

MARTIN CELHOFFER (BRNO)

APPROACHING BARTOK'S NOTATION IN TERMS OF AUTHENTICITY

With special thanks to Dr Rachel Beckles Willson

Béla Bartók was ethnomusicologist, composer and performer par excellence. These three dimensions of his inventive personality are inextricably linked together and can be found in his compositions. This might be the reason why Bartók's work is difficult to interpret in terms of authenticity. The complicated set of problems coming into the foreground when interpreting Bartók's notation (generally speaking either the notation of modern composers, i.e. those who were living in the 20th century, and contemporary composers) can be considered in fact, that the conceptual difference between traditional notation's features and real music in sound made through performance is surfacing over the level of general convention. The purpose of this writing is to explore the more deep analyzes of this problem with special focus on "authentic" reading of Bartók's notation. The contiguous questions are: examining Bartók's way of arranging a folk music in a sense of transition from "authentic" folk music to diametrically different cultural environment through his detailed notation and why Somfai claims that Bartók's notation is 'misleading' today.

In a course of aspiration of this writing and to avoid unintelligible definition, it should be necessary to explain the term "authenticity". The authenticity of the music is in direct relation to the authenticity of a written source. But above all it is a performance itself that has an authentic meaning, as mentioned John Butt:

"Authentic performance may refer to one or any combination of the following approaches: use of instruments from the composer's own era; use of performing techniques documented in the composer's era; performance based on the implications of the original sources for a particular work; fidelity to the composer's intentions for performance or to the type of performance a composer desired or achieved; an attempt to re-create the context of the original performance; and an attempt to re-create the musical experience of the original audience"¹.

¹ Butt, John: 'Authenticity', Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed 07/12/2005), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

However, can music or source, or even performance be authentic by means of epistemology? It is possible to bring into live an “authentic experience” in a way outlined above? Is therefore authenticity nothing more than a subset of ontology? Actually, Peter Hill in his paper “*Authenticity*” in *Contemporary Music* poses the most fundamental and a bit provocative questions: “...*is authenticity attainable? is it desirable? and does authenticity exist?*”² Needless to say, by means of analytical approach we come to this resolution. But they are not only over-skeptical and meaningless statements pretending philosophic point of view. They are trying to make obvious that authenticity might take cover of a masque. Stephen Davies describes another side of this coin (but how many sides have this coin?) taking likeness with the notion of accuracy:

*“If ‘authentic’ means ‘accurate’, then many different-sounding performances could be equally and thoroughly authentic. Moreover, because the performer’s contribution to the work’s realisation is by no means fully determined, authenticity and creativity in performance will be complementary, rather than exclusive.”*³

Replacing the notion “authentic” by another such as “accurate” may hardly resolve the problem. Anyhow, the main point is that Davies considers the performance as a creative process. Therefore authenticity is subsumed by creativeness, is incorporated into more complex activity by giving it the same hierarchical level as to a composition. Above all, authenticity is not the main purpose, as Hill insinuates in his questions. Davies further explores the overly disputable question, especially among performers, whether a performance has a moral dimension:

*“The fact that performance is creative explains the reluctance nowadays to talk of the performer as owing a moral duty to the composer, or (though this rarely is considered) to the audience which relies on performers for access to the composer’s work.”*⁴

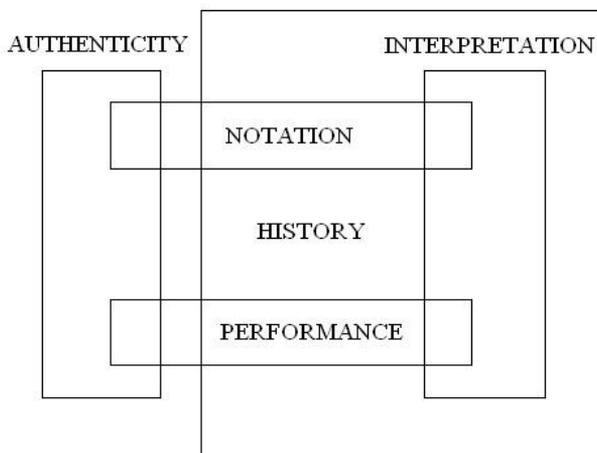
In my point of view, the problem lies in fact that authenticity is perceived subjectively in particular extent, although authenticity *eo ipso* might be considered as an objective phenomenon or category. In this sense authenticity is unsuitable for making judgments about performance and interpretation in a similar way as making them by the logical antithesis such as “true” – “false”. And consequently: “authentic” – “unauthentic”, or: “more – less authentic”? Judgment about “accuracy” of particular performance seems to be more adequate. It will hardly ever be the sufficient scale of authenticity measure. Authenticity is seemed to be misappropriated as another pigeonhole for “professionnel simplificateurs”: such as an easy tool for a half-professional musical critique. The boundary lines of examining whether particular performance is “authentic” are not clear and the basic

² Hill, Peter: “Authenticity” in *Contemporary Music*, IN: *Tempo*, New Ser., No. 159 (Dec., 1986), pp. 2–8, p. 2.

