

**The Liszt Academy of Music**

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**BARTÓK MODELS AND IDEALS OF PERFORMING  
PRACTICE**

**Doctoral Thesis**

**Arguments**

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## Overview of the research

My study on the models and ideals of performing practice of the composer and pianist Béla Bartók relies on two concepts. Performing practice models include the study of the educational and other contemporary influences of Bartók, whereas ideals refer to his own interpretive conceptions on his piano repertoire. The Hungarian musician was educated in the turn-of-the-century Budapest, a rich and stimulating cultural milieu for the young student of piano and composition. The relatively small research literature on Bartók as a performer of his own works and on his instructive editions of the classical piano repertoire examined a number of musicological questions about Bartók’s conscious—and sometimes non-conscious—performing ideals.<sup>1</sup> However, evidence was still lacking regarding the influence of Bartók’s contemporary musical environment on his ideals of performing practice. My research is the first to investigate the similarities and the differences between the performance practice of Bartók and of many of his most influential predecessors and contemporary pianists (such as Hans von Bülow, Eugen d’Albert, Frederic Lamond, Ernst von Dohnányi, Artur Schnabel, Alfredo Casella, Igor Stravinsky, alongside with Bartók’s Hungarian colleagues including Kálmán Chován and Árpád Szendy) based on these artists’ score editions (and, occasionally, of recordings). To examine Bartók’s models and ideals of performing practice, I followed two lines of investigation in my dissertation, exploring the possibilities of convergence between music history and cognitive musicology. First, I conducted a thorough philological and analytical research on Bartók’s instructive editions of the classical piano repertoire ranging from Couperin to Chopin, in comparison with performing editions of his contemporary pianists (such as Lebert, Bülow, d’Albert, Lamond, Casella, and Schnabel). Second, I examined written documents, including pedagogical and analytical works on performance practice, Bartók’s writings, his remarks in the scores of his students, concert reviews, and oral history documentation on his piano teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Lampert, V.: “Bartók at the piano: lessons from the composer’s sound recordings” in Bayley, A. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók* (Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 231–242; Somfai, L.: “Nineteenth-century ideas developed in Bartók’s piano notation in the years 1907–14” in *19th-Century Music* 11/1 (1987), 73–91; Somfai, L.: “Bartók’s transcription of J. S. Bach” in Laubenthal, A. (Ed.), *Studien zur Musikgeschichte: Eine Festschrift für Ludwig Finscher* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1995), 689–696.

## Findings

In the first part of my dissertation (“Influences: Environment and Giftedness”), I provided a detailed description of the musical and pedagogical environment of Bartók’s parents and of the young Béla Bartók. The historical and social processes I have analysed in the first few chapters (including the gradual professionalization and nationalisation of the mainly subcultural middle-class musical life and music pedagogy in the multilingual and multinational Hungarian countryside) guided the crossing pathways of Bartók’s parents in a rather typical way. The examination of all available documentary sources, including oral history sources, research reports on the history of pedagogy, and teaching materials of the era, shed light on the fact Bartók’s mother – heiress of a German-speaking middle-class family from Pressburg (in Hungarian: Pozsony, now in Slovakia: Bratislava) – had the opportunity to get a generous and fairly high-level musical formation in the Hungarian language teachers’ training-school of Pressburg. In fact, she made her future husband’s acquaintance as a piano teacher (teaching the sisters of Béla Bartók senior) in the small town of Nagyszentmiklós (in Torontál county, Southern Hungary [now in Romania: Sânnicolau Mare]) where he was one of the founder members of the local musical association, besides his main work as the director of the agricultural vocational school of the town. My detailed analyses and publication of historical documents, including rarely cited ones, may illustrate rather clearly that the family circle and the entire socio-cultural milieu should have provided the gifted child – the future composer and pianist – with a very meagre musical legacy. However, after the premature death of Bartók’s father, the mother – who was able to recognise the talent of the child thanks to her sufficient musical formation she got in Pressburg – actively helped her son to deploy his talent to the maximum possible advantage by sending him to her relatives in Nagyvárad (now in Romania: Oradea), then by returning to Pressburg where the teenager Bartók could get gradually into the mainstream of the music pedagogy of the era.

