

Spring 2002 newsletter

What Is It About Bartok?

[Last fall, after the Emerson String Quartet's November concert, we asked this question of the group. Violinist Eugene Drucker sent us a thoughtful, interesting reply, which he was kind enough to give us permission to include in our newsletter. Here it is, in part. – Ed.]

Bartok was a modernist, swept up in the huge tides of change that liberated and shaped literature, the visual arts and music in the early 20th century. But he was a modernist strongly linked to two traditions: the folk music of his homeland and neighboring regions and the lineage of Bach through Beethoven and on to Brahms, Wagner and even Debussy. Bartok's great contribution was to incorporate the melodies, rhythms, sound colors and rough-hewn directness of the songs that he collected (during several years of traveling through the Balkans and Asia Minor) into the large-scale structures, procedures and esthetic aspirations of Western art music. He did not merely quote folk music or emulate a folksy sound; he found what was essential in the music of the soil and the people, and allowed that essence to suffuse and transform the very foundations of the music he created. His quirky, asymmetrical rhythms, wide harmonic palette and idiosyncratic use of instrumental color all are rooted in the most basic characteristics of the songs and dances he studied.

String quartet players love Bartok because of the new sonorities he achieved, the sheer rhythmic energy he unleashed in his fast movements, the exotic atmosphere of the slow movements, the twitterings and murmurings of his "night music" sections, the pathos and speech-like utterance of his melodies. We admire his counterpoint, the absolute equality of all four voices in his ever-shifting textures, the concise logic with which his motivic content generates form. He experimented the way Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven experimented, constantly in quest of structural cohesion and a greater range of expression. Much of Beethoven's music was considered bizarre, incomprehensible, even ugly when first heard. Whatever seemed dissonant and ugly – like the Grosse Fuge – could inhabit the same musical terrain as the sublimely lyrical Cavatina. Bartok's output has a similarly broad and fearless range of sonority and effect.

The biting dissonance of much of his music, especially from the 1920's, the percussive attacks, pounding rhythms and sheer complexity of his textures may be a challenge for some listeners, but those abrasive characteristics are only part

of the soundscape he created. Audiences familiar with some of Bartok's works from different periods will be aware of his remarkable stylistic evolution, from the romantic and impressionist influences of his youth through the harmonic and formal experimentation of the 1920's to the more expansive phrases, the increasing reliance on Balkan and Asiatic modal scales and the nostalgic atmosphere in his music of the 1930s and '40's. A lot of his music is difficult to play, and some of it may be difficult to listen to, but we feel that the effort it takes to achieve greater familiarity with this genius is amply rewarded by the depth, coherence and unflinching honesty of his art.

[The Emerson String Quartet's Grammy-winning recordings of the six Bartok quartets are in a two-CD set on the Deutsche Gramophone label.]