Béla Bartók's Turn to Neoclassicism in Light of His Social Commitment: Some Evidence from Archival Sources

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For László Somfai on his 90th birthday

The fairly and variously problematic, but at the same time unavoidable, music historical term 'neoclassicism' has an increasingly important role in the discussion about music in the inter-war period.[1] The expression is awkward, partly because of its lack of specificity, though, also due to its uneasy relationship to kindred and generally more precise, more accepted designations in art history such as 'classic', 'classical', 'classicism' or 'neoclassical'. Still, musical neoclassicism appears to have become an important and meaningful keyword to describe tendencies, especially stylistic and technical features used by prominent composers from about 1920. As the date also suggests, despite very important and considerably earlier manifestations of similar tendencies, from the late nineteenth century, especially in France, neoclassicism became a debated term – associated primarily with Stravinsky's decisive stylistic change of orientation that gradually and effectively ended his 'Russian' period.

The historical period, and especially tendencies in society, in the two decades between the First and the Second World War may have influenced changes of style in another important composer, Béla Bartók, whose music of the same period – less consistently but still undoubtedly – shows neoclassical features. In the

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following discussion, little-known archival evidence will be presented to consider the possible relevance of serious social and political concerns to Bartók's stylistic choices.

An active participant at events of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) founded in the early 1920s, Béla Bartók became fully aware of neoclassicism as a new stylistic orientation, and a catchphrase, by 1925 at the latest.[2] In an interview by the poet Dezső Kosztolányi, given after taking part at the orchestral concerts of the Prague festival organized by the ISCM, where his recently composed *Dance-Suite* had been performed and reviewed with unanimous enthusiasm, Bartók mentioned two distinct tendencies in contemporary music: 'away from romanticism' and 'neoclassicism'.[3] By 1926, he developed his new idiom in a series of piano pieces, especially the *Nine Little Piano Pieces*, the *Out of Doors* suite, and the First Piano Concerto, that contain conspicuous stylistic elements and compositional devices borrowed from the style of earlier historical periods in music. Bartók's neoclassicism involved the integration of a whole series of new elements in his style. Among these were characteristics inspired by pieces from French and Italian baroque keyboard literature that he had also performed and edited for piano pedagogical books. In addition, he obviously also realized that a re-evaluation of the style of such canonical composers as J. S. Bach, Mozart, and even Beethoven as models was also possible in ways that were different from his youthful studies as pianist and composition pupil at the Academy of Music in Budapest. What we can call his neoclassicism developed continuously in the following years by employing a set of special stylistic features. Following his 1926 watershed series of new compositions, mainly for piano, his new stylistic orientation manifested itself in works such as *Cantata profana* (1930, with emphatic references to Bach's cantatas and in particular to the introductory chorus of *St. Matthew Passion*), the Second Piano Concerto (1930–31, with a consciously 'revised' style and form of the First Piano Concerto but with a strictly symmetric large-scale structure while also using cyclic thematic material, their transformation, inversion and even retrograde form) or *Music for Strings Percussion and Celesta* (1936, with a non-plus-ultra realization of the fugue principle through all the keys combined with the cyclic idea of thematic transformation). Arguably, Bartók's neoclassicism further continued to evolve in the Divertimento (1939, integrating elements of a concerto grosso structural principle), the Solo Violin Sonata (1944, once again a thoroughly Bachian undertaking especially its Tempo di ciaccona first movement and the third, *tour de force* Fugue, movement) and the last complete work, the

Third Piano Concerto (1945, with conspicuous neo-Baroque passages in the second and third movement).

Technically, Bartók had to realize the new possibilities of neoclassicism as a re-integration of historic compositional techniques, like imitation; the heightened role of counterpoint in general resulting in simpler, more transparent textures; the use of sequences; and a greater emphasis on tonality than in his earlier 'expressionist' works, such as *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–19, orchestration 1924), or the two Sonatas for Violin and Piano (1921 and 1922, respectively).[4] As far as musical form is concerned, Bartók started to approach traditional forms, especially the sonata form and the rondo, with new ideas in individual movements. In addition, he chose occasionally traditional genres such as the piano sonata, the three-movement classical concerto (in the First and Second Piano Concertos and later in the Violin Concerto, 1937–38). He started to experiment with different formal principles in the middle string quartets (No. 3, 1927, with its baroque slow-fast-slow-fast four-section attacca form and the two different symmetric five-movement structures of the Fourth and Fifth String Quartets, 1928 and 1934, respectively). Furthermore, he had to reconcile these techniques with the use of his own more special folkloristic sources and manners. To understand his dilemma, it might be instructive to consider how he himself summed up his opinion of Stravinsky's neoclassicism in his late Harvard Lectures.

The final section of the first of this incomplete series of lectures, held at Harvard University, in early 1943, was entirely devoted to Schoenberg and Stravinsky 'the two leading composers of the past decades' in Bartók's estimation. When turning to an outline of Stravinsky's career he emphasizes that '[b]etween Schoenberg and Stravinsky is the greatest imaginable contrast'. He explains, 'Stravinsky started from a totally different point or, better, from totally different points', adding that 'he shows several starts during his career'. Stravinsky's then current style is still identified with the word 'neoclassicism'. It is less surprising that Bartók mentions *Pulcinella* as merely 'preparatory' and starts this period of compositions rather only with the Octet for winds. What is more significant is that he makes an important distinction between the 'material' and the 'spirit' in these works:

> The opinion of some people that Stravinsky's neoclassical style is based on Bach, Handel, and other composers of their time is a rather superficial one. As a matter of fact, he turns only to the material of that period, to the patterns used by Bach, Handel, and others. Stravinsky uses this material in his own way, arranging and transforming it according to his own individual spirit, thus creating works of a new, individual style. Had he tried also to transpose Bach's or Handel's spirit into his work, imitation and not creation would have been the result.[5]

Bartók thus regarded Stravinsky's neoclassical works as 'creative' rather than 'imitative' of the style they referenced. While this incisive, and by then unambiguously favourable, characterization of Stravinsky's neoclassicism might only represent Bartók's view in 1943, the distinction between 'material' and 'spirit' must have been crucial for his aesthetic thinking in general from very early on. The '[g]eneral spirit' which should have served as the goal of the argumentation in the unrealized final part of this fragmentary lecture series, as a sketch shows, was an important concept in several of his earlier programmatic texts from at least the early 1920s.[6] That the 'spirit of the work' for him was necessarily connected with folk music, as the heading for the intended last lecture also specifies, should not indicate that his aim was 'historicist' in nature. While the spirit of Bach's and Handel's music transposed into modern works would have meant 'imitation' rather than 'creation', the 'spirit' of folk music pervading a modern composition – Bartók's repeatedly confessed ideal – was meant to be new. Thus, he might have regarded his own stylistic turn in the mid-1920s as nothing more than the incorporation of previously neglected or even avoided 'material', and 'patterns' taken over from earlier periods, mainly the Baroque and classicism. Their use, however, intended to serve some new 'spirit', the spirit of his own time. This is also the reason why he might have chosen to use previously ignored technical possibilities and elements without fundamentally changing his intended goal of the 'spirit' of the work.

