

Comments on Béla Bartók's Working Method in Dealing with Proofs for His Violin Concerto (1937-1938)

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Bartók himself once said to the writer of these lines that his artistic development might be likened to a spiral: to deal with the same problems on an ever rising level, with correspondingly rising success--this seemed to him the guiding principle of his development.¹

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The validity of Béla Bartók's quoted statement--"to deal with the same problems on an ever rising level, with correspondingly rising success"--becomes evident in a particularly convincing manner from the structural affinity of his two violin concertos: the one composed in 1907-1908 (not performed or published during the composer's life), and the accomplished masterpiece written thirty years later, 1937-1938.²

Totally different in quality, these two works are related in kind through the determining role of the variation principle. Bartók composed the concerto from his early years for Stefi Geyer (1888-1956), the beautiful and gifted violinist, with whom he had fallen in love. His original concept of the work called for three movements using variants of a "love chord of four notes": character variations reflecting the nature of the beloved. Next to that of the "heavenly" ideal image, Bartók wanted to sketch the "humorous" portrait of a "tempestuous" and an "indifferent, cool and silent" Stefi Geyer.³

In the end, only the "ideal image" within this total concept was realized in the opening movement of a concerto. It was subsequently published as the first part of the orchestral work *Deux*

groups of percussion instruments. Aside from this, I should write a violin concerto."¹⁵

Zoltán Székely's September 20, 1937,¹⁶ visit to the composer in Budapest evidently resulted in a fresh impulse for the work on the violin concerto. And, though from September to the beginning of the year 1938 Bartók could not concentrate upon his work without disturbance, he was at least spared from concertizing abroad. Bartók's October 9, 1938, letter to Annie Müller-Widman, a devotee of his in Basel, shows that the major part of the composition remained for the summer of 1938. During the summer, wrote Bartók, he had worked hard in order to finish the violin concerto and to write *Contrasts*, a trio promised to Joseph Szigeti and Benny Goodman.¹⁷ The score of *Contrasts* shows September 24, 1938, as the finishing date of composition. On September 5, 1938, Bartók sent to the "King of Swing" his firm promise to compose a new work for him. It is to be assumed that this promise was given only after completion of the sketch for the violin concerto.

The concerto's instrumentation covered several months, interrupted in November by a concert tour through Holland and Belgium. During this tour, Bartók apparently made changes in the composition. The composer and pianist Gösta Frid, a former Bartók student living in Holland (who assisted Székely in his study of the work before the first performance) supplied important details about Bartók's last-minute decisions:

"The final measures of the violin concerto, incidentally, were completed by Bartók here in Amsterdam, at my Bechstein piano. This finishing and not only this one, had troubled the composer. He chose then from among various possibilities the one known today. I thereupon made bold to suggest a two-note upbeat to be added to the beginning of the first theme. Bartók only smiled; several years later, however, after the work's appearance, I looked at the score and saw that he had accepted my suggestion."¹⁸

renew grave
and 1 bar of p. 33
re-entr
no below
 22
 Fl. I, II
 Ob. I, II
 Cl. I, II
 Bassoon I, II
 Tuba
 Trombone I, II
 Trumpet I, II
 Percussion
 Violin I, II
 Viola
 Violoncello
 Double Bass
 Harp
 Piano
 Conductor's part
 (pt. 0)

*This is a bad situation indeed. The Tempo I. (no tempo) begins on the upbeat
 this I cannot help and change. Every different placement would be incorrect. It is too
 bad that the piano score has this "incomprehensible" I do not see the only solution (see 22) in
 the M.S. which looks queer (it would not mind it?) to compare pp. 22 & 33 and being sure that the
 following bars from p. 33 to p. 32 which is crazy. Decide alone? I must disagree that this*

Violin concerto no. 2

*in the solution: compare only last bar of p. 22, with the 1st bar of the 2nd
 head of the bar would then be:*

Tempo I.
 ♩ (no tempo)
 22 23
 p

(in italics which are smaller)
solution no 5

What insights do these comparisons afford us?

--By reference to other documents, we are able to reconstruct phases of the process by which the orchestral score was published.

--They also provide a glance into Bartók's workshop and give witness to its perfect order and high degree of organization. Without exaggeration, we venture the claim that even Bartók's style of correction reflects his uncompromising character.

The proof of the engraved orchestral score, of which Bartók received a copy, was based upon a copy of the photographic reproduction of his autograph score, revised by him, as well as upon certain written instructions which Boosey & Hawkes had transmitted to the engraver. On May 29, 1939, Bartók had sent a copy each of the photographic reproduction of the piano score and orchestral score from Budapest to the publishers in London.²⁰ As early as November 5, 1939, the composer could return the revised proofs of the piano score and of the solo violin part to London. These were followed two days later by the return of "printer's copies" for both piano and full score.²¹

No correspondence between publisher and composer with regard to the Violin Concerto has survived from the year 1940--the time of Bartók's two journeys from Europe to America with all its complications of preparation for his relocation in New York. As late as February 5, 1941, Ralph Hawkes wrote to Bartók:

VIOLIN CONCERTO. The Piano reduction of this work is now being printed and I hope to get copies away some time of this month. My idea with regard to the Full Score of this work is that we should engrave it, so that it could be submitted to various Conductors and I think this is really necessary. It will cost a lot of money to do but I think it could be managed during the next six months. I shall be glad to know your views on this but, of course, much will depend upon the arrangement of any First Performance.²²

On April 30, 1941, Hawkes wrote further to Bartók:

VIOLIN CONCERTO. I am sure you will be glad to see the copies of the Violin and Piano Reduction of this work; I received them from the printer yesterday and they have gone forward to you via our Office. I shall be interested to hear from you that they have arrived safely and that you are pleased with the publication. I am taking no steps here to arrange a performance until I hear from you.²³

It took some time before the first copies of the published piano score reached New York from London, the mails having been slowed by war conditions. Dr. Heinsheimer, representative of Boosey & Hawkes in New York, was able to inform Bartók of getting ten copies only on June 17, 1941.²⁴ In this form the work made its way through preparations for the first performance. The prospect of an American premiere--Spivakovsky's Cleveland performance in January of 1943--emerged by the end of the year 1941. On January 9, 1942, Heinsheimer wrote Bartók about the Violin Concerto: "The parts and score have been sent to Cleveland this morning."²⁵ Chances are that the publisher was not ready to face the considerable expense for the production of the large orchestral score until after a successful performance in Cleveland. The engraving process--the copyright year in the proof is given as 1945--could not have been completed earlier than 1944 (more likely, however, 1945). Since the proofs for the engraving contain entries reflecting the composer's rehearsal, or rather direct listening impressions, it may be assumed that his revisions were not made until 1944 (more likely again 1945). Two such entries, emanating from rehearsal or performance experience, might be mentioned here. In the second movement, measure 35, Bartók added to the last bottom note of the harp: "(sic)." What is involved is an extended unison passage, in which this note appears as B rather than A. Bartók's comment reads:

I have the experience that (good) musicians believed this B to be a misprint for "A". It would be advisable (though unusual) to add a (sic).

We find an earlier suggestion of this point in the autograph (page 43) in what obviously reflects an exchange between a performer or editor and the composer. The former apparently marked the pitch B and placed at the margin: "A?", and Bartók added: "no!" The other entry occurs in the first movement, page 25, measures 179-184. Here Bartók changed twelve dynamic indications with the commentary: "(these are later changes made after I heard the performance)."

