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Source: *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T. 41, Fasc. 4 (2000), pp. 457-465

Published by: Akadémiai Kiadó

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/902612>

Accessed: 18-01-2016 07:14 UTC

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Bartók's Place in Cultural History

Mihály SZEGEDY-MASZÁK

Judit Frigyesi: *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*
Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1998, 357 pp.

A literary historian is not qualified to comment on a work by a musicologist unless it deals with literature as much as with music. The author of this book attempts to situate Bartók's music in cultural history. She aims high – perhaps a little too high – but the book has undeniably a much wider horizon than most, if not all, full-length studies of the works of the greatest Hungarian musician of the first half of the twentieth century.

Her analyses of Bartók's compositions are impeccable. The closer we are to the structural examination of specific pieces of music, the more convincing the arguments are. The emphasis on the "variational technique" (251) seems her overriding concern. This is an excellent starting point, for it helps us understand "the developmental process of the music" (261), "thematic relations," "the dialectic of unity and utmost opposition" (281), which may involve a recapitulation that "appears to be the result of a gradual process and yet strikes the listener as something unexpected" (273). The composer's ability to transform material is demonstrated with rare sensibility. It is a pity that this production-oriented train of thought is not supplemented by a study of actual (recorded) performances. There is one exception: the assessment of the recordings of the remarkable Mária Basilides (accompanied by Bartók himself) in a brief yet highly pertinent note (330–31).

It might be a slight self-contradiction that although the reconstruction of the goals of the artist is brought under question, the focus is on "Bartók's artistic decisions" (119). Fortunately, during the actual analysis of Bartók's works structural relations are interpreted with references to the listener's experience. This is quite evident in the discussion of the *First Piano Concerto*: "the many themes derived from the introduction become gradually more and more distanced from their common thematic origin (...). Because the technical aspects of these themes change very gradually, the listener experiences each change of character as surprising and yet somewhat unavoidable" (137). What the reader may miss is a research into the history of the reception of the works. László Somfai has set an example for such an investigation with his comments on interpretive traditions in his *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). "Wirkungsgeschichte" is an integral part of cultural history; the analysis of different interpretations could be as instructive as the investigation of how Bartók's legacy has survived in the music composed during the more than five decades since his death.

In contrast to the chapter on the *First Piano Concerto*, in the case of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* the author adopts a different perspective by making perceptive comparisons with works by Ernő Dohnányi, Zoltán Kodály, Leó Weiner, and even with other pieces by Bartók. The discussion of Bartók's opera may be the best part of the book, containing illuminating pages on the conceptualization and notation of rubato.

The detailed analysis of the two selected works serves as a solid basis for more general remarks about Bartók's musical style. Among these the most important are related to the composer's interest in folk music. Although some of the criticism levelled at Schönberg's preconceptions may be too harsh and some readers could ask for a more substantial comparison with Stravinsky, the parallel drawn with the second Viennese school leads to a conclusion that deserves special attention: "The theory Bartók devised for his folklore-based style is no less artificial than Schönberg's and Webern's thesis claiming the universal necessity of twelve-tone music. Similar to theirs, Bartók's concept intellectualized a highly personal artistic style in a manner that could be seen as part of a common European aesthetic tradition. (...) In fact, it would be misleading to say that Bartók's aim was to integrate elements of folk music or even to organically derive the new style from it. What he wanted to achieve was a profound understanding of the material of music" (108–109). The argument that Bartók's position has to be given a historical interpretation is further strengthened by the approach to "gypsy music" that is entirely free of dogmatism. Relying on the works of Bálint Sárosi, Judit Frigyesi admits that the composer criticized "gypsy music" "with the enthusiasm typical of a new convert" and views its sharp separation from "peasant music" as belonging to the paradigm Bartók "created for himself" (245).

