

*Béla Bartók: A Portrait of His Personality Drawn
from His Letters*

Otto Deri

Edited, with an Introduction, by Neal Zaslaw

This article was originally written for *Light Motifs*, a mimeographed publication of the Friends of Music at the City College of New York. It appeared in three installments in Volume 2, Numbers 1, 2, and 3 (March, April, and May, 1963). While no substantive changes have been made in the version below, several minor emendations have been incorporated to conform with *Current Musicology's* editorial style. The translations from Bartók's letters were made from two collections, where they may easily be located by date:

Bartók Béla—Levelek, fényképek, kéziratok, kották [Béla Bartók: letters, photographs, manuscripts, facsimiles], edited by János Demény (Budapest, 1948).

Bartók Béla levelei—Az utolsó két év gyűjtése [Béla Bartók's letters, collection of the last two years], edited by János Demény (Budapest, 1951).

Many of the letters in these two volumes are also to be found in several more recent Hungarian publications. (In some of these, however, certain politically sensitive passages have been suppressed.) Several of the letters are also available in German translations. For English-language readers this article offers the double reward of a well-translated sampling of Bartók's fine prose style and the sympathetic commentary of Bartók's compatriot Deri. Deri's interest in Bartók was of long standing, and it was merely reinforced by their common plight: emigration to the United States to escape the Nazis. One outcome of that sympathetic link between the two Hungarian musicians was the forty pages devoted to Bartók in Deri's book, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music* (New York, 1968). The appearance of this work in the last year of Otto Deri's life provides us with a final, unhappy parallel between him and Bartók: each was taken from us in the midst of a productive career.

N.Z.

Preface

Today Béla Bartók is acknowledged by the music world as one of the foremost composers of this century. Although his music is reaching an ever larger circle of listeners in this country, little is known about Bartók himself. The articles about him that have been published in English deal mostly with his music and are too technical for the layman. The present writer, a compatriot of the composer, therefore feels that a picture of Bartók, the man, would be of general interest. Two volumes of his letters published in Hungarian in 1948 and 1951 provide especially appropriate source material for this study.

In order to present a meaningful picture of a great man, it is not enough to

describe his personal characteristics, his preferences and dislikes, or the mere outward events of his life. The special task of a biography is, as Goethe wrote in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, "to present the man in relation to his times, and to show how far—as a whole—they are opposed to him, how far they are favorable to him, and how, if he is an artist, he reflects them outwardly."

In view of the limitations of space and material, this article cannot pretend to be a biography of the composer. The letters under consideration, some 300 in all, by no means cover every period of Bartók's life. The aim of this study is, in accordance with Goethe's criteria for a biography, to acquaint the reader with Bartók as seen in the context of the particular political and social milieu into which he was born and to which he had to adjust. His family background and his early years—both important shaping forces in his development—have also been taken into account. His works have not been considered, nor his musical growth, except for its role in the development of his personality.

Family Background and Early Experiences

Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sînnicolaul-Mare, a small community in Rumania), situated in an area where four languages were spoken (Hungarian, German, Serbian, and Rumanian). The family later moved to Nagyszöllös (Winogrado, now part of the Soviet Union), from there to Beszterce (Bistrița, now Rumanian), and in 1893 to Pozsony (Pressburg, later renamed Bratislava and now in Czechoslovakia). In Bartók's childhood all these localities belonged to Hungary and were within the framework of that large political unit called the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The area was alive with national and cultural aspirations and with the tensions arising from them. The bitterness and dissatisfaction felt by the Hungarians against the iron rule of the Hapsburgs had been smoldering for a long time before Bartók was born. It reached a climax in the War of Independence of 1848, when the Hungarians rose under Kossuth's leadership and attempted to cast off Austrian rule. After two years of fighting, the Austrians won the war with Russian help. Kossuth found refuge first in Turkey and later in the United States. The thirteen leading generals of the Hungarian Army were executed, and a reign of terror followed, which lasted more than a decade. In 1867 a reconciliation took place, but in spite of this the Hungarians still felt that Emperor Franz Josef was partial to Austria and derelict in his duty as King of Hungary. He spent no time in Hungary and did not care to learn Hungarian. A special grievance of the Hungarians was that the language of the Austro-Hungarian army was *German* even in the specifically Hungarian divisions (references to this are found in Bartók's letters).

