

# Drumming on the keys: Béla Bartók's pianistic style and its linkage to the aesthetics of Primitivism

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of the present article is to define and summarise several characteristics of selected piano music by Béla Bartók as supporting the composer's adherence to the paradigm of Primitivism in light of the composer's own ethnographic work having a strong influence on his compositional practice. The authors investigate the evolution of Bartók's pianistic style from the embedded traditional technical precepts to more innovative solutions aiming at reproducing peculiar features of folksong repertoire on a modern instrument. It is claimed here that, as a consequence, a pianist performing Bartók's music encounters very specific tasks that entail high-level technical mastery and specific tactile approaches to the keyboard, as well as vivid auditory imagination and brilliant creativity.

**KEYWORDS:**  
Primitivism,  
Béla Bartók,  
piano performance,  
pianistic style,  
percussiveness.

## Introduction

Over the 20th century, many different artistic tendencies arose in response to people's astonishment and dismay towards deep changes in the political and socio-economic balance, scientific and technological progress and the ways of daily life. Several artistic movements and trends radically distanced the modernity of the age in favour of a return to a more authentic and people-oriented dimension such as that of the ancestors, likewise represented by the manners of life of native populations from Asia, Africa and Oceania at that time, in the light of Rousseau's *noble savage*.

The word "primitivism" appeared for the first time in a French encyclopaedia, the *Nouveau Larousse illustré*, published between 1897 and 1904, simply as the "imitation of primitives" (Morphy, Perkins 2006: 130). The critics employed this term with a derogatory connotation, in order to describe those artworks directly inspired by native African cultures. Even though Primitivism never became an organised unitary movement, it remained a wide-spread attitude among a variety of artists, regardless of their belonging to different avant-garde groups.

Likewise, musical Primitivism appears as a cross tendency within the work of different music composers in the realm of several major artistic currents during the 20th and 21st centuries. To find a definition of Primitivism in the field of music, therefore, represents quite a challenging task, as the term itself is suited to a large variety of possible interpretations. A rather systematic approach from the visual arts field can be of assistance. The art historian Colin Rhodes defines the broad category of “primitive” in the following way:

The word “primitive” generally refers to someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared. It is conventionally defined in negative terms, as lacking in elements such as organization, refinement and technological accomplishment. In cultural terms this means a deficiency in those qualities that have been used historically in the West as indications of civilization. The fact that the primitive state of being is comparative is enormously important in gaining an understanding of the concept, but equally so is the recognition that it is no mere fact of nature. It is a theory that enables differences to be described in qualitative terms. Whereas the conventional Western viewpoint at the turn of the century imposed itself as superior to the primitive, the Primitivists questioned the validity of that assumption, and used those same ideas as a means of challenging or subverting his or her own culture, or aspects of it. (Rhodes 1995: 13)

In relation to Rhodes' viewpoint on Primitivism, Fred Myers writes:

This relationality may help us to understand an extraordinary diversity of forms within the “primitive”, what Connelly has called “the difficulty in discerning a rationale underlying the chaotic mix of styles identified as primitive”. (...) A consideration of relationality further suggests that the operation of this category must be understood within a particular structure and in relation to the properties of the objects themselves. (Myers 2006: 267)

In 1984, the MOMA exhibition *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, attempted to redefine the boundaries between “primitive” and “modern” in art, pointing out “direct influences”, “coincidental resemblances” and “basic shared characteristics” among contemporary and primitive artworks. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue summarising the influence from several tribal objects from North and South America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe to works by Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse and others (Berman 2001: 21).

The exhibition placed itself on the wavelength of the fundamental assumptions by Robert Goldwater in his treatise *Primitivism and Modern Art* (1938), aiming at discovering the foundation of all various facets of modern Primitivism. According to him,

Modern Primitivists deemed simplicity and basicness to be more profound, more important and more valuable than the complexity and sophistication that define modern civilization; they assumed that the closer one gets to historical, psychological or aesthetics origins, the simpler things become. (...) In this search for simplicity and for “lower origins”, modern artists valued tribal arts, whose intensity and directness of emotional expression they believed to be more important than the technique employed to fashion the object. In addition to artifacts of foreign provenance, modern artists also appreciated certain European arts, such as those produced by peasants, children, and the insane, where, again, a direct conveyance of emotion was thought to overshadow the medium itself. (Goldwater 1938: 253)

