

Folk and Traditional Music as a Creative Element in Modern Music

BARTÓK'S MELODIES IN THE STYLE OF FOLK SONGS

LAJOS VARGYAS (Budapest)

It is known that Bartók had a high opinion of the aesthetic value of folk songs. We find the following passage in his work (Bartók, 1931¹): "In their small way, they are as perfect as the grandest masterpieces of musical art. They are, indeed, classical models of the way in which a musical idea can be expressed in all its freshness and shapeliness . . . with the simplest of means." This was written by an artist whose compositions very rarely included melodies as rounded off as those of folk songs. Surfeited with the over-ripe melodic style and the exaggerated cult of harmonies of the romantic school, Bartók—like his contemporaries—made rhythm and tone-colour effects predominant in his works.

This notwithstanding, we constantly encounter in his works, from his first compositions to his late "Microcosm," minor song-like and even folk-song-like creations, exceptional instances of the power of melody in Bartók's musical language. These melodies radiate the same perfection as do most of the admired folk songs; their style elements have so much in common with folk songs that some of them impress us as veritable folk songs amidst his other musical inventions. Elements of Bartók's musical language which are rooted in the folk song become especially conspicuous in these melodies, and it is through them that we can assess the differences and estimate the mystic proportion between the borrowed style and the individual power of expression which form a magnificent complex in the creations of a great artist.

A little unisonal melody, the "Peasant Song," already occupied the first place in the "Ten Easy Piano Pieces." It is something like a rounded song of four lines with a repetition. As regards structure, two lines, with four bars each, repeat the same contents with insignificant variations, rather by way of diminutions; they are followed by a longer more composite line with a different melody; the whole is then concluded by a shorter line which repeats the final tones of the first two lines (see Fig. 1). Such structure is not uncommon in Hungarian and Slovak folk songs, nor in dance songs from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These are the traditional elements in this minor piano composition. But Bartók's individuality breaks through even here; it seems as if he had got tired of too much symmetry after two recurring lines, since the next line is added asymmetrically—although composed of short motives—it forms a grandiose arch indissolubly united with the rest of the melody. This particular portion is composed of small units in folk songs also, but there it consists of the repetition or the sequence of two equally long parts (e.g. Bartók, 1931, Nos. 239–241 and Fig. 5B), and so in the present case either of two motives of four bars each, or the sequence of four motives of two bars each. If it is possible to dissect this line in Bartók's case, it might be disjoined into 3 + 5 bars; however it may be, these small motive-units, all the hardly perceptible separate elements, are masterfully united to form a uniform and indissoluble whole which is pervaded by a strong emotional tension, to become subsequently once more symmetrical by the repetition of the half line. This half repeat blends symmetry with asymmetry and coalesces the two parts both in contents and form. Continued

repetition intensifies the impression of asymmetry by shortening the composite line by two bars, while the melody line is varied and ascends to greater height. The recurrence of the resolving cadence is thus the more soothing. A similarly complete unity of emotional tension and closed form does not exist in folk songs in which quiescence is predominant.

Elements of rhythm and melody are both close to and far from the folk song. They present hardly more than the skeleton of the known folk-song-tournure. Taken as a whole, the "Peasant Song" does not resemble any of our known folk songs or folk-song types. The elements of popular music contained therein, while producing the illusion of a folk song, afford an opportunity to the composer to give free course to his innate tendency towards great tension in a strictly closed form.

The second piece of the series, called "An Evening Among the Szeklers" (Fig. 2), creates the impression of being a veritable folk-song imitation. The pentatonic descending melodic contour recalls the style of our old eight-syllabled pieces; even the cadences of the melody-lines are folk-song-like, and the fact that their succession throws the structure into prominence endows the little song with a solid framework. We have no such folk song but we might easily have one. What is it then that passes beyond the limits of folk song even in this little tune, that is individual and characteristic of Bartók? It is the artistic legerdemain with which, by means of the ethereal shades of repetitions and increasing deviations, the composer conjures up the entire song from the tiny melodic nucleus, and creates, with the use of a minimum of musical elements, the impression of a simplicity that is rarely found even in folk songs. The first motive runs three times to and fro on three adjacent tones. The same motive is repeated with a deviation of two tones in the cadence. The third line begins deeper, proceeds in a different direction but the two hitherto most frequently heard tones, the octave and the seventh, flash up nevertheless; they are displaced and appear at a rhythmically new point which lends them emphasis; a tension is created here, otherwise indicated by a *tenuto* in the performance. The artist creates tension even in this little reverent evensong!