When focusing on organicism, Frigyesi has put finger on issues of vital importance. Bartók's idea of a natural "Weltanschauung" that has not been corrupted by urban civilization is undoubtedly part of a Romantic legacy. What may be problematic in the author's line of argument is a consequence of a somewhat loose terminology. "Romanticism" and "Modernism" are used without paying attention to the continuing debates over their definition. Once again, there may be a self-contradiction. On the one hand, the author remarks that "it is always difficult and sometimes foolhardy to reconstruct the purpose of an artist" (2), on the other hand, she is reluctant to examine the relations between the composer's declarations and the impact of his music. In view of the predominance of the organicist view of art since the later eighteenth century, it is not easy to accept the claim that "the revival of the organicist theory means less the continuation of prevailing concepts of art than a break with them" (90). In so far as Bartók regarded peasant culture as organic, his position was in perfect harmony with the legacy of Romanticism. Webern admitted that his organicist conception, the idea that there was no sharp distinction between products of nature and those of art, was inspired by Goethe's morphological worldview.¹

The author's thesis that Modernism subscribed to an organicist aesthetics has been questioned by John Neubauer,² a cultural historian whose earlier works stress the problematic ideological implications of the biologicistic approach to art and history.³ The book widely

¹ Anton von Webern: *Wege zur neuen Musik*. Wien: Universal Edition, 1960, 10.

² John Neubauer: "Overtones of Culture". *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 243–254.

³ John Neubauer: "Morphological Poetics?" *Style* 22 (1988), 263–274; "Organic Form in Romantic Theory: The Case of Goethe's Morphology". Larry H. Peer, ed.: *Romanticism across the Disciplines*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1998, 207–230.

regarded as the most thorough historical study of the subject, Lotte Thaler's *Organische Form in der Musiktheorie des 19. und beginnenden 20. Jahrhunderts* (München–Salzburg: Katzbichler, 1984), traces the organicist music theory from Adolf Bernhard Marx through Hugo Riemann to Heinrich Schenker and Hans Mersmann. This continuity was not broken before the rise of the avant-garde. Marinetti's insistence on the beauty of the machine made its influence felt throughout Europe, including Hungary. In 1915 Lajos Kassák started his first Activist journal, *A Tett*. By consensus his free-verse text *Craftsmen* (1915) is regarded as bringing a paradigm shift in Hungarian literature. His movement meant a serious challenge for *Nyugat*. One of the fundamental differences between the aesthetics represented by the leading contributors of the two periodicals was that the first group accepted, whereas the second rejected the ideal of organic form.

Frigyesi's book nowhere deals with the Hungarian avant-garde, except for some passing references. This may be a serious weakness. While with the exceptions of Kosztolányi and his cousin, Géza Csáth, the most original writers associated with *Nyugat* never wrote about Bartók and neither the poet Ady nor the philosopher Lukács expressed any interest in modern music, the composer found some of his strongest supporters in Kassák's circle. What may be even more important is that the representatives of this avant-garde movement tended to view Bartók's music as a manifestation of their aesthetics. It would be interesting to know the reasons for this. The question could be asked whether the spokesmen of the avant-garde associated internal repetitions with the inorganic, in the same way as Furtwängler, a late Romantic representative of the tradition surveyed by Lotte Thaler – who regarded the great artwork as a “living organism” or “organic development” (*Werden*)⁴ – was inclined to associate Bartók's music with “construction” (*das Konstruierte*), on the basis of the composer's instruction on the exact duration of his pieces,⁵ and perhaps also under the impact of what has been called “the motoristic drive” in the first movement of the *First Piano Concerto*,⁶ a work that had its first performance with Furtwängler as conductor. Of course, it is quite possible that both the German conductor-composer's reservations about and the avant-garde admiration for Bartók's music may be considered partial misinterpretations due to a failure to understand Bartók's rubato performance.

How can we define the relations between Modernism and the avant-garde? This question leads to issues that need a different competence from that of the analyst of musical compositions. Frigyesi insists that Bartók's work has to be examined in the context of his age. This is a very important thesis, but my impression is that the early twentieth century was a more complex period than suggested in this book.