On a similar basis, diverse interpretations of the idea of the “primitive” can be distinguished in the field of music, ranging from peasant and tribal music to child-like music towards the over-simplification of Minimalism. Primitivism in piano music, which is the primary object of this article, has been differently manifested within works of composers from the 20th century on. Forerunners of this trend may be traced back to the compositions by Claude Debussy, directly influenced by Javanese *gamelan* music and thus significantly linking the pianistic style towards percussiveness, along with a remarkable exotic flair. Later, such composers as Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky proficiently exploited this orientation, while also glancing at their own national folkloric backgrounds. Their attitude resulted in a more distinguishable primeval character due to rather specific characteristics of music: pan-diatonic melodies, avoiding any hierarchy of functions; bi-modality and bi-tonality, generating harsh dissonances; complex and often asymmetric meters; frequent use of sound masses, determining a strong percussive effect.

The focus of the present article is the selected piano music of the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881–1945) as featuring particular links with Primitivist aesthetics.

## 1. Béla Bartók's ethnography as a path towards a new musical language

The piano works by Béla Bartók represent one of the most outstanding cases of expression of a primeval character on a modern instrument, leading to considerable changes and developments in instrumental writing and technique. The style of Bartók's music went through several different phases during his creative life, in which a significant turning point is represented by his discovery of folk music in 1904 and the following ethnomusicologic activity until 1917–18, corresponding to the achieved economic stability after the enormous success of his ballet *The Wooden Prince* (Ritchie 1986: 7). The composer's fieldwork led to a recollection of three-hundred and twenty strophic

items as representative of over a thousand folk songs classified by tune, range, rhythms, metric, ratio of variation, performance peculiarities and other parameters.

Bartók's interest in folk music arose in 1904 after graduating from the Academy of Music in Budapest. It was fueled by the aim at distancing himself from a certain influence by Romantic composers in his early works, such as the Rhapsody Op. 1 for piano solo (1904) that glanced back to Liszt's pianism. Bartók gave evidence of this trend reversal for the first time in a letter to his sister in December of the same year: "Now I have a new plan: to collect the finest Hungarian folksongs and raise them, adding the best possible piano accompaniments, to the level of art-song" (Eremiášová 2001: 3).

However, it must be emphasised that his compositional activity during the years between 1908 and 1910, while carrying out a meticulous fieldwork in Transylvanian villages, led to the progressive disclosure of a truly innovative musical language rather than a simple arrangement of pre-existing melodies, incorporating them into more elaborated compositional schemes and conveying their essential character of modality towards new ways of pitch organisation. Some of the most representative works of this period are *Ten Easy Pieces* (1908), *Two Elegies* (1908–09), *Two Romanian Dances* Op. 8a (1910) and *Fourteen Bagatelles* Op. 6 (1908–10) (Dobszay 1981: 303).

Bartók's legacy both as a musicologist and composer unfolded wider perspectives on the complexity of musical phenomena: his in-depth analysis of the customs and habits surrounding music, together with its role during the ordinary life of communities, brought about a significant feedback as for the comprehension of musical creation as a living process, submitted to space-time contingencies. His investigation contemplated a multitude of variables, such as the intended occasion (i.e., weddings, funerals, work in the fields, etc.), the diversity of instrumental ensembles and a wide range of morphological features. All these aspects merged into the unique character of the composer's music, some of which was purposefully chosen as a case-study for the present investigation.

The *Two Romanian Dances* Op. 8a are among the first of Bartók's works for piano to make intentional use of folkloric material by relying on largely common procedures in peasant music-making, such as the employment of non-diatonic scales, extemporaneous variation and ornamentation, as well as emphasis on the rhythmical properties of music. The *Fourteen Bagatelles* Op. 6 encompass all such characteristics within a pianistic style deliberately modelled on them, which results in overall simplicity and repetitiveness, despite the modernity of the employed musical language. Ultimately, *Mikrokosmos* is particularly representative of the paradigm under question as it brings the aforementioned features to the foreground, rejecting any virtuosity in favour of a total commitment to essentiality and elementariness as valuable qualities in music.

## 2. Special features of Bartók's writing for piano

### 2.1. The early specifics in *Two Romanian Dances* Op. 8a

The first of *Two Romanian Dances* exhibits some specifics of Bartók's early musicality. The piece is modelled on a short, simple melodic segment based on the so-called Romanian Minor scale<sup>1</sup> in C and made of two motivic fragments, both repeated twice over (Example 1). The initial melody is symmetrically modelled around the central note of E flat, so that the highest and lowest pitches are respectively G and C, i.e., one third above and below. F and D flat, which do not belong to the main pitch set, always appear as ornamental notes or on a weak beat. A similar configuration is maintained all over the diverse transpositions of the main theme and with different gradients of variation throughout the composition.



