

# BARTÓK AND LITERATURE

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## 1. Text and Music

One of the more disquieting hypotheses to which thinking about the relations between text and music has led me is that such thinking is more effective in exposing the problems than it is in uncovering solutions to them. What has been discovered usually seems to be more useful in pointing out ways in which the existing gap between literary studies and musicology could widen rather than ways in which it might be narrowed.

A case in point is the analysis of modernism in Hungarian literature and music. Although there are many works on the culture of the period that contain suggestions about the link between Bartók's music and the poetry written by his contemporaries, most musicologists seem reluctant to go into details of literary history, and most literary historians confess their inability to draw any conclusions that go beyond their proper sphere. The discrepancy is most conspicuous in treatments of Bartók's vocal music and his opera, a work based on a text discussed more often by musicologists than by literary scholars.

*Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, Bartók's one-act opera, was composed in 1911. Its final revision was not completed until 1921. The first performance took place on 24 May 1918 in the Hungarian Royal Opera; the full score was published by Universal Edition (Wien) in 1925. Unlike Pfitzner or Boulez, Bartók took no profound interest in literature. His opera was his first mature work of vocal music. The majority of his early songs – *Drei Lieder* (1898), *Tiefblaue Veilchen für Gesang und Orchester* (1899), and the sequence of six pieces entitled *Liebeslieder* (1900) – were imitations of German songs, whereas the four songs composed in 1902 on texts by Lajos Pósa (1850–1914) represented a rather superficial nationalist reaction against the dominance of German culture. The gap between these early attempts and the opera is wide, but the difference is even more obvious in musical than in literary terms. Although Balázs wrote poetry that was a far cry from the verse of Pósa both in style and in quality, it would be absurd to claim that the text of Bartók's opera is one of the masterpieces of Hungarian literature.

If the play *Pelléas et Mélisande* is minor poetry, the Hungarian text of *Bluebeard's Castle* is much more inferior. The play is dated in a pejorative sense,

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whereas the opera could be called almost ultra-contemporaneous, despite the fact that it is suffused with period atmosphere. The text makes its presence felt insofar as it is largely responsible for the shortcomings of most performances of the opera.

The roots of the problem lie in the rules of the Hungarian language. In Hungarian words the first syllable is stressed. The result is a descending intonation. If the opera is sung in some other language, the musical structure becomes distorted. Artists as eminent as Christa Ludwig and Jessie Norman have recorded the work in Hungarian. Admirable as their efforts are, they could not succeed in making a distinction between long and short vowels and consonants, which broaden and shorten the rhythmic values, and thus represent a departure from the printed page. In line 12, for instance, Walter Berry pronounces the words “Mennél vissza?” (“Would you like to turn back?”) with a short, instead of a long “n.”

There is, of course, no single answer to the question of why the composer decided to set the play to music. Sometimes it is assumed that Bartók’s interest in the text has to be explained with reference to his first marriage. My hypothesis is that there may have been a more abstract reason for the composer’s attraction to *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle*: the idea of the conflict between intruder and intruded upon, a tension that grows only more profound as their relations develop. Familiarity breeds incomprehension. To Judith, obsessed with a desire to see the secrets of the castle, Bluebeard appears less and less accessible; to him Judith seems less and less interesting.

The text of *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* was not written as a libretto. Composed in 1910, it was published in the June 23, 1910 issue of *Szinjáték*. In 1912 it appeared in a somewhat modified version in a book entitled *Misztériumok* (Mysteries), a collection of three one-act plays. It would be difficult to argue that the play was regarded as an important artistic achievement by any specialist of Hungarian literature. Even Carl S. Leafstedt, the author of the single book on the opera, admits that when Bartók submitted his work to a Hungarian competition, “it was opposition to Balázs’s play, not Bartók’s music, that proved to be the opera’s undoing” (Leafstedt 1999, 144). What is more, there is evidence suggesting that even the composer had reservations about the poetry of Balázs. Upon receiving the text of the folksy play *A halász és a hold ezüstje* (The Fisherman and the Silver of the Moon, 1917), he made the following comment: “I don’t like the text itself very much (I find it rather commonplace, like so many of the verses in picture-books for children)” (quoted by Leafstedt 1999, 30). By 1917 Balázs himself reached the conclusion that Bartók’s interest in his poetry was rather limited. “He joined forces with me quite accidentally, without any inner necessity,” he wrote in his diary (Balázs 1982, 313).