To further orient ourselves around an important point in time, significantly closer to the actual events, we can examine a written statement in Hungarian by the composer which was published on the basis of a single manuscript by László Somfai with the title 'Bartók Béla nyilatkozata a "progresszív zenei alkotásokról" (1927–1928?)' [Béla Bartók's Statement about 'Progressive Musical Works' (1927–1928?)].[7] If the convincingly suggested date is correct, the 'statement', whatever its actual purpose could be, might have been penned in connection with the composer's first American concert tour which took place between December 1927 and February 1928. (See the complete text in translation in Appendix I.) The text emphasizes neoclassicism in music as one of two domineering movements: the one being 'a turn-away from yesterday's music (romanticism)' whereas the other being 'the reliance on the music of previous epochs'. According to Bartók, the latter then can be realized in two different ways, 'by relying on old folk (peasant) music' and 'with the inspiration of the art music of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries or even earlier periods'. He calls the latter 'neoclassicism'. In this early text, Bartók already emphasizes the significance of 'revitalization of old musical elements, forms and means of expression' for the movement to be 'justified'.

Interestingly and conspicuously, at the beginning of his 'statement' Bartók proposes to discuss progressive compositions while disregarding Schoenberg and his school. In fact, he completely leaves the 'atonal' and 'dodecaphonic' compositions out of consideration, unlike in his late Harvard Lectures of about fifteen years later, when he offered his students an introduction to both Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Since his central claim for progressive music is the common endeavour of turning away from romanticism, it seems obvious that he then – in the late 1920s – found Schoenberg and his followers lacking this basic gesture, necessarily regarding them rather as a continuation of late romantic style. According to a reported interview from October 1926, Bartók 'regards Schoenberg as highly [as he regards Stravinsky], but he [Schoenberg] has further developed and perfected the music of Wagner'.[8] In fact, Bartók did not change his estimation of Schoenberg's style in his Harvard Lectures, either. There, he characterizes Schoenberg's early works 'a continuation, a further development, or – if I am allowed to use the word – an exaggeration of the Wagner style'.[9] Even Schoenberg's later style is only described as 'still more complicated because of the use of the [twelve-tone] system, but their style of expression is, in its main features, the same with which he began in Op. 11.'[10] It is thus obvious that Bartók did not want to consider Schoenberg's work, despite some of its conspicuous neoclassical features, whenever he discussed his view of neoclassicism.

If we look for the possible inspiration behind his willingness to embrace neoclassicism by 1926, more than one factor seems to be relevant. First of all, there certainly was a decisive change in Bartók's personal life due to his divorce from his first wife Márta Ziegler and his second marriage to his young pianist pupil Ditta Pásztory in 1923. By 31 July 1924 their child, his second son, Peter Bartók had been born, charging him with new responsibilities for a young family once again in his life. (His first son had been born in 1910 when he was 29, whereas now he was 43 years old.) The finally realised orchestration (and revision), also in 1924, of his ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin*, the apogee of his expressionist period actually composed in 1918–19, may also have contributed to the necessity of a change of style and a new beginning. His letter of 21 June 1926 is clear testimony that he overcame a long period of withdrawal from composition and gestation of new possibilities.[11]

The stylistic renewal seems to have been linked to the plan, already publicized in 1925, for the composition of a piano concerto to represent his modernist style in his contribution to orchestral concert programmes. His two works for piano and orchestra, Rhapsody op. 1 (1904–05) and Scherzo op. 2 (1904), were composed twenty years earlier. The latter, despite rehearsals for a planned

March 1905 concert in Budapest, remained in manuscript and was discarded.[12] The former, first performed in Paris at the Rubinstein competition, in 1905, and published in 1910, was Bartók's only work for piano and orchestra available at the time. Although he continued to perform it occasionally up to the late 1930s, its national romantic style based on Liszt's 'Hungarian' idiom, employing a folk inspired two-section rhapsody form (slow and fast), was inappropriate to represent the Bartók of the 1920s. However, the plan of a work in the piano concerto genre, probably envisaged as being cast in a traditional – 'classical' – form from the start, in contrast to both the attacca two-section Rhapsody and the early two-movement Violin Concerto (1907–08, in its original form also only published posthumously), was probably in itself a neoclassical gesture.

It is plausible that Bartók's new creative experiments under the aegis of neoclassicism were instigated by his experience of Stravinsky's Budapest concert on 15 March 1926, when Stravinsky himself participated as the soloist in the performance of his Concerto for Piano and Winds, a work also mentioned by Bartók in his later summary of Stravinsky's neoclassical period. The important moment represented by this concert, as Bartók recalled in an interview, was decisive in helping him learn to appreciate Stravinsky's new stylistic orientation:

> Stravinsky's more recent compositions which he calls neoclassical, and which indeed remind one of music from Bach's time, seemed to me to be dry after I had first read them, however, thanks to his Budapest concert, they have gained a lot in my eyes.[13]

Bartók also remarks that the change in Stravinsky's style 'is in close connection with the development of the other arts'. Although he typically showed a general restraint with references to the arts, to prove this, Bartók specifically names Picasso as a major influence upon Stravinsky.

As a matter of fact, one conspicuous but generally neglected feature of Bartók's statements about neoclassicism is his somewhat surprising references to the history of arts. Just as he was quick to point to the influence of Picasso on Stravinsky in the above interview, he readily and understandably referred to the Renaissance whenever he wished to justify the use of older forms, also pointing out the originality of the new content (or 'spirit'). He did so in his 1925 interview by Kosztolányi, and he also did so in his undated 'statement' printed in Appendix I.[14] In this second text, however, he also considered an example contrary to the brilliant achievements of the Renaissance, nineteenth-century 'neoclassicism' in architecture, which he found 'imitative' rather than 'creative'.

