The String Quartets of Béla Bartók
Tradition and Legacy in Analytical Perspective
The String Quartets of Béla Bartók

TRADITION AND LEGACY IN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Edited by Dániel Péter Biró
and Harald Krebs
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The Companion Website to this volume contains score examples for numerous essays in the volume, as well as audio examples for the essays by Charles Morrison and John Roeder. The audio examples for the latter essay, consisting of excerpts from Bartók’s Fourth String Quartet and hypothetical versions of the same excerpts by John Roeder, were recorded on October 10, 2012, by the Lafayette String Quartet in the Phillip T. Young Recital Hall at the School of Music, University of Victoria. Yariv Aloni was the producer, and Kirk McNally was the recording engineer.

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Readers may access the companion website with username Music4 and password Book2497. Please note that these are case-sensitive.
Contributors


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THE STRING QUARTETS OF BÉLA BARTÓK
Introduction

Dániel Péter Biró and Harald Krebs
University of Victoria

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945) was one of the most important composers and musical thinkers of the twentieth century. His contributions as a composer, as a performer, and as a pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology profoundly changed the course of music history and the field of music composition. Bartók's six string quartets are among his most important works; indeed, they are generally acknowledged as being crowning achievements of twentieth-century chamber music.

In September 2008, at the University of Victoria, a group of internationally recognized music theorists, musicologists, performers, and composers from North America and Hungary participated in an interdisciplinary workshop focusing on these remarkable works. This volume presents the results of this workshop, along with essays by additional scholars of Bartók's music. The authors' contributions deal with theoretical, musicological, and performance-practice issues, and they consider both the imprint of folk and classical traditions on Bartók's string quartets, and how his quartets influenced works of the next generation of Hungarian composers, specifically György Kurtág and György Ligeti.

There have been a variety of conferences dealing with Bartók's music (Radford 1995; Bard 2006; Budapest 2006) and multiple publications on Bartók’s music based on these conferences (The International Musicological Conference in Commemoration of Béla Bartók, Budapest, 1971; Bartók Perspectives: Man, Composer, and Ethnomusicologist, Radford, 1995; Proceedings of the International Bartók Colloquium, Szombathely, 1995; Bartók's Orbit: The Context and Sphere of Influence of His Work, Budapest, 2006). The current volume differs from these publications in its focus on the string quartets, which it examines from a variety of theoretical, analytical, and historical perspectives. Integrating
The String Quartets of Béla Bartók

The fields of music theory, musicology, music history, performance practice, music cognition, and ethnomusicology, the volume presents a wealth of new insights into these important works of the last century.

Bartók’s string quartets present special challenges for scholars, as they combine elements derived from both the European classical tradition and folk music traditions. Initially, Bartók was influenced by the music of the European classical and romantic traditions. Although Wagner, Liszt, Strauss, and Debussy were early influences, the impact of Beethoven, Bartók’s main musical authority, is clearly perceptible with regard to the form, motivic development, and rhythmic structures of the quartets. On the other hand, involved as he was in the Hungarian national struggle, Bartók was the first Hungarian composer, alongside his compatriot Zoltán Kodály, to study the then-undiscovered folk music traditions of his native Hungary. By 1918, Bartók had gathered more than ten thousand folksongs in Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, and he went on to collect and study the traditional music of North Africa, Turkey, and the south Slavic territories. As Bartók became more active as an ethnomusicologist, folk music elements from these areas were embedded in his string quartets, resulting in musical creations of unprecedented structural, formal, and topical complexity. As his compositional style became increasingly modernist, the influences of traditional music from a variety of cultures penetrated more deeply and more subtly into the cellular structure of his compositional method.

Simultaneously, Bartók’s compositional method developed in the special context of Hungarian modernity. Hungary, at the turn of the century, existed between feudalism and modernism; its population consisted of a very small landed aristocracy, a small population of petits bourgeois, and a vast peasant class. As Hungary became increasingly independent as a nation and people, its artists strove to create new Hungarian art forms that would be distinct from those of the economically richer Western European countries. This national movement eventually gave way to more internationalist philosophical tendencies and ideologies. Bartók, first emerging as a nationalist composer, eventually became a leader in the internationalist cause of ethnomusicology. As a composer, he combined elements of progressive, modernist Western art music with those of folk music from a variety of peasant cultures; this musical dichotomy is fully present, at its highest level of maturity, in his works for string quartet.