Although the composer made no extensive revision of the text published in 1910, the fact that most of the changes were deletions rather than additions might

suggest that he found the language of the play repetitious, perhaps even turgid. In the case of the sixth door scene, even Leafstedt admits redundancy:

When comparing the operatic text with the original play, one senses that Bartók found Balázs's dialogue a little cumbersome in this scene, or at least unnecessary at times. Of the alterations he did make, many involve a reduction of repeated lines. This is particularly evident in the final section of the scene, where he cuts nine of the twenty-eight lines spoken by Bluebeard and Judith (Leafstedt 1999, 113).

In one respect Bartók's alterations were so significant that they changed the outcome of the drama. The analyst admits this but he fails to realize that this undermines his claim about the artistic integrity of Balázs's work.

In the original play, Bluebeard protests when Judith demands the seventh key. He asserts one more time that he won't open the last door: 'Judith! / I won't open it.' Bartók cuts these words. In his hands, the figure of Bluebeard becomes more passive, more victimlike, at this final moment of confrontation. In contrast, Judith is stronger, more assertive. This increased polarization of character has the effect of portraying Bluebeard in a more sympathetic light (Leafstedt 1999, 113).

The upshot is that the playwright and the composer interpret the relationship between Judith and Bluebeard in different ways. Balázs views Judith as a victim, whereas Bartók regards her as an intruder by associating her with chromaticism. It was one of the composer's deep-seated preconceptions that pentatonic music stood for a natural, organic mode of life. He regarded folk music "as a sort of *Urpflanze*," "equating Nature and tonality" (Tallián 1987, 179, 177). Because of this, it is somewhat misleading to assert that "Bartók was conscious of the text's inherent structure and chose to reflect that structural framework in his music" (Leafstedt 1999, 115). The idea that a text has some "inherent structure" is in contradiction with the deeply historical mode of existence characterizing all texts. Besides, it is difficult to see how a piece of music can "reflect" a literary structure.

## 2. From Text to Context

Leafstedt's book is symptomatic in the sense that it represents the cultural studies approach to Bartók's opera that characterizes most treatments of *Bluebeard's Castle*. Much emphasis is put on the context at the risk of misreading the play. "The silent lake of tears that rises," we are told, "gray and lifeless, behind the sixth door is interpreted by Judith as the tears of Bluebeard's former wives" (Leafstedt 1999, 36). This observation contradicts the text:

## JUDITH

I can see a sheet of water,  
 White and tranquil sleeping water.  
 What is this mysterious water?

## BLUEBEARD

Tears, my Judith, tears. tears.

In what is called “contextual studies” – part III of Leafstedt’s book, consisting of two chapters – much information is given in the form of a catalogue about speculations concerning the innocence or guilt of the historic Gilles de Rais and the fictional accounts of his life. The link between text and context is far from being obvious; it is difficult to see, for instance, how operettas or musical comedies may be helpful for the understanding of Bartók’s opera. A question arises as to the basis for the selection of the material covered by the comparative scholar. The single criterion offered is the name. The same may be true of the second contextual study: “Like the name Bluebeard (as we saw in the previous chapter), the name Judith descends from an extended lineage in European art and literature. Consequently, it bears considerable symbolic meaning in the context of this opera, particularly when we realize just who it is that Bluebeard has invited into his castle” (Leafstedt 1999, 186). The idea that a character in a literary work has intrinsic qualities irrespective of the work itself leads to the assumption that writers work with ready-made elements. This view may represent a rather dated version of thematic criticism. In the Apocrypha of the Old Testament Judith saves her people by decapitating the Assyrian general Holofernes. Leafstedt blames the Hungarian musicologist György Kroó for ignoring the link between Judith and the heroine of Bartók’s opera. In my view the resemblance is so distant that it may not be worth a thorough analysis. The influence of Hebbel’s *Judith* on Balázs’s play is suggested but this hypothesis is not supported by any substantial analysis of the German text. Although Balázs published an essay on Hebbel in the journal *Nyugat* in 1908, the idea of tragic guilt cannot be ascribed to Hebbel; it has a wide and highly complex history. From Aristotle to Nietzsche several major philosophers tackled the problem, and in the second half of the nineteenth century leading Hungarian critics published books and long essays on the tragic as aesthetic quality.

“Judith leaves her sword – her basic identifying feature – behind” (Leafstedt 1999, 198). A supposition like this is risky because it can easily lead to the view that literature can be reduced to the circulation of ready-made elements. The dissimilarities between Hebbel’s five-act tragedy and Balázs’s mystery play are striking. For example, the German work has a great number of characters and is written in prose. The distance between the two dramas is so great that their comparison may reveal the limits rather than the advantages of thematic research.

