

Theses of the DLA Doctoral Dissertation

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Béla Bartók and Percussion Instruments

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I. Background of the Research

Over the past thirty years, numerous outstanding studies have emerged in the field of Hungarian Bartók scholarship, many of which have addressed – explicitly or implicitly – the significance of percussion instruments in Bartók’s oeuvre. Among the authors of these studies are some of Hungary’s most prominent Bartók scholars, including Tibor Tallián, László Somfai, János Kárpáti, and László Vikárius. Their work has provided important reference points for the initial formulation of the topic of this dissertation.

However, no Hungarian study has yet focused specifically on the relationship between Bartók and percussion instruments as a central topic. Bartók’s most significant composition from the perspective of percussion — the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* — has been the subject of research and in-depth analysis by numerous scholars both in Hungary and internationally. Among these, only one foreign-language study places the percussionist’s perspective at the forefront. In her DMA dissertation titled *A Percussionist’s Guide to Performing Bartók*, Kristen J. Lou analyses the work primarily from the standpoint of

performance, discussing in detail the technical challenges of the percussion parts as well as the practical aspects of achieving the desired sound.

Other Hungarian and foreign-language studies dealing with the *Sonata* also include important observations regarding percussion, yet a comprehensive analysis of the individual percussion roles within the work – corresponding to the four aspects identified in Bartók’s own analysis – is absent from earlier literature.

Among the most relevant international studies in relation to Bartók’s North African and Arab ethnographic research is Mehdi Trabelsi’s PhD dissertation *La musique populaire arabe dans l’œuvre de Béla Bartók*, which explores the collection in detail and provides valuable observations on its connections to percussion.

II. Sources

The most important primary sources for this research are the manuscript drafts of Bartók’s compositions, which I had the opportunity to examine in detail at the Budapest Bartók Archives. This direct access provided valuable insight into the composer’s creative process.

I became acquainted with the earliest manuscript drafts of the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* through the recently published facsimile edition edited by Felix Meyer, which also contains the latest scholarly studies related to the work. Primary source material for researching the genesis and early performances of the *Sonata* was drawn from Bartók's correspondence, which I accessed through two key publications: *Bartók Béla levelei* [Béla Bartók Letters], edited by János Demény, and the CD-ROM edition *Bartók Béla élete – levelei tükrében* [The Life of Béla Bartók – Through His Correspondence], edited by István Pávai and László Vikárius.

Bartók's field recordings and related notes from his Arab collection were studied via the CD-ROM *Bartók and Arab Folk Music*, edited by János Kárpáti.

An important group of sources are Bartók's own writings, particularly those included in *Bartók Béla írásai 1: Bartók Béla önmagáról, műveiről, az új magyar zenéről, műzene és népzene viszonyáról* [Béla Bartók Writings, 1. Béla Bartók on Himself His Works, New Hungarian Music, and the Relation between Art Music and Folk Music], edited by Tibor Tallián, and *Bartók Béla írásai 3: Írások a népzenéről és a népzene kutatásról*, [Béla Bartók Writings, 3. Writings on Folk

Music and Folk Music Research], edited by Vera Lampert and Dorrit Révész.

Additional insight into Bartók's relationship with percussion can be gleaned from a 1970 Hungarian Television interview with Rezső Roubál, then timpanist of the Hungarian State Opera, produced on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Bartók's death. I was able to view this material at the National Audiovisual Archive.

III. Methodology

At the outset of my research, I conducted a detailed examination of all percussion parts appearing in Bartók's orchestral and chamber works. I identified their key characteristics, such as the exact percussion instrumentation, unusual playing techniques, timbres, effects, and distinctive roles within the compositions. I investigated the circumstances surrounding the emergence of Bartók's innovative percussion techniques and sounds, the motivations behind their usage, and the specific functions percussion instruments fulfilled within the orchestral or chamber music contexts. This analysis was grounded in an extensive comparison with available sources, including Bartók's own

writings and correspondence, manuscript drafts of his works, and reminiscences, which I organized chronologically in the appendix of my dissertation.

I explored the use of percussion effects and their varied roles in the scores through an in-depth analysis of three key works: Bartók's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, *Piano Concerto No. 2*, and the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*. The analytical sections are supported with musical examples taken from the full scores or the percussion parts.

The study of percussion accompaniments in Bartók's Arab folk music collections is particularly important for this topic, as in this body of ethnographic material Bartók encountered a complex percussion practice characterized by diverse striking techniques and rhythmic motifs, which served as a model for his own compositions. During the examination of these collections, I discovered several recordings for which the percussion notation was partially or entirely missing. Due to the incomplete notation of the recordings, the poor quality of the archival audio, and the rapid and complex rhythmic patterns of the accompaniments, transcription was often only possible through slow playback of the recordings. Moreover, achieving an accurate, instrumentally idiomatic transcription required performing the parts on percussion instruments.

IV. Results

My choice of research topic was primarily influenced by my personal experience as an orchestral percussionist, through which I became familiar with the exceptionally colourful use of percussion in Bartók's works. Additionally, I recognized the untouched nature of this subject area, along with its rich yet unexplored source materials, whose investigation became the main motivation for my study.

In my dissertation, I present an overview of Bartók's innovative percussion effects across his entire oeuvre, and offer detailed analyses of these elements in his *Piano Concertos No. 1 and 2*. Through the examination of the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, I demonstrate the diverse percussion roles identified by Bartók himself but hitherto unexplored in depth, illustrating these with musical examples. From the lesser-studied, previously incomplete percussion accompaniments in Bartók's Arab folk music collections, I have prepared transcriptions of selected examples which stand out due to their frequently varied rhythmic patterns. These transcriptions are included and thoroughly analysed in the first chapter of my dissertation.

V. Documentation of Activities Related to the Dissertation

I presented a series of lectures showcasing the percussion accompaniments from Bartók's North African and Arab collections, as documented and completed in my dissertation. These presentations combined theoretical discussion with playback of archival recordings and live demonstrations on authentic Arab percussion instruments at the following institutions:

- Bartók Béla Secondary School of Music and Dance, June 18, 2024
- Hermann László Secondary School of Music and Elementary School of Arts, Székesfehérvár, June 19, 2024
- Richter János Secondary School of Music, Győr, March 18, 2025
- Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, May 6, 2025

Additionally, the chapter of my dissertation concerning the percussion accompaniments in Bartók's Arab folk music collection has been accepted—with some requested revisions—for publication as a study in the journal *Magyar Zene Zenetudományi Folyóirat* (Hungarian Musicological Journal), with publication expected in 2025.