Thus Bartók got his pedagogical and musical legacy from several characteristic sources of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century piano pedagogy. The strong instrument-technical grounding, including practising scales and etudes during the majority of the time devoted to practice, was a prerequisite of teaching the musical poetics. The young Bartók’s piano teachers in Nagyvárad – Ferenc Kersch and his wife – and in Pressburg – László Erkel, son of the famous composer Ferenc Erkel – took technical training in focus for the little “savage” (to take Bartók’s own self-ironical expression). My analyses of contemporary sources revealed that at the onset of instrumental studies, the “purgatorial” function of the independent technical training was a heritage of central European piano pedagogy that can be

traced back to the generation of Beethoven. This almost “axiomatic” element of piano pedagogy, transmitted from generation to the next, was a central character of the “German way” of instrumental pedagogy – later, so often condemned by Kodály in his writings – prevailing both in the mainstream of musical culture and pedagogy (including the teaching activity of Beethoven, Czerny, Liszt and his eminent pupils) and in the periphery (like in the Hungarian countryside: this may well be illustrated with the pedagogical work of István Bartalus and Kálmán Chován, authors of the most widely used teaching materials in Hungary in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Although the official curriculum of the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, Bartók’s alma mater, closely followed this “German” way of instrumental pedagogy from the first years of Bartók’s studies in the Academy to the last ones of his professorship held there, technical issues were no more in focus on Bartók’s own lessons with István Thomán. This stance may have originated in the consciously “Parnassian” attitude of Thomán (as opposed to his most important colleagues like Árpád Szendy who was considered the best piano professor of the Academy) who inherited this approach from his teacher: the late Liszt. Bartók, in turn, took on this path.

In the second and third part of my thesis, I aimed at uncovering Bartók’s ideals of performing practice by means of an analysis of his pedagogical practice and of his instructive editions. The study comprising the second part of my dissertation (“Teaching: Method and Individuality”) takes its starting point in Bartók’s characterisation of his Academy professor, István Thomán, written in 1927. In fact, when sketching the pedagogical portrait of Thomán, Bartók outlines his self-portrait, providing a subtle description of his own pedagogical ideal. However, the distance between the ideal and the reality leads to an enlightening explanation to the contradiction well-perceptible in Bartók’s academy classes: apparently, he did use the pedagogical “methods” attributed to Thomán but exerted a contrary influence on the artistic personality of his students. The method of direct showing (i.e., showing-by-playing), inherited from the Liszt–Thomán lineage and seriously criticised by many influential pedagogues of the era, became part of the pedagogy of mechanical showing-and-imitating in Bartók’s classroom from the 1920’s when Bartók usually forced his students to imitate his interpretations with a punctilious precision. While it may have seemed to Bartók’s early students that he encouraged their individuality, many of his later students experienced his paralysing, or even wrecking, influence. Namely Bartók tolerated less and less when his students went against, and this fact, coupled with Bartók’s personal suggestivity, led to the creation of carbon copies, especially in the case of less mature and individual students. Although the respect for the author’s intentions Bartók took as a starting point in teaching did not mean the suppression of the performer’s own personality but rather the “filtering” of the author’s intentions through the performer’s personality,

in his pedagogical practice, Bartók not only provoked the subordination of his students to his thoughts and views but he might also have consciously held that the emotional subordination – the suppression of his own personality and individuality – is a duty of the student. This fact may provide an explanation to Bartók's different attitude towards his students *versus* his fellow musicians: while Bartók required subordination from the part of musicians (especially students) he did not consider as equals to him, he nevertheless remained open to the personalities "of his own level". His attitudes towards independent, autonomous artists he accepted on personal or professional grounds reflected a stance of pliability and concession.

In his classroom, the minutious working out of the tiniest parts of the compositions to be interpreted was the starting momentum that may have triggered the process of emotional subordination, leading to the deconstruction of the student's individuality and habit developed thus far. The overprecise elaboration of the musical expression – rehearsed more and more obsessively with his later students – almost automatically resulted in clearing all details from "superficialities". Recollections by Bartók's students revealed that this process involved first of all a tenacious teaching of the "appropriate dosage" of rhythm and accents. The ability of shaping the form of entire movements resulted almost instinctively from the polishing work. Bartók seem to have held that only this kind of "craftsmanship" can be transmitted from teacher to student in an explicit way in the domain of performance pedagogy: since he thought that it was impossible to teach the art of *interpreting* – involving poetics whose source is the performer's personality and individuality –, he took aim at teaching the art of *execution* in his classes, using the method of showing-and-imitating. However, the urge to perfection and control surmounted the process of polishing the details – similarly to his folk music transcriptions he revised again and again until the "microscopic" precision.