Other countries of the Empire (Rumania, Serbia, Bohemia, etc.) were also seething with unrest, and an especially intense antagonism existed between Hungary and Rumania. The murder of the Archduke in 1914 in Serbia, which precipitated the First World War, rounded out the sequence of events.

This was the political climate into which Bartók was born, and we can understand, in the light of this background, why his first composition, written at the age of eleven, already dealt with geographical realities and was entitled *The Stream of the Danube*. It is of almost symbolic significance that the young Bartók attempted in this first work to integrate austere German melodies with light Austrian tunes. These are followed by Hungarian folk-songs signaling the entrance of the Danube into Hungary at Deveny; Rumanian and Bulgarian tunes later represent the course of the Danube through these countries on the way to her final destination in the Black Sea.

More will be said later about Bartók's early, intense patriotic feelings, but first a picture of his family environment and the history of his early years should be given. These facts emerge partly from his short autobiography and from a brief biography written by his mother. Bartók's parents were both musical. His mother was a schoolteacher and also gave piano instruction. His father—director of an agricultural school—was an amateur musician, played several instruments, and organized an orchestra in Bartók's native community.

Bartók's first years were greatly influenced by a most unfortunate event: at the age of three months a smallpox inoculation caused an allergic condition, resulting in a painful skin disease. This skin condition, diagnosed as contagious, lasted five years and caused Bartók great physical and mental suffering. It meant complete isolation from other children of his age and probably had a decisive influence on his character development. The complete loss of all outside contact must have been responsible also for the extremely close relationship that developed between him and his mother.

According to his mother's biography, Bartók was always a very serious and quiet child, who kept away from the games and other physical activities of his playmates, even after his recovery. At the age of seven, Bartók was cast into still deeper gloom by the death of his father. To the widow now fell the task of bringing up young Béla and his sister Elsi, four years his junior.

Bartók received his first piano instruction from his mother; his lessons started when he was five. Three years later his instructor in Nagyszőlőses foresaw a brilliant future for the young boy. Systematic musical studies, however, were begun only in Pozsony under the guidance of a very competent teacher. After graduation from high school Bartók continued his studies at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest. This separation from his mother in 1899 gave rise to an intensive correspondence between mother and son, revealing their devoted relationship. Through this correspondence we gain a picture of Bartók as a young student at the Academy and learn about his first experiences away from home.

His first year of study was interrupted by an attack of tuberculosis. Complete rest and great caution were required, as reflected in the anxious tone of his mother's letters. Bartók suffered mostly because he was required to be separated from his piano. At the end of three months, however, he had recovered completely.

Bartók was slow to make new friends in the noisy capital and attempted to share everything, even his musical experiences, with his mother. A letter dated February 18, 1900, illuminates this close relationship:

Last week I studied the score of *Rheingold*. I found many interesting things which I had never seen before. It is scored for a great number of instruments: 1 small flute, 3 large flutes, 3 oboes, 1 English horn, 3 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet

After describing the complete score he continues:

In some instances there were more than 30 lines in the score. (I really don't know whether all this interests you.) Incidentally, I was told that this is really nothing; Professor Szabe has score paper with 60 lines, because he is using so many instruments.—The cake was good.—Next week I shall write two post cards, and a letter will be due on the following Monday.

Melodies are frequently jotted down in his letters, sometimes in the form of a musical quiz. In one of his early letters he constructs a puzzle out of the Ring motive from Wagner's tetralogy. At other times he gives his mother and sister the task of finding the texts of Hungarian folk songs, the melodies of which he gives in the correspondence.

The smallest details of his finances are frequently recurrent topics. The following excerpt is from a letter dated March, 1903:

Something prosaic: You told me already at Christmas that my pants and shoes are torn. I have worn them up to now—and I have only just bought new ones for six forints.

He writes to his mother in the same year about the reaction of his friends to one of his first compositions:

One person found that it sounds like Strauss; Professor Thoman said it has a Brahmsian flavor; Dohnanyi said it sounds like modernized Tchaikowsky—somebody else again heard Wagner's influence. That shows that nobody was right. The fact is that it has its oddities. For example, it starts with the following chord:



Isn't it beautiful?

We learn from Bartók's autobiography that by the time he came to Budapest he had acquired a fairly thorough knowledge of music from Bach to Brahms. At the Academy he studied Wagner and Liszt. He later wrote that

at that time he had still not grasped “Liszt’s true significance for the development of modern music.”

