

Béla Bartók's Correspondence

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When in 1946, shortly after Béla Bartók's death the previous autumn in New York, his friend Zoltán Kodály was asked to give a commemorative lecture about 'Bartók the Man', later also published as an article, he felt obliged to make this caveat:

I have never been interested in artists' biographies. Even if I did read them I was usually disappointed because I did not learn anything about them that brought me nearer to understanding their works. A work can be understood without one's knowing its author but there is no understanding a man without his works, for this is where he has planted the best part of himself.¹

Although Kodály was certainly right in emphasizing that what really mattered, could only be discovered through the work, the letters of even a generally rather reticent man such as Bartók are known to belong to the most direct and most precious sources of not only the events of his life but also of his personality.

Two documents might serve as a sufficient introduction to the subject. The first is related to Bartók himself, the other is related to the Budapest Bartók Archives, the institution that was established as the centre of research on the composer. Furthermore, both documents originate in the place of the present

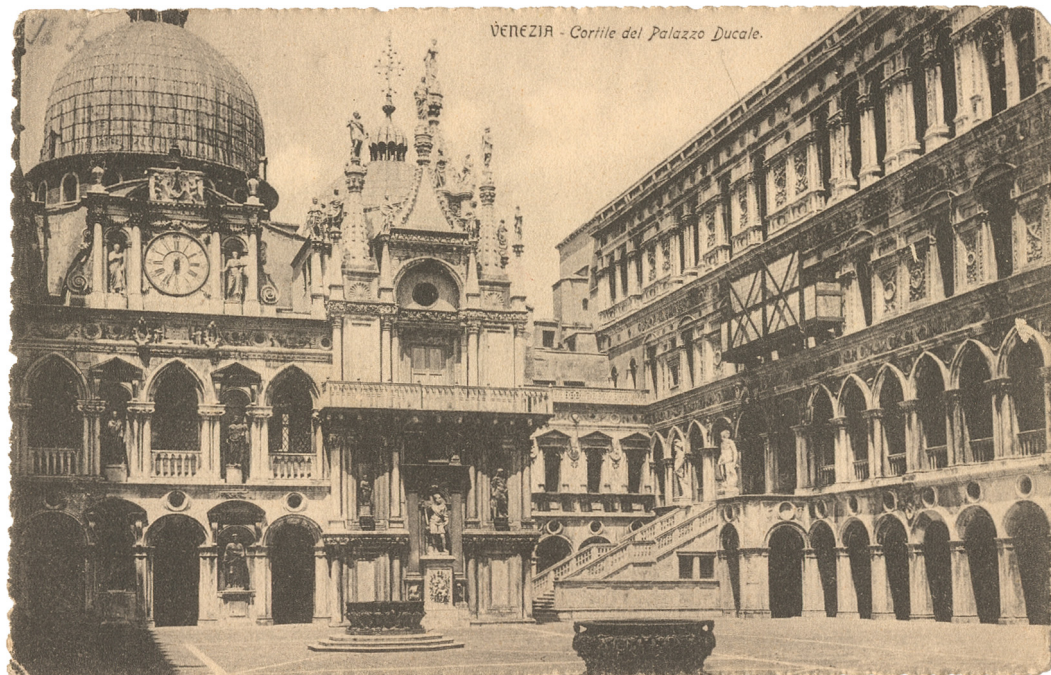
publication, Venice. In late June, 1909, Bartók was on holiday in Venice with his mother and sister – a rare trip of the small family together. From there he sent a postcard to the Liszt pupil István Thomán, his own former piano teacher at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest (FIGURES 1–2). In it he mentions that from Venice he intended to visit the Romanians, meaning to collect some folk music.² It is, however, written using a play on words characteristic of him: referring to the Romanians as ‘*oláhok*’, a Hungarian word for ‘Vlachs’, he chose a word that at the same time sounds close to the Hungarian name for Italians, ‘*olaszok*’. One might try to render it saying: Bartók was not going to visit the Romans but rather the Romanians. This small and almost insignificant document, a rather conventional picture postcard, thus already shows the difficulties and values of working with composers’ letters.