In the third part of my thesis ("Interpretation: Tradition and Personality"), I aimed to uncover Bartók's performing practice ideals through a detailed musical analysis of his Beethoven editions. Through my analyses, I succeeded to reveal the presumable ideal forms of Bartók's interpretations from Beethoven's piano works (especially from the sonatas) with an almost microscopic precision, along with the cognitive, generative instructive rules working behind his interpretive choices. The ideal interpretations, recorded in Bartók's editions in a particularly detailed way, seizes the attentive reader of these scores in an almost compelling manner; and the analyst of these editions may characterise the editor's habit as well as his analytical and performing aptitudes (including his ability to embrace different levels of musical time-spans with his attention) with a surprising precision.

In the philological introduction to the analyses of Bartók's Beethoven editions, I outlined a detailed portrait of the first generation of Hungarian editors in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

yielding a supplementary overview of the work of the three most important editors: Kálmán Chován, Árpád Szendy, and Béla Bartók. In the first chapters of the third part of the thesis, I provided an overview of Bartók's studies of Beethoven's music in his youth. This is followed by chapters on my philological research of Bartók's editorship. Following these introductory chapters, I approached Bartók's Beethoven interpretations through their elements that are likely to stem from the Liszt tradition. After an analysis of the historical context of these elements of the interpretation, including basic tempo choice and orchestral thinking, I examined the interpretive elements that seemed to reflect more characteristically the editor's own habit and personality. Concerning Bartók's fingerings, for example, I discovered that although a very significant proportion of the fingerings published in his instructive editions was simply copied from the Cotta edition – in the case of many sonatas and piano pieces by Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn edited by Bartók –, his own fingerings to the remaining pieces reveal his urge to highlight boundaries of form and to stabilise the musical pulse. Thus, in contrast to Bülow, d'Albert, or Lamond, Bartók used the fingerings more often as agogical tools in order to sensitively display the grouping structure and the metrical structure of a movement.

Contrarily to the well-known German editors he often considered as models for his work, including Lebert, Bülow and d'Albert, and to his fellow editors (like Chován), the rhythmic execution of the metrical structure was a central element of Bartók's interpretation of the piano repertoire ranging from Couperin to Chopin. However, I demonstrated that in contrast to the mainstream of the performance practice of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and to some of Bartók's influential contemporary figures, like Stravinsky, as well –, Bartók's pronouncedly rhythmic interpretation of the musical material never became an obtrusively mechanical element; Bartók always considered it as a quality that fitted to the gestural and emotional content and the tonal and metrical architecture organically and in a meaningful way.

In the chapter "Focus and continuity of the musical attention", I analysed an emblematic aspect of Bartók's habit as a performer: the capability of directing the attention simultaneously to the superordinated levels of the musical structure and to the most embedded ones, in contrast to overall and ordinary expressive solutions that are usually applied to the musical flow by performers (and many of Bartók's fellow editors). Moreover, one of the most important sources of the "force" and the "magnetism" of a performance is the continuity of attention (note that these expressions were most frequently used in the recollections on Bartók's playing). I have demonstrated that this quality of Bartók's performing style – a quality which is so difficult to measure based on audio recordings – is clearly reflected in his notation.

In the chapter entitled “Sensuality and rigour”, I approached Bartók’s “objective” and “anti-sentimental” stance regarding interpretation (as experienced from the viewpoint of the mainstream of contemporary performance practice) through the typical interpretive patterns of the following musical elements: the so-called “pause filler”, the melodic middle point, the melodic summit, and the cadence. In the four subsections of this larger chapter, I compared Bartók’s typical interpretations of these musical elements with Bülow’s, d’Albert’s, and Schnabel’s interpretations in Beethoven’s music. Moreover, an additional analysis of a Mozart sonata edition (K. 545) shed light on an intriguing phenomenon: through this telling example, I could demonstrate in which way Bartók’s interpretation can be considered as puritanical and anti-sentimental with respect to the interpretation of Kálmán Chován, Bartók’s senior colleague at the Royal Academy of Music, in which the representation of the metrical and grouping structures is obscured by an obsessive focus on local tonal and melodic momentums. My following analyses shed light on a fact concerning the most influential performance theory of the turn-of-the-century: I argued that Bartók’s seemingly Riemannian interpretations of the musical form (including motifs, phrases, and bigger formal units), pairing measure and positing the fundamental impulse of upbeat to downbeat, are mere coincidences. It can be argued with certainty that these interpretations do not bear a causal relationship to the Riemannian theory.

