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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft = Annales suisses de musicologie = Annuario Svizzero di musicologia**

Band (Jahr): **27 (2007)**

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835211>

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A Creative Cul-de-Sac? Bartók's *Wooden Prince* and *Miraculous Mandarin*

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This paper is a sequel to «Bartók's Fallow Years: A Reappraisal», a paper that I presented to the Budapest Bartók conference in March 2006.¹ In that paper I speculated that behind the periodization of Bartók's creativity found in the biographies and dictionaries lay a pattern of «fallow» years, at least compositionally speaking. I investigated the pattern of those «fallow years», which occur in the earlier periods of each of the decades of Bartók's maturity and precede the dates of renewed compositional activity, which I take to be 1902, 1914, 1926, 1934 and 1943. That «Fallow Years» paper also observed that Bartók was anything but idle in these supposedly «fallow» years. Indeed, those years were very often compositionally «fallow» because of Bartók's intensive involvement with other musical tasks, such as ethnomusicology or performance. (And, one of them – 1923–6 – was to considerable degree fallow for personal reasons related to his new marriage, illnesses and the birth of his second son, Peter.) These «fallow» years can be seen to be years of incubation and accruing of new experiences, from which Bartók would suddenly emerge with new works exhibiting distinctly different attributes from their predecessors. I also observed that in each of the periods of compositional «flow» there was a generally high degree of stylistic consistency. One period, however, stuck out as being different: the long period of reasonably regular composition occurring between 1914 and 1923. This period, I argue, was inspired by the commissioning of a ballet, eventually *The Wooden Prince*, from Bartók by the Budapest Opera in March 1913, and led to renewed compositional activity from as early as April 1914.² I concluded my paper on «Bartók's Fallow Years» with the statement:

«Although Bartók was reasonably consistent in production of works over that [1914–1923] decade – a surprise perhaps given the many changes in his external and personal circumstances – there is less consistency of style. This inconsistency is as observable between the folk-music settings and the more original, opus-numbered works, as it is between the wartime works and the more tonally speculative works of 1918–1922. The long 1914–1923 period of compositional crea-

- 1 Malcolm Gillies, «Bartók's Fallow Years: A Reappraisal», in: *Studia Musicologica* vol. 47 (2006), pp. 309–318.
- 2 Much of the biographical tradition dates this renewed compositional activity to 1915, a mistake that may have influenced even the starting date of the title of this conference.

tivity has, in consequence, been least successfully treated in the life-and-works studies of Bartók to date, and has also proven the least graspable by music theory. It remains the ultimate challenge for the biographer and the analyst.»³

Australians have a lovely word: «billabong». A «billabong» is a section of a river that has, over time, become cut-off and by-passed except in flood times, as the river finds different courses to the sea or simply fails to reach the high-water marks of yesteryear. Indeed, our most popular national song, curiously, is about a «swagman» who camps by a «billabong», under the shade of a «coolabah» tree.⁴ «Billabongs» can be very pleasant, but their defining feature is, like the cul-de-sac, that history proves them to be deviations from which the surge then retreats and moves on. The interpretative challenge for the biographer or analyst of Bartók's oeuvre lies in determining how much the works of this 1914–1923 were part of a billabong-like «speculative deviation»: a creative cul-de-sac to which Bartók did not creatively return. In its broadest term, the challenge relates to the evidence for creative *progress* and creative *retreat*.

Now, I do not intend to sink into the quagmire of ideological debate about artistic or aesthetic *compromise*, crystallised so crisply in the years immediately after the Second World War,⁵ and spasmodically returned to by musical commentators ever since (most reputedly so, by János Kárpáti).⁶ Rather, I take as a point of inspiration, the question raised by Richard Taruskin at the end of his account of Bartók in his *Oxford History of Western Music*. The section is entitled «Retreat?».⁷ After a long analysis of parts of the *Fourth String Quartet* of 1928, Taruskin cries out:

«[...] how is one to explain his [Bartók's] maximalistic phase? Is it fair to describe the move away from it as a retreat, or is that a necessarily (and therefore superfluously) prejudicial term? Can one move forward in time yet backward in «history?».⁸

Now, Taruskin asks exactly the right question – «can one move forward in time yet backward in «history?» – and from it we can see exactly why the

3 Gillies, «Bartók's Fallow Years», p. 318.

4 A riparian eucalyptus tree.

5 René Leibowitz, «Béla Bartók, ou la possibilité du compromis dans la musique contemporaine», in: *Les temps modernes* 3, no. 25 (October 1947), pp. 705–734.