Quite different is the case with *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*. “In fact, stylistically very little in *Bluebeard* can be traced to this play,” says Leafstedt about Maeterlinck’s play (Leafstedt 1999, 38). This claim seems unjustified. *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue ou la délivrance inutile*, a “conte en trois actes” composed in 1901 and transformed by Paul Dukas into an opera that had its first performance in 1907, shares several features with *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle*. Like Judith, Ariane is surprised to see that the previous wives “ne sont pas mortes.” “Les six clefs d’argents sont permises, mais la clef d’or est interdite. C’est la seule qui importe,” she says. Although the structure of the Belgian poet’s play differs from that of *Bluebeard’s Castle*, both are based on an opposition between darkness and light.

A misrepresentation of the context may easily lead to a misreading of the text. “Why must she be entombed? She has done nothing morally wrong in opening the doors” (Leafstedt 1999, 44). Both the question and the answer suggest an irrelevant characterization of Judith. If the castle stands for the soul of the hero – and this unfortunately is made too explicit in the text – Bluebeard’s remark that the doors are bolted because “none must see what is behind them” and his request from Judith to love without asking questions make it more than obvious that she can have freedom only if she is willing to ignore the previous life of Bluebeard.

It has been suggested that Balázs and his friend, the philosopher György Lukács, had become dissatisfied with the aesthetics of French Symbolism and transcended it by a return to Romanticism. The evidence Leafstedt offers is second-hand information: a statement is quoted from one of the American works on the Hungarian culture of the early twentieth century about “the crisis of aestheticism” that gripped many Hungarians (Gluck 1985, 138). This argument is too sketchy to be satisfactory. First of all, the links between Romanticism and Symbolism are well-known. One of the essays in Maeterlinck’s *Le Trésor des Humbles* (1896), a book widely known to Hungarians both in the original and in translation, is about Novalis. As for Balázs and Lukács, they preferred German Romanticism to French Symbolism from the outset of their careers to the end of World War I, when they joined the Communist movement. Cultural historians are right to insist that both authors had a German culture. What could be added is that except for an essay on Maeterlinck, there is no evidence that Balázs took any interest in Francophile Symbolism.

Until the end of World War I Hungary was part of the Habsburg Empire. In 1848 Hungarians tried to liberate themselves from Vienna, but their revolution was crushed. In 1908 the journal *Nyugat*, which published Balázs’s essay on Maeterlinck, was started with the explicit desire to represent a reaction against German cultural hegemony. Understandably, Mihály Babits (1883–1941), one of the major authors of the circle of *Nyugat*, expressed reservations about the pro-German attitude that characterized the activity of Balázs. When the war broke out,

Balázs expressed his enthusiasm about Hungary's participation on the side of Germany, whereas Babits wrote pacifist verse that provoked the banning of *Nyugat*. The suggestion that Babits's criticism was based on anti-Semitism is not legitimate. Even a superficial familiarity with the works of this author would make such an interpretation seem absurd. In any case, the explanation given in the only book-length study of Bartók's opera is hardly compatible with scholarly investigation: "It has been suggested to me that Babits's choice of the word 'German' here was probably meant as a euphemism for 'Jewish'. Undercurrents of anti-Semitism may therefore be present in Babits's review" (Leafstedt 1999, 211).

While international implications are often emphasized, the Hungarian context is usually ignored in books on Hungarian music and literature. Well-known figures are viewed against a superficially described background. György Lukács is given the "role of generational voice" (Leafstedt 1999, 4). He and Balázs were undeniably close friends in the first decades of the twentieth century and shared an interest in German philosophy and literature. Bartók's values were radically different from theirs in most respects. The idea that these three intellectuals found themselves in a world marked by an "increasingly strong sense of Hungarian national identity that began to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century" (Leafstedt 1999, 3) is based on insufficient historical evidence. The age in which Lukács, Balázs, and Bartók worked could be characterized by the decline rather than the rise of Romantic nationalism. The correct observation that *Bluebeard's Castle* "begins and ends in total darkness" (Leafstedt 1999, 37) should suggest that the inspiration may have come from the monologue of the Night in *Csongor and Tünde* (1831), a verse play by Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855), known as one of the masterpieces composed at the time of the rise of Romantic nationalism. This work was taught in Hungarian secondary schools, and admired by writers as different as Babits and Lukács. Leó Weiner (1885–1960) composed incidental music for it that had its first performance in Budapest in 1915. Bartók must have known about this work, since he was in contact with its composer. In 1911 he, Zoltán Kodály, Weiner, and three other musicians founded an Association for New Hungarian Music. In any case, the structural parallels between Vörösmarty's verse play and the text of Bartók's opera have been pointed out by scholars (Lendvai 1983, 220).

