

Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Canadian University Music Review

Judit Frigyesi. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. x, 357 pp. ISBN 0-520-20740-8 (hardcover)

Zoltan Roman

Volume 20, numéro 1, 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015659ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015659ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (imprimé)

2291-2436 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Roman, Z. (1999). Compte rendu de [Judit Frigyesi. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. x, 357 pp. ISBN 0-520-20740-8 (hardcover)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 20(1), 138-141. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015659ar>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes, 2000

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

It would be helpful to think of Brahms also as an arriviste, someone who suffered class anxieties manifest in his repudiation of other artists (Liszt and Wagner most notably) and in his cultivation of the upper echelons of Viennese society (the Wittgensteins, the von Herzogenbergs). A heroic character insofar as the nineteenth century treated the lives of the great heroically, Brahms needs to be treated also as the psychologically odd, financially savvy, nationalistically aggressive and artistically careerist person that he was.

Allan Hepburn

Judit Frigyesi. *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998. x, 357 pp. ISBN 0-520-20740-8 (hardcover).

With such major contributions to the literature as a doctoral dissertation ("Béla Bartók and Hungarian Nationalism: The Development of Bartók's Social and Political Ideas at the Turn of the Century [1899–1903]," University of Pennsylvania, 1989) and the article "Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and Volk in Modern Hungary" (*The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 2 [1994]: 255–87), Judit Frigyesi has established herself over the past several years as a respected Bartók scholar. Yet now, this daring and ambitious book makes even those pieces seem like preparatory works, and forays into territory that has been largely unexplored, at least in Western scholarship. If, in the end, the book is less than entirely successful, this is due neither to the author's preparation for the task, nor to a lack of effort in writing it.

Befitting his stature as one of the undisputed greats of contemporary music, Bartók's life and work have given rise to an impressive body of scholarly literature.¹ However, closer analysis reveals a number of peculiarities which distinguish it from the literature on, say, Arnold Schoenberg, his great contemporary and, in many respects, comrade-in-arms as musical path breaker and latter-day cultural icon. Chief among these is the separation of the authors into two camps: native Hungarian-speakers and the rest. Although there have been some noteworthy crossovers, a complete mastery of Bartók's difficult and unique native language has eluded (inevitably, I am tempted to add) even the most dedicated "foreigner." And therein lies, I suggest, the central problem of Frigyesi's book, both as preconceived task and as finished product.

Putting it somewhat simplistically, the book aims to present the musically and culturally sophisticated non-Hungarian reader with a portrait of the composer that is drawn against, and fleshed out with, figuratively "translated" matter from the linguistic and socio-cultural tapestry of his origins, his intellectual and artistic development.² In order to succeed, such an undertaking

¹ Readily available to the English-speaking reader from among a number of more or less comprehensive bibliographic compilations is Elliott Antokoletz's *Béla Bartók: A Guide to Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1997); it contains some 1,200 numbered entries, most of them annotated.

² The title originally planned for the book (*The Birth of Hungarian Modernism: Béla Bartók and Turn of the Century Budapest*; in Antokoletz, p. 269) seemed to project an even greater role for the cultural milieu.

must, perforce, rely on the artifacts (be they verbal, visual, or musical) that are native to a given culture. For the appropriately trained musician, this is eminently workable in music in all but the most exceptional circumstances. In the visual domain, the same sort of "translation" and interpretation is usually manageable, at least among European cultures. But when the literature of the originating culture (as we may usefully refer to it for present purposes) is composed in an insular and esoteric language like Hungarian, there is no *lingua franca*, no ideational interface, to facilitate "translation" between its specific linguistic constructs and thought patterns, and the vocabulary and semantics of the receiving culture. And yet this is what Judit Frigyesi attempts to do, against odds perhaps only vaguely discerned, although, as the long list of acknowledgement attests, she has had the benefit of advice and assistance from an impressive array of musical and non-musical persons and institutions.