6 See, for instance, János Kárpáti, *Bartók's Chamber Music*, Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon 1994, pp. 78–79.

7 Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, New York: Oxford University Press 2005, Vol. 4, pp. 420–421.

8 Taruskin, *The Oxford History*, p. 421.

term cul-de-sac, or «billabong», might be appropriately used for this phenomenon. The question supposes Bartók is retreating from the high-water mark of his creativity, or perhaps the high-water mark of his radicality, if we believe history is fundamentally about progress in the varied uses of musical resources. Yet, I believe Taruskin misdates the start of the phenomenon, taking refuge in his sweeping concept of Bartók's «maximalistic phase». The summary example that he has chosen is Bartók's *Fourth String Quartet*, which he explains as a work that «is often looked upon as the culmination or far out point string [*sic*] of Bartók's maximalistic explorations». ⁹ However, in his chapter, Taruskin (and he is not the first) overflies all the works of 1914–1923, and so does not observe that the *Fourth Quartet* and its growingly neo-classical companions in the short 1926–1931 creative period are already a significant retreat from the extreme radicality of Bartók's compositions from the 1918–1922 years. (But, perhaps I am being unfair to Taruskin here, as he claims the *Fourth Quartet* as the work that «brings [Bartók's] preoccupation with symmetry to a peak» that encompasses both vertical and horizontal dimensions. ¹⁰ That is something different from the high-water mark of expressive radicality, although in Taruskin's argument the two are nebulously related.) Of course, the commonly used word for that «extreme radicality» is *atonality*, a tendency to which Bartók himself confessed in his essay of 1920, «The Problem of the New Music». ¹¹ There, he illustrated the «previously undreamed-of wealth of transitory nuances» at «our disposal» with examples from his *Three Studies* Op. 18 and *The Miraculous Mandarin* Op. 19. Bartók himself, looking back in 1929 in a little referenced interview with *The Musical Times*, was inclined to reinforce the tonal elements, even in those pieces that he had seen as «striving decidedly toward atonality» only a decade before. In that 1929 interview, as taken down with a high degree of plausibility by the London-based critic M.-D. Calvocoressi, Bartók stated:

«It is also true that in my recent works [from 1926] I make for clearer definition of tonality than in many of the things I wrote a few years ago. Not that I have ever indulged in «atonality» as practiced by Schönberg and others; in the works I refer to [Bartók had just talked extensively about *The Miraculous Mandarin*] tonality (in the broad sense of the word, of course) is not lacking, but at times is more or less veiled either by idiosyncrasies of the harmonic texture or by temporary deviations in the melodic curves.» ¹²

9 Ibid., p. 402.

10 Ibid.

11 *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff, London: Faber & Faber 1976, pp. 455–459.

12 Malcolm Gillies, «A Conversation with Bartók: 1929», in: *Musical Times* 128 (1987), pp. 555–559 (cit. pp. 556–557).

Taking Taruskin's provocative sub-title «Retreat?» a little further we could observe that retreat follows advance. And that raises the well-nigh military question of precisely where the greatest point of advance lay, before the hypothesized retreat set in. Put another way, when was the *apogee* of Bartók as radical artist? This is a very necessary question if we see musical history as captured by those who make the advances, rather than by those who make decorous retreats.