The other document I wish to mention in advance is a picture which shows László Somfai, former head of the Budapest Bartók Archives, with Luigi Nono at the Teatro La Fenice during an exhibition and conference commemorating the centenary of Bartók’s birth.³ The fact that in 1981, several Bartók specialists from the Budapest Bartók Archives presented papers at the memorial conference in Venice shows that this research centre had already had a long history. Indeed, the Budapest Bartók Archives had opened its doors to the public twenty years earlier, in 1961. Ever since, it has represented one of the two central collections of Bartókiana, the counterpart of the American Estate, which publicly operated in the 1960s and 70s as the New York Béla Bartók Archives,⁴ and which is now Peter Bartók’s private collection, largely deposited at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel.

Although the composer’s correspondence is among the most important parts of the Archives’ holdings, a comprehensive edition of Bartók letters is still far from what seems realistically possible. Part of the problem lies in the fact that many letters are still unavailable for scholarly scrutiny. Another part of the problem is legal. One could cite as an admonition the case of *Béla Bartók Letters: The Musical Mind*, edited by Malcolm Gillies and Adrienne Gombocz. Although planned to be published some twenty years ago by Oxford University Press, its fate was plagued by legal challenges and so it remains unpublished.⁵

Sadly so, because research into and work on editing Bartók’s letters had started very early indeed, with the publication in 1948 of *Bartók Béla: Levelek, fényképek, fakszimilék, kották* [*Béla Bartók: Letters, Photos, Facsimiles, Scores*] edited by János Demény who was to become the champion of publishing biographical documents pertaining to Bartók’s life, reviews of his concerts and, more significantly, letters.⁶ Demény successively published four volumes of

FIGURES 1-2. Letter from Bartók to István Thomán, Venice, 2 July 1909 (Budapest Bartók Archives, BA-N: 39/17)



letters before editing a comprehensive volume in 1976. With its 1,098 items this publication has served as basic orientation to Bartók's life and career. Five years later, on the occasion of the Bartók centenary in 1981, a second volume of collected letters was published, *Bartók Béla Családi levelei* [*Béla Bartók Letters to His Family*] edited by the composer's elder son, Béla Bartók, Junior. A small portion of the collection repeated but often also completed family letters edited by Demény, who received for study purposes a very limited selection from the family correspondence, whose items he often only had access to in incomplete, fragmentary form. Most of the 919 items in the second volume were, however, new additions. Yet, this volume as well only made a significantly sifted material available. Since the family correspondence is still almost exclusively in the private collection of the heirs, one can only guess that perhaps the greatest part of Bartók's letters to his mother, who died just six years before her son, leading their correspondence to cover forty years, might be included in the collection relatively completely, while letters to his first wife, Márta Ziegler, and his second wife, Ditta Pásztor, certainly represent a drastic selection; as the editor remarks, both women offered exactly 82 letters each for publication.⁷ Although the number of letters to Márta Ziegler is unknown, the letters (including occasionally short messages on postcards or picture postcards) to Ditta Pásztor number more than 500. The two selections of 82 letters each obviously represent only a fragment of the correspondences that still exists, especially when the almost completely unknown letters by family members to Bartók are also taken into consideration. The major single addition to this appeared in Peter Bartók's book of recollections, his father's letters to him.⁸

In his German and English selections of Bartók's letters, Demény further included a number of important documents in the original language.⁹ Many of the letters, however, were published only in Hungarian translation. A selection of interesting letters to Bartók, preserved in the Budapest collection, was published by Denijs Dille in the original language (Hungarian language pieces accompanied by German translations) in the Archive's own series, *Documenta Bartókiana*,¹⁰ which was published between 1962 and 1982 in six volumes, and which was also an important forum for publishing groups of closely related letters, such as the first known correspondence between Bartók and Kodály.¹¹ This was later significantly enlarged by László Eősz, but his edition is also only 'part of the story', especially because both the Kodály Archives and the Bartók Archives house many more letters belonging to a 'triangular' correspondence between Bartók, Kodály and Kodály's wife, Emma. A particularly precious and lavishly produced collection of letters and a rare diary, all addressed to the violinist Stefi Geyer, was published by Paul Sacher, the owner of the

documents.¹³ Both the Paul Sacher Foundation and the Budapest Archives were involved in the most recent full-length publication edited by Ferenc Bónis: the two-way correspondence between Bartók and Paul Sacher himself, a German-Hungarian bilingual edition including 81 letters.¹⁴