The idea that it was actually about 'the development of the other arts' rather than just one composer's personal development, clearly suggests that Bartók considered

the change to be of greater and more general significance. While this does not immediately indicate that the change was dictated by some social necessity, it does make the consideration of a wider context for the new stylistic orientation in the arts advisable or at least justified.

Bartók's stylistic turn might appear to be just or basically a technical question. It can, however, also have been motivated by a new sense of social responsibility. First of all, he was eager to contribute to the revival of international cooperation after the First World War. By the early 1930s, however, partly due to the economic crisis, he became acutely aware of the growing tensions in international politics and the rise of new nationalism which, in a significant part of Europe, led to a gradual lapse into dictatorships leading, finally, to war.

Due to this social and political background it is thus worth considering whether his turn to neoclassicism can be interpreted as part of an effort to save cultural and humanistic values as well as to reconnect with an idealized past.

Apart from his continuing international activity as a scholar of folklore, Bartók, always an ardent advocate of international cooperation, accepted an active role, in 1930, in a committee for arts and literature of the League of Nations, whose meetings he tried to use to warn against rising authoritarian tendencies. His sending for safekeeping his manuscripts to the United States, and especially his personal decision to go there with his wife on an indefinite concert tour, with luggage of more than 300 kg containing his most important ethnomusicological collections for publication, are all parts of his efforts to save values and to try and accomplish what he considered to be his mission.

Realizing Bartók's acute sense of responsibility, one may legitimately wonder whether the stylistic changes in his compositions during the 1920s and 30s might in some way reflect and react to social and political changes. *Cantata profana*, a work often interpreted as a 'hymn of Exodus' and one of his most obviously neoclassical works, can hardly be interpreted without a discussion of the composer's profound dissatisfaction with tendencies in the European society of the time. While we generally discuss developments in Bartók's compositional style and strategies from 1926 on and his social commitment as a carefully acting but uncompromising public figure separately, we might try to consider a possible and perhaps even necessary connection between the two fields of his activities.

Bartók's insistence in his writings on the 'complicated' style of Schoenberg's later music may lead us to further documents of Bartók's occasional more general statements about music in the 1930s. Some of them survive, interestingly, together

with papers related to his activity within the League of Nations committee. These statements, including his 'Draft resolution' of 1931 published posthumously by János Demény,[15] his recently published related 'Proposal for the Safeguarding of the Freedom of the Arts and Sciences' also from 1931,[16] and 'Staat und Kunst' [State and Art] probably also for a committee session in 1934, published in German by Tibor Tallián,[17]show Bartók's growing concern with dictatorial tendencies in the politics of the time. This concern seems to have defined his attitude towards his expressed views regarding tendencies in musical composition during the 1930s. Kept with these documents is finally the partly heavily revised manuscript draft in Hungarian of 'Béla Bartók's Opinion on the Technical, Aesthetic and Spiritual Orientation of Contemporary Music' written for *La Revue Internationale de Musique* in 1938 (**FIGURE 1**).[18] His answers to the first two questions regarding the present state and later goal of music (both technical and aesthetic), emphasize 'spontaneity' and 'simplicity', 'the spontaneous idea of any creator' and, especially, 'simplicity' or 'inspired simplicity'.

> 1. – *Briefly, what is your opinion concerning the present state of music (its technical development, the spiritual and aesthetic aspect)*?
>
> In order to express our ideas and sentiments through music it is necessary to forsake all that weighs down its flight and to make use of all the means within our reach. We say nothing new by that, since it is the spontaneous idea of any creator belonging to a new school of music. Simplicity is something very relative: what appears simple to some might be perfectly incomprehensible to others. The spontaneous expression of Genius is sometimes more complicated than a mechanical creation, and the simplest means sometimes appear as the most complex.
>
> 2. – *Toward what, according to you, is the contemporary musical movement heading generally (technically, aesthetically, etc.)? Is it in disarray or is it heading toward an equilibrium which is already perceptible?*
>
> All efforts ought to be directed at the present time to the search for that which we will call 'inspired simplicity'. The greater the number of those who will dedicate themselves to that, the more will disarray be avoided. – The reason why we have in the last twenty-five years attained the greatest confusion from the creative point of view is that very few composers concentrated their efforts toward this goal, and also because musical creation has relied too much on the unique value of the most unexpected and sometimes least appropriate means of expression to convey the inventive idea. That is what the Snobs called 'inventive Genius'.[19]

Interestingly, but certainly not accidentally, Bartók's manuscript of the draft for the discussions of the two first questions shows few and slight revisions.[20] His answer to the last, fifth, question that recommends the possibility of a re-

evaluation of romanticism, while not at all agreeing with what is suggested in the query, contains few changes and corrections quite similarly to his comments on the first two questions. In contrast, his answer to the two questions in between that he decided to discuss under a single heading (in Bartók's shortened wording, '3. 4. which are the adverse factors and how to neutralize them') swarms with changes creating several layers of texts and revisions. (For a presentation of the Hungarian autograph draft of this section with English translation, see Appendix II.) The final formulation, however, is terse as well as clear enough.

> The most formidable adversary of a flowering contemporary music is the unlimited interference of bureaucracy and State control. If statesmen completely ignorant in the domain of the arts will maintain the power to forbid certain works for reasons totally unrelated to the arts or – and this is even more fearful – if the prohibition is motivated by totally erroneous artistic reasons, then the future of music is forever compromised. Just as we cannot conceive of a 'controlled' folk art, it is just as impossible also to domineer creative genius. – As for remedies to be applied against these tendencies, I am ignorant of them: perhaps the politicians could advise us? [21]

The final text is truly instructive. First of all, only the last sentence is devoted to the fourth question and it points to the chief responsibility of politicians. The main part of the argument, however, deals with the third question and underlines 'bureaucracy' and 'state control' being the real 'adverse factors'. Perhaps surprising, but particularly characteristic of his thinking, is the parallel Bartók proposes between 'folk art' and the 'creative genius'; neither should or can be 'controlled'. It is here that we might grasp the true significance of his insistence on 'spontaneity' earlier in his remarks.