The six string quartets, written over a period of thirty-one years, display the various stages in Bartók’s development as a composer. The First String Quartet, op. 7 (BB 32, Sz. 40), completed in January 1909, shows the inspiration of Bartók’s first folk music collecting expeditions. Although the use of counterpoint in the quartet, as well as its harmonic and thematic language, shows the influence of late Romanticism and Impressionism, the newly discovered music of Bartók’s homeland finds an important place in the work. The Second String Quartet, op. 17 (BB 75, Sz. 67), written in the years 1915–1917, presents an increasingly modernist language; its formal and motivic structuring can be heard as Bartók’s response to atonality and expressionism. Bartók’s work as ethnomusicologist helped to shape this early work; the composer fully integrates elements of
traditional music from Hungary and Romania, as well as from outside Europe, notably from Northern Africa. In terms of form, the Third String Quartet (BB 93, Sz. 85), completed in September 1927, is a seminal work, as it bears the mark of Bartók’s preoccupation with symmetry, which would come to fruition in the Fourth and Fifth Quartets. The Fourth String Quartet (BB 95, Sz. 91), written in July to September 1928, demonstrates the composer’s mastery of form and proportion with its five-movement arch form (the fourth movement, which mirrors the second movement, was completed only after the other movements). With the Fifth String Quartet (BB 110, Sz. 102), written in the time period from August 6 to September 6, 1934, Bartók further investigated the possibilities of symmetry, again employing a five-movement form. In this work Bartók’s expressive thematic material, calling forth melodic and rhythmic associations to Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian folk music, coalesces into a mellowed, more harmonic musical language that seems to strive for an almost classical order. Finally, the Sixth String Quartet (BB 119, Sz. 114), completed just after the outbreak of the Second World War, continues in a similar manner, presenting both a cyclic form as well as folk music influences; moreover, its *marcia* and *burletta* topics are integrated within an ironic yet nostalgic expression of profound beauty.

Although many of Bartók’s quartets were not widely performed in his homeland until the 1950s, his influence as a composer and musicologist on postwar Hungarian composers was profound. He was regarded as an exemplary composer within the Socialist system, which promoted not only the study of folk music but also the integration of peasant music into Socialist art music. After the 1956 revolution, many works of Bartók, deemed “formalist” by the previous regime of Rákosi, were re-introduced to Hungarian audiences. Postwar Hungarian reception of Bartók differed greatly from the reception of his music at the same time in Western Europe, where composers, reacting to the experiences of fascism, were dismissive of attempts to integrate folk music into art music and often regarded Bartók as a “compromised” composer. One axis of this book is concerned with his influence in its historical and geographical context, concentrating on the reaction of two aforementioned Hungarian composers, Kurtág and Ligeti, with the goal of inscribing Bartók’s legacy within the context of the larger changes in Hungarian and Western European society. Ligeti completed two quartets, *Métamorphoses Nocturnes* (written in Hungary in the years 1953 and 1954), and String Quartet No. 2 (composed in the West in 1968). Kurtág completed his String Quartet op. 1 (1959) and most of his subsequent works for this medium in Socialist Hungary. Responding to Bartók’s quartets, both composers employed the specific medium of the string quartet to position themselves within the complex historical trajectory of music composition at the time of the Cold War.

Bartók’s string quartets present scholars and performers with a variety of questions and problems, not only in regard to cultural contextualization but also with respect to theoretical classification, auditory perception, authentic performance practice, relationships to tradition, and their continuing legacy. Bartók scholarship has faced the challenge of
integrating the theoretical, historical, and ethnomusicological aspects of his compositional oeuvre into a holistic assessment of his music. The current volume investigates these issues from the vantage point of the string quartets, as it presents the most recent research of a diverse group of experts and supports a fresh assessment of these important compositions.

The book is organized into five parts, each dealing with a particular aspect of Bartók scholarship. The first subsection focuses on the role of classical formal traditions in the quartets. The first two chapters refer to Bartók’s own analyses of the form of his quartets. In Chapter 1, Paul Wilson, author of a prominent theoretical study of Bartók’s music in Yale University Press’s Composers of the Twentieth Century series, counterpoints Bartók’s analysis of the first movement of the Fourth Quartet with Hepokoski and Darcy’s theories of sonata form and arrives at new insights into the form of the movement.

In Chapter 2, Jonathan Bernard, who has written extensively on the music of Bartók and Ligeti, addresses tensions between traditional formal models and Bartók’s applications of them in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth String Quartets, taking Bartók’s own analyses as his point of departure. In Chapter 3, Jee Yeon Ryu (who at the time of the original formulation of her essay was a graduate student in musicology at the University of Victoria) focuses not on Bartók’s recasting of classical formal models but rather on the relationship between his forms and the radical dialectical structures of Beethoven’s late works.

The following subsection brings together three experts in the field of rhythm and temporality studies. In Chapter 4, Harald Krebs, author of *Fantasy Pieces: Metrical Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann,* continues Jee Yeon Ryu’s investigation into the influence of Beethoven on Bartók as he applies his theory of metrical dissonance to movements from Bartók’s Second and Sixth Quartets. In Chapter 5, John Roeder, well known for his writings on rhythm and meter in twentieth- and twenty-first-century music (including that of Bartók), employs Christopher Hasty’s theories of meter to elucidate periodic structures in Bartók’s Fourth String Quartet. In Chapter 6, Daphne Leong, another music theorist who has published extensively on rhythmic features of twentieth-century music (including Bartók’s), investigates relations between complex metric structures in the Fifth String Quartet and Bartók’s theories of folk music rhythm.