Example 1. Scheme of the main theme from *Romanian Dance* Op. 8a/1 by Béla Bartók.

The dance bears an approximate ABA<sup>1</sup> form with coda:

- ♦ A (bb. 1–63) is made of several reiterations of the main thematic idea through diverse transpositions, inversions, rarefactions and densifications of it, together with the employment of different registers, sound levels and textures. The main unifying trait is represented by the constant, regular pulse, relying on the sharpness of rhythmical patterns.
- ♦ B (bb. 64–75) is a brief, more meditative episode, equally modelled on the same musical idea and having the character of an improvised recitative on a long pedal section.
- ♦ A<sup>1</sup> (bb. 76–112) is a frenetic divertissement bearing the same rhythmicity of A, leading to an over-emphatic recapitulation from b. 101.
- ♦ The coda (bb. 113–138) serves as a conclusive cadenza on the main musical ideas all over the piece.

1 A Dorian scale with augmented 4th degree and variable 6th and 7th degrees.

In general, periodicity and repetitiveness characterise the overall organisation of the music material, whereas a leading criterion of diversification is represented by the most elementary means of variation, such as those mentioned before. The musical discourse is shaped on recurring ideas in different manners, so that the supposed form does not rely on the opposition between two or more different thematic regions, but rather on the diverse manipulations of the same thematic material, generating areas of contrasting character and mood. A similar outcome resembles an organised improvisation beyond any preset temporal dimension, as it is ascertainable in folk-singing.

A typical feature of Bartók's music, which is already observable in his early piano works, is the predilection for a wide range of dynamics, articulations and textures, aiming at recalling specific demeanors from the original sources, such as different ways of voicing and instrumental timbres, as well as different styles and genres of performance. The first *Romanian Dance* already presents such characteristics, starting from the initial theme that features rather meticulous phrasing and articulation.

The percussive character of the composer's music is recognizable in such rhythmical patterns as both the sequence of alternating  $H^0-F^{\#1}$  and  $C^1-G^1$  *staccato* and triple-*piano* bi-chords from bb. 1–6 (Example 2a), imitating the soft action of mallets on a pair of timpani, and the sound agglomerations from bb. 37–38 at the right hand, generating harsh dissonances (Example 2b). Rolling drums, along with *tremolo* by plucked chordophones, are recognisable at the left hand from bb. 64–71 (Example 2c).

The image contains three musical excerpts labeled a, b, and c. Excerpt a is in bass clef, 3/4 time, marked 'Allegro vivace' and 'ppp'. Excerpt b is in treble clef, 3/4 time, showing complex rhythmic patterns. Excerpt c is in grand staff, 3/4 time, marked 'Lento' and 'poco f sonoro'.

Example 2. Excerpts from the *Romanian Dance* Op. 8a No. 1:  
a) bb. 1–6; b) bb. 37–38; c) bb. 64–71.

Another peculiarity of Bartók's writing for the piano is the presence of chords exceeding the octave, which in this case is limited to the only bb. 123–126. This feature is largely common within more massive and demanding works by the composer, such as the Piano Sonata (1926). Mária Comensoli (1905–1982), who studied with Bartók in the mid-1920s, reported of his tendency to play most of these chords as tight *arpeggi*, in compliance with a consolidate tradition over the 19th century (Bonis 1995: 146). Another pupil, Irma Molnár-Kippich, also referred to some other singularities of his pianistic technique, such as his ability to quickly change the position of the hands on the keyboard:

I had to play each recurring figure with the same fingering throughout, regardless whether there was a black key or not, and wherever it was. Bartók taught that the touch of every finger had its own special color, and that one had to use it throughout the whole series of sequence, so that it sounded uniformly. Of course, to play in this way was much more difficult than usual, but it did not bother him at all. (ibid.: 298)

A similar means is observable in the majority of cases of transpositions in quick succession of the same musical material, such as at bb. 119–121 (Example 3a). An utterly radical application of this principle is acknowledged by the direct experience of Bartók's son Péter:

Instructions found in literature had to be disregarded in playing the scale: my father had his own method and he did not wish the thumb to be moved under the rest of the hand in climbing up a scale. Instead, he instructed me to shift the whole hand and simply jump at the appropriate point, without bending the thumb sideways; all fingers were to remain in the same relative position as the whole hand moved. Playing a scale this way appeared nearly impossible, but my father demonstrated how easy it was (for him). (Bartók 2002: 36)

For instance, at b. 86 the composer recommends maintaining an equal 2-3-4 fingering during the three consecutive transpositions of the same motivic cell (Example 3b), demanding for fast shift movements of the hand. The true effectiveness of a similar approach relied on a proficient hand-arm-wrist coordination by him, combining his own wrist dexterity with the innovative weight technique at that time.