The next important influence was, according to the biography, that of Richard Strauss. Bartók states:

. . . I was roused as by a bolt of lightning by the first performance of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in Budapest (1902); . . . it filled me with the greatest enthusiasm.

Letters to his mother from 1903 tell us that he had memorized the *Heldenleben* in piano arrangement and amazed his professors and colleagues by performing it from memory. This feat brought him his first appearance abroad. He was invited to repeat the performance of *Heldenleben* in Vienna and won the acclaim of Hanslick and other reviewers. Hanslick said, according to Bartók:

By all means he must be a musical genius; it is a pity, however, that he specializes in Strauss.

The Strauss spell did not last long, however, and after a period of renewed study of Liszt and Debussy there is no evidence, either in the autobiography or the letters, that Bartók concentrated on the study of any single composer. He had now become a composer in his own right.

At the same time he became deeply interested in Hungarian peasant music, which had a decisive influence on his musical development. If the question is raised as to the motivation that started Bartók on his search for the half-forgotten Hungarian peasant music, the answer is indicated in his letters of the time. Their main theme is an intensely patriotic feeling and a complete identification with everything genuinely Hungarian. It is only natural that, as a musician, he focused his attention on the investigation of true Hungarian music.

Nationalism

The strength of Bartók’s pro-Hungarian and anti-Hapsburg feelings is revealed by his Kossuth Symphony, written in 1903. A tone poem along the lines of the Straussian models, its ten-part story was also written by Bartók. The work starts with a characterization of Kossuth, sounding a warning of the danger menacing the country. The warning is followed by a call to arms. A sinister theme, played by the bass clarinet, symbolizes the tyranny of the Hapsburgs. Later the distorted version of the Austrian National Anthem signals the death-struggle resulting in national catastrophe. The country mourns; but even mourning is banned, and therefore the motto of the last section is “Everything is quiet. . . .”¹

Bartók’s opposition to the Hapsburg regime is also reflected in a letter from the same year. He writes to his mother:

Do you know why the opposition is struggling and filibustering in the parliament? The issue is whether it should remain Austro-German, as

the situation shamefully existed before, or whether our army should be Hungarian from now on. At last the opposition grew tired of the endless empty promises of the Government. . . . The ministers dare only defend the status quo because He who is called the King of Hungary wishes it so. As things stand, there is really no Hungarian King. Only a Hungarian can be the King of Hungary. . . . God save the Hungarians and save them from the Hapsburg family. Unfortunately, even God is unable to carry out my second wish. . . .

In another letter, also from 1903, he wrote even more bitterly:

The present conditions dangerously resemble the situation that existed before 1848. The Hungarians have awakened from their inertia and are demanding their rights. The Croats, too, are revolting, and the most wise Secretary of War is issuing the most stupid decrees, stirring up the situation even more. And the good Hungarian King! The constitutional King. He dares to state that it is his privilege to decide what should be the language of command in the Hungarian Army. A Hapsburg as a constitutional King amounts to an iron ring made out of wood.² A Hapsburg does not have the least understanding, and even a feeble-minded person's insight is superior to his.

A few months later he wrote to his mother:

In case you should meet Rigele, tell him not to invite the Archduke. I am not going to play for such bribing, criminal murderers.

His complete dedication to his country is summed up in a letter (September 8, 1903) to his mother:

It will be the downfall of the nation that every single Hungarian is so completely indifferent with regard to everything Hungarian. . . . We are sinning, all the time, in everyday life, in every small matter against the Hungarian nation, because we don't care whether somebody speaks Hungarian; neither does it matter *how he uses* our only and beautiful language. . . . It is imperative that every youth, when he reaches maturity, should decide for what ideal he wants to struggle. . . . *As far as I am concerned I shall serve but one purpose in my whole life with all means at my disposal: the best interest of the Hungarian nation.*

Unfortunately, even in my own home there are many things which ought to be corrected. I was sad to see during my last stay at home, that even you and my sister were committing the above-mentioned sins. Do speak Hungarian among yourselves!!! It would be terribly embarrassing for me if you, visiting me, were to address me in German in the presence of my friends, who are familiar with my way of thinking. They would think I am only giving lip-service to that cause. . . .