His intensely reworked text contains much deliberation which is obvious sign of his awareness of the importance and possible risks involved with discussing the issue. In his final text he carefully avoided directly referencing current political conditions. While in the end he referred to 'bureaucracy', the 'state' and 'statesmen', in his draft he expressed his ideas much more directly speaking about 'shrewd dictators' and 'dictatorship'. In addition, it is only in the draft that the necessary social base of the 'dictator' is mentioned: 'the mass', 'the *plebs*', which 'applauds political success' and which also 'applauds the shackling of art'. The unambiguous reference to the 'mass success of dictators' speeches' as proof of the fact that 'great masses can only be stimulated by cheap truisms', strikingly shows Bartók's disgust of general social conditions.

However more specific the draft is, the final published version of Bartók's answer to the third question is still clear enough. It is in the published short paragraph that the statement is revealed once again as testimony of Bartók's

wider concerns while discussing questions of musical style. Now it might also appear that even the emphasis on the 'spontaneous idea of any creator' and on 'inspired simplicity' might well have been dictated by his political worries. On the other hand, when he emphasized the importance of the 'use of all the means within our reach' while also warning against the excessive use of romanticism (in Bartók's fairly short answer to the rather long fifth question), he may very well have thought of embracing 'neoclassicism'. This is especially so, if we consider one of his signature projects of the 1930s and his occasional comment on it, which might be crucial for a true evaluation of his stylistic turn first manifested in his piano music of 1926.

More specific neoclassical means seem to be used less conspicuously in one of Bartók's most important undertakings in the 1930s, *Mikrokosmos*. The composition of this collection of 153 piano pieces, published in 1940, occupied Bartók from at least 1932 to 1939. It is not a coincidence that some of his early compositional attempts that finally found their way into this collection also originate in the crucial year of stylistic change, 1926. His somewhat later comment in a letter to his new publisher, Boosey & Hawkes (13 February 1940), specifies some of the most important and most openly neoclassical devices.[22] In his comment, Bartók emphasizes that the whole collection represents the 'composer's personal idiom', a 'twentieth century idiom', which is present in all the pieces despite his use of 'the same devices as many centuries-old folk-music', 'or devices [...] as for inst[ance] canon, imitation, etc. of older art music'. In this statement about his piano pedagogical work he concludes that it is 'connecting new age with old ages'. As an exception, perhaps, he is not only referring to his use of folk music as belonging to old age but also to that of old compositional techniques of art music, namely neoclassicism or, more specifically, neo-Baroque. At the same time, his remarks also elucidate his earlier insistence on the claim that 'the revitalization of old musical elements, forms, and means of expression' should be 'done in a manner that in the end new music arises, different from all earlier music' from his earlier statement about 'Progressive Musical Works'.

Bartók's neoclassicism is convincingly discussed in writings by David Schneider in connection with the Hungarian composer's reaction to Stravinsky. Schneider offered a number of possible ways to thoughtfully describe the relationship. In the title of his earliest essay he suggested 'respect', 'competition' and 'influence' as possible key words to characterize the relationship while in his later book he used the expressions 'challenge' and 'confrontation'.[23] All are possible and all might have played some role in Bartók's turn to neoclassicism following Stravinsky's example. It is important to realize, however, that his main endeavour was to reconcile the

'new' means that neoclassicism offered for him with his idiom based deeply on folklore. Unlike Stravinsky, who made a decisive break with his 'Russian' style – the very style Bartók so enthusiastically and unconditionally admired – (and so the common features between his earlier 'Russian' and later 'neoclassical' works are mainly defined by his personal manner) Bartók strove from the beginning to use neoclassicism as a set of strategies that should be used to shape and mould the elements which he continued to derive from his folk sources, be it melodic or thematic, rhythmic or metric, formal or structural in nature.

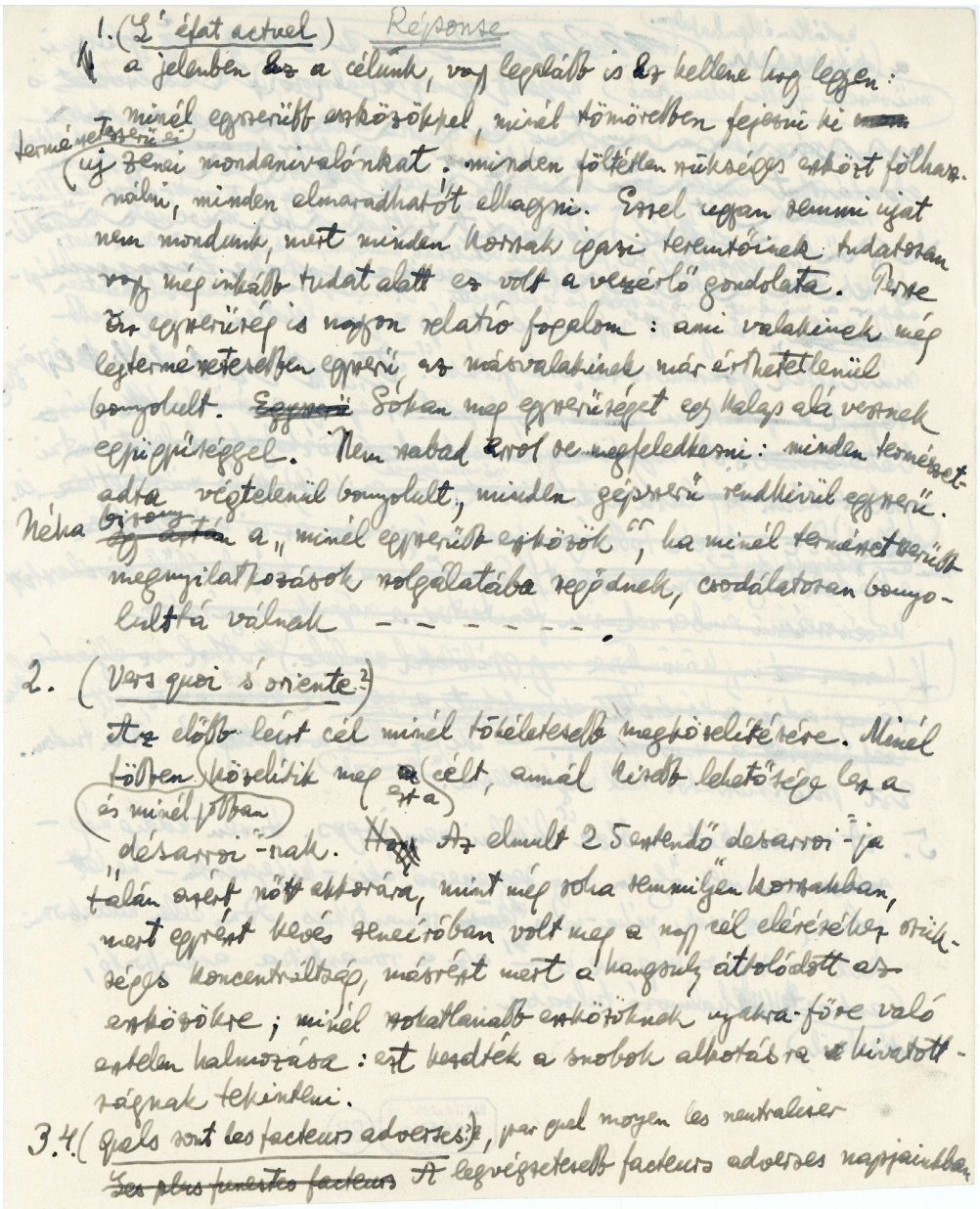
Whereas Stravinsky was undoubtedly a decisive inspiration behind Bartók's turn to neoclassicism, it is important to note that Bartók had a number of special and individual 'sources' for the development of his 'own' neoclassical idiom. These included works by composers he studied for pedagogical editions, such as Domenico Scarlatti and François Couperin.[24] Although he only published works by them in the early 1920s, he already included selected pieces by both of them and by Rameau in one of his concerts of 1911. Further impulses came from the more recently studied repertoire of Italian baroque composers, whose works he started to perform in his own concert transcriptions from 1926 on, finally also editing a selection of these transcriptions in 1930.[25] His experiments then, probably inspired by Stravinsky and first and foremost by his experience of Stravinsky's Budapest concert of March 1926, could draw upon the 'early music' styles and repertories he also engaged with from the 1910s; but more systematically from about 1925, and his first Italian concert tour, when he purchased some of the new scores he would use for preparing transcriptions.[26] To what extent these works had a direct imprint on his writing during the most conspicuously neoclassical works of 1926 might be debated, but the piano style and texture he used in his transcriptions of the baroque harpsichord and organ pieces, adapting them to the virtuoso concert pianist's modern instrument, certainly did. Especially the piano technique in the First Piano Concerto seems occasionally strikingly close to that in his transcriptions.[27]