The image contains two musical excerpts, labeled 'a' and 'b'. Excerpt 'a' (measures 119-121) shows a piano piece with a treble and bass staff. It features three consecutive transpositions of a motivic cell. The first measure starts with a *mf* dynamic and a *din.* marking. The second measure has a *p* marking. Excerpt 'b' (measure 86) shows a single measure with a treble and bass staff. It features three consecutive transpositions of a motivic cell with a 2-3-4 fingering indicated above the notes. The dynamic is *sempre pp* and the tempo is *agitato*.

Example 3. a) A case of transpositions in quick succession of the same music material, presuming the maintenance of the same fingering and, consequently, fast shift movement of the hands; b) an equal 2-3-4 fingering is recommended during the three consecutive transpositions of the same motive, by means of quick shift movement of the right hand.

Molnár-Kippich also commented on Bartók's wrist technique: "He based the whole technique of piano playing mainly on his wrists. That is why those Bartók's *staccati*, which were like the clattering of hailstones, sounded so wonderfully" (Bonis 1995: 299). On the other hand, István Thomán (1862–1949), who taught Bartók at the Royal Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest, would not conceal his own predilection for wrist *staccato* in quite specific cases: "With wrists we only rarely play chords. However, it will be good for variety of timbre, if another way of touch is available for us. Especially in light *staccato* chords we can benefit from this way of touch" (Thomán 1906: 2).

Thomán was mentored by Liszt, who in turn owed a similar approach to the 19th century's tradition on playing octaves and *staccato*, as *Die Schule des Octavenspiels* Op. 48 (Ger. "The School of Playing Octaves", 1841) by Theodor Kullak (1818–1882) wholly summarises. Besides, it is definitely unexpected how several of Bartók's textural resolutions seem to fully match with Kullak's technical precepts, although enormous changes in piano playing occurred between the lives of the two composers. For instance, Kullak's Preparatory Exercise No. 5, in which the upper voice is maintained by the 5th finger at the right hand whilst the other two voices independently move within the octave range, largely applies to textures such as the one from bb. 50–52 in Bartók's *Piano Sonata* (Example 4), as an example of the full application of principles from a solid pianistic tradition to the modernity of his musical language.

The image displays two musical excerpts side-by-side. The top excerpt, labeled '5. (a)', is from Kullak's *Die Schule des Octavenspiels* Op. 48. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff with a series of chords and a bass clef staff with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom excerpt is from Bartók's *Piano Sonata* (1926), bb. 50–52. It also consists of two staves, showing a more complex texture with multiple voices in both hands, including a 'cresc.' marking.

Example 4. Comparative view of two excerpts respectively from Kullak's *Die Schule des Octavenspiels* Op. 48 and Bartók's *Piano Sonata* (1926), bb. 50–52.

## 2.2. *Fourteen Bagatelles* as an anti-Romanticist manifesto

In the *Fourteen Bagatelles* Op. 6, a collection of short free-standing piano pieces composed in 1908, Bartók comprises quite different approaches to the instrument in the logic of his own compositional style, aiming at “a reaction against the exuberance of the Romantic piano music of the 19th century, a style stripped of all unessential decorative elements, deliberately using only the most restricted technical means”, as he himself wrote in the introduction to the set (Suchoff 1981: *Introduction*). In other words, he relies on the purest, most essential elements of pianistic technique, depriving them of any pretentiousness of virtuosity, but rather considering them as constructive parts of music.

In addition, the composer merges those elements into the typical features (melodic, rhythmic, textural, structural, etc.) of authentic folk music heritage, also variously processed by him. Hence *Bagatelles* ultimately bring to the front the fundamental procedures of piano playing (scales, chords, passages in octaves, double thirds and sixths, etc.) as well as the key features of music itself, such as sound and rhythm, merged into a certain peasant flavour, consequent to the employment of traditional folk tunes.

