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GENESIS AND THE ‘SPIRIT’ OF BARTÓK’S *MIKROKOSMOS*

PhD Thesis

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1. Research Background

Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* can be considered one of the unique compositions in the first half of the 20th century, being a monumental pedagogical work that can be used from the very beginning of piano teaching and which was composed by one of the leading composers at that time. Each of the 153 small pieces deals with different musical and technical problems; thus, it is possible to regard these pieces (and even some of the 33 exercises) as representing different small musical worlds with a characteristic quality, as Bartók himself explained it in a radio programme ('Ask the Composer') in 1944. This unique feature of the work has attracted a wide range of musicians, especially progressively minded piano teachers. They started to use and propagate *Mikrokosmos* shortly after its publication as a teaching material that introduces beginners to various kinds of non-traditional elements unusual in Classical and Romantic music—modal and other extraordinary scales, non-triadic harmonies, non-binary phrase structure, and asymmetric rhythms.

At the same time, *Mikrokosmos* has been considered a compendium of Bartók's musical language; thus, it is not surprising that a selection from *Mikrokosmos*, or even the entire series, have inspired musicians and scholars to write short analyses, articles, and even monographs on them. Possibly reflecting this unique status of the work, some important philological researches were already conducted in relatively early years in comparison with other works by Bartók: a philological survey, including the re-organisation of the manuscripts, by Benjamin Suchoff (part of the result is published as his doctoral dissertation on education in 1956) and the establishment of the micro-chronology of the *Mikrokosmos* pieces by John Vinton in 1966.

Their research has become the basis of research on Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*: the division of the manuscripts established by Suchoff (e.g., 59PS1, 59PID1–ID2, and 59PFC1, all currently located in the Paul Sacher Foundation as part of the Béla Bartók Collection) is still used as a kind of reference number, and Vinton's research is referred to in order to date a given piece in the analytical literature (if necessary). It is, however, necessary to conduct new research on the manuscript sources, mainly for two reasons: (1) since then, several additional sources have surfaced; (2) the American scholars did not personally know of a few important sources left in Budapest. These sources have already been included in the catalogue of Bartók's compositions by László Somfai; however, no detailed research has been done that concentrates on the complete source situation of *Mikrokosmos*.

It should be mentioned that the author has already written a master's thesis (2012) on the same topic with a limited scope (concentrating on the compositions of 1932–1934), which can be considered a preliminary study to this dissertation. The author already conducted a thorough manuscript research at that time; however, the author has been able to examine the details

of all the available autograph sources in relation to the preparatory tasks of the *Mikrokosmos* volumes of the Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition (vols. 40–41, published in 2020 and 2021, respectively). It is necessary to emphasise that although there are some overlapping contents in the present dissertation and the *Mikrokosmos* volumes of the Complete Critical Edition, the former should nevertheless be considered independent from the latter. While the volumes of the Complete Critical Edition concentrate on the documentation of the given sources as well as the compositional process of the individual pieces, this dissertation tries to offer some hypotheses, including Bartók's working method concerning the preparation of a fair copy (Chapter 4.2.2.), and the analysis and interpretation of the given pieces based on the results of philological research (Part II).

Concerning the analysis and interpretation of the selected *Mikrokosmos* pieces in this dissertation, Bartók's own term 'spirit of the work' is featured—a term that the composer used in his lecture at Harvard University to illustrate his working process. Even though its meaning remains ambiguous, what he states deserves attention: the technical detail of a composition is affected by the 'spirit'. In Bartók analysis, the purely technical aspects of his compositional techniques are often emphasised too much and dealt with independently from the context; however, the composer suggests that the choice of a particular compositional technique cannot be separated from what we may identify as the 'spirit of the work'.

According to László Somfai, this 'spirit' can be considered 'the narrative of a piece' (i.e., according to him, 'the plot of the secret plan'). In the case of the *Mikrokosmos* pieces, however, a much more comprehensive range of phenomena can be related to this 'spirit', including the use of a particular technique (e.g., no. 102 'Harmonics') as well as intervals (e.g., no. 144 'Minor Seconds, Major Sevenths'), considering that the whole piece is written by featuring these elements. In a certain sense, each of the 153 *Mikrokosmos* pieces has its own 'spirit'.

2. Methods and Findings of Philological Research

The first half of the dissertation is devoted to the philological problems of the manuscript sources of *Mikrokosmos* in detail. Even though the commentary volume of the Complete Critical Edition also deals with philology and it shares some tables and illustrations with the dissertation, there is a remarkable difference in the content and methodology. While the commentary volume strives to state data and facts as the research result, the dissertation intends to clarify how these data and facts are collected and established, what kind of problems are inherent in the sources, and why preceding scholars arrived at different conclusions.