There is no denying that the young Bartók could not escape the impact of German culture, but by the time he composed his opera, he was determined to distance himself from it. There may be traces of the influence of Wagner in *Bluebeard's Castle*, but they should not be overestimated. The similarity between Elsa's and Judith's redeeming love and their curiosity about the identity and past of their partners has been known at least since the analyses by György Kroó, a musicologist specializing in Wagner and Bartók. The same scholar drew a parallel between the music associated with the opening of the sixth door and Ortrud (Kroó 1974,

61–62, 65). In contrast, the claim that “Bluebeard is in many ways modeled on the Dutchman type” (Leafstedt 1999, 47) seems exaggerated, and the same is true of the following comparison of Senta and Judith: “Like Senta looking at the Dutchman’s picture on the wall, Judith’s longing for Bluebeard arose before she knew him” (Leafstedt 1999, 180). In Wagner’s work Senta’s ballad paves the way for the appearance of the hero, whereas in Bartók’s opera the first words are sung by Bluebeard.

In many respects the music of *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle* is the expression of a desire to distance Hungarian from German culture, a desire that was shared by the poets Babits and Ady, as well as by the composers Bartók and Kodály. Ady and Babits turned to Baudelaire for inspiration, Bartók and Kodály to Debussy. In the obituary he published in *Nyugat* in 1918 Kodály characterized Debussy’s music as an antidote against the hegemony of German music in general and “the pathos of Wagner” in particular (Kodály 1918, 641). Bartók was also attracted to the works of the French composer. In 1921 he described the music of Kodály in the following manner: “His art, just as mine, is rooted in Hungarian peasant music and in contemporary French music” (Bartók 1921, 235). Leafstedt draws attention to this in his analysis of the composer’s revisions to his opera, which is by far the most interesting chapter of his book, even if it contains a somewhat far-fetched conclusion: “Were it not for the Hungarian language and the occasional Hungarian inflection in the vocal lines, large parts of the original ending to *Bluebeard’s Castle* might easily be mistaken for the work of Debussy” (Leafstedt 1999, 135).

The male protagonist of the opera sings pentatonic phrases, whereas Judith’s role is associated with chromatic and whole-tone chords and segments. The tension between the two kinds of material is understandable in view of Bartók’s allegiance to the high culture of the West and the folklore of the pre-industrial peasants of Hungary. As a collector of old-style (pentatonic) folk songs, he tried to cross the limits of the culture represented by Wagner and Brahms, a limit some identified as the dividing line between civilization and barbarity. For him the peasants of Transylvania represented all that seemed alien to the West. He viewed them as the Other that Western civilization would annihilate.

Bartók’s music came to represent a meeting of East and West, archaic peasant and modern urban culture, infancy and adulthood, a static, closed and a dynamic, open world. The tension suggests that he believed that this meeting is fatal for the archaic but might also turn out to be the cause of the decline of our historical consciousness. In the text of Balázs peasant culture was a decorative element, whereas in Bartók’s music it appears as an alternative to the legacy of Wagner and Brahms. Of course, the idea which makes pre-industrial village life seem to be a way of life without history, a closed off world, sufficient in and of itself, is a fiction.

### 3. Literature vs. Music

Despite the fact that Bartók's interest in literature was rather limited, it cannot be denied that his artistic development was affected by his reading. The Secessionist poetry of Balázs was radically different from the conservative verse of Pósa, but it was Ady's work that had the most significant influence on him. In the spring of 1908 Kodály gave him a copy of *Blood and Gold*, the poet's fourth volume, published in 1907. "I am sending you a book of poems by Ady," Bartók wrote to a Romanian friend in 1912. "He is our youngest poet, but the most respected since Petőfi and Arany. I suggest that you read particularly the poems on pages 30, 34, 38, 43, 49, 88, 106, 115" (Ujfalussy 1971, 126, translation slightly modified). Although Leafstedt gives incorrect biographical information about Ady – it is not true that this poet "spent many years in Paris before publishing his sensational *New Poems* in 1906" (Leafstedt 1999, 33) – the American scholar's hypothesis that the "harmonic language of *Bluebeard's* 1917 ending" may have been affected by the innovations introduced in the *Five Songs* (op. 16), based on poems by Ady, deserves serious attention (Leafstedt 1999, 155). A closer look at this sequence may support the view that Bartók's opera underwent significant change during the revisions. It can also shed light on the composer's image of women and on his approach to national identity. For historians of Hungarian literature it is a well-known fact that a new interpretation of love and a new self-portrayal of Hungarians were among the distinguishing features of Ady's poetry.