In some respects, the panoramic character of the investigation is combined with remarkable subtlety of perception. The author avoids a serious pitfall by translating “faj” as “ethnicity” and not as “race,” and she is no doubt right in arguing that Bartók's interest in folk music was inseparable from his desire “to arrive at a higher level of simplicity”: “Simplicity was both at the beginning and at the end of the road in the development of artistic ex-

⁴ Wilhelm Furtwängler: *Ton und Wort: Aufsätze und Vorträge 1918 bis 1954*. Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1966, 12, 186, 215; *Briefe*. Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1965, 214; *Aufzeichnungen 1924–1954*. Zürich: Atlantis, 1996, 77, 142; *Gespräche über Musik*. Siebte Auflage. Zürich: Atlantis, 1958, 40.

⁵ Wilhelm Furtwängler: *Vermächtnis: Nachgelassene Schriften*. Dritte Auflage. Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1956, 38; *Aufzeichnungen*, 288.

⁶ Halsey Stevens: *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*. Revised edition. London–Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 233.

pression" (98–99). No less convincing are the parallels between the composer's interest in peasant culture and the inspiration drawn from peasant architecture by secessionist artists or between the forgeries of Kálmán Thaly and Ady's imitations of songs sung by poor fugitives in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Problems start when the value-judgement implicit in such a phrase as "the sickness and corrupt selfishness of Hungarian society" (168) is not supported by a thorough analysis.

The idea that the "road to modernization and democratization" (92) was the same may involve a tacit acknowledgment of the Marxist preconception that the superstructure is a reflection of the base. Sometimes Marxist clichés occur in the characterization of Hungarian society and literary works are given a rather simplistic treatment. In one case a psychologically motivated detail is taken out of context, in another a bitterly grotesque parody of the 1848 revolution is misinterpreted: "For Arany, the portrayal of Toldi would not have been complete without a scene of dancing and drinking – but in the *Gypsies of Nagyida*, another of his epic poems, he caricatured the *verbunkos* mania" (58–59). We have seen many cases of the literary misappropriation of musical works. It seems that not much less irrelevant can be a musicologist's readings of literary texts.

Let us turn to an even thornier question. Throughout its long history Hungarian nationalism had many versions. It is absolutely justifiable to criticize Dezső Bánffy, whose government introduced chauvinistic measures between 1895 and 1898, but it is advisable to be careful with generalizations, even when speaking about such a class as the Hungarian aristocracy. We could mention, for instance, Miklós Bánffy, another member of the same Transylvanian family, who was appointed by the Hungarian prime minister to exercise control over the Budapest Opera House in the years 1912–18. Tibor Tallián has collected the evidence suggesting that it was thanks to the support of this aristocrat and politician that *The Wooden Prince* was performed.⁷ Some members of the old ruling class resisted chauvinism, and some versions of nationalism were not necessarily incompatible with Bartók's outlook. It is an exaggeration to maintain that "Bartók selected the folk-music sources of his Hungarian national music in such a manner that his folklorism could not be used to support the nationalism of the political establishment" (21). It is not quite easy to endorse the following declaration: "The claim that features of Hungarian peasant songs could be traced back before the conquest of Hungary challenged the traditional view of the conquest as the very moment of the nation's birth – the origin of everything truly Hungarian" (79). Some of the literary texts that Bartók had to read in secondary school tied national identity to pre-conquest times. In *A Short History of Hungarian Literature (A magyar irodalom kistükre, 1896)*, a work that "served for almost half a century as a kind of secular Bible, a paragon of style and a measuring rod in secondary schools and especially for Conservative instructors," the criteria of being Hungarian were "traced back to the nomadic ancestors of the steppe in the Volga region". Zsolt Beöthy, the author of the book, was a highly influential ideologue of the "gentry" class and an advocate of the organicist interpretation of culture.⁸

No cultural historian starts from scratch. In this book an astonishingly large number of sources is cited but sometimes the selection is arbitrary. Two books published in America on

⁷ Tibor Tallián: "A gróf szolgálatában: Bánffy Miklós az Opera élén (1912–1918)". *Protestáns Szemle* 55 (1993), 189–197.