Such aspects, which find expression in all music by Bartók, provide the key of how to interpret a primeval character in his vast pianistic outcome. Bagatelle No. 1 quite convincingly supports this assumption, which is fully reflected in the main features of the piece:

- ◆ Simple scales act as the main structural elements. C# Eolian scale is hidden in the ascending motive at the right hand from bb. 1–6, while fragments of descending C Phrygian scale always respond at the left hand (the complete succession is obtainable by juxtaposing the two counterpointing tetrachords at b. 9).
- ◆ The modal character derives from the combined usage of the two previously mentioned modes, generating an inclusive octatonic mode, whose alternation of tones and semitones defines a symmetry (Example 5). However, the two intervallic constructions are always perceived as separate, since they never merge. Furthermore, the quite strict association between each of the two modes and a specific set of sound attacks (rather diversified for C# Eolian at the right hand and rigorously *tenuto/staccato* for C Phrygian at the left hand) utterly clarify such distinction.
- ◆ Intervals and direction of the melody serve as the main diversifying traits of the composition, making use of the two alternating modal scales and either rising or descending movements of the two melodic lines.

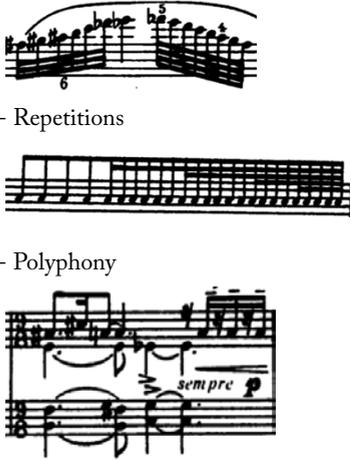


Example 5. Octatonic mode in Bagatelle No. 1 by Béla Bartók, whose alternation between tones and semitones defines symmetry.



<p>II</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Repetitions</li> </ul>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sound attacks</li> </ul>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rhythm</li> <li>- Intervals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Percussiveness</li> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> </ul>
<p>III</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Legato</li> </ul>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fast notes</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chromaticism</li> <li>- Rhythm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simplicity of the melody</li> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> <li>- Periodicity</li> </ul>
<p>IV</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Legato</li> <li>- Chords</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intervals</li> <li>- Chords</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simplicity of the melody</li> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> <li>- Periodicity</li> </ul>
<p>V</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Repetitions</li> </ul>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sound attacks</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rhythm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Simplicity of the melody</li> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> </ul>

<p>VI</p>	<p>- <i>Legato</i></p>  <p>- Polyphony</p> 	<p>- Intervals - Chromaticism</p>	<p>- Repetitiveness - Periodicity</p>
<p>VII</p>		<p>- Rhythm - Intervals</p>	<p>- Repetitiveness - Percussiveness</p>
<p>VIII</p>	<p>- <i>Legato</i></p> <p>- Polyphony</p> <p><b>Sostenuto</b> ♩ = 42-46</p> 	<p>- Chromaticism</p>	<p>- Repetitiveness</p>
<p>IX</p>	<p>- <i>Legato</i></p> <p>- Sound attacks</p>  <p>- Ornaments</p> 	<p>- Intervals</p>	<p>- Repetitiveness - Homophony</p>

<p>X</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chords</li> <li>- Sound attacks</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chords</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> <li>- Percussiveness</li> </ul>
<p>XI</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chords</li> <li>- Sound attacks</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intervals</li> <li>- Chords</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> </ul>
<p>XII</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scales</li> <li>- Fast notes</li> <li>- Repetitions</li> <li>- Polyphony</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intervals</li> <li>- Scales</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Repetitiveness</li> </ul>
<p>XIII</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Legato</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rhythm</li> <li>- Intervals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Homophony</li> </ul>

<p>XIV</p>	<p>- Fast notes</p>  <p>- Chords</p> 	<p>- Rhythm</p> <p>- Intervals</p>	<p>- Repetitiveness</p> <p>- Percussiveness</p>
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### 2.3. Establishing the paradigm: *Mikrokosmos*

A similar approach reveals quite an accomplished systematisation in *Mikrokosmos*, a set of 153 progressive piano pieces in six volumes written between 1926 and 1939, representing the common ground for Bartók's experimentalism, his interest in local music heritages and his pedagogic effort. Once again, the composer operates within the perfect synthesis between the essential elements of pianistic technique and of music in general, with the usual glance at the folksong tradition.