³ Davies, Stephen: “The Ontology of Musical Works and the Authenticity of their Performances”, *NOUS*, No. 25, 1991, pp. 21–41, p. 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

question remains: how we could define and understand “authenticity”? Is it referring to notation, interpretation, performance or even experience? The following scheme is very simplified, designed only for demonstration of interrelation among the various phenomena and authenticity:



According to this schema, the authentic interpretation is done through notation on the background of detailed knowledge of historical causality. The performance, afterwards, is based on interpretation and returns into authenticity in a cycle. The most important are the overlapping areas: authenticity - notation/performance; interpretation - notation/performance; history - notation/performance. The idea of direct connection between interpretation and authenticity is, said philosophically: an inversion of phenomenological reduction. Authenticity and interpretation are not linked together in this context. Therefore is not possible to interpret “authentically”, but only to interpret authenticity of particular phenomenon, such as notation, recording of performance, written remarks, etc.

It is a challenging issue what type of written remarks should be considered as an Urtext. Are they only those, which are written by composer? In accordance to actual presence of several views among composer’s contemporaries, the answer is positive. The other remarks should be accounted as historical background that might provide even very actual interpretation of Urtext. The Urtext can be defined in accordance to scheme above as an overlapping area of notation and authenticity rectangles. If we decided to exclude the Urtext source and rely on some edition, the continuity of this cycle may be disrupted. However, it is ocular, that notation rectangle interlopes also with history and interpretation rectangles. For all these multidimensional relationships, it would not be suitable to assert only on Urtext. It is the same risk as to rely exclusively on non-Urtext editions. The interpretation of Urtext itself cannot still ensure the authenticity of performance.

Authenticity and its relationships with notation, interpretation, performance, convention, culture, and perception can be mathematically defined as a particular quality of equation:

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$$N(\text{notation}) + I(\text{interpretation}) + P(\text{performance}) = C(\text{convention}) + C'(\text{culture}) + P'(\text{perception})$$

Implicitly, this equation is simplified in regard to schematic demonstration. The authenticity represents particular interfaced equilibrium among the various parameters. The convention is subjected to permanent changes in time. That is why if we are, for example, to perform mediaeval music (to demonstrate the distinction more obvious), the transcriptions are required; because different conventions requires different notation to sustain the equation. If we are interpreting original notation as an Urtext on the basis of different conventional background, the equilibrium would be disrupted and the outcome of interpretation would be different from interpretation restricted by original convention. First is necessary to model the parameters of the original notation by transcription into modern notation (through different convention) or converting just the models of original notation, by which could be possible to understand the original notation as an Urtext. This is the point of authenticity. It should not be applied to only one side of this mathematical formula. Authenticity cannot be reached by urgent insistance on original version of notation. It seems to be no surprise that Somfai claims the Bartókian notation as misleading today:

“If he [Bartók] thought that the exact style of the piece could not be fixed in traditional notation, which might have been the case, we have to face the truth: the notation of a great many piano works and piano parts by Bartók is not sufficiently precise; it may even be misleading without the author’s recording”⁵.

On the other hand, knowledge of the original versions should be an indispensable part of investigation and of accurate interpretation. Multiplicity in relationships indicated above and unstableness of phenomena included in the operation of reading and interpreting Bartók’s sources cause methodological and conceptual difficulties. Methodological are those according to notation and conceptual according to interpretation. Somfai considers Bartók’s “microscopically detailed notation” as “the perfect model” for ethnomusicology. In transcriptions of folk music there are problems with rhythm, pitch and versions of particular song according to generating transcription. After Somfai, Bartók is precise with pitch and accents, but not in rhythm. In accordance to examination of several versions of Bartók’s transcriptions of folk music he mentioned that “...*primary divergences*

⁵ Somfai, László: ‘Bartók’s Notations in Composition and Transcription’, *Bartók Perspectives*, ed. Antokoletz, Fischer and Suchoff, Oxford & New York: OUP, 2000, pp. 213–225, p. 224.