Chapter 7, by the eminent Bartók scholar Elliott Antokoletz, also discusses Bartók’s music from the perspective of folk traditions; Antokoletz, however, focuses on harmonic language rather than rhythmic structure. Two additional chapters on harmonic aspects follow. In Chapter 8, William Benjamin brings together two of his research concerns in analyses of excerpts from Bartók’s first three string quartets: he explores (1) how passages from these works can be heard tonally via multiple simultaneous harmonic functions (an approach that derives from aspects of late-nineteenth-century tonal practice), and (2) how, through a tonal hearing, these works can come to “reside in imaginative memory” in a “vivid and stable representation.” In Chapter 9, Edward Gollin, like Benjamin, demonstrates continuities between Bartók’s early harmonic practice and that of the late nineteenth century. Although Gollin touches on functionality in his analysis of the final
movement of the Second String Quartet, he emphasizes interval cycles and their influence on harmonic architecture, continuing lines of investigation that he has pursued in two important articles.\textsuperscript{17}

The fourth subsection of the volume focuses on issues that are already broached in a number of the earlier chapters: listening and performance. Listening, in particular, is a recurring theme in this volume. Benjamin’s analyses are intended to provide tonal listening strategies for the passages under consideration. Bernard considers how Bartók’s form outlines of the string quartets might affect listeners’ perceptions of the form. Roeder investigates how listeners might participate “through memory, anticipation, and immediate entrainment, in the rich confluence of repeated patterns” in the Fourth String Quartet. Leong’s rhythmic analysis of the Trio of the Fifth String Quartet departs from the observation that string quartets perform its rhythm and meter in widely divergent ways. Chapter 10, by the theorist Charles Morrison, whose research has focused on Bartók and Ligeti,\textsuperscript{18} brings performance and listening into the forefront. Morrison discusses narrative and rhetorical qualities in Bartók’s Second String Quartet, with emphasis on the manner in which they are realized in recorded performances, and how listeners might perceive them. In Chapter 11, Judit Frigyesi, the distinguished Hungarian musicologist and ethnomusicologist (and keynote speaker of the conference on which the volume is based), investigates prevalent perceptions of Bartók as a composer and their relationship to current performance practice of his fast movements with predominantly forte dynamics (with special reference to the Fifth String Quartet).

The fifth and final section of the book deals with the legacy of Bartók’s quartets. Three chapters focus on the influence of these works on subsequent generations of Hungarian composers, especially Kurtág and Ligeti. In Chapter 12, composer and musicologist Martin Iddon investigates historical influence and nostalgia, with emphasis on Ligeti’s String Quartet No. 2. This chapter is complemented by composer, theorist, and ethnomusicologist Dániel Péter Biró’s examination in Chapter 13 of Bartók’s influence as composer and ethnomusicologist on Kurtág and Ligeti. In Chapter 14, Friedemann Sallis, a pioneering scholar of twentieth-century music and an authority on the music of Kurtág, deals with the manifold historical and topical influences on Kurtág’s music and shows the lasting traces of Bartók’s influence on his works.

Through this cornucopia of scholarship, the nature of Bartók’s legacy can be reevaluated within the complex musical realities of our present century. Such a reexamination of Bartók’s work begs the question of his continuing influence today. An Epilogue by Dániel Péter Biró and Martin Iddon, a conceptual exercise inspired by Derrida’s \textit{Spectres de Marx}, investigates Bartók’s relevance to, and his haunting of, our own time. The authors consider how such a multidimensional being was able to integrate various fields of study—an integration that permitted him to forge a new musical language—and they also ponder whether such integration is still possible today. Although the six quartets exist as one significant outcome of this integrative process, there are broader ramifications of Bartók’s production. Because of his ethnomusicological activities, we are today better able to
appreciate the diversity of the music of the world. The traditional music of the world has become an object for discovery, performance, and scholarship, and ethnomusicology is now an established part of the academic universe, acknowledged as a core discipline within music scholarship. In the post-Bartók world, it is common practice for composers from a variety of backgrounds to integrate traditional music from various parts of the world into their compositional language in more than merely anecdotal ways. Furthermore, the field of music scholarship has become increasingly interdisciplinary, combining elements of music theory, musicology, ethnomusicology, and performance practice—the very fields represented in this book. One might say that Bartók, a genius of integration, active as composer, performer, and scholar, was profoundly ahead of his time in terms of his interdisciplinary approach. Through a series of penetrating investigations of six masterpieces of the preceding century, this volume illuminates the traditions that influenced Bartók, his impact on later composers, and his multifaceted, lasting legacy in our own time.

NOTES

1. Bartók’s relationship to Beethoven has been discussed by János Kárpáti in Bartók’s Chamber Music (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1976) and by János Demény (“The Pianist,” in The Bartók Companion, Malcolm Gillies, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 67. See also the chapters by Jee Yeon Ryu and Harald Krebs in the present volume.