One of the most important research results of this first part is that the currently available compositional source groups—which have been

established by the New York Bartók Archive—are thoroughly re-evaluated. For this purpose, all the available documentary sources are considered, including the correspondence between the composer and the publisher, Boosey & Hawkes, or his acquaintances, such as Annie Müller-Widmann or Walter Schulthess. While all the preceding researches regarded the compositional source groups as independent units, the dissertation points out that these groups actually consist of several minor units originating in different circumstances; thus, they should be dealt with separately from each other. The most remarkable case is the group of autograph drafts (marked **D** in this dissertation; hereinafter source sigla are similarly distinguished in boldface), which was sent to Switzerland in 1938, now contains the autograph draft which originated in 1939 (**D**₁₉₃₉). In addition, based on (presumably archival) numbering on each page, it is suggested that this 1939 draft was originally preserved together with a set of fair copies on conventional music paper (**A**_{III}) when Bartók took them to the USA in 1940. These sources were later separated from each other, and the fair copy became part of a miscellaneous collection of autographs (**A**_B). Even though the precise circumstances of the re-organisation of the manuscripts cannot be clarified, the concept that the group of the autograph draft (**D**) consists of at least two chronologically independent subunits may underscore the assumption that the current source groups can be meaningfully divided into several units. (This assumption can also be applied to the source groups of some other works by Bartók, especially the 1926 compositions.)

In the present dissertation, five independent and extensive units of the draft (**D**₁₉₃₂, **D**₁₉₃₃, **D**_{1934–36}, **D**₁₉₃₇, and **D**₁₉₃₉) are distinguished based on a comparison with the contents of a set of fair copies on transparent tissue (**A**_{I-II}, prepared from 1933 to 1939). The division basically coincides with Vinton's micro-chronology; however, while Vinton only listed the pieces belonging to each year, the present dissertation offers a comprehensive table containing the list of pages with their contents and reconstructed paper structure (similar tables are also provided for other important sources). Such tables will facilitate future researchers' orientation in the manuscript sources of *Mikrokosmos*, a relatively extensive and complex collection of autographs within Bartók's oeuvre.

Concerning the reconstruction of the paper structure, Bartók's working method is briefly discussed: one of the most intriguing issues is that the composer drafted different elaborations of the main musical idea in parallel, on systems below one another, without filling out the previous system. This working method occasionally causes a strange appearance of the draft; a system beginning with relatively spatial notation ends with extraordinarily dense notation, usually written on hand-ruled staves in the right margin. The acknowledgement of this kind of notational characteristics may help us better understand the formal structure of several *Mikrokosmos* pieces.

Based on several minor discrepancies of notation, Vinton pointed out that

A_{I-II} consists of four units (marked as **A_{I/1}**, **A_{I/2}**, **A_{I/3}**, and **A_{II}** in the dissertation). However, it is possible to identify several small subunits that were prepared separately from each other. For instance, the first several subunits of **A_{I/1}** contain the pieces already in order of difficulty; in the later subunits of **A_{I/1}**, the order of pieces precisely follows the order as drafted in **D₁₉₃₃**. This observation may help future scholars conduct research into the micro-chronology of other works by Bartók.

In the present dissertation, a miscellaneous collection of autographs (**A_B**) is extensively analysed for the first time. This source has been considered a set of final copies, as the reference number, ‘59PFC1’ (= 59 Piano Final Copy) suggests. Although this evaluation is basically appropriate, **A_B** should also be divided into several units based on their historical function. The most remarkable case is that part of **A_B** was originally used at the first public performance of a selection from the *Mikrokosmos* pieces on 9 February 1937 in London, together with a bifolio currently belonging to another source group (**AP_{B&H}**, a set of tissue proofs sent to the publisher in June 1939). It is also remarkable that **A_B** contains an apparently elaborated version of no. 69 ‘Chord Study’, with octave doublings (Example 4-20). Even though this version can be used as a piano solo, it is almost certain that this version was used as the second piano part at the two-piano performances of the *Mikrokosmos* pieces with Bartók’s wife, Ditta Pászty.