Paul Wilson has neatly tied together the concepts of apogee and cul-de-sac:

«The five major works that Bartók completed between 1918 and 1922 seem in some important ways to be separate from *the main line* of his compositional development. The musical centre of gravity in the period is clearly *The Miraculous Mandarin* Op. 19, which is one of Bartók's most significant compositions.»¹³

In short, could the work of both stylistic and creative apogee, namely, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, be located firmly, with the hindsight of history, in a cul-de-sac? Of course, there is no contradiction in that at all. Indeed, logic suggests that a composer who follows an advance-then-retreat lifepath (as Taruskin plots for Bartók) will *necessarily* locate the work (or works) of creative apogee within some kind of cul-de-sac.

In the broadest of terms, then, and to return to Taruskin's question: how do we, still living with a progressivist view of the world (a world still obsessed with growth and advance), account for these cul-de-sacs, these «billabongs», somehow cut off from the main course of history yet the highpoints of the creative radicality of their day? History wants, at one and the same moment, to plot the heights of progress but also to follow the main course. In Bartók's case, as the biographer and commentator on his works soon appreciates, the interpretative challenge is made more complex by the way in which his works do not quite so neatly cut themselves off into this cul-de-sac. There is no punctuation mark of «fallow years» immediately preceding his *Three Studies* and *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Nor does a break immediately follow, with the *Dance Suite* – seen by many commentators as the resumption of his longer-term main line of creative development – following on in 1923, within a year of writing his *Second Violin Sonata*, the last of the so-called «radical» works. In style, too, there is not a strict sense of separation from his composition of benign folksong settings (to which habitually he did not put opus numbers). As Tibor Tallián comments in his life-and-works study,

13 Paul Wilson, «Approaching Atonality: Studies and Improvisations», in: *The Bartók Companion*, ed. Malcolm Gillies, London: Faber & Faber 1993, p. 162.

Bartók was, while composing the first section of *Mandarin* also «harmonizing» seven Hungarian songs he had collected the previous year, including Róza Ökrös's «Angoli Borbála».¹⁴ So, as in aviation, we have work separation around this time neither in earth position nor in height. In fact, as Elliott Antokoletz's paper at this conference highlights,¹⁵ Bartók's radical Op. 20 settings of eight Hungarian folksongs are no longer really settings at all, but rather «composing *with* folk tunes». They extrapolate the tunes' chief pitch (and some other) characteristics in radical ways. The Op. 20 settings highlight the final integration, of Bartók's – to that point – segregated concepts of «setting» and «original work»: another prompt to his subsequent abandonment of opus numberings. (He did actually attach the descriptor «Op. 21» to his *First Violin Sonata*, but then removed it before the work was published.)

If we recognize *The Miraculous Mandarin* as the culminating work of this 1918–1922 cul-de-sac, or of the larger 1914–1923 period, and perhaps even of Bartók's entire output, the work then also poses difficult questions as to its stylistic origins and provenance. As with many great works, some important features appear to arise completely without precedent. It is not a spiritual kin, for instance, of the other stage work of the period, *The Wooden Prince*, with its Wagnerian opening and excessive «flab» of descriptive music. *Mandarin* demonstrates rather more stylistic kinship with the second movement of the *Second String Quartet* (1914–1917), with parts of the *Piano Suite* Op. 14 (with their «bone and muscle», to which Bartók referred in a late New York radio broadcast¹⁶), and with the *Three Studies* Op. 18, conceived almost simultaneously with the Bartók's pantomime in 1918. That is, despite the «astonishingly slight» resemblances¹⁷ between the two stage works – «astonishing», given that one was completed only the year before the other was started – there is, nonetheless, quite a degree of planned advance from 1914 towards *Mandarin*. In short, the *Three Studies* and *Mandarin* do not come «out of the blue». Put more technically, the 1914–1923 period shows strong overlapping and overlaying between the last of the Romantic in

14 Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók: The Man and His Work*, Budapest: Corvina 1988, p. 108.

15 Elliott Antokoletz, «Bartók's Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs op. 20: From «Folksong Arrangement» to «Composing with Folk Tunes» and a greater abstraction in his Three Etudes op. 18», Béla Bartók: La décennie 1915–1925 colloquium, 1 December 2006; cf. in this vol. pp. 63–86.