The Exercises Nos. 1–6 are named *Six Unison Melodies*. Each of them goes along with a portion of the score on the top defining the pitch range and summarising the melodic profile. For instance, Exercise No. 4 ranges from B to F, while the melody consecutively rises and drops (Example 7). Such configuration certainly reveals the influence of his musicological background: Bartók would generally pair his transcriptions of folksongs with their main skeleton (usually disclosed beneath the main score line), stripped of all ornaments and rhythmical peculiarities. The composer was familiar with the necessity of identifying the essential elements of music, which in turn became foundation of his own creative outcome, as it was already observed in *Bagatelles*.

In addition, Bartók's way of processing such elements may comply with standard procedures in popular music as well. For example, Exercise No. 2b is the exact inversion of Exercise No. 2a transposed one third above, except for ending with A instead of E.

Example 7. Exercise No. 4 from *Mikrokosmos* by Béla Bartók (on top), along with a portion of the score defining the pitch range and summarising the melodic profile. Similarly, the composer would reveal the main skeleton of his transcribed folksongs (below). (Lord 1951: 96)

Furthermore, Exercise No. 3 comprises four motives of three measures each, whereas Exercise No. 5 presents motives of either two or three measures, in antithesis with the traditional square-shaped musical discourse.

Table 2 summarises the influence from the folksong tradition into the first seventeen exercises from *Mikrokosmos* (the ones preceded by their own melodic scheme).

Table 2. Elements inherited from the folksong tradition in Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*.

1	n.d.
2 (a, b)	Simple imitation procedure: 2b consists of the exact inversion of 2a transposed one third above, except for ending in A instead of E.
3	Asymmetric phrasing: division in four motives of three measures each.
4	n.d.
5	Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either three or two measures each. Use of the Aeolian mode.
6	Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either two, three or four measures each.
7	Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either three or four measures each. Use of the Phrygian mode.

8	Use of the Aeolian mode.
9	Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either three or four measures each.
10	Simple imitation procedure: canon in octave at the time interval of three measures. Unusual clef signature: A flat.
11	Simple imitation procedure: use of parallel thirds. Use of the Mixolydian mode.
12	Simple imitation procedure: mirror counterpoint starting from the interval of major second. Asymmetric phrasing: change of meter from 2/2 to 3/2 at b. 15. Use of the Dorian mode.
13	n.d.
14	Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either four or five measures each. Use of the Dorian mode. Presence of lyrics above the notes.
15	Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either two or three measures each. Use of either the Ionian (Major) or Mixolydian modes. Title suggestive of peasant derivation ( <i>Village song</i> ).
16	Simple imitation procedure: use of parallel thirds and sixths. Asymmetric phrasing: combined use of motives of either three, four or five measures each.
17	Simple imitation procedure: mirror counterpoint starting at the unison. Use of the Ionian (Major) and Locrian modes.

An analogous outcome is acknowledgeable within the more demanding exercises as well. For instance, Exercise No. 48 *In Mixolydian Mode* (Example 8) comprises the following features:

- ◆ Use of the Mixolydian mode.
- ◆ Use of 5/4 meter.
- ◆ Asymmetric phrasing.
- ◆ Simple imitation procedure involving dissonances, such as the major second at the beginning of b. 12, and empty fourths and fifths.
- ◆ *Ostinato* type accompaniment from bb. 1–10.

The most complex pieces, which are meant to be performed as concert works, are similarly built on specific technical means within the framework of a more elaborated musical discourse. For example, Exercise No. 124 *Staccato* is entirely based on the use of *staccato*, both characterising the melodic segments and emphasising the rhythmical pulse. Its peculiarity consists of the overall contrast between the uniformity of the rhythm and the motivic fragmentariness, whose interaction determines multiple intervallic relations (Example 9).

Example 8. Excerpt from Exercise No. 48 *In Mixolydian Mode* (bb. 1–12) from *Mikrokosmos* by Béla Bartók, bearing several elements of influence from the folksong tradition, such as the modal character, the asymmetric meter and phrasing, the *ostinato* construction at the left hand and the use of dissonances.

Example 9. Excerpt from Exercise No. 124 *Staccato* (bb. 1–8) from *Mikrokosmos* by Béla Bartók, which is entirely based on the use of *staccato*.

