

DLA Thesis

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The Music of the Beginning. The Organic
Development of Bartók's Stylistic
Characteristics in the First Volume of
Mikrokosmos.

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Antecedents of the Research

The most important background to my research is my own pedagogical work. I have been teaching children, teenagers and sometimes adults since I finished my university studies, so I deal almost every day with the pieces of the first volume of *Mikrokosmos*. Over the years, I have looked deeply into these miniatures and have fallen in love with them. Writing my dissertation was an excellent opportunity to summarise my ideas I had gathered while teaching.

Mikrokosmos is not one of the under-researched works of music literature. There are many books, studies and dissertations on this series. They mostly do not focus on the very first pieces, but rather on the larger-scale pieces of the series. I felt it was worth filling this gap. In my opinion, these pieces occupy very important place in Bartók's oeuvre. It is in these compositions that the composer achieves the most concentrated expression, which he so admired in folk songs. In my thesis, I do not deal with the history of the genesis of the pieces. Excellent

works have been written on this subject. The most important of these are John Vinton's study entitled *Toward a Chronology of the Mikrokosmos*, Lampert Vera's study *On the Origins of Bartók's Mikrokosmos* and Nakahara Yusuke's dissertation *Genesis and the 'Spirit' of Bartók's Mikrokosmos*.

Sources

The primary source of my work is Benjamin Suchoff's book called *Guide to Bartók's Mikrokosmos*, which contains Bartók's own comments on the pieces of Mikrokosmos. Bartók generally shared little information about his own music. This circumstance gives this document a special significance. In addition to this book, my other important sources are Bartók's other writings on his own music, folk music and contemporaries. The most important of these are his Harvard' lectures. In these he gives the most detailed information about his own music. Other important sources are books on Mikrokosmos by

other authors. The most important of these are the works of Benjamin Suchoff, Jürgen Uhde, Hans Ulrich Engelmann and Oszkár Frank. I was very influenced by the works of Ernő Lendvai, László Somfai, László Vikárius and Tibor Tallián. I have tried to incorporate the results of these works into my dissertation.

Method

In my dissertation, I used above all the method of analysis. First, I tried to find the main characteristics of Bartók's style in the very first unisono melodies. Then I tried to follow their organic development in the following pieces of the volume. Bartók composed the first pieces of Mikrokosmos under strict restrictions. These restrictions are partly the result of the pedagogical concept of Varró Margit. Bartók had never taught beginners to play the piano – except his own son –, so he needed an experienced teacher. He chose the famous pedagogue of the period. She was Margit Varró. Bartók followed her steps for teaching

beginners while composing the Mikrokosmos. The first pieces represent the first step.

In this step the melodies can move only in pentachord range, in parallel. These rules leave very little room for the composer's imagination. Nevertheless, Bartók increases the strictness of the rules. The first pieces can only move in second steps. The reason for this tightening is to make it easier for the child to read music. But for the composer, this is an even greater restriction. The melodic line is simplified into an ascending and descending pentachord, or its segments. How a pentachord moving up and down becomes a typical Bartók piece? In my dissertation I am looking for the answer to this question.

Results

The most important conclusion of my thesis is that the most characteristic features of Bartók style can be found in the very first melodies of Mikrokosmos. The first melody is like a cell. The stem cell of Bartók's music. In my analysis I follow how this cell develops step by step. In my dissertation, I hope to show the unparalleled richness of Bartók's compositional invention, which can be expressed even within the strict restrictions of pedagogical purpose. I show examples of the many ways in which Bartók is able to form a piece from a pentachord stepping up and down, the many variations on the four-line folk song structure, or how, despite simple devices, he often creates more complex forms based on self-similarity. Many people think Mikrokosmos is dry. I hope reading my dissertation will change their opinion.

Documentation of the Activities Relevant to the Topic of the Dissertation

The first volume of Mikrokosmos is primarily related to my teaching activities, but I have also played its pieces in concert. When I play selections from Mikrokosmos, I regularly include pieces from the first volume.