16 Béla Bartók, «Ask the Composer», 2 July 1944, reprod., in original English, in: *Bartók Béla írásai*, vol. 1, ed. Tibor Tallián, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó 1989, pp. 261–262.

17 Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, third edition, ed. Malcolm Gillies, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, p. 299.

Bartók, of which *The Wooden Prince*, with its fairy-tale story, is a notable example, and the avowedly modernist tendencies, influenced both by Schoenberg, in boldness of pitch organization, but, in pantomimic tendencies, more by Stravinsky.

The irony of the reception of Bartók's music at the time as well as during his lifetime is that Bartók himself rapidly moved to identify the works of the cul-de-sac, and to quarantine them. Writing on 31 December 1925 to Jenő Takács, he observed that any attempt to «put on» such works as his *Three Studies*, the Op. 20 *Improvisations* or the two violin sonatas must be avoided wherever there were low levels of musical appreciation (which, in Bartók's analysis, was pretty well anywhere, but particularly referring to the remnants of the gentry in Hungarian post-War towns).¹⁸ He believed that the antagonism aroused by performing these pieces before an audience «which has not been trained to listen» was not worth incurring. Moreover, the only remaining work of the cul-de-sac was effectively quarantined by others. *The Miraculous Mandarin* never gained a stage performance in Budapest during Bartók's lifetime,¹⁹ its Cologne premiere of 1926 was sensationalized, and its only satisfactory presentation, from Bartók's viewpoint, was in Prague in 1927.²⁰ Bartók lived his life, then, yearning for more attention to be given to *The Miraculous Mandarin* and less to works such as the perennially popular *Romanian Folk Dances*.²¹ *Mandarin* was, like the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, a «momentous work» in his estimation of his own creativity.²²

There is an additional irony for those who see history's winners as always being in the vanguard of advance, for while *The Miraculous Mandarin* could not gain an Hungarian performance, the stage work that *did* score a success at the time – I now refer to 1917–1918 – was Bartók's fairy-world piece of mysticism and morality, *The Wooden Prince*, which he had, even by the time of its first performance, started to dislike. In fact, if we lay end to end all of Bartók's extant comments about his four major works involving orchestra written between 1911 and 1919 we see that he appreciated them in this hierarchy: *The Miraculous Mandarin* most, then *Bluebeard's Castle*,

18 *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. János Demény, London: Faber and Faber 1971, p. 168.

19 Its first stage performance in Budapest occurred on 9 December 1945 at the Opera House.

20 See Tallián, *Béla Bartók*, p. 110.

21 See unpublished letter, Bartók to Universal Edition Vienna, 22 October 1932 (Peter Bartók Archive, PB BB-UE V), and unpublished letter draft, Bartók to Claire R. Reis, probably late July 1943 (Budapest Bartók Archive, 186/14).

22 Unpublished letter, Bartók to Boosey & Hawkes (Hans Heinsheimer), 21 August 1943 (Peter Bartók Archive, PB BB-B&H IV).

then the Op. 12 *Four Pieces*, and least of all, *The Wooden Prince*.²³ (If we include the *Dance Suite* of 1923 in this implicit self-ranking, as well, it probably needs to be placed between *Bluebeard* and the Op. 12 Pieces.) Bartók's ear early told him that *The Wooden Prince* was full of «padding», a circumstance he described in a letter written to Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock) around New Year 1921 and blamed upon the libretto of Béla Balázs.²⁴ He was, for instance, perversely pleased to receive news from Ernst Latzko, who conducted a performance of both *Bluebeard* and *The Wooden Prince* in Weimar in 1925 and very tactfully expressed the view that both he, and his audience, appreciated the opera more than the ballet.²⁵ And it was only in 1932 that he would finally, through various levels of cuts, establish a form of the work with which he was at least marginally satisfied: «From a musical point of view, but especially with regard to the stageworthiness of the work, these cuts represent an absolute improvement».²⁶ Bartók had performed radical liposuction, removing some minutes of music from the stage version. The work, however, despite this surgery remained imperfect, both in conception and execution.