Outside the series of independent volumes of correspondence, numerous occasional editions of groups of letters or even individual letters have been published in periodicals and volumes of essays. Two groups of letters published in *Studia Musicologica*, Bartók's letters to the Greek-born French-English music critic Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi¹⁵ and a mixed group of newly acquired letters at the Bartók Archives could be mentioned as examples.¹⁶ Certain smaller bodies of letters, like those by the German music pedagogue Erich Doflein to Bartók, have been published separately.¹⁷ The important two-way correspondence between Bartók and the Romanian folklorist Constantin Brăiloiu was edited by the late Ferenc (Francisc) László in two instalments: the Bartók letters appeared again in *Studia Musicologica* while the Brăiloiu letters were published separately and only in digital form on the website of the University of Leipzig.¹⁸ This latter was part of a particularly instructive project initiated by Helmut Loos, the edition of musicians' correspondences with the main purpose of bringing out connections between different regions ('*überregional*' was the keyword).¹⁹ A selection of 95 of Bartók's letters to his publisher, Universal Edition, Vienna, edited by Adrienne Gombocz and myself, was also included in this project.²⁰ And there are numerous further occasional publications including scholarly articles in which salient passages from previously unpublished correspondence are quoted.

Due to the disconcerting dispersion of published letters by Bartók and despite a number of authoritative editions, to offer a survey of all unpublished items available in the Bartók Archives itself requires specialised knowledge. In the following I will provide an introduction (as more particularly relevant to the 'state of the art' heading of the symposium advertisement) to the collections, indexing and cataloguing of letters in Budapest.

Essential for an understanding of the situation is the fact that the Bartók Archives had a basic collection of letters which was then enormously enlarged by various later additions. Letters are naturally divided in the Bartók Archives into two separate sections, those *by* the composer and those written *to* him. An additional smaller group of original letters contains items 'related to' the composer, either kept separately and catalogued among the letters or, unfortunately, kept with miscellaneous documents and often missing from the category 'letters'. Characteristic examples can be found among documents received from the Liszt Academy which include such items as the important draft

letter of recommendation by the director of the Music Academy, Ödön Mihalovich, for a scholarship to support Bartók's first collecting trip to Transylvania.

Not only are the two main sections, letters by and to Bartók, kept separately in the basic collection of the Archives, but their ordering is also different; the letters by Bartók being arranged chronologically while the letters to him are kept in alphabetical order according to the correspondents. Whereas our basic collection originates in the holdings of the Hungarian estate, it was variously enlarged with both original documents and copies of the most varied form, photocopies, photos, transcriptions and typescripts from the original, or copies of published facsimiles.

According to the old system, which is still in use today, separate card indexes for the two groups help locate individual letters. A number of search possibilities were taken into account when preparing the card indexes: apart from chronological or alphabetical series, geographical names and even certain important subject entries were indexed. The most significant single enlargement of the Archives' files of Bartók's correspondence happened in 1988 when Peter Bartók, after taking over his father's American estate, sent a whole set of black and white photocopies of letters (together with copies of all compositional sources) to Budapest, that had been collected in the former New York Archives and are now, as far as I am aware, also in Basel. In 2001, a new set of original size colour copies, also containing previously withheld documents, was sent to Budapest. The American collection was arranged according to its own system, always based on correspondents first and chronology second, and was furthermore supplied with lists that could practically serve as indexes. Instead of integrating the new and homogeneous collection of copies into our original system of files, they are kept separately and large-scale projects were initiated to digitise their content, in the best manner possible in the early 1990s, i.e. by typing. Most significant among these were the digitisation of all the letters belonging to Bartók's correspondence with his foreign publishers, Universal Edition (between 1917 and 1940) and Boosey and Hawkes (between 1938 and 1945). We also made use of a helpful, if somewhat cumbersome, system of indexing within the text to detect, identify and normalise references to works, persons and institutions while preserving their idiosyncratic appearance in the main letter text. Also, special indexes were drawn up to these crucial bodies of documents. (The larger collection of correspondence with Universal Edition comprises almost 1,300 items.) These files are in constant use still today, especially because of the easy searching possibility in Word. (The 95 letters to Universal Edition already published were also selected using the digitised

version.) While certain groups of letters from the American collection were digitised as separate entities, when working on the correspondences with the publishers we took into consideration all available sources uniting every available piece of correspondence from whatever source (our original collection, the American collection or even otherwise unavailable individual letters published somewhere occasionally as facsimiles or just quoted).