⁸ Béla G. Németh: *A magyar irodalomkritikai gondolkodás a pozitivizmus korában: A kiegyezéstől a századfordulóig*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981, esp. 201–204 and 379–380.

the intellectual life of early-twentieth-century Budapest: *Literature and Cultural Change: Budapest, 1908–1918* by Mario Fenyo (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1987), the only monograph on the journal *Nyugat* available in English, and *Béla Balázs: The Man and the Artist* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), a 550-page-long biography by Joseph Zsuffa, could have been consulted. Among the Hungarian sources that could have inspired the author to develop a more nuanced interpretation, the special issue of *Huszadik Század*, entitled “The Jewish Question in Hungary” (1917) deserves mention, together with those works on Lukács which do not neglect the philosopher’s texts written in German. As is well-known, in his later years Lukács became a Marxist philosopher. His inclination to social prophecy cannot be ignored when reading his early works. “The weaknesses of the later work are already present from the beginning,” as Paul de Man observed. “The roots of Lukács’s later dogmatic commitment to realism are certainly to be found” in the works written in the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁹ If this interpretation is correct – and much evidence could be cited to prove the young philosopher’s Conservative taste – it may be questionable to associate Lukács with artistic Modernism.

From a Postcommunist perspective some of the sources cited in this book seem dated. This makes some interpretations vulnerable, especially in the case of second-hand references. Zoltán Horváth’s book on turn-of-the-century Hungary was published in 1961, a few years after the revolution of 1956 was crushed. Although it still has some validity, its fairly dogmatic Marxist approach – characterized by such clichés as “Horthy fascism,” “a half-feudal society,” and “a never completely finished bourgeois revolution” – has been long surpassed. Judit Frigyesi calls him a “historian”, in contrast to the author of the “Afterword” to the second edition, who tried to warn the reader by calling him “a publicist rather than a scholar”.¹⁰ To derive second-hand information from this work implies that one accepts the preconceptions of its author. In a similar way, it may lead to distortions to characterize Ady’s poetry with the help of a book published in 1949, the darkest phase of Communism, written by József Révai, the cultural dictator of the period.

In any case, some of the generalizations in this book are in conflict with the results of recent scholarship. Krúdy, Ady, Móricz, Babits, and Kosztolányi insisted so much on their close ties with their literal and spiritual ancestors that it is one-sided to assert that “all members of this generation found themselves opposing the ideas they had inherited from their parents” (2). Furthermore, some literary works are described in contradiction with cultural and literary history. Three nineteenth-century authors: Vörösmarty, Széchenyi, and Madách are compared in one sentence: “His dark images were preceded by Széchenyi’s vision of the country as a barren and deserted fallow land, and this topic was explored in Imre Madách’s *Tragedy of Man*” (67). Since the lyrical drama last named has no more than one hardly perceptible allusion to Hungary, and this reference is to the fifteenth-century warrior János Hunyadi, it is difficult to understand the statement. In a later chapter *The Tragedy* is given a fanciful interpretation. The hero’s decision not to commit suicide is explained in the following way: “He chooses to live, not out of fear of death and not even simply because of his love for life but because he understands that spirit is not possible without life” (189). Readers fa-

⁹ Paul de Man: *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed., rev. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 52, 55.

¹⁰ Péter Nagy: “Utószó”. Zoltán Horváth: *Magyar századforduló: A második reformnemzedék története (1896–1914)*. Second edition. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1974, 623.

miliar with the text will know that Adam's desire is to make the history of mankind impossible. When Eve tells him that she is pregnant, he falls on his knees, acknowledging God's victory: "Lord, you have conquered."