When discussing Stravinsky's neoclassicism in 1943, Bartók observed that it was still Stravinsky's current style. But what about Bartók's 'neoclassicism', was it continuing in the 1940s? In his essay on Bartók's 'classical' middle period, László Somfai not only points out its indubitable beginnings in 1926 but also states that the end is 'less articulated'. One important characteristic that appears to prepare the 'late style' is a 'less rigorous, warmly melodic style', which Somfai detects in the last compositions of Bartók's final European years, starting with the Violin Concerto ('no. 2') of 1937–38.[28] Somfai also emphasizes the importance of Bartók's search for 'inspired simplicity' throughout this period but even more so when he

was occupied with developing his late style. In this respect, neoclassicism itself offered new possibilities for simplification by a systematic control of the musical fabric of linearity, harmony and rhythm, but also form, especially his famous symmetric large-scale structures from the five-movement Fourth String Quartet (1928) onward. In this regard, some loosening of methods can be seen as key to Bartók's development of a late style. His embrace of a more accessible melodic idiom and a generally less dissonant sound was combined with certain neoclassical characteristics present in one form or another in all three major finished works of the American period, the Concerto for Orchestra (1943), the Solo Violin Sonata, and the Third Piano Concerto.

Whether the change of musical style can indeed be brought in – direct or indirect – connection with social circumstances and especially dangerous tendencies in social-political life might be questionable. In any case, Bartók was working from the early 1930s with growing alarm of an impending catastrophe. He mentioned 'a world revolution, a world war or some other nice thing' that he feared could break out any moment already in October 1932.[29] This is what convinced him not to wait with the publication of his *Cantata profana*, despite plans for an extension of the work to include other compositions of similar dimensions. It was from now on that a sense of urgency characterized some of Bartók's most important decisions. Although these are more easily seen in other spheres of life, compositional concerns could hardly be left completely untouched, either. Some of his writings in which stylistic questions are discussed with close connection to political issues seems to speak volumes in this regard.

FIGURE 1. The first page of Bartók's Hungarian draft for his reply to the circular questions of *La Revue Internationale de Musique* (1938).