It was only during the publication in *Studia Musicologica* of a mixed group of recently acquired autograph letters, while trying to draw up lists for all known correspondence with the different addressees, that I realised how difficult it actually was to get an overview of what could be *known* from the composer's correspondence, since no single 'locator' of Bartók letters existed. Due to this frustration, I have initiated the creation of an ever-increasing excel file that should comprise all published and unpublished letters known to us. This 'locator', now listing more than 9,000 items, also includes data about letters surfacing in auctions even though they might then disappear from (scholarly) view.²¹

Since this locator is our main tool at the moment, let me mention that it is designed as a listing with the necessary minimum amount of data. Its fields (columns) include 'From' (full name of the writer of letter, if not Bartók), 'To' (addressee), 'Date' (straightforward but classified according to certainty), 'Collection' (meaning in what form do we have access to the letter in the Archives), 'Remarks', 'Language' (i.e. original language of the letter), 'In' (data on publication if relevant) and, finally, the 'Form' in which it is available (original or the type of copy specified). To save time and energy, we have omitted place names so far, although separate columns are reserved for the place of destination ('Place (to)') and that of dispatch ('Place (from)').

Before describing our most recent undertaking with the letters using the excel table, I must digress with an account of a major experience with digital technology. Together with colleagues at the Archives, I was involved in the digital republication of the two basic volumes of Bartók letters, mentioned earlier. The Hungarian language CD-ROM, *Bartók Béla élete levelei tükrében* [*The Life of Béla Bartók through His Letters*], was published in 2007. Apart from the complete text of the two volumes, it also contained one of Béla Bartók Junior's indispensable documentary volumes, *Apám életének krónikája* [*Chronicle of My Father's Life*], compiled and presented strictly chronologically in the form of a calendar with entries to individual dates.²² This basic pattern suggested the use of what could be called a 'time tree' for the CD-ROM, in which one can have access to the individual letters (as well as to Béla Bartók Junior's calendar entries) in a 'zooming' fashion, by year, by month or even by day (FIGURE 3).²³ In

this way the CD-ROM is already an excellent device making the letters in the two independent volumes accessible, ordered in a consistent way. In addition, the CD-ROM made it possible to use the search function in the whole corpus of texts and so one can look up a word, a word fragment or a string of words, a feature that has of course proved extremely helpful and effective for scholarly work. Moreover, the CD-ROM also contains the united indexes of the three separate publications, and a digitised form of the original publications is also included.

Based on our experience with this CD-ROM, a database has been planned for the composer's entire known correspondence. This database should be built out of the excel table and should also cumulatively unite the documents themselves: digitised copies from editions, facsimiles and transcriptions. Our aim is furthermore to make all letters whose text is included searchable. For this reason we will use texts from the highly varied sources available at the moment, including the digitised version of the two letter volumes, the typed texts of the

FIGURE 3. Looking up a date (2 July 1909) on the CD-ROM of Bartók letters

BARTÓK BÉLA ÉLETE – LEVELEI TÜKRÉBEN

ELŐSZÓ | FORRÁSKLADVÁNYOK | MUTATÓK | KERESŐ | IMPRESSZUM | KILÉPÉS

TALLÓZÁS A KRONOLÓGIÁBAN

TALÁLATOK: 3 TALÁLAT SZÖVEGE ÚJ ABLAKBAN

1908
 1909
 fénykép
 január
 február
 március
 április
 május
 június
 július
 1
 2
 3
 4
 5
 12

1909 július 2.

- [1909. július 2.]
Július 2-án képtárba mennek. Freund Eteľkának és Thomán Istvánnak írja, hogy Bihar vármegyébe készül gyűjtőútra.
- [1909. július 2.]
 FREUND ETELKÁNAK — BUDAPESTRE -- [Veleńce, 1909. júl. 2.] (BBLev 185, p. 150)
- [1909. július 2.]
 THOMÁN ISTVÁNNAK — UNGVÁRRA -- [Veleńce, 1909. júl. 2.] (BBLev 186, p. 150)

various correspondences including those with the publishers, and occasional publications of letters in articles which happen to be available digitally. The other large body of resources should consist of facsimiles of letters available in the original or some kind of photocopy. If necessary, even old monochrome photocopies will be reproduced.²⁴

In lieu of a conclusion, let me quote one more sentence from Kodály's article 'Bartók the Man': 'Anyone who knows the language of sounds does not need what I can say about the man for he is in his music even more than in his handwriting, from which graphologists can decipher many a thing today.' Once again, he was right. Let us hope, however, that editors can also decipher from letters something more about the personality and the *artist* than just biographical data.