One of the reasons why it is difficult to make interarts comparisons is the lack of a common terminology. The reader of this book will be uncertain whether "symbol" is a synonym for "representation" or "expression" (266), or – if the answer is "no" – how these concepts may be related. Of course, such problems of terminology also apply to many other scholarly studies. Musicologists have a language of their own for structural analysis but when they attempt a semantic interpretation, they often borrow terms from literary criticism. The rather loose use of such words and expressions as "lyricism," "dramatizing" (244), "musical metaphor" (253), or "musical symbol" (260) may be open to question. In general, "metaphor" and "symbol" are used too often and somewhat vaguely. "Love thus becomes the metaphor for life" (217). Shortly after this statement there is the subtitle "Woman as the Metaphor for Life" (218), and later the following sweeping generalization is made: "in Hungarian modernist literature the act of 'seeing' is a metaphor for love" (261). At the start of the splendid analysis of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* occurs the following sentence: "Night is the symbol of coldness and emotionlessness, and it is the symbol of fiery love. (...) Furthermore, night is the traditional symbol of womanliness (...), but also the symbol of the mystery of existence (...). And finally, total darkness is the symbol of wholeness" (228–29). A literary historian would prefer to connect the libretto to *Csongor and Tünde*, a verse play by Vörösmarty, in which Night has a monologue. Both Balázs and Lukács admired this work and Weiner composed incidental music for it that had its performance three years before Bartók's opera, in 1915.

When a term is undefined, in some cases it may be used too vaguely, whereas in others its field of relevance may be too restricted. This is true of the use of the term "romantic". When it is declared that "the underlying aim of the Viennese was essentially romantic: to attain the maximum potential of art in expressing truth" (39), the reader may wonder whether this statement is about a feature that is specific to Romanticism. On the other hand, the consequences of the Romantic philosophy of language are not considered, although they could support the claims for organicism. In sharp contradiction with Wilhelm von Humboldt's view of language as organism, it is asserted that already "at the middle of the nineteenth century, artists and critics of art proclaimed that 'the great mystery of being' was not expressible in the logical framework of language" (33). One of the distinguishing features of Romantic literature was the separation of logical structures from language, a separation that played a major role in the language-based cultural relativism of Kosztolányi, Bartók's only major Hungarian literary contemporary whose essays on language are significant.¹¹

Western publications that contain texts in Hungarian are always marred by innumerable misprints. Frigyesi must have taken great care to avoid this danger, and in this respect her book is a complete success. Considering the vast literary material covered, it is amazing how few inaccuracies occur. The information given about a photography from 1930, show-

¹¹ I have published several essays on the topic: "Organic Form and Linguistic Relativity." *Proceedings of the Xth Congress of the ICLA*. New York: Garland, 1985, Vol. III, 233–239; "Dezső Kosztolányi." George Stade, ed.: *European Writers: The Twentieth Century*. Vol. 10. New York: Scribner, 1990, 1231–1249; "Kosztolányi nyelv-szemlélete". Ernő Kulcsár Szabó – Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, eds.: *Tanulmányok Kosztolányi Dezsőről*. Budapest: Anonymus, 1998, 259–271.

ing the participants of a *Nyugat* evening (86), is not quite correct. Those familiar with Ady's work will know that *New Poems* (*Új versek*, 1906) was not the poet's first but third verse collection (322). Not much more important is to observe that the writer and translator Marcell Benedek is called Jewish (82), whereas Béla Balázs is characterized as "German on his mother's side" (48), although Benedek's father, Elek Benedek de Kisbacon (1859–1929), the author of short stories based on folk-tales mostly collected by himself, came from the Transylvanian nobility, and Balázs's mother was Jenny Levy. Somewhat more embarrassing is the starting hypothesis about Bartók's contacts with literary Modernism: "He consistently allied himself with the circles whose ideals came closest to those of the radicals before the war (that is, with the literary circles that formed around the journals *Nyugat* (West), *Szép Szó* (Beautiful word), and *Ma* (Today) and not with the mildly right-wing and somewhat racist 'village-movement' " (7). Of the three periodicals, one belongs to the pre-war period. The first issue of *Ma* was published in 1916, and *Szép Szó* (1936–39) was the organ of a later generation. As to the "village movement", some of its representatives (József Darvas, Ferenc Erdei) were Communists.