In the following chapter entitled “The representation of the musical architecture”, I illustrated, through an analysis of Bartók’s interpretation of the third movement of Beethoven’s sonata Op. 10 No. 2, how Bartók, in contrast to Lebert, Bülow, d’Albert, Lamond, and Schnabel, guides the performer using his edition in producing a clear representation of the overall shape of the movement, simultaneously with an articulate display of the embedded formal units. Finally, in my closing analyses, I focused on Bartók’s interpretive solutions connected to ambiguous musical textures leaving the possibility for the performer to different metrical interpretations. By way of precisely separating his own musical instructions (including corrections) from the urtext elements in his editions, Bartók opened the way for himself to the possibility to interpret the ambiguous elements of a composition, or even highlight their ambiguousness, without violating the integrity of the musical text known to him as Beethoven’s.

## List of publications related to the thesis

### 1. Articles in journals and book chapters

“Signification musicale et expressivité temporelle dans l’interprétation musicale: une vision basée sur la théorie de la pertinence”, in *Topiques et stratégies narratives en musique*, Ed. Márta Grabócz (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines) [2013, in preparation].

“Musical excellence and conceptions of musical ability: Introduction to the pedagogy of musical performance” [A zenei képesség és a kiemelkedő zenei teljesítmény – bevezetés a zenei előadóművészet pedagógiájába], *Parlando* online [2013, in preparation].

“Structural communication and predictability in Bartók’s and Dohnányi’s performance style”, *Studia Musicologica* 53/1–3 (2012), 171–186.

“Meanings embedded in music: Introduction to the psychology of music” [Zenébe rejtett jelentések: bevezetés a zene lélektanába], in *From Szeged to Szeged: An Anthology (2009)* [Szegedtől Szegedig. Antológia – 2009], Vol. 2. (Szeged: Bába Kiadó), 640–656.

“After the generation of Bartók: A paradigm shift in Hungarian folk music research?” [A bartóki generációk után, avagy paradigmaváltás a népzene kutatásban?], *Szeged* 18/3 (March 2006), 32–37.

“20<sup>th</sup>-century editions of Bach’s Das Wohltemperierte Klavier” [20. századi instruktív kiadások Bach Das Wohltemperierte Klavierjából] (Budapest: The Liszt Academy of Music, manuscript [2003]).

“Levels of musical psychosemantics: Innate, psychodynamic, and cognitive cues in musical meaning assignment” [A zeneértés szemantikai szintjeiről: velünk született, mélylélektani és kognitív útirányjelzők a zenék jelentéseinek kibontásában], *Hungarian Review of Psychology* 56/3 (2001), 465–477.

### 2. Conference lectures

“Structural communication and predictability in Bartók’s performance style”, *International Musicological Colloquium to celebrate to 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Budapest Bartók Archives* (‘Scholarly Research and Performance Practice in Bartók Studies: The Importance of the Dialogue’), Szombathely (Hungary), 16.07.2011.

“The impact of musical meaning on rubato playing in historical recordings: A theoretical approach”, *10th International Congress on Musical Signification (ICMS10)*, The Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius, 23.10.2008.

“Relevance and Musical Performance” [Relevancia és zenei előadás], *Annual Conference in Linguistics and Philosophy of the Erasmus College Budapest*, Institute of Linguistics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, 29.04.2008.

“Cognitive predictability and relative importance as determinants of subtle tempo changes in nineteenth-century piano performing tradition: An empirical approach”, *CHARM/RMA Annual Conference on ‘Musicology and Recordings’*, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, 13.09.2007.

“Exploring expressive timing in musical performance: Narrative perspectives”, *18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Musicological Society*, University of Zürich, Zürich, 12.07.2007.