakian and other peoples. He traveled in rural areas for lengthy periods, as he believed the effects of folk music cannot be deep and permanent unless studied as part of a life shared with the peasants. As an outcome of this devotion and painstaking work, Bartók the composer saw an “invaluable rejuvenation” (as he described), to be gained from the folk music, as oppose to the complete break with the tonal system adopted by Schönberg and his disciples.

Bartók believed there are different levels in utilizing folk music in a composition. One is to write an accompaniment to a folk melody unchanged or

¹ One of such example is the “Dumky Trio” (op. 90) by Dvorák. *Dumky* is the plural form of *Dumka*, a type of folk music (usually a melancholy lament) of Ukrainian origin taken up in Poland and Bohemia in the nineteenth century.

slight modified, though the accompaniment should be of secondary importance and should “only serve as an ornamental setting for the precious stone: the peasant melody.” The next level is the opposite: the folk melody only serves as a “motto” on which the work is built. As a result, the character of the finished product takes on real importance. In both cases it is vital to derive the idiomatic character from the folk music so that the work has a unity. A simple melody brings freedom to treatment; the simpler the melody the more complex and dissonant the harmonization may go well with it.

Bartók also saw no true difference if the composer creates his own imitation of folk music, or even works with no trace of real or imitated folk materials but pervaded by the spirit and atmosphere of folk music. He considered the latter the ultimate goal—the composer has totally absorbed the folk music quality, and so, like a poet, he has completely mastered his mother tongue.

It is extremely important, too, to recognize that Bartók’s achievement was also built on his profound understanding of the classical musical tradition before him. As one of the finest pianists of his time, he possessed a most insightful view of the classical repertoire, which he shared with concert audiences and students worldwide for many decades. In his letters and articles we learn of his perceptive knowledge of the past. Above all, in his music we hear a tight bond to the German-Austrian tradition. “Work, study, work, study, and a third time work and study: thus we can get somewhere,” he once wrote.

His vision, however, was not obtained nor shared by his contemporary Hungarian composers, with the notable exception of Zoltán Kodály. “Why do we need more Hungarian music if we already have Liszt?” they asked. “Maybe Bartók could not write original tunes.” Bartók, like many great composers before him, held his head high and followed his own path honestly, and was rewarded handsomely. Through his music, the world learned about the true nature of Hungarian folk music: beautiful, but “primitive” and “savage” as well. The concept of Hungarian music was forever changed.

This is nationalism in its truest sense. It is why Bartók’s music has such strong resonance in the music of some Chinese composers like myself. It is the spirit of his approach to composition and the essence of his deep understanding of both the folk and classical tradition that I find meaningful. This goes beyond the immediately apparent similarities—such as the pentatonic scale—shared by Hungarian and Chinese folk traditions. It is true that most Chinese folk music, like some Hungarian folk songs, was based on five fundamental (“pentatonic”) tones. In practice, however, each fundamental tone is often modified and embellished by its adjacent semitones. So in a real sense Chinese music has never been pentatonic.

As in Bartók’s time and place, the tradition of folk music is fading away quickly in China and its real value and beauty are largely unknown and underappreciated both inside and outside China’s boundaries. Bartók might be out of fashion. But especially in a time the world is getting smaller by the second, we may benefit greatly from his approach to music. A true musical fusion can only happen at its deepest level when both elements retain their original qualities, and when the

composer possesses the most profound understanding and knowledge of both cultures. Thus the music of earth never dies.

In 1986, after centuries' searching, ethnographers found near Urumchi, the capital of Xinjiang province in the northwest of China, a small ethnic group of nine thousand called Ugars, whom they believed to be the ancestry of the Hungarian people. Two significant findings convinced the scholars: the objects they excavated from the twelve hundred graves nearby are identical to those found in ninth and tenth century Hungarian cemeteries, and the seventy-three pentatonic folk songs of the Ugars are the same as those known as Hungarian folk songs, the songs made world famous by Béla Bartók.

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