That was the task; what, then, of the finished product? It may be assumed from the foregoing that the chief problem of the book lies in "translation" (especially, but not exclusively, of the figurative kind). The magnitude of the problem varies, of course, and is most noticeable in its non-musical chapters. For the most part, it depends on the level of abstraction demanded by a given situation. The most difficult task in a work such as this is the rendering of poetry (understanding the term broadly), for it involves both translation and interpretation; it is closely followed by philosophical thought and personal idiosyncrasies of usage. But, in the end, it all mandates a superior command—one that is beyond basic fluency—of both tongues. Though its lack may result in no more than a certain infelicity of expression, in other instances an inadequate or incorrect translation may convey information that is substantively misleading and—worse—will go undetected by a non-Hungarian reader. Almost inevitably, this will distort the kind of cultural or ideational evidence and argument that is inseparable from chronological context, as it is in the work before us.³

Aware of the need to illustrate the richness, diversity, and geopolitical conditionality of the cultural milieu in turn-of-the-century Hungary as fully as possible within the limits imposed on the study by various considerations, the author's selection of representative personalities and significant events fluctuates between parsimony and excess. Unhappily, the resulting mix does not always serve either the subject's or the reader's interests. Thus, in addition to the appropriately detailed scrutiny of the key literary personages in Bartók's orbit (Béla Balázs and Endre Ady), and the necessarily more limited treatment of some secondary figures (for example Mihály Babits), Frigyesi also refers to numerous writers and painters of

³Faulty translations (in both senses of the word, as used in the foregoing) abound in the book and run a wide gamut. Two examples will suffice to show their range. In her discussion of the role Endre Ady played in the dissemination of the progressive socio-political ideas of the so-called "second reform generation," Frigyesi quotes from his seminal essay, "A nacionalizmus alkonya," translating this title as "The fall of nationalism" (p. 311); in fact, the precise translation is "The twilight [or decline] of ...". Of course, such minor distortions seldom result in significant misunderstanding. But when, in a discussion of the "literary context" of *Bluebeard's Castle*, the author cites a collection of short stories by contemporary Hungarian writers with the collective title *Éjfél: Magyar írók misztikus novellái*, and renders this as *Midnight: Mysteries by Hungarian Writers* (p. 327) (instead of *Mystical Novellas* [or short stories] by ...), the mistranslation both falsifies the genre and obscures its essential chronological-stylistic congruity.

mostly local and ephemeral fame. Even the most committed non-Hungarian reader does not now, and will likely never, have ready access to their works.

But even if we can accept the foregoing as a type of harmless name-dropping, the author's expansive treatment of György Lukács does not warrant similar charity. Now that Marxism has been thoroughly and irrevocably discredited in the eyes of all but the most intractable, nine-tenths of the massive output of this chameleon-like philosopher-apologist of the creed has lost currency and retains only that certain fascination one experiences when confronted with a brilliant mind gone wrong. As it happens, most of the remainder of Lukács's production (largely juvenilia, in fact) was written in Hungary, in Hungarian, before he linked his fate with international Communism by joining in the short-lived, local brand of the Red Terror of 1919. Be that as it may, the lengthy excerpts from Lukács's youthful works in this book, and the equally lengthy discourses upon them, contribute nothing that is useful to an understanding of Bartók's development as man and artist. Thus we are hard put to see them as anything else than a misguided (or quite unnecessary) bid for a kind of academic respectability.

In an exceptionally meaty introduction, Judit Frigyesi summarizes the "five subjects" of her book as the following: (1) Bartók's aesthetics and its formation in the years between 1907 and 1911; (2) the connection between this aesthetics and that of Endre Ady's poetry; (3) the historical background, problems, and aspirations of the bourgeois segments of Budapest; (4) the Hungarian modernists' ideals and artistic achievements; (5) the attitude of the modernists to the questions of existence (p. 6).