have to do with rhythm, such as hardly perceptible dotted rhythms that often involve irregular triplet figurations"⁶. It means, for instance, triple groups of one eighth and one sixteenth instead regular one dotted eighth and one sixteenth. Although the question would also be: what rhythm is considered as "a regular" one? It has to do with determinate paradigm of what we entitle as regular rhythm. Exempli gratia: the six rhythmic modes in mediaeval music, the *prolatio* indicating relative duration or time value of the *minim* to the *semibreve* in renaissance music, or the disagreement among theorists and composers concerning the question to what extent is possible to crumble the note value (for instance: the polemics of Jacobus of Liège in his *Speculum Musice*). Proper example of allowed rhythmic irregularity can be found in French music for lute and clavecin. In many places there is not noted down whether the group of notes is *égal* or *inégal*. These examples demonstrate how such an important role plays the contemporary rhythmic paradigms given by convention and culture in considering and evaluating "regular" rhythm. Paradigm should be known in terms of multilateral relationships designed in the schema above. In Bartók's transcription the two not very quite factors are in convergence: folk music (with its particular rhythmic patterns and with unique expression) and notational system that "is not designed" to this particular style of music. Thereafter added remarks (inside or outside the notation) input into interpretation.

*"However, so far as concerns the Hungarian material, Bartók was absolutely self-confident in judging what was imperfection in the individual performance (including out-of-tune notes) or personal style (including vibrato here and there) and what "mistuned" pitch belonged to a regional style that therefore had to be fixed in the transcription"*⁷.

Bartók was able to distinguish added features in performance from the basic form of song in a manner attesting his skill as an ethnomusicologist. He was able to decide what was intentional, accidental, or just personal in the performance.

In accordance to conceptual issues, the coexistence of composer's several versions of transcriptions might uncover the process of maturation of genuine idea into the final stage of work. We can lay out the process of arranging into several stages in consequent order: collecting and choosing the material - one or several stages of adaptation for particular arrangement - revising and correction - interpretation (actual convention) - performance. However, Somfai states:

*"...it is often easier to re-create the individual performance of a heavily embellished folk song from Bartók's mature transcription than to re-create the intended style of many of his compositions from a seemingly sophisticated "perfect" notation"*⁸.

6 Ibid., p. 216.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 224.

Currently, the feedback loop within performance and composer's correction is important for distinguishing between composer's intention and aspect of individual performance. With reference to Fisher:

*"The successful interpretation of Bartók's piano works depends, like any other composer's music, on an understanding of stylistic context. The performer's obligation is to attempt to understand the intentions of the composer as communicated through the written notation"*⁹.

Though the problem remains: how to make distinction between stylistic context and performance? Fisher suggests that his detailed and sophisticated articulation notation "*constitutes a significant aspect of the message from composer to interpreter concerning appropriate performance style*"¹⁰. Bartók's attempt might be the incorporation of specific features of folk music in terms of musical style into his compositions. Naturally, it should be done in different convention which causes the originality of his notation:

*"Bartók's discovery of Eastern European folk music was the primary catalyst for the important changes in his style after about 1907, and played a large role in inspiring Bartók to communicate, through articulation notation, specific interpretive instructions related to folk inflection."*¹¹.

The distinction between intentional and just personal might be very disputable. The boundary lines between objectiveness and subjectiveness in interpretation and performance could hardly be defined. The problem might rest in epistemological issue of what should be considered as a work of art: tradition, music trapped into a score or performance; eventually the act of perception? There are in music, of course, many stages starting from source and finalized by perception and all of them are chained together into work of art. Every stage has at his disposal more or less possibilities and, as it is typical for art, there is no exact based proof for quality-judgments. Hence the decision making of what version of transcription (provided with all the details) has to be considered as authentic should be based on more complex analysis. The problem when approaching to Bartók's notation is to distinguish among style, composer's intention and performance. Moreover, it is necessary to be aware of multilateral nature of relations among notation, interpretation, performance, convention, culture and perception; and how they are chained together. This can be brought into effect by the detailed investigation in the field of Bartók's transcriptions, his notation and his field recording.

⁹ Fischer, Victoria: 'Articulation Notation in the Piano Music of B Notation in the Piano Music of Béla Bartók: Evolution and Interpretation' In: *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T. 36, Fasc. 3/4, Proceedings of the International Bartok Colloquium, July 3–5, 1995, Part I (1995), pp. 285–301, p. 285.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 286.