Introduction

University Press, 1995) 3–63. The larger developments in Hungarian society in the course of the century have been discussed in Ignác Romsics’ *Magyarország története a XX. században*, also in English as *Hungary in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999).


8. This includes the String Quartet, op. 1, from 1959; *Hommage à Mihály András* (12 Microcules for String Quartet), op. 13, from 1977; *Officium breve in memoriam Andreae Szervánszky*, op. 28, from 1988–89, and *Aus der Ferne III*, from 1991. Kurtág’s *Six Moments Musicaux*, op. 44, were completed in Saint-André-de-Cubzac, France, where the composer has lived since 2001.

9. For more on the historical context of these important Hungarian composers, see Rachel Beckles Willson, *Ligeti, Kurtág, and Hungarian Music During the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The String Quartets of Béla Bartók


Sonata Form in the First Movement of Bartók’s Fourth String Quartet

Paul Wilson

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On the face of it, the title of this chapter may seem like an invitation to belabor the obvious. The Fourth Quartet has already attracted a great deal of sophisticated and careful analysis in the eighty years or so of its life on earth. What more is there to be said about sonata form in the first movement? We have an analysis of the movement in those terms by Bartók himself, as well as important commentaries by George Perle, Leo Treitler, Elliott Antokoletz, and János Kárpáti, among others. Bartók’s analysis, with its aura of special authority, has shaped the views of most subsequent commentators in general terms, and it is clear and reasonable as far as it goes. But it does not go very far, leaving untouched much of the movement’s uniqueness. In addition, as we read through those commentaries, we find some interesting differences of opinion concerning the character and meaning of certain events in the form, especially within the exposition. Just by themselves, those differing views suggest that the movement contains complexities that are worth a second look. My hope here is to provide such a look, to amplify and enrich Bartók’s account, and to offer for the movement a structural and expressive profile that sheds more light on its eccentricities and its compelling narrative design.

In 2006 James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy published a magisterial and controversial study entitled *Elements of Sonata Theory*. My encounter with this book provided impetus for a reexamination of a number of twentieth-century sonata forms, including the first movement of the Fourth Quartet, in what proved to be the very naïve hope that much of what Hepokoski and Darcy had developed in relation to Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven would find some direct application to works by Bartók and Prokofiev in particular.
Despite the almost immediate frustration of that hope, especially in Bartók’s case, Hepokoski and Darcy still provide much of the underpinning for this discussion, but in a more indirect and complex way. This chapter therefore begins with a quick review of some important ideas from one central model of sonata form according to Hepokoski and Darcy. Then it looks briefly at the quartet movement’s form and thematic design on the largest scale. Following that comes a closer examination of the movement’s successive parts, an attempt to understand the musical and expressive design of each large section of the piece. Finally, I step back again and make a few comments about a possible reading of the whole movement in expressive and narrative terms.

In the view of Hepokoski and Darcy, traditional sonata forms, like many forms in Western art music, derive their intelligibility from a succession of what the authors term “rotations”—rhyming statements of thematic modules that can operate on several time scales within the form. These rotations interact with tonality and with the expressive characteristics of the various thematic modules to create a strongly directional and goal-oriented musical process. Example 1.1 is an adaptation of a diagram taken from chapter 2 of their work. The example shows the essential elements of the form on a large scale, with labels marking its rotations and dotted slurs designating nested trajectories leading to important cadential arrivals. The account rests on the same familiar three-part framework, exposition-development-recapitulation, given to all students of sonata form for many years, though Hepokoski and Darcy have surrounded it with a good-sized new vocabulary designed to draw subtle distinctions among various compositional possibilities. Example 1.1 is a general model of their Type-3 sonata form, the most familiar one, with a development section and a two-part exposition. The harmonic details in the example come from the first movement of Mozart’s Piano Sonata in F major, K. 332, one of the pieces that Hepokoski and Darcy use to demonstrate the features of the Type-3 model. Those features include the Medial Caesura within the exposition and recapitulation, the Essential Expositional Closure within the exposition, and the most important moment in their goal-oriented view of sonata form, the Essential Structural Closure in the recapitulation. The Medial Caesura is a break at the end of the transition, separating the first parts of the exposition and the recapitulation from their respective second parts, which start in each case with the secondary theme. The music normally builds to the Caesura with increasing intensity until the cadential break, frequently marked by silence, is reached. Following the break, the secondary theme most often begins at a much lower level of musical energy.

The Essential Closures, Expositional and Structural, complete the secondary theme area in exposition and recapitulation, respectively, and serve also as culminations for the move away from the tonic key in the exposition and back to the tonic in the recapitulation. The authors’ adoption of the Schenkerian concept of interruption in sonata form makes the Essential Structural Closure, rather than the beginning of the recapitulation, the final and confirming event in the large-scale tonal design of the form. In this dynamic
view, each section, subsection, or thematic module performs a specific expressive and structural task within a single overarching quasi-narrative path. Composers of sonata forms have realized such paths in an almost unimaginably varied array of widely differing movements. Hepokoski and Darcy acknowledge this variety in many ways, especially through the profusion of subtle subcategories, variants, and caveats with which they surround their basic account.

