

Theses of the DLA Doctoral Dissertation

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Bach–Bartók: *The Well-Tempered Clavier*
Through the Eyes of the Young Bartók

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I. Background of the Research

My research on Béla Bartók's edition of *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* (hereafter: WTK) is fundamentally grounded in the work of László Somfai and László Stachó. Somfai's pioneering studies not only explored the historical background of Bartók's WTK edition but also revealed essential aspects of his notational practice. László Stachó's analyses place Bartók's editorial activity within a broader performance-historical context and provide methodological guidance for the analysis of editorial notation. My dissertation builds on the results of these studies, and many of its research questions were inspired by the findings of Somfai and Stachó.

Accordingly, the aim of my work was not to revise earlier conclusions, but rather to elaborate on certain previously raised issues and to examine them from new perspectives. Although Somfai published important analyses of Bartók's WTK notation, a detailed investigation of the system of signs, focusing on the internal relationships and musical functions of the markings, has received less attention so far. The previous

literature on Bartók's WTK edition has primarily concentrated on its historical background, pedagogical role, Bartók's editorial activity, and the development of his notational system. Therefore, my dissertation aims to contribute to these existing studies by placing stronger emphasis on the analytical, music-oriented examination of the musical text.

The significance of this research is heightened by the fact that no audio recordings of Bartók's interpretations of the WTK have survived. For this reason, his edition becomes a document of exceptional importance. My research is based on the assumption that dynamic and articulation markings, pedal indications, phrasing solutions, fingerings, tempo indications, and Bartók's written remarks on individual pieces together form a complex system through which his performance thinking can largely be reconstructed. Therefore, one of the central theses of my dissertation is that Bartók's WTK edition is not merely a pedagogical document or a historical curiosity of performance practice, but an independent interpretative source that reveals not only the young Bartók's conception of Bach, but also his sensitivity

to polyphony and structure, as well as his approach to musical form.

II. Sources

Three scholarly sources served as essential points of reference for understanding Bartók's notational and performance practice.

My primary sources in this regard were the aforementioned publications of László Somfai, among which the most relevant is the afterword to the Bach–Bartók *Wohltemperiertes Klavier* volumes published by Editio Musica Budapest in 2019. In this text, Somfai provides a detailed account of the circumstances and historical background of Bartók's edition. Another fundamental source for my analyses was Somfai's study titled "*Nineteenth Century Ideas Developed in Bartók's Piano Notation in the Years 1907–1914*", which examines the development of Bartók's notational system, with particular emphasis on the period when the young composer–pianist–pedagogue published his instructive WTK edition.

The broader context of Bartók's editorial activity helped me understand the broader context of Bartók's work as a performer by László Stachó's book *Bartók the Pianist*. In this work, Stachó offers a comprehensive overview of the musical trends of the editorial market at the turn of the century, thereby providing insights into the historical background of Bartók's editorial work. The exceptional value of the volume lies in the numerous contemporary recollections it contains, which served as important starting points for my research.

Among the memoirs of Bartók's students, Júlia Székely provides the most detailed account of his teaching of Bach, therefore, her recollections served as a fundamental eyewitness source for my topic.

Among my musical sources, in addition to the two editions of Bartók's WTK volumes (1907 and 1914), the WTK editions by Carl Tausig, Eugen d'Albert, and Ferruccio Busoni proved to be indispensable contemporary references. Their study and analysis were essential from both editorial-historical and musical perspectives. In addition to these, I also examined other

contemporary WTK editions mentioned in the following chapter.

III. Method

In my research, I primarily sought to return to primary sources: Bartók's preface and appendix to his instructive WTK edition, his original remarks attached to the pieces, and above all the musical text itself, furnished with performance indications.

In addition, I consulted WTK volumes available in the library of the Liszt Academy that may have been accessible to Bartók during his years of study and editorial activity. Alongside the editions by Tausig, d'Albert, and Busoni, I examined the WTK editions by Czerny, Reinecke, Boekelmann, and Riemann. I analyzed their prefaces, pedagogical and interpretative observations, and compared their notation and systems of markings with those of Bartók. Among these, the editions of Tausig, d'Albert, and Busoni received particular attention, as they can be regarded as Bartók's most important editorial models.

The methodological foundations of my analyses were informed by the notation analyses in László Stachó's aforementioned monograph, especially the analytical approach he applies in his examination of Bartók's Beethoven editions.

IV. Results

My detailed analyses revealed that Bartók's markings concerning dynamics, articulation, and pedal usage are never arbitrary, rather, they are closely connected to the internal structure of the works, voice leading, and the clarity of polyphonic texture. Bartók rejected the externalities of Romantic interpretation and developed his own expressive yet strictly controlled performance style (and notational system). His distinctive system of signs guides the performer toward following the internal logic of the musical fabric; the visual layout of the score itself functions as an interpretative guide.

Bartók's WTK edition represents a distinct performance concept, in which the composer–pianist–pedagogue projects his own interpretative ideas, rooted in

his artistic personality, onto Bach's compositions. The unusually strong source criticism characteristic of Bartók was, in my view, already present in his youth: he strives to include all markings originating from Bach and to mention them in some form in his editorial notes. He also faithfully preserves Bach's original ordering, indicating it in the upper right corner of each movement. These efforts make his editorial practice entirely unique in comparison to his contemporaries.

Through the analysis of this edition, we gain not only a precise understanding of how the young Bartók approached one of Bach's most significant keyboard works and what performance ideals he represented in the musical environment of the early 20th century, but we also come closer to Bartók's musical sensitivity and even to his compositional thinking. Bartók's artistic disposition is authentically reflected in his editorial instructions, which convey his interpretative ideas in a detailed and compelling manner through a precisely developed notational system.