The last example suggests that Judit Frigyesi's familiarity with Hungarian literary scholarship is uneven. She is perfectly aware of the fundamental shortcomings of the poetry of Balázs, but her treatment of Ady's verse suggests that she does not speak the language of literary history. "The positive message of Ady's art, embracing the entire society, cannot be overestimated" (103–104), she writes. Her task is certainly very difficult, because the "literature on Ady in English is minimal", but her complaint that "he is far from being extensively studied by modern scholars in Hungary" (14) may be correct only if we add that more has been written on Ady than on any other Hungarian writer of the twentieth century.

History is inseparable from reinterpretation. Frigyesi is aware that Ady's poetry "lost something of its appeal for the following generations" (172), and "few in Hungary choose him for their favorite poet" (195). What she could have added is that Ady's works were distorted by the Communists, and this is one of the reasons why his reputation declined in recent years. Although it is quite possible that he will make a come back in the future, today the legacy of Babits and Kosztolányi seems more powerful. When Debussy set *Pelléas* to music, Maeterlinck was much more famous than the "musicien français". Although Ady may be a greater poet for Hungarians than Maeterlinck for the French-speaking audience, it would be pointless to deny that today Bartók's works internationally are far more admired than Ady's verse.

Frigyesi loves Ady's poetry and makes valuable observations about the poems she discusses. Her selection is subjective; it does not do justice to the complexity of the work as a whole. Readers unfamiliar with Hungarian literature will not realize the apparent contradiction between the harsh criticism directed against the poet's Conservative contemporaries and the praise for the "foundational study of Ady's symbolism" written by the Conservative scholar János Horváth (323). Ady made the following statements in *Új Idők*, a Conservative weekly edited by Ferenc Herczeg, in 1908:¹² "I have nothing in common with the so-called modern Hungarians, my alleged rebellion is not a rebellion. (...) I know nothing about the revolution which is attached to my name."

¹² Endre Ady: "A duk-duk affér." *Ady Endre publicisztikai írásai*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1987, 656.

One of the merits of the chapter on Ady in Frigyesi's book is the special emphasis laid on the devotional lyrics that was neglected in Communist Hungary. Unfortunately, no attention is paid to the poet's attraction to the Calvinist concept of predestination, the legacy of Protestantism in Hungarian literature, or the quotations in Ady's works from the late-sixteenth-century Hungarian translation of the Bible. Because of this, the claims that for Ady "God is an entirely secular concept" (183), and the "particular form of mysticism in Ady's poetry comes especially close to the spiritual thinking of East European Jews" (186) seem exaggerated.

Jews played a highly significant role in the intellectual life of Budapest in the early twentieth century and it is very fortunate that this book pays a special attention to their contribution to culture. *Nyugat* was sponsored by industrial magnates of Jewish origin. There is much truth in the statement that "Ady's most faithful supporters and closest friends were two Jews, Béla Reinitz and (...) Hatvany" (82), but the whole truth is more ambiguous. In the above-mentioned article Hatvany is ridiculed, and the sentence "I have nothing in common with those who have failed to learn the Hungarian language"¹³ may contain a criticism of some assimilated Jews.

Sensitive issues cannot be discussed if we paint in black and white. "I have nothing to do with those who have read some German books in a cheap edition and now want to bring salvation to Hungarian literary art at that low price."¹⁴ These words may suggest a kind of inferiority complex, but also dissatisfaction with the German culture of some Hungarian Jews. Because of the tensions inside the *Nyugat* circle and in Hungarian cultural life, "Költés és való" (Poetry and the Real), an article by Ignótyus, published in 1926, can hardly be taken as a text that "represents the aesthetics of the movement in general" (90). Born in 1869, Ignótyus was older than those who introduced innovations into Hungarian verse and prose; his taste was more Conservative. In 1919 he left Hungary and by 1926 his position had become marginal. Shortly after his above-mentioned article was published, his name disappeared from the title page of journal.