Our songs of similarly narrow compass are likewise striking examples of economical construction. However, their effect consists in a proportional utilization of the available tones, and show no increasing tension arising from varied repetitions; they are rather characterized by the calm due to their equipoise.

We may look upon the "Microcosmos" as presenting a cross section of Bartók's piano music and even of his entire late creative period. Making our way through the rich growth of tone-colour effects, instrumental motives and even instrumental-technical innovations, we come across a few very simple and dainty melodies. One of the most folk-song-like pieces is that with the title "Melody" in Vol. IV, p. 116 (Fig. 3). Its rhythm is identical with that of our eleven-syllabled songs: both this and its contrasting salient cadences create the full impression of a folk song. Yet, these cadences or melodic lines have never appeared in folk songs; half lines of this nature may perhaps match the pattern of folk song but never an entire line: these cadences and lines belong to a different world of tonality. The melodic pattern of folk songs appears here as do parallel lines in a non-Euclidean space: they are parallels in both cases but, existing in different media, obey different laws.

This phenomenon is still more conspicuous in the piece entitled "Bulgarian Rhythm," Vol. IV, p. 113 (see Fig. 4). Although its melody is more song-like and has an exquisite contour, only the first and fourth lines accord with our notions of song-melody. The two inner lines make it clear that this tune, too, is moving in "another" space, and that it is but a pale reflection of the melodic pattern of folk songs. Its

structure is likewise just a stylized reflection of the well-known form: *A* followed by the same *A* a fifth higher, then *B*, and once more *A*. The second line may be regarded as just a free variation of the line *A* transposed a fifth higher, and also the last line fails to bring back the entire first motive. All elements of this piece are just suggestive of something to be found in folk songs; the first and fourth lines suggest pentatonism, but it is actually a semitonic pentatonism, and only some of its steps are familiar. The Bulgarian rhythm—though characteristic of Bulgarian, Rumanian, and occurring sometimes even in Hungarian, folk songs—is applied by Bartók in a combination that recalls the dotted 4/4 rhythms and 6/8 formulae of the Hungarian folksongs—of course, in a stylized form. Such dome-like melody construction is a characteristic feature of our new style. Briefly, what we hear is a conventionalized folk-song-like composition which consists of different elements and is presented in the artist's special individual musical language.

The very title "Melody" suggests that, when composing it, Bartók actually thought of folk songs and wished to present an equivalent from his own world. This tendency is still more conspicuous if we read the title of the piece, "In the Style of a Folk Song," Vol. IV, p. 100 (see Fig. 5A). This dainty and artistically simple melody is a typical instance of Bartók's folk-song-stylization. It begins with an anacrusis and continues with a third-sequence, neither of which savours of Hungarian folk songs. Nor do the next three shorter lines which descend, in the manner of a sequence, to the keynote. The whole progression is the same as that of the Slovak folk song which has become the Slovak national anthem (see Fig. 5B). However, the anacrusis serves also as the concluding tone, as shown by the theme passing over to the left hand where there is a real descent, so that we can look upon the melody as beginning with a fourth, describing a highly soaring arch, and concluding with a fourth. The cadence is a stylized image of that of our pentatonic songs, but it becomes evident at the end of the line only if there follows no anacrusis-like downward leap. The fine variations of its dotted rhythm impress us like a faint image of the Hungarian folk-song rhythm. This little masterpiece represents folk song as a concept irrespective of type; it does so by employing the style-elements of different peoples and further by creating an equilibrium between symmetry and asymmetry, a structure that has extreme importance for Bartók and is executed by him with puritanical simplicity. At the end an already heard but concealed cadence rounds off the song with a simplicity that has no counterpart in our folk songs. Not even folk songs manage to discontinue so unceremoniously and to create a similarly soothing and yet almost pointed sensation of simplicity. All concluding figures are more emphatic and more complex in folk songs. It is as if Bartók had wished to show up all those features of the folk song which he regarded as significant; it is as if the very end of this piece had been intended to serve as a flashlight illuminating the real essence of the folk song which means for Bartók pure, natural and unsophisticated simplicity.

There are many more examples in Bartók's *oeuvre*, that would have been suitable for similar analyses. The samples presented in the foregoing will have shown what folk songs meant to Bartók, how he translated their characteristic features into his own language. We have hoped to demonstrate how Bartók's creative relationship to folk songs is revealed for the analyst even by such tiny compositions as analysed here. They will moreover have shown how folk songs can become the means of expression in the highly intellectual type of modern art.

NOTE

1. B. Bartók, *The Hungarian Folk Music*, London, 1931, p. 3.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5a



Fig. 5b