### 3. The performer's view

Generally speaking, Béla Bartók's piano music demands specific tactile approaches to the keyboard as well as vivid auditory imagination from the performer's side. For instance, the true effectiveness of passages such as the one shown in Example 3a is anchored on a proficient hand-arm-wrist coordination, combining wrist dexterity and elasticity with the natural hand prehensility depending on its own weight. At the same time, fingers must be disengaged and freely moving on one side, compliant with the

overall gesture on another: a performer ought to consider such repeated patterns as entailing diverse physical abilities at once.

Concerning cases of imitation of plucked-string instruments, as illustrated in Example 2c, both clarity and fluidity is demanded of the pianist in the execution, in compliance with the need for distinctness of the single notes and their arrangement into a broader, more uniform pianistic gesture, respectively. The reiteration of similar patterns of notes, encompassed within analogous intervals, usually facilitates the retention of the same hand setting throughout the passage. However, the amplitude of the intervals themselves and the partial collocation of the passage on the level of black keys lead to a full extension of the hand and, consequently, to a larger expansion of the fingers rather than the compactness generally required for the execution of similar excerpts. Thus, to maintain crispness and brightness in the articulation without fully relying on the very fingertips, while also fluctuating back and forth along the keyboard, represents a challenging task.

Aiming at more percussive effects, as for the series of chords in *Bagatelle* No. 10, it is nevertheless recommended to take into account the risk of resulting in a too harsh and compressed sound if not calibrating the movement of vertical repetition with the horizontal linearity of the passage in its entirety. For this reason, both solidity in hands and fingers and flexibility in arms and wrists are advised, together with a wise use of pedal as a tool for sound amalgamation and resonance. At the same time, a performer must not be worried about upsetting the audience by means of a certain fierceness in character. It may indeed happen that the preeminence of dissonances provides a significant element of discomfort to the listener.

Sometimes, a pianist ought to face uncustomary dramaturgic choices in order to preserve the static nature of the music without ceding to overt monotony, as for *Bagatelles* No. 1 and 3. At the same time, the interpreter of these pieces is due to abide by the simplicity of music, avoiding the temptation to add some of their own expressiveness (*rubati*, additional dynamics, etc.) for the purposes of variety. The ability of the performer relies on their capability to comply with the original sense of hazy indeterminacy and unfathomable mystery and to pass it down to the audience as a genuine aesthetic quality, albeit deprived of usual trademarks and eventually trespassing into bemusement and upset. A total commitment of the performer to music is an essential condition, refusing any musical initiative or physical gesture (such as any unnecessary vault-shaping with hands or redundant facial expressions) which might interfere with the maintenance of such linear tension, provoking a nerve-wracking expectation of the listener for something new to happen.

It is also important to encompass all such technical and stylistic peculiarities within a more global interpretative insight. It is worth recollecting what Bartók thought about the folksong, whose influence on his own music is uttermost:

Peasant music is the outcome of changes wrought by a natural force whose operation is unconscious; it is impulsively created by a community of men who have had no schooling; it is as much a natural product as are the various forms of animal and vegetable life (Lord 1981: 4).

Thus, an impression of spontaneity and impulsiveness befits the character of his music. For instance, sudden dynamic contrasts and abrupt accents or *sforzandi* may serve to enhance this peculiar aspect: a performer must train to avoid anticipating them, both by physical gestures and musical intentions, so that they might truly sound as an impetus.

Generally speaking, peasant music is constantly susceptible to variability, due the different sensitivities of as many different performers. As is common knowledge, a modern pianist, as well as any academically trained musician, might find this conception totally unfamiliar. However, a certain degree of freedom might be suitable while playing Bartók's music, unless the score specifically demands the opposite<sup>2</sup>.

## Conclusions

The adherence to Primitivism in piano works by Béla Bartók is quite an elaborate phenomenon, in a very generalised manner to be approached from three main perspectives:

1. The reference to folksong repertoire and its morphological features (rhythmical, melodic, textural, syntactical and formal) and certain related interpretative issues, entirely belonging to the sphere of orality and, therefore, prior to Western music tradition.
2. The exploitation of the prime, simplest elements of music, such as rhythmic pulse, sound/silence alternation, dynamic oppositions, interval and pitch successions.
3. The emphasis on primarily pianistic tasks (fast scales, chords successions, double-thirds passages, repetitions, etc.) as constructive elements of the musical discourse.