The 1910s was the only decade in which Bartók produced stage works. Of his opera, ballet and pantomime, he came to see *Bluebeard's Castle* and *The Miraculous Mandarin* as compositionally and stylistically «momentous», and *The Wooden Prince* as a bit of an embarrassment. Yet *The Wooden Prince* was the work of warmest reception and, to Bartók's own mind, of most biographical significance. It was the work whose commissioning had pushed him back towards composition after two years of «fallow» in 1912–1914. It was the work whose successful reception had led to the offer to stage *Bluebeard* – and, hence, provided the spur to complete its orchestration. And it was *The Wooden Prince's* première that persuaded Universal Edition's director Emil Hertzka to take Bartók into its publishing fold.²⁷ *The Wooden Prince*, then – one of Bartók's *least* radical works of the 1914–1923 period –

23 See Malcolm Gillies, «A Guide to the Musical Mind» in the unpublished typescript to *Bartók Letters: The Musical Mind*, ed. Malcolm Gillies and Adrienne Gombocz (Budapest Bartók Archive), vol. 1, pp. 26–34.

24 Unpublished letter, Bartók to Philip Heseltine, 20 December 1920 to 3 January 1921, in German (Szathmáry Family Archives, Chicago).

25 Letter, Bartók to Ernst Latzko, 15 May 1925, in German, reprod. in: *Documenta Bartókiana* 2 (1965), pp. 128–129.

26 Unpublished letter, Bartók to Universal Edition Vienna, 1 July 1932 (Peter Bartók Archive, PB BB-UE V).

27 See unpublished letter, Bartók to Universal Edition Vienna (Emil Hertzka), 23 May 1917 (Peter Bartók collection, PB BB-UE I).

became, during the succeeding decades, the most emblematic stage work, simply through repeat performances, in a way not altogether dissimilar to the «signature quality» of his *Romanian Folk Dances*.

It remains now to probe how much the works of the 1914–1923 period were actually retreated from in the following two decades, as, in Taruskin's model, time goes forward but (progressive) history goes backwards. While Bartók may have been in retreat from his expressionistic and expressive radicality – in retreat from those harmonic «idiosyncrasies» or «deviations in the melodic curves»²⁸ – and was, in total, undoubtedly becoming more tonally reaffirming, this does not mean that his subsequent works were uninfluenced by works of the 1914–1923 decade, even its especially radical cul-de-sac of 1918–1922. This influence could be both, as it were, «negative» (what he sought subsequently to avoid doing) and «positive» (what he sought to revive and re-express).

From the heady experiences of 1917–1919 – premières of his ballet and opera, as well as the civil chaos and many personal dilemmas – Bartók was persuaded never again to attempt a stage work. His caution caused him to delay orchestrating *Mandarin* for five years until, in 1924, it looked as if a performance was likely. As a result, *The Miraculous Mandarin* is a work of two distinct time layers (1918/1919 and 1924), with the orchestration being much influenced by Bartók's experiences in orchestrating not only the *Four Orchestral Pieces* Op. 12 in 1919–1920 (leading to the work's première in Budapest under Ernő Dohnányi late in 1920) but also the *Dance Suite*, which was composed, orchestrated and performed within 1923. Despite many proffered librettos and plots,²⁹ Bartók would not be prepared again to risk the vast investment of creative energy and time in stage works, with their indeterminate likelihoods of performance and crises of reception. Only *The Wooden Prince* had moved with a fair degree of security and regularity from initial commissioning in 1913 to première in 1917.

From *The Wooden Prince* and *Mandarin* Bartók learned to some degree the hard lesson of reconciling descriptive and strictly musical functions. From *Mandarin*, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he made considerable cuts, and also sought a tightness of materials that would be the hallmark of most of the works of his last two decades. The difficulty of this technical accommodation of stage action to music, and vice-versa, undoubtedly influenced him to concentrate more on what he did best: smaller instrumental pieces or movements, and then also smaller texted vocal works. Indeed, after 1922

28 See Gillies, «A Conversation with Bartók: 1929», pp. 556–557.

29 See László Somfai, «Nichtvertonte Libretti im Nachlass und andere Bühnenpläne Bartóks», in: *Documenta Bartókiana* 2 (1965), pp. 28–52.