Example 1.2 [Web] is a diagram of the first movement of the Fourth Quartet. The diagram uses some of the terminology of Example 1.1 to present the generally accepted architectural view of the movement’s sonata form. This view of the piece comes, again, directly from Bartók’s own analysis, first published in the score of the quartet and reprinted in Benjamin Suchoff’s edition of Bartók’s essays. Almost every other commentator has accepted it, although Leo Treitler does present an interesting dissent concerning one point, to be revisited here shortly.

In place of the continuous quasi-middleground harmonic process shown for Mozart in Example 1.1, Example 1.2 uses a kind of short-score quotation of the thematic material corresponding to each named part of the sonata form, each at its characteristic level in the hierarchy. Three motives have special importance in this thematic succession, and the example gives them working names according to their roles. The “rhyme” motive marks the beginning of each of the three main sections in the movement, spelling out the rotational design on the largest scale within the sonata form. The “stasis” motive plays a special, deeply ambiguous role within the exposition and recapitulation. It provides material for what Bartók called the “transitory passage,” but it has characteristics that undercut that function, as will be shown. It also shapes the central subsections of the development. The “agent” motive, the most memorable of all, appears first in m. 7 (not shown in the example) and then becomes a more and more powerful presence as the movement proceeds. Example 1.2 also provides simple labels for other musical material, in particular, a tremolo motive, which will require some additional attention.

This assignment of names to sections and motives, necessary though it is, is only the first step toward a deeper understanding of the form’s structural or narrative design. A good next step is to explore the disagreement referred to earlier, not presuming to settle it in some definitive way, but using it to shed light on the special characteristics of the movement.

Example 1.3 [Web] shows the first fifteen measures of the movement in an annotated full score. The example picks out some details of musical material and design that deserve a bit of review. The horizontal brackets and labels below the score indicate an interpretation of the primary theme as a sentence in the Schoenbergian sense. The boxes in the example enclose cadential moments that punctuate the stages of the sentence, and the square brackets enclose lists of pitch classes at the various cadential points. All of these cadential events have pitch-class material drawn from the same seven-note chromatic segment, the semitone succession from B♭ up to E, and in two of them the notes come
from the pitch statement of that set at the center of the grand staff, B₃ to E₄. At the downbeat of m. 6, this chromatic segment divides itself into two significant, slightly overlapping subsets, the chromatic tetrachord from C₄ to D♯₄ and the whole-tone segment from B₃ to E₄. George Perle first identified these two set types as “X” and “Y” in his 1955 article on symmetrical formations in the Quartets. Leo Treitler used that insight as a starting point for his own 1959 article on harmonic procedure in the Fourth Quartet, and Elliott Antokoletz has deeply explored the uses and meanings of these cells and other pitch and pitch-class symmetries, in this Quartet and in many of Bartók’s other compositions.⁷

In the first half of m. 7 we hear in the cello the first statement of the movement’s agent motive. In this first appearance it seems to be part of the primary theme, and yet it emerges from the texture almost sneakily, almost as an afterthought. This understated beginning belies its subsequent role in the ongoing rhetorical process of the movement, but it also suggests a certain separation from the main thematic material of the piece, at least from the rhyme motive. The agent motive sounds again, much more emphatically and characteristically, in m. 11. Beginning from that point, the motive’s imitative and inversional process heightens the expressive energy of the passage and brings us to the cadence of m. 13, where the full seven-note chromatic set sounds as an attacked simultaneity for the first time in the piece. After more than two beats of silence, the next block of material begins, pianissimo, with reduced rhythmic energy and with a melodic figure drawn, in a way, from the cadential event we have just heard, using the scale segment C–D–E in the viola. In Example 1.3 this three-note line (and set) receives the label “Y*” to indicate its derivation from Y as another whole-tone subset and for future reference, since forms of the subset recur throughout the movement.

The cadence in m. 13 is the locus for the disagreement mentioned earlier. Bartók clearly stated that the cadence is the end of the primary theme, followed in m. 14 by the beginning of his transitory passage. But Leo Treitler asserted that m. 14 begins what he called the “second subject.”⁸ If we were to take Treitler’s view of the exposition, the cadence in m. 13 would serve as the Medial Caesura, and in fact its handling conforms very closely to Hepokoski and Darcy’s description of the expressive profile surrounding the traditional Medial Caesura. But there are a number of reasons not to take that view, in particular, the difficulty of locating a good starting point for a meaningful transition anywhere prior to that cadence. In fact, if we think of mm. 1–13 as a sentence, the cadence in m. 13 need not even be the end of the primary theme. One can certainly call to mind musical sentences in the work of, say, Beethoven where, depending on the piece, the music following the sentence either continues with the primary theme or else makes an immediate move to the transition or even to the secondary theme.⁹ Which of these options exists here? We know what Bartók said, and the stark and abrupt changes in density, dynamics, musical material, and string sound do together create at m. 14 a new beginning that seems too radical for a continuation of the primary theme. On the other hand, the emphasis on the stasis motive in the development led János Kárpáti to speculate that mm. 14ff. were better
identified as a part of the primary theme—in his words “a second first subject and not a transition.” This intriguing notion at least suggests for the stasis motive another possible level of meaning in the piece.