Notes

- 1 Zoltán Kodály, 'Béla Bartók the Man', in: *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, trans. Lili Halápi and Fred Macnicol, Budapest: Corvina Press, 1974, p. 97.
- 2 Text and translation of this postcard: 'Nagyon sajnáltam, hogy már nem találtalak odahaza – közvetlenül az évvárás után látogattam föl hozzád. Most innen oláhokhoz megyek tanulmányutra. Sokszor üdv. Béla jul. 2'. [I was very sorry that I could not find you at home – I went to call on you immediately after the end of the term. Now I shall go from here to the Vlachs for a study trip. Many greetings, Béla, 2 Jul.] The postcard is preserved in the Budapest Bartók Archives (BA–N: 39/17). Cf. *Bartók Béla levelei [Béla Bartók letters]*, ed. by János Demény, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1976, p. 150 (no. 186).
- 3 My inspiration for showing this picture, during my presentation at the symposium was the involvement of the Luigi Nono Archive as well as the privilege of having Nuria Schoenberg Nono with us.
- 4 Victor Bator, *The Béla Bartók Archives: History and Catalogue*, New York: Bartók Archives Publication, 1963.
- 5 When I enquired about the chances of publication at a recent conference, the 2011 Bartók Colloquium at Szombathely, Malcolm Gillies remarked that once the book will be published, it should appear as a 'reprint' of a book never published before. See his apposite paper presented at that colloquium, Malcolm Gillies, 'Bartók Performance Practice through Correspondence', *Studia Musicologica*, LIII/1–3, March 2012, pp. 103–112.
- 6 János Demény's most important publications of Bartók's letters appeared under the title *Bartók Béla levelei [Béla Bartók's Letters]* between 1948 and 1971, some including the original text of foreign language letters as well. Demény's last summarizing volume was published under the same title, *Bartók Béla levelei*, in 1976, see note 2 above. The complete volume together with the selected letters of Bartók's family Correspondence (see next footnote) are united in *Bartók Béla élete – levelei tükrében [Bartók's Life through His Letters]*, ed. by István Pávai and László Vikárius, Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2007 (CD-ROM).
- 7 See *Bartók Béla Családi levelei*, ed. by Béla Bartók Jr. with Adrienne Gombocz, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981. According to information gained from the late Krisztina Voit, former owner of Bartók's letters to Ditta Pásztory, her collection actually included more than 500 items (letters and postcards) in contrast to the rather disproportionate selection of the published 82 pieces of documents. As a matter of fact, Krisztina Voit, the composer's grand niece and a scholar herself, started to work on a complete edition of the letters to Ditta Pásztory before her death but could not complete it.
- 8 Peter Bartók, *My Father*, Homosassa, Florida: Bartók Records, 2002. The Hungarian original texts were then published in a Hungarian translation of the English book, see Péter Bartók, *Apám [My Father]*, trans. Judit Péteri, Budapest: Editio Musica, 2004.
- 9 Béla Bartók, *Ausgewählte Briefe*, trans. Mirza Schüching, Budapest: Corvina, 1960; Béla Bartók, *Briefe*, trans. Klára L. Brüll, Henning Pätzke *et al.*, 2 vols., Budapest: Corvina, 1973; Béla Bartók, *Letters*, trans. Péter Balabán and István Farkas, Budapest: Corvina, 1971 – all edited by

János Demény.