It is important to note, at this point, that Béla Bartók's pianistic outcome and ideas related to the usage of this instrument have significantly influenced composers of piano music from the most diverse musical backgrounds throughout the 20th century. In Europe, Manuel de Falla (1876–1946) drew upon Bartók and Stravinsky's music, among others, in order to distance himself from a certain early Romantic flavour and pursuing a

2 This definitely applies to *Bagatelle* No. 12, whose improvisational character is implicit in the style of writing. The composer often relies upon the interpreter's own sensitiveness and imagination, for instance in *Bagatelle* No. 7, where the plentitude of *accelerando* and *ritardando* confers perpetual mutability to music.

more genuine revitalisation of Spanish national music. Particularly in relation to Bartók, De Falla incorporated characteristics such as folk-dance rhythms, plucked-strings textures and percussive stroke and foot-stamping effects into his piano pieces (i.e. *Cuatro Piezas Españolas*, 1906–1909; *Fantasia Baetica*, 1919).

Outside of Europe, Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983) encapsulated different elements from Amerindian culture, art and music into his music vocabulary, bestowing an incontrovertible arcane and savage aura upon his music, while also gathering influences from the leading artistic fronts in Europe, such as French Impressionism, atonality and serialism. His piano works (i.e., *Malambo for Piano* Op. 7, 1940; *Danzas Argentinas* Op. 2, 1937) bear the remarkable influence of Bartók's music as well, comprising such features as frequent *ostinati*, brief and reiterate motivic units, progressively enhancing dissonances by superimposing intervals, sudden and abrupt occasional small-values shifts interrupting the metric periodicity.

One could not omit Bartók's co-national György Ligeti (1923–2006), who is largely in debt to his forefather regarding the ways of processing rhythm, as it can be appreciated in his *Études for Piano*, written between 1985 and 2001: those pieces considerably exploit polyrhythms and related pianistic issues, along with the diverse timbral possibilities of the instrument towards sound masses and percussiveness.

All such features of piano writing require a specific attitude and knowledge from the side of the performer of this music. High-level technical mastery encompassing diverse (and simultaneously employed) physical abilities and a specific, rather percussive tactile approach to the keyboard needs to be combined with vivid imagination and creativity, in order to preserve the static and simplistic nature of this music without making it monotonous and unappealing to the listener.

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## Būgnijimas klavišais: Bėlos Bartoko pianistinis stilius ir jo sąsajos su primityvizmo estetika

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami ir apibendrinami vengrų kompozitoriaus Bėlos Bartoko kūrinių fortepijonui ypatumai, atskleidžiantys jo kūrybos sąsajas su primityvizmo paradigma, ryškiausiai pasireiškiančias kompozitoriaus etnografinio darbo įtaka jo kompozicinei praktikai. Pasitelkdami keletą ryškiausių tokios estetikos kūrinių fortepijonui – „Rumunų šokius“ op. 8a, 14 bagatelių op. 6 ir paskirus Bartoko megaciklo „Mikrokosmosas“ pavyzdžius, autoriai tyrinėja Bartoko pianistinio stiliaus evoliuciją nuo išsiskyrusių tradicinės technikos elementų naudojimo iki naujoviškų sprendimų, leidusių kompozitoriui moderniu instrumentu atkurti tipiškus liaudies muzikos bruožus. Nors Bartoko ryšiai su primityvizmo estetika (kaip ir apskritai pati primityvizmo muzikoje paradigma) laikytini daugiasluoksniu fenomenu, apibendrintai juos galima suskirstyti į tris pagrindines grupes: 1) sąsajos su liaudies kūryba ir jos morfologiniais (ritminiais, melodiniais, tekstūriniais, sintaktiniais ir formos) bruožais, kreipiančios prie iki vakarietiškos muzikos tradicijos ir atitinkamos atlikėjo prieities; 2) išradingas pirmapradžių muzikos elementų (ritminio pulso, garso ir tylos sąveikos, dinaminių prieštarų, tam tikrų garsų ir intervalų sekų) panaudojimas; 3) pianistinių užduočių (greitų garsaeilių, akordų sekų, dvigubų tercijų pasažų, repetacijų ir kt.) laikymas konstruktyviaisiais muzikos diskurso elementais. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad Bartoko muziką atliekantys pianistai susiduria su itin specifinėmis užduotimis, todėl iš jų reikalaujama aukšto lygio techninio meistriškumo ir ypatingo prisilietimo prie klaviatūros, taip pat – gyvybingos vaizduotės ir kūrybiškumo.

### REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:

primityvizmas,  
Bėla Bartokas,  
forte-pijono atlikimas,  
pianistinis stilius,  
perkusiškumas.