There are other ambiguities here that we should pause to consider, ambiguities that lead us further away from any conventional name for the passage. Example 1.4 [Web] is an annotated score of mm. 14–30, the whole of Bartók’s transition plus the first measure of his secondary theme. The example points out some salient features of this passage, beginning with the linkage we already noted, the linear form of Y* in the viola. But the presence of G# as the first note of the cello line overshadows the connective effect of the viola line. G# is a new point of departure in the bass, strongly hinting at an already accomplished transition to new pitch-class space and thus perhaps one of the factors that led Treitler to his dissenting view of the exposition’s design. The example also shows, as an essential part of the texture, the emergence of Treitler’s “Z” set, the companion he proposed to add to Perle’s “X” and “Y.” The prime form of Z is [0, 1, 6, 7]. A transposed statement of it emerges from the first notes of the melodic figures appearing at different locations in the texture after m. 14 and also as a single arpeggiation in the first violin at m. 22.

Overall, the passage uses another imitative texture to create a gradual expansion and subsequent contraction of registral space. Within that texture there is no interior articulation of phrase, so that the passage, despite its fairly busy surface, is essentially a single span, held together by the registral process, the imitative texture, and the dispersal of the lines along the [0, 1, 6, 7] transpositional scheme. The imitative process begins to collapse in m. 21, and by m. 24 we can hear the return of the cadential sonority of m. 13, almost unchanged. This time Bartók has divided the same seven pitch classes into two components: a transposed return of Y* in the second violin and cello (B3 to D#4) and, in first violin and viola, the now-familiar original statement of Y itself spanning B♭3 to E4.

The return of this cadential sonority creates an interesting interpretive problem for us. Both the beginning and the end of the passage militate against our calling it a traditional transition. In essence, the passage reverses the normal path of a transition, because it starts out in a new place, at least in the bass; uses a completely new thematic idea; and then returns to a previous point of arrival. At this point, then, the exposition has apparently set aside its traditional shape and function, replacing the transition with another kind of event. Up to m. 25, we might, somewhat fancifully, hear the passage, with its registral expansion and contraction and its lack of real motion in harmonic terms, as something akin to the taking of a deep breath before continuing a difficult journey.

But in mm. 26–29 Bartók sweeps away the returned cadence, as the agent motive reasserts itself and begins a new process of imitation, inversion, and transposition, leading to the downbeat of m. 30. So in these four measures we do hear music that we can meaningfully interpret as transitional, beginning with familiar material, intensifying its energy, and driving to a new pitch location at the next formal juncture. In this way Bartók in a
sense rescues the traditional formal function of his designated “transitory passage.” But
the stasis motive has left its mark on the piece, and we will soon see that the rescue falls
somewhat short.

Measure 30 brings us new thematic material, conjoined with another reference to
earlier events: the cello’s bass note A\textsubscript{2}, rhyming with the G\textsubscript{#2} of m. 14. Measures
30–43 make up the secondary theme area, giving us three well-articulated subsections
before an expanded version of the agent motive takes over in m. 44. There is no
need to discuss these subsections in detail, but the end of the exposition deserves
additional comment. Example 1.5 [Web] shows its last eleven measures, mm.
39–49, and the beginning of the development section. Measures 41–43 feature a
sequential compression of registral space in the first violin’s melodic voice, and that
process completes itself as all the instruments come briefly to rest on E\textsubscript{3} or E\textsubscript{4}. This
arrival on E serves as Bartók’s only analogue to the Essential Expositional Closure
of the traditional sonata form. But the pitch class E as an upper-voice note, rather
than presenting a culminating arrival within a changed and newly established pitch
context, creates a link with all the other cadential sonorities we have looked at—a
link that Bartók quickly reinforces. The closing section follows with a slightly
extended version of the agent motive, using E\textsubscript{4} as a kind of upper pedal. A quick and
dramatic process of registral expansion and collapse brings all the voices together in
m. 47 on a single transposition of X, the chromatic tetrachord C\textsubscript{#4}–E\textsubscript{4}, lasting until
the first eighth note of m. 49.