It would be very sad, indeed, if those who are closest to me were not to cooperate.³

This letter throws light on the fact that the source of this strong patriotic feeling was not his home environment. An almost childish chauvinism is shown in a letter (1905) from Paris in which he reported with satisfaction that

he could find all the major Hungarian newspapers at the newsstands and added that it gave him pleasure to see that Rumanian, Croatian, and Polish papers were not available.

It is quite logical, as has been said before, that a composer who dedicated himself as ardently to the Hungarian cause as did Bartók should investigate its greatest treasure for a musician: its almost forgotten peasant music. Bartók soon became aware of the fact that the pseudo-Hungarian music that inspired Brahms and Liszt to write "Hungarian" rhapsodies and dances was very different from the old, genuine Hungarian folk music. The only way to find this treasure was to travel to remote parts of the country, where this music still lived, and to obtain first-hand knowledge of it. Thus resulted Bartók's famous folk music expeditions, first to many parts of Hungary and later to Rumania, Slovakia, and as far as Turkey and North Africa. In addition to his creative genius Bartók had the searching and analytical mind of a scientist. As a result of these trips and studies, a monograph was published on Hungarian folk music and, many years later, a book on Serbo-Croatian folk songs.⁴ Both works are models of methodology and analysis and are considered basic studies in the field of folk music research.

The other result of these travels was the effect of this music on Bartók the composer. He completely assimilated the folk idiom, so that it became his musical mother tongue, in contrast to composers who used folk songs merely as fertilizer for their own melodic invention. Bartók succeeded in creating a unique style by integrating this folk idiom with other elements of contemporary European musical developments.

Humanism

The moment when Bartók extended his trips beyond the geographical boundaries of Hungary was a highly significant one, marking a new phase in his maturation. The early, strongly nationalistic feeling gave way to a deep humanistic attitude. He realized that folk music of all nations is an international treasure, and that it has the power to unite all nations. He frequently emphasized that he had never found a folk song in which the words expressed hatred or hostility toward other nations. Bartók maintained that common people, as a rule, felt friendly toward other countries, and that hostilities were created by the ruling circles. In view of Bartók's past, it seems almost paradoxical that after publishing some Rumanian folk music he was accused in chauvinistic quarters of being a traitor. Bartók himself never belonged to any political party. He probably sensed that politics always implied compromising truth and freedom, so that he had to remain in isolation.

As Bartók matured he became increasingly aware of the cultural weakness of the Hungarian "intelligentsia." He wrote to a childhood friend in 1905:

The Hungarian middle class has no sensitivity with regard to national art. There is nothing to be done with the concert audience in Budapest.

Increasing bitterness was indicated in a letter written two years later to his mother:

With the Hungarian fools—I refer to the concert audiences—I shall not struggle any more. Let them drown in their own *Merry Widows* and other operettas. It seems to me that every serious cultural production has to be taken abroad.

As he realized that he had nothing in common with the group to which he belonged by birth and by education, and also that there was no other group with which he could identify himself, he was more and more overcome by loneliness. He wrote to his mother from Paris in 1905:

In spite of the fact that I have meals with a dozen people—Cubans, North and South Americans, Spaniards, etc., in spite of the excursions with Germans and Turks, I still feel lonely. Although I am aware that I have friends in Budapest and Vienna, I have, nevertheless, suddenly realized that I am completely alone. I know it, I can foretell it: this intellectual loneliness will be my fate. I am looking and searching for an ideal companion, but I know very well that it is futile. Even if I should find somebody, I know that, after a while, disappointment will follow.

Although resignation seems to be in complete contrast to the above-mentioned searching, little by little I acquiesce in the thought that there can be no other solution. As a consolation I can offer this to others: one has to rise mentally to a height whence one can view conditions with a quiet detachment and complete indifference. It is extremely difficult to do this. However, to acquire this ability is the greatest triumph we can have over ourselves and over everything. I have felt temporarily that I have reached this height, but this feeling has been followed many times by struggle and defeat. When will I succeed in remaining on top?

The same feeling was expressed again two years later in a letter to Stefi Geyer, a concert violinist:

After having finished your letter, I have the sad feeling that I shall have no other consolation in my life but music.

One is reminded by these letters of Beethoven's thoughts, which he expressed in a letter to his friend Wegeler in 1805: "Resignation! What a wretched refuge and yet the only one open to me;" and also, in his journals in 1812: "For thee there is no longer happiness except in thyself, in thy art."