It is worth mentioning that the more precise identification of the paper types attempted in the present dissertation can be considered as something new in the Bartók literature. In addition to the number of staves and the types of trademarks printed on each folio (or bifolio), the precise measurement of the location of trademarks and the detection of print errors make it possible to identify further subgroups of the types of music paper used by Bartók in a particular period. Concerning the present dissertation, it is especially important that the existence of a bifolio used as a historical cover (**D**, pp. 1–2 and 85–86) can only be confirmed by this method; in addition, it is also established that four fragmentary folios containing only twelve staves (**D**, pp. 79–82 and 87–90)—none of them bearing a trademark—are from the same sort of music paper.

3. Findings of the Case Studies

The second half of the present dissertation consists of seven independent chapters, dealing with the analysis of selected pieces from *Mikrokosmos* (as well as several unpublished pieces related to this work). The contents of these chapters largely follow a chronological order: pieces composed before 1932 and their possible relationship to the *Mikrokosmos* pieces composed later (Chapter 6); thematic similarities between the pieces composed in 1932–1934 (Chapter 7); use of inversional symmetry and other compositional techniques in pieces from 1932–1933 (Chapter 8); the relationship between *Mikrokosmos*

pieces composed in 1933 and the Second Piano Concerto first performed by the composer in the same year (Chapter 9); possible references to other composers (Bach, Schumann, and Mátyás Seiber) in pieces composed in 1933–1934 (Chapter 10); some particular compositional techniques developed in the *Mikrokosmos* pieces composed in 1932–1934 (Chapter 11); and the pieces composed in 1937 (Chapter 12).

The fundamental difference between the present dissertation and the previous analytic literature on *Mikrokosmos* is that the author conducts examinations based on the micro-chronology established in the first part of the dissertation and strives to identify relationships between the *Mikrokosmos* pieces composed in a short period (but in some instances, even the pieces written one after another), as well as possible influence from biographical events and contemporary works (including those by other composers). This approach leads to intriguing results. For instance, in pieces from 1932–1933 (nos. 132 ‘Major Seconds Broken and Together’, 122 ‘Chords Together and Opposed’, 144 ‘Minor Seconds, Major Sevenths’, 140 ‘Free Variations’, and 141 ‘Subject and Reflection’), it is possible to observe that inversional symmetry is used as a key concept to devise primary motives of these pieces. The fact that five pieces share a common compositional element may suggest that Bartók planned to compose a set of pieces by using a common technique. At the same time, some pairs of pieces share related elements, such as the promoted use of cluster chords (e.g., nos. 122 and 144) and some featured diatonic/chromatic intervals (e.g., nos. 132 and 144). In this regard, it is likely that Bartók received the inspiration for a new piece from a finished one (this phenomenon is named ‘chain of inspiration’ in the dissertation). László Somfai has already pointed out the motivic (or, occasionally, gestural) relationship between themes in contemporaneous compositions; however, my research suggests that works written in the same period may also be related on a more abstract level.

The case of the relationship between the Second Piano Concerto and especially *Mikrokosmos* no. 143 ‘Divided Arpeggios’ (Chapter 9) may illustrate that Bartók might have been inspired not only by his contemporary compositions but also by an earlier composition. Even though the direct thematic relationship is limited to the initial, upward arpeggio exclusively using black-keys (at the beginning of no. 143 and the Finale of Second Piano Concerto), it is possible to relate the manipulation of the interval in no. 143—a pentatonic arpeggio consisting of major second/perfect fourth/major second—is transformed into a Bartókian major-minor arpeggio consisting of minor third/perfect fourth/minor third—to the various combinations of minor thirds in the ritornello section of the Finale. This analytic approach may shed light on the latent thematic relationship in the Finale of the Second Piano Concerto.

While this case exemplifies a type of the *Mikrokosmos* pieces in which a compositional technique used in a previous composition is picked up again, there are a few interesting cases where the *Mikrokosmos* pieces served as an

experiment with new compositional techniques (Chapter 11), such as the expansion of interval (nos. 64 ‘Line and Point’ and 112 ‘Variations on a Folk Tune’) and the systematic application of twelve tones (no. 133 ‘Syncopation’). These experiments later became essential features of Bartók’s masterpieces, such as the chromatic and diatonic versions of the theme in the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (in the first and fourth movements), as well as the exploitation of the twelve notes in the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (slow introduction of the first movement).

