

Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music  
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(6.8 History of art and culture: musicology)

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ORCHESTRATION IN BARTÓK'S WORKSHOP:  
THE EXPRESSION OF INDIVIDUAL INSTRUMENTAL TIMBRES  
IN THE ORCHESTRAL WORKS

PhD Theses

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## 1. The Antecedents of the Research

The orchestration is central to Bartók's compositional thinking, since he worked with a wide range of playing techniques and nuances, which affected the whole orchestra and all instrumental groups. In addition to melody, rhythm and harmony, Bartók also attached great importance to the expressive power of the orchestra and the instruments. Although he only occasionally commented on the orchestration of his works in his compositional analyses – such as the »Kossuth« symphonic poem for large orchestra” (BBÍ/1, 41–48), the „Rhapsody for piano and orchestra (op. 1)” (BBÍ/1, 48–50), the „Suite No. 1 for large orchestra (op. 3)” (BBÍ/1, 51–56), the „Suite No. 2 for small orchestra (op. 4)” (BBÍ/1, 57–61), the „Piano Concerto No. 2” (BBÍ/1, 69–73), the „Hungarian Folk Songs for voice and orchestra” (BBÍ/1, 75), the „Sonata for two pianos and percussion” (BBÍ/1, 81–82) and the „Concerto for orchestra” (BBÍ/1, 87–88) – those still reveal some of the important aspects of the composer's thinking in terms of timbre. Another factor that also supports the central role of the orchestration in Bartók's art is his compositional method, since he chose the instruments and their various combinations early, during the compositional sketching stage. More specific timbres were also recorded already when writing the rough draft.

To this date, there is only one dissertation that has dealt in depth with Bartók's orchestration. George Dawson's *Bartók's development as Orchestrator* (California, 1970) systematically discusses Bartók's orchestral treatment in parallel with his stylistic development. His research therefore focuses primarily on the orchestration of the works, with particular emphasis on the unison passages, the homophonic movement, the relationship between melody and accompaniment, the counterpoint, the polyphony, the use of tutti chords and the multi-layered orchestral setting. It also gives a detailed picture of other composers' influences on Bartók's music and their adaptation as well as incorporation in his oeuvre. However, it does not discuss at all at least two important features of the Bartókian style, i.e., his emphasis on illuminating the individual timbres of his instruments and the influence of folk music on instrumentation. Furthermore, it ignores the composer's analyses, statements and academic lectures that reveal a lot about his thinking, including instrumentation.

Bartók's orchestration had already been studied and discussed in different approaches. In Hungarian literature, we must highlight the fundamental studies of László Somfai, which provide a detailed picture of the compositional process and orchestration. First of all, he points out one of the hallmarks of Bartók's music, i.e., the use of instruments closely related to dramaturgy, for example in the variation-structured movement of the *Violin Concerto* (BB 117, 1937–1938) (*Variation strategy in the „Violin Concerto”, movement II*), and in the *Piano Concerto No. 2* (BB 91, 1926), where there is also a close connection between form and orchestration (*Structural planning and formal dramaturgy in „Piano Concerto No. 2”*). The paper of Sándor Kovács *...and celesta. Reflections about „Zene”* (2013), also focuses on the presentation of a single phenomenon, in which he presents the dramaturgical function of the celesta in the composition *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* (BB 114, 1936). Virág Büky Ditta's *Music of the Night* (2014) draws conclusions from Bartók's music of the night type of movements in parallel with the use of instruments. Márta Papp's study (*Bartók's Violin Rhapsodies and the Influence of the Romanian Folk Violin on Bartók's Works*, 1973) provides a detailed picture of the influence and assimilation of Romanian folk violin playing. Jaroslav Volek makes observations on the instrumental groups of the *Concerto* for large orchestra (BB 123, 1943) (*Über einige interessante Beziehungen zwischen thematischer Arbeit und Instrumentation in Bartóks „Concerto für Orchester”, 1963*). David Cooper (*Bartók's orchestral music and the modern world*, 2001) and John McCabe (*Bartók orchestral music*, 1939) discuss the orchestration on an equal footing with formal, tonal, harmonic and melodic components. The works of Ernő Lendvai (*The Poetic World of Bartók*, 1995; *Bartók's Dramaturgy*, 1964; *Bartók's Style in the Light of the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*