A comparison of the cadential tetrachord in mm. 47–49 with the chords in mm. 13 and
25 again raises interesting questions. All three of the chords either state fully or draw their
pitch classes from the same seven-note set, and Bartók has voiced all three such that E\textsubscript{4} is
their highest note. One cannot speak of this last chord as formally equivalent to the
previous two, but its strong audible connections with them create a particular sense of
recurrence. In fact, we can now hear the exposition overall as a series of three musical
spans with a common abstract design. Each span begins with a striking gesture at a differ-
ent pitch location, at mm. 1, 14, and 30, respectively, but each concludes by returning to a
variant of the cadential event first sounded at m. 13, either preceded or followed by the
agent motive. Therefore, rather than a single arc of tonal and narrative energy driving
from the beginning of the primary theme to the Essential Expositional Closure, this
exposition presents a series of departures and returns, each of which displays a strong
individuality at its outset, but none of which ultimately accomplishes any substantive
motion in musical terms.

Interpreting the exposition in this way suggests the possibility that the development
and the recapitulation may also alter their traditional roles in favor of something else. We
already know that the recapitulation does serve its rotational function, supplying thematic
rhymes for the events of the exposition. But we cannot expect it to restore balance to, or
provide a homeward completion for, a large-scale musical journey if the exposition has
not truly begun that journey in essential respects. I return to this issue below.
But first, looking at the development, we see immediately that it uses the rhyme motive to take over one important function from the exposition, the definitive move into new harmonic territory. Example 1.6 [Web] shows the development’s first eight measures, with some annotations to point out a few well-known features of the passage. First, the rhyme motive and its derivations reproduce in small the X-to-Y-to-Z succession of set types. Then the development’s second part takes up a variation on the first tune of the secondary theme area, using a revoicing of the same Z set reached in m. 52. The crossing arrows in the example show the pitch-class connections between the two voicings. Accompanying the melodic voices is an embedded form of X, deployed as a kind of ingenious imitative riff in contrary motion at the center of the texture.

Once having established this new location for familiar motives, the development takes us through an elaborate set of variations on the stasis motive, also introducing a new tremolo idea with harmonic connections to the seven-note cadential set. The tremolo motive hangs around subliminally through mm. 66–81, punctuating or accompanying the stasis-motive variations, themselves organized around two series of systematic transpositions. The tremolo, after its understated role as accompaniment for the stasis motive, returns with full force at m. 82, where Bartók combines it with the agent motive in what one might think of as the movement’s retransition. This completes a succession of events in mm. 60–92 that represents an expanded and greatly energized version of mm. 14–29, energized in part through the addition of the tremolo. The development as a whole becomes an elaborated restatement of the exposition’s materials more or less in their original order, omitting the secondary theme area except for the brief reference at mm. 54ff., but otherwise rotating through the same succession of ideas we heard earlier. The tremolo takes its place in this rotation, first as a new motive and then as part of the process leading to the beginning of the recapitulation.

The recapitulation presents its own rotation through the same set of ideas in almost the same order. Here the secondary theme area is present in its original place, but compressed, lasting a bit more than seven measures, roughly half its previous length. Earlier, we considered the possibility that the recapitulation would have a changed role in the large design of the movement, something different from the traditional restoration of tonic as the basis for the thematic rotation. Example 1.7 [Web] shows that, while completing the expected thematic rotation, the secondary theme in the recapitulation takes us to yet another new area in pitch-class space. This change occurs with the return of the agent motive at the very end of m. 115, in a clear transposition of materials at T8, a major third down from the statement in the exposition. Bartók maintains this transposition throughout the brief secondary theme area but summarily abandons it when the coda begins in m. 126. Therefore, far from restoring a balance or a fundamental pitch orientation in the movement, the recapitulation sets up a move to new territory and then breaks off before taking any steps toward returning the music to its harmonic origins. Bartók leaves the latter task to the coda.
Before discussing the coda, let us step back and consider a larger picture of the movement, gathering together in one view all the details of the previous discussion. This discussion suggests that, in place of the goal-oriented tonal and thematic process of traditional sonata form, the piece substitutes two distinct but cooperating schemes, one an architectural structure, the other a strand of narrative. The architectural plan is a two-stage expansion of the tripartite structure of mm. 1–13. The exposition becomes the first stage of expansion. Its three parts, mm. 1–13, 14–29, and 30–49, supersede to some degree the traditional four-part division of Bartók’s description, and each of the parts ends, like the initial sentence, with a statement of the agent motive. The second and final stage of expansion spans the entire piece, the development being the second part, and the recapitulation plus coda the third.

In addition to this architectural plan, the piece contains at least one narrative thread that differs, again, from that of a traditional sonata form. If the piece were a traditional motive-driven sonata form, we would expect the rhyme motive to act as protagonist in a symbolic musical journey. But this narrative is the story of the agent motive. I want to characterize and summarize that narrative in somewhat fanciful but—I hope—evocative terms.