Bartók rarely wrote a unitary work or movement lasting more than ten minutes. He reconciled himself – as with many composers of his generation – to being, to some extent, a miniaturist.

Behind broad characterizations of advance and retreat lie myriad local parries and creative arabesques. If we look at the detail of how Bartók explored the different parameters of music in the years after 1922–1923, we find a very uneven profile. As he moved through the 1920s, he undeniably strengthened baroque and classical tendencies in his dealing with form. That is, he was in retreat from the less musically coherent forms found in *The Wooden Prince*, or even the more free-flowing smudging of formal archetypes found in the *Three Studies* and two violin sonatas. Around 1930 he described this as a move towards more Bachian models.³⁰ Yet, Bartók was more «progressive» in his treatment of rhythm. In this he was not just following some of the more radical variational tracks his increasingly serious analysis of folk music was uncovering, but he was moving from one Stravinskyan rhythmic model – the *Rite of Spring* which had so influenced *Mandarin* – to another Stravinskyan rhythmic model: Stravinsky's *Concerto for Piano and Winds*, which considerably influenced his «Piano Year» works of 1926, and beyond.

So, too, while his tonality became more overt in its articulation from 1923 onwards, his pitch investigations, in terms of local harmony and melody, maintained a direction away from the triadic conceptions last strongly seen (apart from various folk-music settings) in *The Wooden Prince*. It is this continuing tendency towards greater expression of pitch symmetries that causes Taruskin, following Antokoletz, to see the *Fourth Quartet* as the «far out point string» of Bartók's creative explorations.³¹

The decade from 1914 was also of crucial importance to the furthering of Bartók's facility as an orchestrator and a writer for piano. I have just referred to the large amount of orchestration that he did at this time, and, particularly in the early 1920s, when the connections with Universal Edition and knowledge of recent works of other composers within its stable helped Bartók to develop more modernistic uses of instruments in contrast to the more strait-laced, impressionistically-tinged orchestration techniques evident up to, and including, the *Four Orchestral Pieces*. That change in instrumental usage is well seen, for instance, in the changing demands upon the clarinet between the orchestration of *The Wooden Prince* in 1916–1917 and of *Man-*

30 See quotation from undated Bartók correspondence with Edwin von der Nüll, in Edwin von der Nüll, *Béla Bartók: Ein Beitrag zur Morphologie der neuen Musik*, Halle (Saale): Mitteldeutsche Verlags-Aktien Gesellschaft 1930, p. 108.

31 Taruskin, *The Oxford History*, Vol. 4, pp. 402–421.

darin in 1924. That greater confidence in instrumental usage was put to good work in the following creative period of 1926–1931, particularly in the two piano concertos.

One hugely important, and largely neglected, phenomenon is Bartók's growing facility from 1914 in a more «bone and muscle» style of piano writing. Despite his ballet, pantomime, one string quartet and various vocal pieces, what is most noteworthy of his 1914–1923 output is the writing for piano. This is, in terms of life-time development, more significant as a phenomenon of compositional «advance» than the sudden outpouring of solo piano works in 1926, after which he gravitated more and more to write for strings. Of the twenty-odd works composed during 1914–1923, most involve piano, or exist – like the *Dance Suite* – in an idiomatic piano format. That is true of *all* the works of the 1918–1922 cul-de-sac. The sonority of this high water-mark of radicality is, above all, a pianistic one. Even the violin sonatas are equally piano sonatas, as so many critics of the day pointed out, with the piano often pursuing its vertical truths utterly soloistically against the necessarily more horizontal truths of the violin. This vast development of modernistic technique for the piano continued for a further decade, particularly with the Sonata and the two piano concertos. However, *Mikrokosmos*, Bartók's only substantial solo piano work from the 1930s, is neither an advance nor a retreat from the high-water mark of 1918–1922, but rather, like many works of the mid-late 1930s, a timeless, even bloodless, compilation of all that Bartók had learnt: little «lapidary» sketches, as one London critic exclaimed on hearing them in 1938.³²