1. (L'état actuel) Réponse

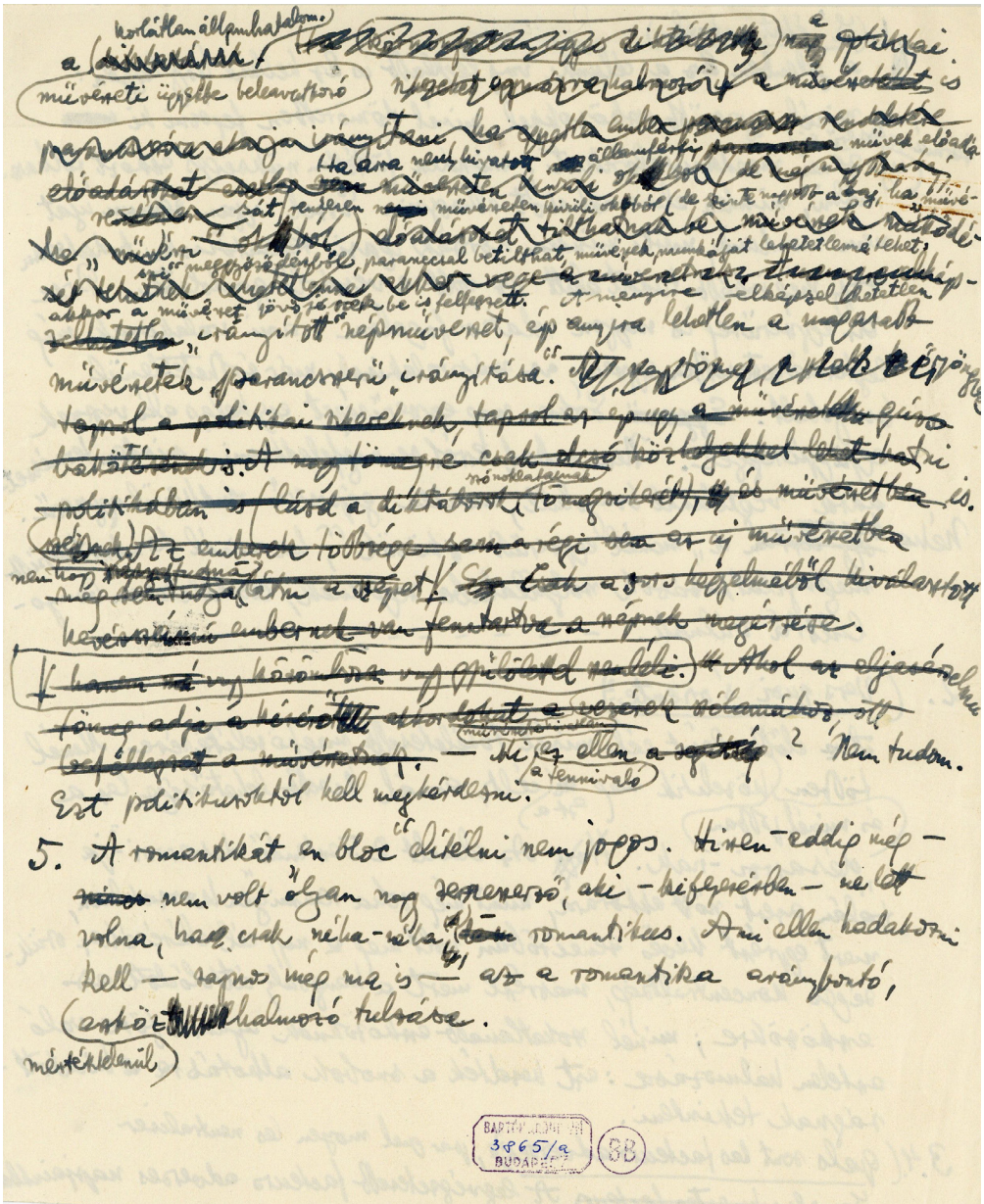
A jelenben az a célunk, vagy legalább is az kellene hogy legyen:
minél egyszerűbb eszközökkel, minél tömörebben fejezni ki
természetesen
(új zenei mondanivalónkat. minden feltétlen szükséges eszközt felhasználni, minden elmaradhatót elhagyni. Ezzel egyáltalán semmi újat nem mondunk, mert minden korszak igazi teremtőinek tudatában vagy még inkább tudat alatt ez volt a vezérlő gondolata. Persze az egyszerűség is nagyon relatív fogalom: ami valakinek még legtermészetesebben egyszerű, az másvalakinek már érthetetlenül bonyolult. Sokan még egyszerűségét egy lapos alá vetnek egyszerűséggel. Nem szabad erről se megfeledkezni: minden természetadta végtelenül bonyolult, minden gépszerű rendkívül egyszerű. Néha bizony a „minél egyszerűbb eszközök", ha minél természetesebb megnyilatkozások szolgálatába szegődnek, csodálatosan bonyolultá válnak – – – – – –.

2. (Vers quoi s'oriente?)

Az előbb leírt cél minél tökéletesebb megközelítésére. Minél többen közelítik meg a célt, annál kisebb lehetőség lesz a
és minél jobban
dészarroi-nak. Az elmúlt 25 esztendő desarroi-ja
talán azért nőtt ekkorára, mint még soha semmilyen korszakban, mert egyrészt kevés zeneíróban volt meg a nagy cél eléréséhez szükséges koncentráltság, másrészt mert a hangsúly átcsúszott az eszközökre; minél szokatlanabb eszközöknek egyre-másra való erőltetett halmozása: ezt kezdték a snobok alkotásra is kívánatosnak tekinteni.

3. 4. (Quels sont les facteurs adverses?), par quel moyen les neutraliser
~~Les plus terribles facteurs~~ A legvégzetesebb facteurs adverses napjainkban

FIGURE 1 (continuation). The second page of Bartók's Hungarian draft for his reply to the circular questions of *La Revue Internationale de Musique* (1938).



APPENDIX I

Béla Bartók's Statement about 'Progressive Musical Works' (1927–1928?)

English translation by László Vikárius, based on the Hungarian original published with a short commentary by László Somfai in *Magyar Zene,* XVI/2, 1975, pp. 115–16.

In today's progressive musical works – disregarding Schoenberg and his followers – there are two common features: a turn-away from yesterday's music (romanticism) and the reliance on the music of previous epochs. The latter is done in more than one ways: either – as with, e.g., Stravinsky's first so-called Russian period, de Falla and the Hungarians – by relying on old folk (peasant) music, or – as with, e.g., the adherers of the so-called neoclassicism (thus also in Stravinsky's latest works) – with the inspiration of the art music of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries or even earlier periods. So, a movement like a musical Renaissance can be discerned almost all over the world. In my view, this movement is only justified if, as can indeed be seen in the works of the most significant banner-bearers, the revitalization of old musical elements, forms, and means of expression is done in a manner that in the end new music arises, different from all earlier music. This can be compared to the architecture of the sixteenth-century Renaissance, which movement, either consciously or unconsciously, led to the development of a new architectural style. Far less productive was the 'neoclassicism' fashionable in nineteenth-century architecture, which seems to result in the ever repeated use of hollowed old forms rather than producing truly new art. So I think that most of today's musical will strives towards such a 'renaissance' and this endeavour can be considered justified.

That individual schools, countries, and composers realize these endeavours differently is obvious and it is both natural and healthy. In general, two different ways of realization seems to be crystalizing: one (e.g., with Stravinsky) is revolutionary, that is it advocates a sudden departure from the music of yesterday, but at the same time it introduces a host of dazzling novelties and new ideas in today's music. The other way appears to be, instead, summarizing: offering a great summary of all known usable elements; this is, thus, not a revolutionary departure from yesterday, it even preserves everything from romanticism that does

not appear to be unnecessary or exceedingly bombastic, that is everything that has the quality of vitality. The best representative of the latter is the Hungarian Kodály.

Which of the two ways will prove more durable in time, the initiatory or the great summarizing, the future will decide. If, however, one considers historical parallel examples, then one might tend to vote for the great summarizing art.

