

**On the Role of Tradition in the Renewal of Our Time and Culture:  
*Cantata Profana*, Béla Bartók's Choral-Symphonic Work, as Social Commentary**

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The composer, pianist, and ethnomusicologist Béla Bartók's importance in discovering and cultivating Hungary's national musical heritage is invaluable. Bartók recognized the primeval power in music and culture, and that returning to a nation's heritage enables the nation to renew its values. Furthermore, Bartók believed in a brotherhood of nations, and in particular in the unity of Hungarian, Slovak, and Rumanian people along the Danube shore. He aimed to express this ideology in art music. Bartók started to collect Hungarian folk songs with Zoltán Kodály at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but he soon extended his scope to the whole Carpathian valley, and beyond. His collections include Hungarian, Romanian, Slovak, Bulgarian, Arabic, and Finnish folk songs, which he worked into his own compositions. *Cantata Profana*, one of his most important works, written for tenor and baritone soli, double chorus and orchestra expresses the composer's belief in unity of nations through his choice of a text rooted in tradition and ritual. The composition also reflects his idea that the culture of nations has to derive from a collective, ancient, untouched source of tradition.

Bartók composed *Cantata Profana* in 1930. The work's text goes back exactly to this original source, to pre Christian myths of the wondrous stag, to the Colinde collections of Bartók from the 1910s. Colindes were sung during feasts related to the winter solstice. It is no doubt significant that the message of the legend can be related to a ritual grounded in a natural, recurring phenomenon. That is, as the light starts to revitalize the sleeping nature, leaving the dark winter months behind after midwinter, the nine brothers go out to hunt in the allegorical saga. As they find the tracks of a wondrous stag, they turn into stags themselves in the deep forest and thus are subjected to ritual purification. They cannot return home again: "*And our tender hooves would / Splinter on the hearthstone, / They tread but leafy mold; / And our mouths no longer / Drink from crystal goblets, / But only mountain spring*" (Béla Bartók: *Cantata Profana*).

According to the musicologist Malcolm Gillies, the “initiation-transformation-purification“, the naturalistic freedom and pantheistic integration in the *Cantata Profana* were an emblematic answer by Bartók to the rising fascism of his time. In the reading of Bartók’s biographer Serge Moreux, the freedom expressed in the *Cantata* opposes the increasingly constricting atmosphere of Hungary in the 1930’s. Comments by the contemporaneous Hungarian politician Count Kuno von Klebelsberg support my position that Bartók’s composition conveys social meaning. Cultivating culture and traditions contribute to a nation’s rejuvenation in a political and economic crisis.

Attempts to emphasize the importance of folk tradition in Hungary at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in recent decades to the present were made in many different fields of art and science. Music, and folk music in particular, is a major part of the country’s national heritage, and Bartók’s ideas affected not only his contemporaries, but Hungarian composers in the generations after World War II as well. More than compositional techniques or a school left to posterity, his legacy transmitted human and professional values that contributed to a break from the postwar isolation of Hungarian music. Furthermore, his music allowed Hungary to play a role in creating a broader European culture.

By offering a broader, social point of view on Béla Bartók’s *Cantata Profana* in the first half of my presentation, I aim to stress the importance and contribution of Bartók’s ideas and music, based on peasant sources, in preserving Hungarian and European cultural traditions. In the second half of my presentation, I will share the thoughts of nationally acclaimed contemporary musicologists, composers, and performers on the topic of “Crisis and Culture” with the audience, creating a connection this way between the continuing value of Bartók’s ideas and the cultural mission of artists and philosophers even today.

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