So, back to my «billabong» or your «cul-de-sac». If there is a retreat from expressive radicality – or from Bartók's «maximalist» phase, as Taruskin would have it – it was not a uniform retreat on all fronts back to behind some Romantic palisade of yesteryear. In form, there is a classicizing tendency, but in use of tonality and rhythm Bartók moved to novel, highly distinctive new formulations: if not always modernist, at least modern. In terms of piano and orchestral idioms he emerged from the 1914–1923 period with much enhanced skills, and it is little wonder that he combined both idioms so boldly in 1926 with his *First Piano Concerto*. In terms of pitch thinking, in harmony and melody, he did not return to some safe bank of late Romanticism. Although gradually becoming more consonant, nonetheless he sought new answers in polymodal and «new chromatic» structures.³³

32 Anon., «London Concerts», in: *Musical Times* 79 (1938), p. 536.

33 See Bartók's own explanation of these pitch techniques in his «Harvard Lectures», *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Suchoff, pp. 354–392.

If in later years Bartók's «history» was going backwards – if his artistic car's gear was more in reverse than in «forward» – then he did notwithstanding achieve an admirable integration and synthesis of expressive devices. His years of 1934–1940 show a settled and mature equilibrium of creative elements.³⁴ Following on from Taruskin's question of «Retreat?», however, we must reconsider afresh how music history accounts best for the subtleties of creative ebb and flow, of advance and retreat, and of side-waters and main streams.

34 See Malcolm Gillies, «Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta: Bartók's Ultimate Masterwork?», in: *International Journal of Musicology* 9 (2006), pp. 289–301.

Abstract

Of all the periods of Bartók's creativity, the years 1914–1923 present the greatest interpretative challenge. During this decade of war and following civil chaos Bartók produced some of his most dissonant and radical compositions. At the time he conjectured that he might be approaching an atonal goal, but later reasserted the essential tonal base to all of his works.

Historians, critics and music analysts remain divided over the significance of works from this period. In this paper Malcolm Gillies surveys the various interpretative camps, focusing in particular upon responses to key works of the period – the ballet *The Wooden Prince* and the pantomime *The Miraculous Mandarin* – that Bartók himself considered among his greatest works. Gillies seeks to determine how much this decade laid essential building blocks of Bartók's later style, or, rather, whether it was a creative cul-de-sac, from which Bartók would progressively retreat in following years.

Zusammenfassung

Von allen Schaffensphasen Bartóks sind die Jahre 1914–1923 am schwierigsten zu interpretieren. Während dieser Dekade des Krieges und der folgenden zivilen Unordnung komponierte Bartók einige seiner dissonantesten und radikalsten Kompositionen. Zu dieser Zeit stellte er Mutmassungen über sein mögliches Streben nach Atonalität an, doch später bekräftigte er die im Wesentlichen tonale Basis all seiner Werke. – Im Bereich sowohl der Musikgeschichtsschreibung wie der Kritik und der Musiktheorie herrscht Uneinigkeit über den Stellenwert der Werke dieser Periode. Malcolm Gillies bietet hier einen Überblick über den Spielraum der verschiedenen Einordnungen und konzentriert sich dabei speziell auf Schlüsselwerke – das Ballett *Der holzgeschnitzte Prinz* und die Pantomime *Der wunderbare Mandarin* –, die Bartók selbst zu seinen bedeutendsten Werken zählte. Gillies sucht einzugrenzen, inwiefern diese Dekade wesentliche Bausteine von Bartóks späterem Stil beisteuerte, oder eher, inwiefern es sich um eine kreative Sackgasse handelte, aus der sich Bartók in den folgenden Jahren zunehmend wieder herausbewegen sollte.