and *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, 1955), György Kroó (*Pantomime: „The Miraculous Mandarin”*; *Ballet: „The Wooden Prince”*, 1993; *Bartók’s Guide*, 1980; *On the genesis of „The Wooden Prince”*, 1973; *Bartók’s stage works*, 1962; *Monothematics and dramaturgy in Bartók’s stage works*, 1962), as well as the writings of János Kárpáti (*Bartók’s Chamber Music*, 1976; *The First Two Piano Concertos*, 1993; *Béla Bartók: „2nd Piano Concerto”*, 1975) make some important observations on the use of the instruments. László Vikárius (*Model and inspiration in Bartók’s musical thinking. For the Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Influence*, 1999), Péter Bozó (*Wagner and the Opera House at the Turn of the Century, or Bartók’s Allusion to Music History in Context*, 2019) and Hans Winking (*Klangflächen bei Bartók bis 1911: Zu einigen stilistischen Beziehungen in den Orchesterwerken Béla Bartók zur Orchestermusik des späten 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts*, 1982) draw analogies between the music of the 19th and 20th centuries and Bartók’s compositions, including instrumental solutions. On the genesis of the stage works: on *The Bluebeard’s Castle* (op. 11, BB 62, 1911) and the development of its orchestration Carl Leafstedt’s *Inside Bluebeard’s Castle: Music and Drama in Béla Bartók’s Opera* (1999), on Bartók’s revisions of the orchestration of its score Márton Kerékfy’s 2009 treatise is relevant; about *The Wooden Prince* (op. 13, BB 74, 1914–1917) Anne Vester’s studies (*Der Holzgeschnitzte Prinz: Eine Untersuchung des Tanzspiels von Bartók und Balázs unter Philologischen und ästhetischen Aspekten*, 2015; *„Der Holzgeschnitzte Prinz” – ein Schlüsselwerk?*, 2012) are important, while the study of the manuscripts of *The Miraculous Mandarin* (op. 19, 1918–1919, orchestration 1924) has been carried out by László Vikárius (*„On »Bartók’s« Pizzicato, a Strange Chord and the Manuscripts of The Miraculous Mandarin”*, 2009). The similarities in the use of instruments between the latter two stage works are highlighted by Daniel-Frédéric Lebon in his book entitled *Béla Bartók’s Handlungsballette in ihrer musikalischen Gattungstradition* (2012), shedding light on the meanings of the instrument’s occurrences.

The studies published in critical and facsimile editions are of fundamental importance, as in *Dance Suite* (BB 86, 1923, Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 1998), *Music for stringed instruments, percussion and celesta* (Musik für Saiteninstrumente, Schlagzeug und Celesta. Faksimile des Partiturotographs und der Skizzen, hrsg. und kommentiert von Felix Meyer, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Mainz: Schott, 2000), *Sonata for two pianos and percussion* (BB 115, 1937, Sonata for two pianos and percussion. Facsimile of Paul Sacher’s draft score and annotated score copy, ed. by Felix Meyer, Paul Sacher Foundation, London: Boosey and Hawkes, 2018) as well as the *Concerto for orchestra* (Concerto for orchestra, Academic complete edition with critical notes, 24 vol. Klára Móricz, G. Henle Verlag – Editio Musica Budapest, 2017), which contain significant observations on the development of the orchestration.

## 2. Methods and Structure

During the preparatory work for my thesis, I placed great emphasis on the study of the manuscripts and published scores of Bartók’s orchestral works. This was followed by the more complex part of the research, namely the comparison of the scores, which could begin after the main aspects of the orchestration methods had been established. During the pandemic of 2021, many studies were made available online, which is how I found Dawson’s thesis. Then, taking into account aspects that I discovered in the literature of stylistic analysis of Bartók both abroad and in Hungary, a new objective emerged: to focus my investigation on the hitherto unexplored stylistic features of the composer’s orchestration, the role of the instruments, their individual timbre, and the characteristics that target innovative sounds. The aim of this essay is to fill a

gap and to complement the previously published studies on this topic, so providing a more coherent picture of the Bartókian orchestration.

The paper is divided into three chapters. While the first chapter presents the texture and size of the orchestra in Bartók's compositions, including a table showing the development of the four instrumental groups (1.2), the second chapter provides an insight into the treatment of the latter and the varied timbres of the instruments. The central part of the dissertation, in addition to the interpretation of the individual sound of the instruments, also deals with the broadening of the instruments' function, since the piano and the strings are also present in the orchestra as percussion instruments and the timpani as a melody instrument.

Finally, three case studies illustrate a particular aspect of Bartók's orchestration. In *Piano Concertos No 1* and *No 2*, the wind and percussion section is treated as an equal to the solo instrument and moved as a tone colour block (3.1); the *Concerto for orchestra* is based on the narrative of solo instruments (3.3); and the sound effects and novel sonorities of *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* and *Sonata for two pianos and percussion* (3.2) show the phenomenon of two-choruses of the Baroque tradition.

