

## Companion for the Next Generations—*Mikrokosmos* from the Years of the Crisis of Humanity

It is thought that, characteristically, the elements comprising a musical work (pitch, dynamic, rhythm, etc.) do not have direct and unequivocal meaning that, for instance, words used in daily life possess. Nevertheless, a musical composition sometimes (if not always) conceals the composer's thoughts on a particular subject, which can be either private or public thoughts. Hungarian composer Béla Bartók was often discussed in this respect. Bartók's first string quartet was, according to Kodály, the composer's 'return to life'. *Dance Suite*, according to the composer himself, was a sequence of dances through various characters that represented a humanistic concept ('brotherhood of the nations'), which was clearly a reaction to the contemporary political situation.

Such interpretations or explanations of secret programmes are, however, not always supported by contemporaries and authors. Perhaps, because they thought that the implication of the work was so obvious, they spared the time to write it down, or the author hesitated to reveal a particular idea that would hinder the direct communication between the work and the audience. Trials of interpretation by several scholars seem to be quite fruitful. They succeeded in showing the work's concept—or, borrowing from Bartók, the 'spirit of the work'—which is by no means present in the work's superficial layer. It can only be recognised through profound research on documents and the composer's personality, otherwise the very work will be regarded as an abstract composition that has no specific meaning referring to outside the work itself. For instance, the third movement of the *Piano Sonata* (1926) shows a virtual transformation of a melody played by various folk instruments, which appears as episodes in the rondo movement. The *Rhapsody No. 2* for violin and piano represents a virtual evolutionary process of a folk-tune in its seemingly arbitrary sequence of various original folk melodies.

Such a possible profound implication of the *Mikrokosmos* (1926, 1932–1939) seems, however, not to have been exploited well. People tend to concentrate on its pedagogical (and less frequently compositional) aspects—it is still quite understandable since the work itself has its own significance as a huge collection of pedagogical piano pieces. However, not the quantity (consisting of 153 pieces and 33 exercises published in 6 volumes) but rather the quality that is valuable. Each piece, even the simplest ones, shows the composer's own musical language and is, according to him, 'a synthesis of all the musical and technical problems', which was indeed rarely achieved in the dozens of piano pieces written for children.

Still, by considering the context wherein *Mikrokosmos* was conceived, seemingly insignificant matters, such as the avoidance of folk material, eventually arise to bear an essential message from Bartók. Indeed, since the three folk music arrangements constitute an essential part of the vocal pieces (four in all) that introduce a wider aspect of piano playing or music training (to ensemble with a singer or to read scores having more than two staves), he actually abandoned the use of folk tunes. He explained that this was because it was impossible to build up an organic piano school by using folk

tunes as 'ready-made' materials. Nevertheless, such a practical explanation should not always be taken literally, considering his generally discreet attitude which tended to not reveal but rather conceal the things belonging to the composer's personal thoughts. Strangely, the author of *44 Duos* for two violins (based on folk tunes but progressing in difficulty) gave up the idea to provide folk music arrangements for children. He could have combined the use of folk tunes and original compositions. In addition to this, *44 Duos* is a good example of how Hungarian folk tunes could be accepted abroad, since the very idea of composition was brought by Erich Doflein, a German violinist and pedagogue, so the application of local folk tunes might not have influenced the work's global success.

The Hungarians might have deplored the lack of Hungarian folk tunes, which became more and more important in the years of the crisis. After the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost a significant part of historical territory and became surrounded by hostile countries. Further, towards the end of the 1930s (at the time when *Mikrokosmos* was composed), German influence increased. The political and cultural independence of Hungary was thought to be in danger. Thus, genuine Hungarian folk music could be used as a key to maintaining Hungarian identity—a famous piano school published shortly after World War II may testify to this idea, for it employs some folk music arrangements as elementary materials.

Bartók's attitude might be different from these patriotic (or perhaps nationalistic) ones. Rather, he believed that the coexistence and collaboration of nations are essential for the stable development of human society. He ultimately might not have insisted on the cultural 'independency' (or purity) of his motherland, as he observed during his ethno-musicological research that mutual influence had a positive effect on the development of folk music.

In an interview in 1940, Bartók commented on *Bulgarian Dances*, the last pieces in the *Mikrokosmos*: '...it is a Hungarian melody grafted on Bulgarian rhythm...Like a mule as animal. To some extent, it can be sterile but useful, for it can pull burden'. He took his new pieces as a hybrid of different cultures. His use of irony might not come from his pessimistic attitude, but rather from his sense of humour; he did believe that not a 'pureblood' (as the racial ideology of Nazi idealized) but a 'hybrid' can really be productive. He, by excluding folk tunes from the beginning, tried to write *Mikrokosmos* to include many pieces with different cultural roots. He believed that children, by means of music, would realise the existence of cultures foreign to them and would absorb its influence to be a human with a 'hybrid' mind. This should have led to Bartók's artistic idea, 'brotherhood of the nations'.

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