There are many parallels between the struggles of Beethoven and Bartók; an important difference is, however, that Bartók found considerable happiness in his family life. He married twice and had a son by each marriage. The first marriage ended in divorce, when Bartók fell deeply in love with a former student, Ditta Pásztory. The second marriage took place in 1923. The fact that his second wife was a concert pianist inspired Bartók to compose the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, a work they performed frequently on European and American concert tours.

The happiness of his immediate environment, however, did not change Bartók's feelings of loneliness and isolation. His strong craving to identify himself with a larger group than his microcosm held remained unfulfilled.

This fact must be viewed against the stratification of Hungarian society. As already pointed out, Bartók's own class, the Hungarian bourgeoisie, was alien to him both culturally and ideologically.

The Hungarian peasant, on the other hand, had for hundreds of years lived an almost animal-like existence under Hungary's feudal system, and while Bartók was strongly drawn to their cultural heritage, he could not consider this group as his own.

The remaining group, the aristocracy, was alien to him for two reasons: the idea that a person or a group could have privileges gained only by birth seemed absurd to Bartók; and the Hungarian aristocracy, with its German orientation and its affected mode of living, repelled him. A letter of 1906 reports a meeting with the Countess de Hoyes:

The most gracious Countess de Hoyes, offspring of members of the Imperial Secret Council, has arrived . . . The barbaric Hungarian conversation gave way to the mellifluous Teuton idiom. . . . The Countess is as cold as the Franz Josef Land [in the Arctic Ocean] at Christmas time. The blood freezes in our veins when we see and hear her. English etiquette is strictly followed at meals. However, I like dissonances, and just for the fun of it I appeared in my sport shirt and worn shoes in this formal atmosphere.

The structure of Hungarian society being what it was, Bartók was fated to remain in isolation. He looked in vain for a group with ethical and cultural values similar to his own.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was a hard blow for this man who had always hoped for understanding between all peoples. There are few letters left from 1914–19, but the words uttered by Beethoven in 1809:

What a disturbing wild life all around me, nothing but drums, cannons, men, misery of all sorts . . .

could have been written by Bartók a hundred years later.

In 1919, for the first time, Bartók thought of leaving Hungary. The idea was expressed in a letter to his mother:

I am waiting and waiting; one cannot move. I have already tried to investigate various possibilities in three foreign countries. Although I could make a living here, I could not work as I would like to for at least ten more years. . . . Everything is disintegrating . . . and the best are persecuted.

There are few letters dated from the next decade. Bartók concertized extensively during these years; he toured the United States and Soviet Russia and also visited Turkey to collect folk songs.

The rise of fascism and the weak efforts of the League of Nations filled Bartók with bitterness. A letter from Geneva in 1931 to his mother described vividly the futility and inertia of the actions of that world organization, whose task it was to prevent war:⁵

The following topics were discussed: An English poet (*poeta laureatus*) was complaining bitterly that too few poems are recited in public and that, even when it is done, it is done badly. Valéry added that the reason is that this subject is taught badly in schools. A resolution was made that the radio stations should be asked to have more poems recited on their programs and that an effort should be made to keep these recitals on a high level. (This will have no practical results.)

Another resolution was to urge the movie industry that at every performance, in addition to the main feature, an educational film should be shown. (They will ignore our resolution and will continue to play what brings in more profit.)

It was very amusing how one speaker reacted to the next. All started out expressing their immense pleasure and deep satisfaction with the ideas of the previous speaker. Then it turned out that these ideas had to be changed slightly, or that they could not be carried out or that they were downright wrong. Finally it slowly emerged that nothing the previous speaker had said was any good. Courtesy, however, is the most important thing.

The topic of fascism, which represented the antithesis of everything in which Bartók believed, gained importance gradually in the letters. He wrote to a friend in 1937:

Originally we intended to go to Italy (the Dolomites), but my hatred for Italy has been so intense of late that I am simply unable to set foot on the soil of that country. This might seem to be an exaggerated viewpoint, but I would like not to be disturbed, at least during my vacation, by Italian aggressiveness.⁶

I was told, however, that the Nazi poison has already penetrated into Austria, but at least there it is not so much in evidence.