### 3. Research Results

This doctoral thesis aims to provide a systematic overview of the important stylistic features of Bartók's instrumentation, the instrumental groups and the occurrence of instruments, and his individual voice. I consider the most important result of the dissertation that it demonstrates the diversity of the soundscape of the instruments and also highlights the composer's desire to broaden the use of the instruments. The investigation has covered the orchestral compositions of the oeuvre and has sought to demonstrate the fundamental qualities of the instruments.

In shaping his style, Bartók drew both from the traditions of European music and from observations of folk music phenomena. Folk inspiration was not only embedded in the spirit of his art, but was also significant in his compositional technique. It inspired many layers of his music, influencing melody, rhythm, harmony, metre and instrumentation. The influence of the music of the many ethnic groups he studied can be recognised in the orchestration of his works. The woodwind instruments are Hungarian, the violin is Romanian and Ruthenian, the nuanced use of percussion and the combination of percussion with melodic instruments, in addition to the influence of art music, can also be traced back to Arabic folk music.

To emphasize the folk character, the composer often imitates the sound of peasant instruments with the wind instruments: the *tárogató* (English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet) which was initially considered a folk instrument, the flute (flute), the bagpipe whistle (horn, oboe) and the Alpenhorn (horn). At other times, he uses special instruments such as the saxophone or the recorder to play and emphasise folk melodies. He also uses the bagpipe bass and the folk techniques of stringed instruments to bring out peasant characteristics. In his original composition, *Five Hungarian Folk Songs for Voice and Orchestra* (BB 108, 1933), Bartók uses the technique of tone painting. In order to display the characters derived from the text, he also includes some woodwind instruments – the piccolo, the A and B-clarinet – and the triangle as percussion instrument, to highlight the folk text.

Sublimated, folk music elements also appear in Bartók's works. The glissando, which is considered to be one of the Romanian folk violins playing techniques, is incorporated into Bartók's music as a humorous effect, then as a dramaturgical element, and then appears with different meanings in all the instruments of the orchestra. The composer's treatment of this effect, which is also found in art music, reveals his tendency to use elements discovered in art music only if they are also found in folk music, and vice versa. This is how it has been validated for use in his compositions.

In his orchestration, as in the rhythm of his works, there are also polyphonic passages in which different layers appear simultaneously: the accompaniment, the ornamentation, the mood-enhancing or orchestral sound-enhancing parts, sometimes separated by different articulations, both vertically and linearly.

Bartók also indicates the dramaturgy of his works through the orchestration. He emphasises not only tonal changes, the turning point – which he often highlights with several instruments such as the timpani, bass drum, triangle, cymbal, chime, snare drum, piano and horn – but also the return, sometimes recalling the melody as well as the original timbres organised around it. It also sets the stage for new episodes, most often by the appearance of the percussion or percussion-like playing techniques. The tension is released by the sound of the harp, or the celesta.

Another important characteristic of Bartók's music is the richness of dynamic colours, timbres and characters, which is emphasised by the orchestration. This variation is also reflected in the transformation of melody and the variety of instrumentation.

The orchestration also shows Bartók's experimental inclination, especially in the expression of the piano's *clusters* and its percussion-like nature, the percussion effects of the stringed instruments and the *Bartók-pizzicato*, in the application of the timpani as a melody instrument, and in the way the percussion instruments are played with different objects.

However, the composer was motivated not only by experimentation but also by the realisation of different sound effects. He strove to create music that combined folk music and Western music, to create a style that would incorporate both.

His interest in new timbres and the possibilities of combining different instruments, his innovations in orchestral and instrumental arrangements and in the use of effects became an integral part of his compositional style. By examining his orchestral compositions this way, we have gained an even deeper insight into Bartók's compositional thinking and creative habitus.

#### 4. Publications relating to the subject of the thesis

„Influența muzicii instrumentale populare românești asupra *Concertului pentru orchestră* de Béla Bartók” (<https://obiectiv-sm.ro/>, sajtó alatt)

„Bartók hangszerelése két színpadi művének tükrében. *A táncjáték és a némajáték hangszerelésének tipológiája.*” *Magyar Zene*, LVII/2. szám (2019, május), 213–233.

„Bartók két zenekari gyászindulója. *A Kossuth szimfóniai költemény és a Négy zenekari darab zárótétele.*” In: Kim Katalin (szerk.), *Zenetudományi Dolgozatok 2017–2018*, MTA BTK Zenetudományi Intézet, 2019, 297–312.

„Bartók és Debussy operájának hangszerelése.” In Keresztes Gábor (szerk.), *Tavaszi szél 2016 konferenciakötet III*, Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2016, 338–352.