The poems Bartók selected for his own purpose are not those he recommended in the letter quoted above. The volume he sent to his friend was *On the Chariot of Elijah*, published in 1908. Four of the poems he set to music were taken from *Blood and Gold*, arguably the poet's strongest collection. The third song is based on a piece published in *I Would Like to Be Loved* (1909). The last two songs have texts that belong to "Leda's Golden Statue," a cycle in which love is portrayed as a violent battle between men and women.

For those who cannot read Hungarian it is virtually impossible to see the relationship between text and music in Bartók's op. 16. To translate Ady is notoriously difficult. The edition published by Boosey and Hawkes does not even mention the author of the texts. It has an English version by Nancy Bush and a German one by R. St. Hoffmann. The same translations accompany the Hungaroton recording made in 1992.

Bartók's Ady songs were composed almost simultaneously with Op. 15, five songs based on poems written by two young girls. "Two songs of Op. 15 were written first – on 5 and 6 February 1916 – but the second song of the Op. 16 cycle followed almost immediately in this month. And while the Op. 15 cycle was only completed in August, Op. 16 was ready as early as April" (Lampert 1993, 407–408). A comparison of Op. 15. no. 1 and Op. 16. no. 1 suggests that the text by the



fifteen-year-old Klára Gombossy translates better than Ady's poem. The young girl's love poem can be rendered literally, whereas the repetitions so characteristic of Ady's Symbolism are absent from the translations. The German version needs extra notes. Op. 16. no. 2 clearly shows that the English version has a similarly fundamental weakness: it needs more words. In bar 23, for instance, Ady's phrase "Egy régi ember" (meaning something like "A man from the past," in the more acceptable German version "Ein Mensch vor Zeiten") is rendered as "An old man falters." This is a specifically marked detail of the poem. Accordingly, the piano is silent. The element added by the English translator is incompatible with the context of the poem.

The third of the Ady songs proves that the English text can be a distortion both on the semantic and on the syntactic level. "Mein Bett ruft" is at least a rough translation of "Az ágyam hívogat." The English title "Lost Content" has nothing to do with the original. The structure of the Hungarian poem is governed by a series of infinitives. Each of these is repeated once. They are meant to stress the impersonal nature of the transformation of a bed into a coffin. At the end the singer is left unaccompanied. The first word of the poem is repeated. "I'm lying down" would be the literal semantic equivalent. "Now I come" ("Ich komme schon") is the version in the score published in the United States.

In Op. 16. no. 4 the rhythmic structure closely follows the verbal patterns. This song again confirms that pure morphological repetition used by the poet to suggest that the "same words" can have different meanings is entirely missing in the English translation, which has more words at the expense of poetic effect. It is possible to reach the conclusion that the German text needs more notes, whereas the English requires more words. In the last song of the cycle the refrain "Én meghalok" ("I die") is distorted by the addition of "alas," bringing in an element of self-complaint that is entirely at odds with the bitter, even sarcastic tone of the poem.

After the Ady songs Bartók never set any Hungarian poetry to music. My hypothesis is that the reason for this could be linked to the composer's experience with his opera and the op. 16. cycle. Whatever he thought of the text of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, he could not ignore the widely-held view that the verse composed by Balázs was inferior to his music. As for the songs, the translations of Ady's poems proved to be unsatisfactory, both in a literary and in a musical sense. Although Adrian Collins called the Ady songs "the most perfect works of Bartók, if not the greatest" in 1929 (Dille 1990, 300), Op. 16 had very few performances after Ilona Durigó sang them for the first time in Budapest on 21 April 1919.

Bartók could not read poetry in any other language than Hungarian. For him there was no chance to set verse to music if he desired to reach an international audience. That may have been the reason for his decision not to continue with the experiment represented by the Ady songs. *Cantata Profana* for double mixed

chorus, tenor and baritone solo, is an exception but only in a limited sense. This work, composed in 1930, is based on the composer's own and very free translation of a Romanian "kolinda," which he collected in Transylvania. The London première in 1934 may have confirmed Bartók's belief that the difficulties of performing vocal music based on Hungarian texts were so great that a composer aspiring to have an international reputation should refrain from setting Hungarian texts to music. After World War I Bartók's international career developed very fast. He could expect Furtwängler, Rosbaud, Mengelberg, Sacher, and Menuhin to perform his instrumental works but could not ask non-Hungarian artists to sing his vocal music. Bartók's musical innovations were certainly influenced by literary modernism but in this case the interrelations between the two arts can be perceived only by those who are familiar with the Hungarian language.

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