The eight chapters that make up the main body of the book divide into two slightly unequal halves of four chapters each, a shorter "Part 1—History and Aesthetics," and "Part 2—Poetry and Music: Ady and Bartók." Numbered continuously over the two parts, the chapter headings (and three subheadings) are: (1) "Organic Artwork or Communal Style? — Common Problems, Common Tradition, and the Viennese Response"; (2) "The Historical and Social Context of Hungarian Modernism"; (3) "The Romantic Roots and Political Radicalism of Hungarian Modernism"; (4) "Hungarian Modernism and the Organicist Theory of Art"; (5) "The Formation of Bartók's Aesthetics"; (6) "Ady's Mystical Symbolism"; (7) "Loneliness and Love: The Literary Context of *Bluebeard's Castle*"; (8) "Bartók's Stylistic Synthesis: The Dramatic Music of *Bluebeard's Castle* and Its Antecedents."

The well thought-out headings reveal a good deal about the author's predilections, and thus about the book's probable points of gravity and the various strands of the story which connect them. The main line of inquiry—namely, the conundrum of stylistic-historical perception and positioning at and after the turn of the century—effectively links the two parts of the book. The line runs from what may be styled a general-cultural "question" to a specific, musical-stylistic "answer" that flows from the book's titular main character; an apposite "frame" is provided by these two quotations from the beginnings of Chapters 1 and 5, respectively:

Because of shared orientations and problems, the new and the traditional, the local and the "mainstream" are often difficult to untangle. ... we could explain almost any artistic development that took place in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century either as romantic or modern, as mainstream or

peripheral, depending on which characteristics we took into account and how we interpreted them historically (p. 20).

Twentieth-century textbooks use various terms to describe the distinctive cultural traits that shaped Bartók's art. ... Yet none [of such characterizations] suggests the essential feature of Bartók's aesthetics: a highly individual choice of elements from the common stylistic-aesthetic tradition and their articulation in a coherent personal style (p. 119).

Everything which precedes and follows the second paragraph aims to untangle and illuminate Bartók's complex, and basically contradictory, artistic persona. With deep roots in the mysterious and fertile soil of an ethnic and regional culture, he yet had to attain a form and degree of transcendence that would make it possible for him to contribute to the still vital "mainstream" of cultural-musical evolution in his time. Inevitably, such a transcendence could be achieved only by rising above the limitations that were imposed on him by the prevailing social and cultural tendencies in his country, and by his own "Hungarianness." Not surprisingly, Frigyesi herself adumbrates such a conclusion in a sentence which follows directly upon the foregoing quotation: by interpreting modernist tendencies in his own "unique manner," Bartók "created an aesthetics that in its totality was without parallel even in Hungary" (p. 119). It follows from this, I think, that the less than complete success of the non-musical portions of the book, discussed earlier, is also due to a certain Sisyphean quality inherent in the labour of limning the socio-cultural scene in turn-of-the-century Hungary (or, as the author prefers it, Budapest).

The central musical concern of the book is clearly with *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, Bartók's only opera. Although she draws freely on others' analytical work where this suits her purpose, Frigyesi's rather refreshing approach to the piece consistently focuses on those of its aspects that exemplify her earlier explorations of the building blocks of Hungarian music. Accordingly, much attention is devoted to the singing style, and to the derivation of the orchestral materials from Hungarian instrumental tradition.

As for the other musical portions of the book, these range from more or less fleeting (but always substantive) references to a number of Bartók's earlier works, through a clear and informative discussion of the problematic yet crucial aesthetic and technical differences between Hungarian "folk" and "popular" (or "folkish") music, to an extended and impressive examination of the First Piano Concerto. The latter serves to illuminate a much discussed (if little understood) aspect of the composer's music, one that impacts on compositional process and reception alike. It is the question: why is it that so much of Bartók's music "sounds" like folk music when, in actual fact, so little of it (especially of the mature works) has a direct connection with a pre-existent folk song (or even a type of folk music)?

The book is well illustrated, attractively turned out and virtually free of production errors. Nonetheless, one annoying fault—shared with all too many modern books of a similar type—must not be allowed to pass unremarked. The lack of a bibliography (and the consequent need to excavate such information from copious and crowded endnotes) is, surely, unpardonable in this day and age of automated publishing.

Zoltan Roman