APPENDIX II

'Béla Bartók's Opinion on the Technical, Aesthetic, and Spiritual Orientation of Contemporary Music'

(Bartók's answer to questions 3 and 4 in his Hungarian draft)

English translation by László Vikárius, based on the Hungarian original held in the Budapest Bartók Archives (BA-N: 3865/a)

In the following transcription and translation deleted words and passages are marked by curly brackets: {deleted} or {{deleted within a deleted passage}}, while later insertions are marked by angle brackets: <insertion>, <<later insertion>>. A combined bracket shows consecutive changes, such as {<first inserted then deleted>}. Markings referring to longer passages are in boldface **{deleted}** or **<inserted>**. Any editorial additions are in square brackets: [editorial addition]. Sporadic French words in Bartók's draft are printed both in the original and in the translation in italics, just as a few uncertain words or syllables editorially provided within square brackets: [*uncertain reading*]. Revisions in the translation are occasionally rendered or marked in a slightly simplified form without withholding any important words, phrases and ideas different from the final text. For an English translation of the published article, see Béla Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff, London: Faber and Faber, 1976, pp. 416–417. To consult the original French pubblication, 'Opinions sur l'orientation technique, esthétique et spirituelle de la Musique Contemporaine. [...] Opinion de M. Bela Bartók (Varsovie) [*sic*]' (*La Revue Internationale de Musique,* I/3, July–September 1938, pp. 452–453), visit the website *Béla Bartók Writings* at https://bartok-irasai.zti.hu/en/introduction/on the home page of the Institute for Musicology in Budapest: https://bartok-irasai.zti.hu/en/irasok/opinions-sur-lorientation-technique-esthetique-et-spirituelle-de-la-musique-contemporaine-2/ [both last accessed 26 May 2025].

(A) TRANSCRIPTION

3. 4. (*quels sont les facteurs adverses?*), par quel moyen les neutraliser

{*Les plus funestes facteurs*} A legvégzetesebb *facteurs adverses* napjainkban a {diktatúrák.} <<művészeti ügyekbe beleavatkozó>> <korlátlan államhatalom.> {<Ha>} {nagy} <a> {politikai sikereket egymásra halmozó} <{körmönfontan ügyes diktátor{{ok?}}}> {a művészeteket} is {paracsszóra akarja irányítani, ha egyetlen ember {{parancs}} rendeletére} {előadásokat} {esetleg {{nem}} művészeten kívüli ok{{ok}}ból (de még nagyobb a baj, ha "művészi" ok{{ok}}ból előadásokat tilthatnak be, művészek működését tehetnek lehetetlenné, akkor vége a művészetnek. Amennyire elképzelhetetlen} <Ha arra nem hivatott államférfi {parancsára} művek előadását rendesen[*?*] {nem is*?*} művészeten kívüli ok{k}ból, de szinte nagyobb a baj, ha "művészi" meggyőződésből paranccsal betilthat, művészek munkáját lehetetlenné tehet, akkor a művészet jövőjének be is fellegzett. Amennyire elképzelhetetlen> "irányított" népművészet, ép annyira lehet[*et*]len a magasabb művészetek parancsszerű "irányítása". **{**A nagy tömeg, a plebs [*ki?*] őrjöngve tapsol a politikai sikereknek, tapsol az ép ugy a művészet{{ek}} gúzsbakötésének is. A nagy tömegre csak olcsó közhelyekkel lehet hatni politikában is (lásd a diktátorok <szónoklatainak> tömegsikerét), {{a}} és művészetben is.

Az emberek többsége sem a régi sem az uj művészetben {{meg sem tudja}} <nemhogy szépnek tudná> látni a szépet. <hanem még vagy közömbösen vagy gyűlölettel szemléli.> {{Ez}} {{c}}<C>sak a sors kegyelméből kiválasztott kevésszámú embernek van fenntartva a szépnek megérzése. – Ahol az aljasérzelmű tömeg adja a kísér{{etet}}<ő> akkordokat a <művészetre hivatlan> vezérek szólamához ott befellegzett a művészetnek.**}** – Mi <a tennivaló> ez ellen {a segítség}? Nem tudom. Ezt politikusoktól kell megkérdezni.

(B) ENGLISH TRANSLATION

3. 4. (*quels sont les facteurs adverses ?, par quel moyen les neutraliser*) [which are the adverse factors? how to neutralise them]

{*Les plus funestes facteurs*} The most dangerous *facteurs adverses* [adverse factors] nowadays are/is {dictatorships} <the uncontrolled state power> < which interferes with artistic matters>. {If a shrewd dictator}, {who accumulates political success} wants to command {the arts} {with word of order, if on a single person's} {command} {artistic performances} can be prohibited for non-artistic reasons (but it is even worse when it is done for 'artistic' reasons) and artists' activities can be made impossible, then the future of art is doomed. Just as unimaginable} <If a statesman, who is not adequately prepared, can prohibit {with word of order}

the performance of works for non-artistic reasons, although it is even worse if it is done with 'artistic' conviction, then the future of art is doomed. Just as> 'controlled' folk art is unimaginable, similarly higher art cannot be 'controlled' by command. {The great mass, the *plebs* franticly applauds political successes; it also applauds the shackling of art{{s}}. Great masses can only be stimulated by cheap truisms both in politics (see the mass success of dictators' <speeches>) and in art.

Most people cannot see the beautiful either in old or in new art, <instead, they look at it indifferently or with hate.> It is the privilege of only a few select by fate's grace to recognize the beautiful by feeling it. – Where the mean-spirited mass provides the accompanying chords to the voice of the commanders <who lack any artistic vocation> there the arts are doomed.} – What should be done against this? I have no idea. Politicians should be asked.

Notes

1 'Neoclassicism' is discussed s.v. 'Klassizismus', see the article by Friedhelm Krummacher and Rudolf Stephan in *MGG-online*: https://www.mgg-online.com/articles/mgg15568/1.0/mgg15568 [last accessed 26 May 2025].

2 A few interesting earlier documents are also quoted and discussed in David E. Schneider, 'Bartók and Stravinsky: Respect, Competition, Influence, and the Hungarian Reaction to Modernism in the 1920s', in: *Bartók and His World*, ed. by Peter Laki, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 172–199 and László Somfai, 'Classicism as Bartók Conceptualized It in His Classical Period 1926–1937', in: *Die klassizistische Moderne in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Internationales Symposion der Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel 1996, hrsg. von Hermann Danuser, Winterthur: Amadeus Verlag, 1997, pp. 123–141. The earliest relevant text seems to be an article based on Bartók's report about his spring 1922 tour in England, France and Germany published as Aladár Tóth, 'Bartók's Foreign Tour', trans. by David E. Schneider and Klára Móricz, in: *Bartók and His World*, pp. 282–289. Here, however, the key word with regard to Stravinsky's new orientation is 'objectivity'.

