

DLA Doctoral Dissertation Theses

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The Editions of Bartók's Viola Concerto  
and the Analysis of Its Interpretative  
Tradition through Recordings

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## I. Introduction

Béla Bartók's Viola Concerto is among the most debated works of the twentieth century. Commissioned by William Primrose in 1945, it was left incomplete at the composer's death and survives only in fragmentary sketches. The work is therefore not a finished whole but an "open" composition, shaped by editors and performers who sought to make it accessible to audiences.

The historical context adds to its significance. Composed during Bartók's final months in exile in the United States, the concerto reflects both his deteriorating health and his desire to return to European traditions. The viola itself symbolized a personal affinity, as Bartók had long been drawn to its timbre. Thus, the concerto represents both a swansong and an unrealized promise, standing at the crossroads of tradition and modernity.

Tibor Serly prepared the first version in 1949, which dominated performance practice for decades. Later, Peter Bartók and Nelson Dellamaggiore's Revised Version

(1995) and Csaba Erdélyi's alternative edition opened new perspectives. Each version reflects not only editorial philosophy but also broader questions about authenticity, authority, and interpretation in twentieth-century music.

The dissertation compares these three main versions, asking how they reflect Bartók's intentions and what interpretative choices they allow performers. It treats the concerto not simply as a philological case but as a living challenge, where scholarship and performance interact.

## II. Sources

Primary materials included Bartók's surviving sketches, now preserved in archives, which document his working process. These sketches, though incomplete, provide valuable clues to orchestration, structure, and thematic development. The three major editions—Serly, Revised, and Erdélyi—were studied as different responses to the problem of how to realize an unfinished masterpiece.

Recordings also played a central role. Early versions by Burton Fisch and William Primrose reveal the concerto's first performance tradition, while later recordings demonstrate how Serly's edition became established and how alternative versions gradually gained ground. By comparing recordings across decades, it was possible to trace shifts in tempo, phrasing, and interpretative priorities.

Donald Maurice's monograph *Bartók's Viola Concerto: The Remarkable Story of His Swansong* was an indispensable secondary source. It reconstructs the complex genesis of the work and highlights the editorial decisions that shaped its reception. Maurice's writings, including his Panel Discussion, underline how the concerto has remained a site of tension between text and performance, between fidelity and freedom.

Other scholarly studies on Bartók's late style and on the editing of unfinished works provided a broader framework, allowing the concerto to be placed in dialogue with similar cases in twentieth-century repertoire.

### III. Method

The research was based on three methodological pillars.

1. Score analysis: The comparison of orchestration, dynamic and articulation markings, and form revealed important conceptual divergences. Serly often orchestrated with a late-Romantic palette, while the Revised Version emphasized clarity closer to Bartók's modernist idiom. Erdélyi balanced both approaches, adding practical solutions for performance. Such differences illuminate how each edition constructs a different image of Bartók's musical voice.

2. Recordings: From Fisch's early interpretations to recent studio performances, recordings were compared to study evolving traditions. Special attention was paid to tempo flexibility, balance between viola and orchestra, and phrasing. Recordings not only document choices but also shape expectations, showing how performers became co-creators in the concerto's history.

3. Performance practice: My own experiences as a violist were integrated. In passages where editions diverged, direct engagement with the instrument highlighted the practical implications of editorial choices, such as bowing, phrasing, and balance in orchestral texture. This personal dimension ensured the research addressed the concerto as a living work.

The methodology was complemented by situating the concerto among other posthumous works. Comparing Bartók's case with that of composers such as Mahler, Puccini, and Mozart highlighted the universal challenges of editing unfinished scores.

## IV. Findings

The study produced several key results.

Serly: His orchestrations and formal choices often depart from the sketches. He filled gaps with his own ideas, sometimes influenced by Primrose's preferences. Yet his version ensured the concerto's survival and gained canonical status for forty years.

Primrose: Analysis of recordings revealed that many aspects—such as phrasing, tempo choices, and even certain alterations—stemmed from Primrose's performance style. Fisch's recordings often preserve details closer to the autograph, proving that early performers had a decisive role in shaping the concerto's identity.

Revised Version: Peter Bartók and Dellamaggiore's edition prioritized fidelity to the sketches. Their changes resulted in leaner orchestration, closer thematic development, and stricter adherence to the manuscript.

From a scholarly viewpoint, this version stands closest to Bartók's intentions, though it poses greater challenges to performers in terms of balance and phrasing.

Erdélyi: Combining scholarly awareness with practical insight, Erdélyi created a version that mediates between the Serly and Revised approaches. His edition introduced solutions that make the concerto both playable and faithful, creating a third independent tradition.

Overall, the findings show that the Viola Concerto supports multiple valid readings. Its identity is not fixed but negotiated between text, editor, and performer. This interplay makes it a unique example of how unfinished works continue to live through interpretation.



## V. Documentation of Research-Related Activities

Several activities supported the research.

Early recordings: Fisch's interpretations of Serly's edition provided material to separate Primrose's personal style from Serly's interventions. These analyses clarified how performance shaped the text.

Serly's sources: Prefaces, annotations, and archival correspondence illuminated his editorial philosophy. They show a balance between necessity and invention, revealing how he sought to make a fragmented work performable.

Revised Version: The prefaces and statements of Peter Bartók and Dellamaggiore documented their careful attempt to strip away Serly's additions and return to the sketches. These documents illustrate a scholarly approach, contrasting Serly's practical orientation.

Erdélyi: His handwritten notes and reflections demonstrated how a performer approaches editorial

responsibility. His contribution established a third path in the concerto's history.

The combination of archival documents, score comparisons, and performance analysis created a fuller picture of the concerto's trajectory. Beyond identifying textual differences, the research reconstructed historical contexts and interpretative choices.

Conclusion: Bartók's Viola Concerto embodies the intersection of unfinished text and living performance. Its tradition reveals that music continues to exist not as a fixed object but as an evolving dialogue between composer, editor, and performer.