Kárpáti refers during his analysis of the movement to the ultimate “triumph” of this motive, but I hear its role as more complex and more ambiguous. As suggested earlier, the motive is not a protagonist in a traditional thematic sense. Instead, it serves as a kind of musical enforcer, an element that Bartók repeatedly deploys in order to keep the rotational process in train, to generate new momentum or impart renewed direction to a musical span. The agent prods the other musical elements into action, trying, not always with complete success, to direct them into courses or places that are more closely connected with traditional practice or with the demands of musical coherence. In the exposition, as we have seen, it acts in this capacity at mm. 11, 26, and 44. In the development the motive energizes the final section, creating a kind of retransition culminating in the reappearance of the rhyme motive. At that point it provides two additional statements of itself, as though to make sure that the rhyme motive does its job, in fact ending its work at this stage by compelling the rhyme motive to enact one extra statement of itself at the beginning of the recapitulation.

Later in the recapitulation the agent returns at m. 116 to perform the same task as at m. 26, that is, creating a real transition to the secondary theme, but the passage it engenders, mm. 119–25, is again shorter and essentially more perfunctory than the corresponding place in the exposition. Then, and perhaps even “therefore,” at m. 126 it steps in for almost the last time and creates the coda that replaces the recapitulation’s closing, in an effort to break the large three-stage cycle of rotations and supply a convincing end to the piece. In doing so, the agent finds that it needs to interrupt a process that it has itself initiated. Starting at m. 135 and for thirteen measures thereafter, we hear the motive engage in an alternation between increasingly fragmentary repetitions of itself and expanding restatements of soft ascending parallel lines in imitation, a process that has connections to
a brief passage in the development, mm. 70–72. The coda’s process essentially reaches a dead end in m. 148, whereupon the motive interrupts again with a passage drawn directly from m. 28, giving itself yet another chance to bring things to a convincing conclusion. This final interruption ultimately leads to the motive’s weighty final statement at the very end of the movement.

So the agent motive has the last word in the movement, and it triumphs in at least that sense. But to my ear the coda is not a triumph but rather the culmination of a series of almost arbitrary actions, featuring the agent motive’s impatient interruptions of processes that are going their own ways and that the motive wishes to stop before losing control of them. Other sonata forms by Bartók share a similar character in this sense, however different they may seem in general tone. One might think particularly here of the first movement of the Piano Sonata (1926), a work chronologically close to the Fourth Quartet (1928). In that movement the secondary theme area in the recapitulation similarly returns to and extends a path into uncharted pitch space, and the movement interrupts the process with a piu mosso coda, yanking the piece back on course in order to finish it.¹²

The final appearance of the agent motive in the first movement of the Fourth Quartet has a powerful echo at the very end of the work. The last movement picks up the material of mm. 155–61 from the first movement and uses it to shape its own final twenty-seven measures. Though this return at the very end of the fifth movement takes some of its meaning from the arch design of the entire quartet, the impression it creates, at least in my ear, is even more strongly one of an agent intervening, from somewhere far outside the local musical context, to bring to a close a process over which its control was slipping away. On a more concrete or human level, we might think that such an intervention symbolizes some of the difficulties encountered, and the makeshift expedients required, in carving new paths in composition through familiar or inherited landscapes—that at least sometimes the composer may simply have to end the musical journey by hacking his way through the underbrush in order to reach some not fully satisfactory place of rest.

NOTES

2. [Editors’ note:] See Jonathan Bernard’s commentary in the following chapter on Bartók’s analysis of the fifth movement of the Fourth Quartet.
4. See Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 17, for the original of the diagram, and 74–75 for the authors’ first discussion of the exposition of K. 332. Their discussions of rotational design appear in various places, but most concisely in an appendix, 611–14.


9. For an example of each possibility, see, respectively, the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, the first movement of Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, and the recapitulation of the third movement of Piano Sonata No. 14, op. 27 no. 2 in C# minor.


11. Ibid., 547.

Bartók and Traditional Form Description

SOME ISSUES ARISING FROM THE MIDDLE AND LATE STRING QUARTETS

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A survey of the secondary literature on Béla Bartók that has accumulated over the past half century suggests there are two principal ways in which music analysts have chosen to deal with Bartók’s well-known descriptions of his pieces in terms of traditional forms. One is to ignore them; the other is to accept them more or less at face value, using them as a frame for a “thematic analysis” laid out along conventional lines. Attempts of the latter type, judged in terms of modern-day standards of rigor and depth, usually fall short of being satisfactory, either because the forms referred to are so general as to be practically self-evident in their delineation and implications (such as “three-part form”) or because—as with forms such as sonata, fugue, or rondo—they are obvious anachronisms in a style far removed from the common-practice period that gave them birth, to the point that they seem mere analogies, not true characterizations integral to or expressive of the musical substance at hand.

This outcome, in fact, might seem the best possible reason for adopting the first strategy mentioned above. Why not ignore Bartók’s brief analytical treatments, which may after all have sprung less from a desire to explain his compositional method and aims and more from his realization that the listening public needed something couched in familiar (even if ultimately inadequate) terms to guide them through unfamiliar music? Surely, now that these “traditional” analyses have served their intended purpose, it is high time to set them