A few weeks later, after Austria's incorporation into Nazi Germany, Bartók wrote a significant letter (dated April 13, 1938) to a friend, a Mrs. Muller, in Basel:

Those days, when Austria was being overrun, were horrible for us I would like to add one more thing that is terrible for us: that is, the immediate danger that Hungary will capitulate to that criminal regime. The question is only: When? How I could live and work (which amounts to the same) in such a country, I cannot imagine. My duty really would be to emigrate as long as it remained possible. . . . Unfortunately, in Hungary almost every "Christian" cultured individual is in sympathy with the Nazi system. I am really ashamed that by birth I belong to that class.

My position personally is quite bad, because both my publishing company⁷ and the A.K.M.⁸ have been Nazified and the executives simply thrown out. . . . Yesterday I received the infamous questionnaires, asking for information about my grandfathers, etc. They contained such questions as: "Are you German, or do you belong to related races, or are you non-Aryan?" Naturally neither Kodály nor I will fill

out these blanks. Our standpoint is that such questionnaires are illegal and lawless. (In a way I am sorry that we did not fill out the forms, because in answering the questions we could have made good jokes. We could have stated that we are “non-Aryans” because, in the final analysis, and also according to the dictionary, Aryan means Indo-European. We Hungarians are Finno-Urgic, that is, non-European, and consequently non-Aryans. To another question: “When and where were you wounded?” I would answer: “On March 11, 12, 13, 1938, in Austria.”)⁹

In that same year Bartók banned the performance of his works in all Nazi countries.

A letter of October 1938 shows the keen perception with which Bartók followed world events. He gives in this letter a detailed analysis of the Hitler-Chamberlain meeting and of the resulting appeasement in Munich. He adds:

Thus the influence of this system [Nazi] of lies will spread more in Europe. One has to go somewhere, but where? I live even more withdrawn—if that is possible. I don’t feel like seeing people; everybody who lives is potentially a Nazi. . . . It is a painful situation. . . . I would like to finish my work before the imminent world catastrophe.

The course of European events of the next few years is reflected in a letter of April 1940 to Mrs. Muller:

I don’t have to tell you how everything else affects me. I feel unable to write letters filled with complaints; on the other hand, I don’t approve of a “keep smiling” attitude either. What a dilemma. . . .

A few months later he wrote to a friend:

As a result of the events I cannot compose. . . . Only Wotan (and his earthly ruler) knows what the future will bring.

Finally the day came (October 12, 1940) when Bartók, in his sixtieth year, left Hungary and went into voluntary exile, bound for the United States. An excerpt from his will, made out a few days before he departed, is quoted here:

My burial should be as simple as possible. In case, after my death, they should want to name a street after me, I have the following wish: As long as the former Oktogon Square and the former Korond¹⁰ bear the names of *those individuals*,¹¹ or as long as any public street, square, or building is carrying *their* name—no public street, square, or building shall bear my name.

En route to Lisbon, where he was to embark, he stopped for a day in Geneva, and from there he wrote to Mrs. Muller:

This trip is a leap into uncertainty, instead of staying in a situation that is unbearable. God only knows how long I’ll be able to work abroad. . . . But there is nothing one can do about it; no question can be raised; it has to be this way.

Thus Bartók left his native Hungary. Can a more painful transplantation be imagined?

Exile

At the end of October, 1940, Bartók arrived in New York. He had visited this country twice before, and so he was not a complete newcomer. His first impressions about the New World were expressed in earlier letters, reporting on a transcontinental tour in 1927–28. A letter from Seattle (January 18, 1928) gives some of these impressions:

. . . people are very friendly everywhere. They take us for rides and are sorry if the weather does not permit this. They show great interest in progress in everything, but sometimes it is hard for them. All cities are very new, and every cultural movement has just recently started. As an example, Seattle had 3,000 inhabitants in 1880; today the population is 400,000. . . This country is immensely large; yet distant places are very similar to each other. I travel a distance equivalent to that from Madrid to Moscow and find the same type of buildings, people, and food.

However, in 1940 a more permanent adjustment was necessary. Bartók made a courageous start. He wrote a few months after his arrival:

My head is full of all kinds of new words, names of subway stops, streets, data of timetables, etc. All these things are necessary knowledge, but otherwise useless. . . It was not easy for us to learn how to deal with various electrical devices and gadgets, with can openers, etc. However, by now we master these tasks fairly well.

Half a year after his arrival he stated:

There are three things I could not get used to: (1) to the ruminating people (every second person is chewing gum), (2) to the half-darkened railway coaches, and (3) to pay by check.