- 10 *Documenta Bartókiana* 3, ed. by Denijs Dille, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968.
- 11 Béla Bartók, 'Ein Brief an Kodály' and Zoltán Kodály, 'Zwei Briefe an Bartók', in: *Documenta Bartókiana* 1, ed. by Denijs Dille, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1964, pp. 16–21 and 'Vier Briefe Kodálys an Bartók', in: *Documenta Bartókiana* 4, ed. by Denijs Dille, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970, pp. 129–147. Letters to the conductor Ernst Latzko, the concert manager Antonia Kossar and other correspondents are included in different volumes of the series published in 6 volumes by Denijs Dille and, later, László Somfai, between 1964 and 1981.
- 12 László Eöszse, 'Bartók és Kodály levelezése' ['The Correspondence between Bartók and Kodály'], in: László Eöszse, *Örökségünk Kodály [Kodály: Our Heritage]*, Budapest: Osiris, 2000, pp. 215–264.
- 13 Béla Bartók, *Briefe an Stefi Geyer*, ed. by Paul Sacher, Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, 1979.
- 14 *Bartók Béla – Paul Sacher levelezése / Briefwechsel [Béla Bartók – Paul Sacher Correspondence]*, ed. by Ferenc Bónis, Budapest: Balassi, 2013.
- 15 Adrienne Gombocz and László Somfai, 'Bartók's Briefe an Calvocoressi (1914–1930)', *Studia Musicologica*, 24, 1982, pp. 199–231.
- 16 Adrienne Gombocz and László Vikárius, 'Twenty-Five Bartók Letters to the Arányi Sisters, Wilhelmine Creel and Other Correspondents. Recently Acquired Autograph Letters in the Budapest Bartók Archives', *Studia Musicologica*, XLIII/1–2, 2002, pp. 151–204.
- 17 See *Erich Doflein Briefe an Béla Bartók 1930–1935: Zur Entstehungsgeschichte von Bartóks 44 Duos für 2 Violinen*, ed. Ulrich Mahlert, Köln: Studio, 1995.
- 18 Ferenc László, '36 Bartók-Briefe aus dem Nachlaß von Constantin Brăiloiu', *Studia Musicologica*, XL/4, 1999, pp. 391–457, and Ferenc László, 'Constantin Brăiloiu's Briefe an Béla Bartók', Available: http://www.gko.uni-leipzig.de/fileadmin/user_upload/musikwissenschaft/pdf_allgemein/arbeitsgemeinschaft/heft10/1012_laszlo.pdf [26 March 2015].
- 19 See the proceedings of the conference under the heading 'Briefkorrespondenzen', in: *Musikgeschichte in Mittel-und Osteuropa: Mittelungen der internationalen Arbeitsgemeinschaft an der Universität Leipzig* 10, ed. by Helmut Loos and Eberhard Möller with Hildegard Mannheims, Leipzig: Gudrun Schröder Verlag, 2005, pp. 1–198.
- 20 See 'Briefwechsel zwischen Bartók und der Universal Edition: Ein Querschnitt', ed. by Adrienne Gombocz and László Vikárius, Available: http://www.gko.uni-leipzig.de/fileadmin/user_upload/musikwissenschaft/institut/arbeitsgemeinschaft/musikerbriefe/5_Vikarius.pdf [26 March 2015]. This edition, however useful, unfortunately lacks many notes originally envisaged by the editors.
- 21 The research and preparation of the database presented here has been generously supported by the Hungarian National Scientific Fund (OTKA NK101742).
- 22 Béla Bartók Jr., *Apám életének krónikája [A Chronicle of my Father's Life]*, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, 1981, 2nd ed., Budapest: Helikon, 2006.

- 23 Text on the screen: ‘On 2 July they go to a picture gallery. [Bartók] informs Etelka Freund and István Thomán that he is going to Bihor county to collect folk music.’ Bihor county in Transylvania (now in Romania) was the first region where Bartók systematically collected Romanian folk songs and instrumental pieces. His first scholarly monograph was also devoted to the folk music of this region, see Béla Bartók, *Cântece populare românești din comitatul Bihor (Ungaria) / Chansons populaires roumaines du département Bihar (Hongrie)*, Bucharest: Librărie Socec & Comp. și C. Sfetea, 1913.
- 24 The high-quality digitization of our own basic collection of letters has been completed since this lecture was delivered, although some of my colleagues are still working on digital images and their pdf version (single pdf files containing all documents belonging to a letter) to be used in the database. The programming of the database has been prepared by our system administrator and we plan to develop it gradually. Data on the letters has already been available at the website of the Archives (http://db.zti.hu/bartok_correspondence/bmails_Search.asp) but the texts and facsimiles of letters will only be accessible gradually in the premises of the Archives as special functions of the database due to copyright restrictions.