The last chapter deals with ten concert pieces from 1937, which were supposedly composed to enlarge Bartók’s own concert repertoire (nos. 109 ‘From the Island of Bali’, 120 ‘Fifth Chords’, 130 ‘Village Joke’, 138 ‘Bagpipe’, 139 ‘Merry Andrew’, as well as 148–151 and 153, ‘Five Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm’, as is named by Bartók at that time, an early compilation of nos. 148–153 ‘Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm’ without no. 152 that was composed later, in 1939). These ten pieces originally formed two sets of suites, each consisting of five pieces (the first five pieces constituted a technically easy suite, and the last five a difficult one). Although Bartók often performed these suites at concerts from 1938, there is no direct reference to these suites in the published score: the five pieces constituting the easy suite are divided into Volumes IV–V; as for the difficult suite, no alternative groupings of the ‘Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm’ are mentioned. Consequently, attention has not been paid to the musical importance of these suites. Even though the difficult suite, ‘Five Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm’, was eventually replaced by the final ‘Six Dances’, it is still possible to discuss the significance of the ‘Five Dances’ as an independent suite and the musical relationship between its components and the other five pieces constituting the easy suite.

Similar to the pieces composed in 1932–1933 (discussed in Chapter 8), several common elements can be observed, such as the use of triads (nos. 120, 139, 151, and 153), musical humour (nos. 120, 130, and 139). Even though the application of folk music elements should be regarded as one of the essential elements of Bartók’s compositional style, it deserves attention that most of these 1937 pieces overtly refer to Hungarian folk music (nos. 120, 130, 138, and 148–150), and it is especially remarkable that two of the ‘Five Dances’ (nos. 149 and 150) are apparently based on a Hungarian folk tune that Bartók had recently transcribed (‘Fly, Peacock, Fly’), judging from the theme in the pentatonic scale with a descending melodic contour. Its combination with the so-called Bulgarian Rhythm may represent Bartók’s artistic credo, the ‘brotherhood of the peoples’.

4. List of Publications

a) Published Articles

- ‘“Egy mikrokozmosz darabcskát szottyantottam ki” – a Mikrokozmosz néhány utolsó darabjai Svájcából’. *Zenatudomány Dolgozatok 2017–2018* (2019): 271–280.
- ‘A Zenei rend diadala?: Az inspiráció forrásainak sokfélesége a 44 duó két hegedűre 37. darabjában’. *Magyar Zene* 56, no. 2 (2018): 139–160.
- ‘From Order to Chaos? Compositional Process and Concept of Béla Bartók’s Mikrokozmosz’. *Principles of Music Composing: ratio versus intuitio XVII* (2017): 127–136.
- ‘*Hét darab a Mikrokozmoszból* – Bartók megvalósulatlan tervei, megvalósult kompozíciói’. In *Szekvenciáktól szimfóniákig: Tanulmányok Liszt, Bartók és Ligeti 140 éves Zeneakadémiája tiszteletére*, edited by Ágnes Dobszay et al., 139–164. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2015.
- ‘*Mikrokozmosz: Companion for Later Generations from the Years of Crisis*’. In *Válság és kultúra: a doktoriskolák IV. nemzetközi magyarságtudományi konferenciájának előadásai*, edited by Sándor Bene et al., 375–392. Budapest: Nemzetközi Magyarságtudományi Társaság, 2015.
- ‘Folklorising the “Folksong”? Béla Bartók and *Mikrokozmosz* no. 127 “New Hungarian Folk Song” (“Erdő, erdő, de magos a teteje...”’). *Spring Wind* (2015): 517–531.
- ‘How many times should I play it? The problem of *rep. ad libitum* in Béla Bartók’s *Mikrokozmosz* no. 103, “Minor and Major”’. Online publication, 2014. http://www.cmpcp.ac.uk/conferences_PSN2014_Thursday.html
- ‘Piano pedagogue or composer? Bartók’s ultimate attitude toward the *Mikrokozmosz*’. *Spring Wind* (2013).

b) Edited Publications

- Béla Bartók, *Mikrokozmosz (2)*. Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition, Vol. 41. München: G. Henle, Budapest: Editio Musica, [2021]. HN6204.
- Béla Bartók, *Mikrokozmosz (1)*. Béla Bartók Complete Critical Edition, Vol. 40. München: G. Henle, Budapest: Editio Musica, 2020. HN6203.
- Béla Bartók, *Mikrokozmosz* [the original six books in three volumes], Urtext. Budapest: Editio Musica, München: G. Henle, 2020. Z. 20083–20085.
- Béla Bartók, *Mikrokozmosz*, I–III [the original six books in three volumes], Urtext. München: G. Henle, Budapest: Editio Musica, 2018. HN 1408–1410.

c) Other Publication (as a collaborator)

- ‘Folk Music in Bartók’s Compositions’. Ed. by Márton Kerékfy and Viola Biró. Online publication, 2020. <http://bartok-nepzene.zti.hu/en>