Bartók's place in Hungarian culture cannot be defined unless we deconstruct the idea of a monolithic Modernist movement. On 11 August 1913 Ignótyus gave a lecture in the Society for Adult Education. The text appeared in *Nyugat* under the title "World Literature." A short quotation will give an idea of predictions made by its author: "The whole world is but one city – and nothing can change this. (...) one language will be raised to the language of world literature."¹⁵ Whatever the legitimacy of this prophecy, it is a far cry from Bartók's ideal of the uncorrupted rural community, Ady's poem *I Return to My Village* (1907), or the following confession made by Kosztolányi in 1913: "What interests me is the Hungarian country-side (...). It is the land of miracles. Those who are born there will have a wider horizon than anybody brought up in a highly industrialized capital. (...) In a world where nothing happens and life is dominated by drinking wine, playing cards, sadness, and solitude, the soul will have an inner dimension, a strange compression and intensity of emotion. Provincial life is always of psychic character."¹⁶

¹³ Ady: "A duk-duk affér," 656.

¹⁴ Ady: "A duk-duk affér," 656.

¹⁵ Ignótyus: "Világirodalom." *Nyugat* 1913, 275–276.

¹⁶ Dezső Kosztolányi: *Írók, festők, tudósok: Tanulmányok magyar kortársakról*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1958, Vol. II, 333–334.

Judit Frigyesi believes that there are links between Bartók's ideas and the philosophy of Lukács. I am not sure the evidence she provides is entirely satisfactory. The composer is not even mentioned in the vast collection *Ifjúkori művek (1902–1918)* (Budapest: Magvető, 1977). As far as the relations between *Nyugat* and the philosopher are concerned, although he published several essays in the journal, his interests were somewhat at odds with the aims of Ady, Babits, and others, whose effort was to go beyond German culture. In any case, it is not the whole truth that "Hungarian modern art was deeply rooted in the same philosophical tradition as the art of Schoenberg" (23). Strong as the impact of German culture had been throughout history, Hungarians did their best to liberate themselves from it from the early Middle Ages. Art Nouveau architects turned to Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, painters to the French Impressionists, Ady to Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rictus, Babits to William James and Bergson, Swinburne and Wilde, Krúdy to Turgenev, Kassák to Whitman and Apollinaire for inspiration.

In 1910 *Nyugat* published a review of *Soul and Form* by Lukács. One may call it unjust but it clearly shows the fundamental difference between the positions of the most important creative talents associated with *Nyugat* on the one hand and the circle of Lukács on the other. "I have to admit that these ideas are entirely German," Babits wrote. "He is afraid of calling a spade a spade. We cannot overcome our aversion to this modern, affected German terminology (...). This culture is typically German or rather Viennese."¹⁷ Eight years later Kodály expressed similar views in his obituary of Debussy, published in *Nyugat*, and in 1921 Bartók emphasized the significance of the French composer's works in such terms: "when Kodály called my attention to the works of Debussy, I was astonished to see in his works the presence of pentatonic melodies that were comparable to our folk music."¹⁸

All in all, one has to admit that a reader familiar with Bartók's music but ignorant of Hungarian culture may find much information in this book that can help the understanding of the compositions. The shortcomings are related to the inconsistencies. The author is aware how "difficult it is to draw connections between poetry and music," (193) but she has less respect for the internal laws of literature than for those of music. The ambiguity of her attitude is quite apparent in her judgment on the text of Bartók's opera: "Balázs's neglect of the language reflects his belief in the superiority of the concept over verbal expression. (...) the play became really functional as a libretto" (290–91). Once we admit that the play has an "oversimplified pseudo-folk style", it is hardly possible to assert that "the underlying thought is perfect and brilliant" (292). If the author believes that Ady's poems "resist translation" (177), yet she cannot resist the temptation she herself regards as dangerous, she cannot complain if her reader is not happy with her translations. A musicologist cannot be expected to write poetry, yet what is poetry in one language cannot be transformed into versions that are not poetry in another language. It is one thing to insist that Ady's poetry made a great impact on Bartók, another thing entirely to convince a reader ignorant of the Hungarian language of the high artistic quality of Ady's verse. Judit Frigyesi has succeeded in reaching the first goal, but failed to achieve the second objective.

¹⁷ Mihály Babits: *Esszék, tanulmányok*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1978. Vol. I, 158–159.

¹⁸ Béla Bartók: *Írásai*, Vol. I. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1989, 33.