The first year passed fairly well, but one year after his arrival Bartók wrote with bitterness to a former pupil (Mrs. Creel) in Seattle:

. . . the letter which I planned to write would have been very un-American—complaints and more complaints. (Here we always *have* to feel fine, even if half dead). The only bright spot is my work at Columbia: the study of Serbo-Croatian folk material which belongs to Harvard University. Unfortunately, however, my appointment is only temporary, and my work might have to remain unfinished, and so even this leaves me with a bitter taste.

If I tell you that for the coming season we have only one orchestral engagement and a few more lectures and lecture recitals, you can imagine how uncertain our situation is.

In the next year Bartók's situation deteriorated; he also suffered from unexplained fevers. He wrote to Mrs. Creel on March 2, 1942:

. . . our situation becomes worse from day to day. All I can say is that never in my life, since I have earned my own living, have I found myself in such a horrible situation as seems to lie before me, in the very near future. . . . I have lost my trust in people, in countries, in everything.

His appointment at Columbia expired on January 1, 1943, before he had finished his work. But he suffered even more from the fact that his works were so infrequently performed. He wrote to Mrs. Creel (December 31, 1942):

It seems that my career as a composer has come to an end. My works are almost completely “boycotted” by the leading orchestras. They perform neither my new works nor the old ones. This is very shameful—naturally not for me.

In February 1943 his physical condition suddenly worsened. In addition to his fever, he suffered from rheumatic pains and also lost a great deal of weight. He reported in one of his letters that he was down to a “ridiculous” weight of 87 pounds, and summed up the situation in a letter on June 28, 1943:

There is no hope of recovery, and it is out of the question to accept a position. . . . Now we go to Saranac Lake at the expense of ASCAP. By the end of September all our money will be gone, and I have no idea what we’ll do.

In 1944 his condition improved, but only on the surface. His doctors knew by this time that the diagnosis was advanced leukemia and that the end could not be far off. A letter of August 1944 indicates that Bartók must have been aware of this:

I am glad about the good news.¹² I feel, however, that everything comes too late. Probably too late for me, and surely too late for those who are being murdered by the Nazis.

At the end of 1944, ASCAP and Boosey and Hawkes (his American publishers) provided him with modest financial security for the next three years.

In one of his last letters (July 1, 1945) Bartók for the final time expressed the hope of returning to his native country. He wrote:

I get very depressing news from Hungary: terrible destruction, famine, menacing chaos. As I see it, for the time being we cannot think of going back, although I would like to return—and for good.

Three months later, on September 26, 1945, Bartók died and his voluntary exile came to an end. In 1946 a street was named after him in Budapest, at a time when—in accordance with Bartók’s wish—no street, square, or public building bore the names of the fascist dictators.

This rounds out the picture of Bartók in relation to his times. He strove for freedom and justice and fought constantly for those principles. His battle was at first directed against the oppression of the Hapsburgs and against the injustices of the feudal system; later he struggled against fascism and war.

His voluntary exile had the same symbolic significance as the stand taken against fascism by men such as Mann, Toscanini, and Casals. His name and theirs will endure as symbols of courage and idealism.¹³

NOTES

¹ The Kossuth Symphony had its premiere in Budapest in 1904 and met with considerable success.

² A Hungarian idiom signifying an attempted transformation which by its very nature is completely impossible.

³ This letter was written on white stationery, and the words were underlined with red and green ink. Red, white, and green are the Hungarian national colors.

⁴ *Hungarian Folk Music* (London, 1931). *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs*, in collaboration with Albert B. Lord (New York, 1951). Bartók's *Rumanian Folk Music*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (The Hague, 1967), was published after this article was written.

⁵ Bartók was attending the meetings of the League of Nations as a cultural delegate of Hungary.

⁶ A reference to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

⁷ Universal Edition.

⁸ *Autoren, Komponisten und Musikverleger*.

⁹ The days of Austria's takeover by the Nazis.

¹⁰ Oktogon and Korond were two squares in the heart of Budapest. Oktogon was changed to Mussolini Square, and Korond to Hitler Square.

¹¹ Bartók, as an expression of his deep contempt, did not soil his pen with Mussolini's or Hitler's names.

¹² A reference to Allied victories in France.

¹³ As this journal went to press, an English translation of Bartók's letters was published: *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. János Demény, trans. Péter Balabán and István Farkas, rev. Elisabeth West and Colin Mason, preface by Sir Michael Tippett (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).