3 'Béla Bartók: An Interview by Dezső Kosztolányi', in: *Bartók and His World*, p. 232. Part of the crucial passage is also quoted in David E. Schneider, 'Bartók and Stravinsky: Respect, Competition, Influence, and the Hungarian Reaction to Modernism in the 1920s', in: *Bartók and His World*, p. 181.

4 Most of these features are mentioned in Somfai, 'Classicism as Bartók Conceptualized It', p. 132, who considers 'priorities on Bartók's agenda' in 1926 and their relevance for neoclassicism. See also László Somfai, 'Analytical Notes on Bartók's Piano Year of 1926', *Studia Musicologica*, 26, 1984, pp. 5–58.

5 Béla Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff, London: Faber and Faber, 1976, p. 360. Cf. also Schneider, 'Bartók and Stravinsky', p. 196.

6 Cf. Tibor Tallián's commentary and the outline of the lecture series, especially the final, ninth, section, 'General spirit (connected with folkmusic)', in *Bartók Béla Írásai* [Béla Bartók Writings], vol. 1, ed. by Tibor Tallián, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1989, p. 181.

7 Manuscript BH/II/19, Hungarian Bartók Estate, now Gábor Vásárhelyi's private collection (photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives). The Hungarian text was published with commentary as in *Magyar Zene,* XVI/2, 1975, p. 115. The central part of the text appeared in English translation as a quotation in Schneider, 'Bartók and Stravinsky', p. 183. The most important part of the first paragraph of the text was then published together with Schneider's quotation in Somfai, 'Classicism as Bartók Conceptualized It', p. 131. In this article and in Appendix I, I offer a new complete translation of the text.

8 *Beszélgetések Bartókkal*, p. 79.

9 See Bartók, *Essays*, p. 359.

10 Schoenberg's *Three Piano Pieces* op. 11 was probably the work which Bartók most thoroughly absorbed as he performed nos. 1 and 2 in concert in Budapest and in Paris.

11 See Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók: The Man and His Work*, trans. by Gyula Gulyás, Budapest: Corvina, 1988, p. 140.

12 Scherzo for orchestra and piano was discovered among manuscripts in the Hungarian Bartók estate by Denijs Dille and was then posthumously performed in 1961 and edited in 1962.

13 *Beszélgetések Bartókkal: Nyilatkozatok, interjúk 1911–1945* [Bartók in Conversation: Statements and Interviews, 1911–1945], ed. by András Wilheim, Budapest: Kijárat, 2000, p. 74.

14 See Somfai's commentary to 'Bartók Béla nyilatkozata a "progresszív zenei alkotásokról" (1927–1928?)', p. 116, where he also emphasizes the significance of Bartók's reference to the Renaissance.

15 *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. by János Demény, trans. Péter Balabán and István Farkas, Budapest: Corvina, 1971, pp. 207–208.

16 László Vikárius, 'Béla Bartók as Public Figure: Tracing Two Missing Writings Linked to a League of Nations Committee Session in Geneva, 1931', *Musicological Papers*, XXXVI/1, 2021, pp. 113–114.

17 Bartók, 'Staat und Kunst', *Arion 13: Almanach International de Poésie*, ed. by György Somlyó, Budapest: Corvina, 1981, pp. 104–106.

18 'Opinions sur l'orientation technique, esthétique et spirituelle de la Musique Contemporaine. [...] Opinion de M. Bela Bartók (Varsovie) [sic]', *La Revue Internationale de Musique*, I/3, July–September 1938, pp. 452–453; English translation: 'Béla Bartók's Opinion on the Technical, Aesthetic and Spiritual Orientation of Contemporary Music (1938)', in: Bartók, *Essays*, pp. 516–517.

19 'Béla Bartók's Opinion', p. 516.

20 The manuscript is catalogued as BA-N: 3865/a in the collection Budapest Bartók Archives.

21 'Béla Bartók's Opinion', pp. 516-517.

22 See Bartók's unpublished letter to Erwin Stein, 13 February 1940. Only a typed copy survives as part of the Bartók–Boosey & Hawkes correspondence file, Collection Béla Bartók, Paul Sacher Foundation (photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives). The crucial passage from this important letter is quoted in 'Introduction', in Béla Bartók, *Mikrokosmos*, ed. by Yusuke Nakahara, Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition, vol. 40, Munich and Budapest: Henle and Editio Musica Budapest, 2020, p. 17.

23 Cf. Schneider, 'Bartók and Stravinsky', whose subtitle reads: 'Respect, Competition, Influence, and the Hungarian reaction to Modernism in the 1920s', and the title of his greatly expanded chapter reads 'Tradition Challenged: Confronting Stravinsky' in his book, *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition: Case Studies in the Intersection of Modernity and Nationality*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 119–183.

24 Bartók edited ten Scarlatti sonatas in 1921 and eighteen pieces by Couperin in 1924 with Károly Rozsnyai's publishing house. Both the two-volume *Ausgewählte Klavierstücke* by Couperin and the *Selected Piano Pieces* by Domenico Scarlatti, the latter in a new edition with commentary, is still available at Editio Musica Budapest.

25 See the reprint edition with László Somfai's preface, *XVII and XVIII Century Italian Cembalo and Organ Music Transcribed for Piano*, New York: Carl Fischer, 1990.

26 Cf. László Somfai, *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996, p. 320 for a list of sources; see more recently Nicolò Palazzetti, *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making*, Woodbridge: The Boydel Press, 2021, pp. 63–71.

27 See Benjamin Suchoff, 'The Impact of Italian Baroque Music on Bartók's Music', in *Bartók and Kodály Revisited*, ed. György Ránki, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1987, pp. 183–197.

28 Somfai, 'Classicism as Bartók Conceptualized It', p. 132.

29 Bartók's letter to his publisher, Universal Edition, 12 October 1932, original in the Bartók–Universal Edition correspondence file, Collection Béla Bartók, Paul Sacher Foundation (photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives).