

BÉLA BARTÓK: SONATA FOR SOLO VIOLIN

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SUMMARY. Béla Bartók's personality was a defining force in the musical life of the 20th century. His musical legacy contains countless elements that, even today, 81 years after his death, continue to inspire performers around the world to return to his works with great enthusiasm. From folk roots to modern innovations, the works composed with an almost scientific precision have resulted in a final "product" that is both intellectual and powerfully expressive, both national and universal in character. In my article, I would like to offer readers a closer look at one of Bartók's last completed works from his mature period, and I can only hope that in doing so I contribute to the continuation of Bartók's musical legacy. This work is none other than the Sonata for Solo Violin, which the composer completed in March 1944 and dedicated to the renowned American violinist Yehudi Menuhin. In my work, I would like to discuss Bartók's final years spent in America, his meeting with Yehudi Menuhin, their friendship, as well as the main topic of this article—the Sonata for Solo Violin, its genesis, and its structure.

Keywords: Béla Bartók, sonata, violin, solo, analysis

The American Years

It was 1939, and at the end of November Bartók decided to accept the previously offered request, according to which he was invited to an American concert and lecture tour in May 1940. In one of his letters, he wrote that he did not even want to undertake such a long journey. It is more than likely that, due to the death of his mother on December 19, 1939, he felt he might leave Europe for a longer period. Thus, he wrote to Paul Sacher² in a letter from

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² Paul Sacher (1906-1999) – Swiss conductor, one of the most influential supporters of 20th-century music. Bartók wrote for him the famous *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* in 1936.



December 1939: "I am not at all happy about this trip, but now it has to happen."³ He devoted the income from this tour to his folk music research. In the United States, he had a large number of copies made of scores that had already been completed. Only later did it become clear that this publication far exceeded his financial means. Some consolation for Bartók was the fact that on this American tour he did not primarily value the concert fees, but rather that during his visit he established contact with Columbia University in New York. The university senate decided to award Bartók an honorary doctorate, allowing him to officially begin his research work there. At the same time, they began seeking financial resources to support his work in ethnomusicological research. It very much seemed that this commission was created to fulfill Bartók's final scholarly dream. Both children of the couple remained in Hungary, awaiting an opportunity to leave. The sea voyage lasted ten days, and they finally arrived in New York on October 30. The journey, like so many others, was not easy: baggage problems, delays, and inaccurate information seemed to confirm Bartók's lifelong pessimism. In the end, having lost their large luggage, they arrived successfully with just a single handbag. There is hardly anything different to say about his five years in America than what has already been said. These years were years of struggle and ordeal, first economically and later, unfortunately, physically as well. For his performances, he usually received a gross fee of 150–200 dollars, which only rarely offered any moral or intellectual reward as well. Contemporary newspapers (Time, Newsweek) outdid each other with such headlines about the Bartók couple's concerts as "Kitchen Sonata" or "New Footwork by Bartók." His only relatively secure source of income was the already mentioned Columbia University, and unfortunately even that was not always entirely certain. The university extended his contract only one semester at a time, which caused Bartók great anxiety. His livelihood came from many small, low-budget concerts as well as from the research work, he carried out at the university. The greatest problem, however, was that his final illness was approaching. In addition to his persistent joint problems - which had in fact plagued the composer for years - he had been suffering from continuous fever since April 1942. Despite this, throughout the year he carried out his work with remarkable endurance, up until his collapse in February 1943. With this, the low point of the American years arrived, and the diagnosis was made myeloid leukemia. Only later did it become clear that at the time the composer had not been informed of the true diagnosis of his illness. After the previously mentioned health collapse and the subsequent radiation treatment at Mount Sinai Hospital, he was permanently

³ The original Hungarian text: „Ennek az útnak egyáltalában nem örülök, de most már meg kell történnie.” (Tallán Tibor: Bartók Béla, p.345)

discouraged from giving public concerts. The medical expenses he had incurred up to that point had already been costly, and those that followed required even more money - far more than Bartók could have afforded. For this reason, his friends began to organize support. Many people rushed almost immediately to Bartók's aid, among them Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge⁴, Irving Kolodin⁵, József Szigeti⁶, Serge Koussevitzky⁷, Ernő Balogh⁸, and ASCAP, as well as likely many others. It should be noted that ASCAP⁹ (the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) supported the composer throughout his medical treatments and periods of rest. It later emerged - through Béla Bartók Jr.¹⁰ - that these financial aids were in fact advances charged against the composer's future royalties. In the summer of 1943, after treatments in Saranac Lake, Bartók began to feel better. His physical and mental strength visibly increased, he rested, read, worked with Romanian materials, and, of course, resumed composing. At this time, he composed the *Concerto for Orchestra*, commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation, which also helped ease his difficult financial situation. After this first major American work, events continued to unfold rapidly, Bartók alternated between periods of illness and improvement. Following the premiere of the *Concerto for Orchestra*, interest in his music began to grow noticeably - one might even say that a kind of Bartók cult was beginning to emerge. His last complete work was *Piano Concerto No. 3*, which he finished in 1945 (by that time he was already working extensively on the *Viola Concerto* as well). It is an interesting fact that the *Viola Concerto*, commissioned by William Primrose¹¹ in January 1945, was placed "only" second in priority by the composer, first place was given to the aforementioned *Piano Concerto No. 3*, which he dedicated to his wife. It seems likely that by the summer of 1945 Bartók sensed that his time was limited. He set aside the *Viola Concerto* - having completed it in draft form - and wished to finalize the full score of the *Piano Concerto No. 3*. In a letter dated September 8, 1945, he wrote to violist William Primrose about the work:

⁴ Elisabeth Sprague Coolidge (1864-1953) – American music patron and philanthropist, renowned for her significant contributions to classical music.

⁵ Irving Kolodin (1908-1988) – American author, music historian and music critic.

⁶ József Szigeti (1892-1973) – Hungarian violinist and pedagogue. Premiering works by composers such as Bartók Béla or Kodály Zoltán.

⁷ Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951) – Russian born composer, conductor and music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

⁸ Ernő Balogh (1897-1989) – Hungarian-born pianist and teacher.

⁹ ASCAP was founded in 1914 and it is a U.S.-based organization that protects the rights of its members by licensing and collecting royalties for the public performance of their music.

¹⁰ Béla Bartók Jr. (1910-1994) – Older son of Béla Bartók.

¹¹ William Primrose (1904-1982) – Scottish violist, regarded as one of the greatest viola players of the 20th century.

"I am very pleased to inform you that your Viola Concerto is finished in draft, so that only the orchestration remains to be written, which, so to speak, is merely mechanical work."¹²

Unfortunately, there was no time left for the "mechanical work." The piece was completed by Tibor Serly¹³, who belonged to Bartók's circle of friends in America. It took Serly four years, based on Bartók's notes, to prepare the viola part of the work. It should also be mentioned that in later years a new reconstruction of the Viola Concerto was created by Csaba Erdélyi¹⁴, who remarked: "The Piano Concerto No. 3 portrays Ditta, while the Viola Concerto is the self-portrait of Bartók in his final months."¹⁵ On August 30, 1945, Bartók's condition once again worsened, by evening he was extremely exhausted and had a fever again. By September 21 his condition had become critical, and he had to be taken to the hospital immediately. According to the recollection of Péter Bartók, while they were waiting for the ambulance, the weakened composer asked his son to draw the final seventeen bar lines into the score of the Piano Concerto, afterward, the composer himself drew the closing double bar line.

Béla Bartók died on September 26, 1945, in the West Side Hospital in New York.

Bartók and Menuhin

The friendship between Béla Bartók and Yehudi Menuhin¹⁶ began in 1943, when Menuhin included the composer's First Sonata for Violin and Piano in his program. At that time, the 27-year-old Menuhin already enjoyed considerable international fame, not only in the United States but also in Europe. In October 1943, the Bartók couple had just returned to New York from Saranac Lake, (where the composer had been recovering and resting) because he very much wanted to hear a performance of his Violin Concerto, which he had never heard before with orchestral accompaniment. It is an interesting fact that even after the turn of the century, it was still common practice for concertos to be accompanied by a single piano. Meanwhile, Menuhin also learned the Violin Concerto and performed it in Minneapolis in November of that same year. At his next concert, the young violinist

¹² Tallián Tibor: *Bartók Béla*, p. 404

¹³ Tibor Serly (1901-1978) – Hungarian American composer, violist, student and friend of Béla Bartók.

¹⁴ Csaba Erdélyi (1946) – Hungarian-born violist, soloist, chamber musician, teacher.

¹⁵ Erdélyi Csaba, „Béla Bartók: Viola Concerto. Erdélyi Restoration. Foreword to the Critical Edition”(Wellington, New Zealand: *Promethean Editions*, 2004), pp. III-V.

¹⁶ Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999) – American-born violinist and conductor.

programmed the already mentioned First Sonata for Violin and Piano, as well as Bach's Sonata in C major for solo violin, at Carnegie Hall. That was when they met for the first time. While he was studying the sonata, the young Yehudi Menuhin wrote a letter to Béla Bartók, asking whether they might meet so that the composer could listen to the sonata and offer him a few comments. Bartók accepted Menuhin's request, and the meeting soon took place at the home of one of Menuhin's friends, "Aunty Kitty" Perera, herself a violinist and a close friend of the conductor Arturo Toscanini. The meeting was held in Perera's apartment on Park Avenue. After Menuhin and his pianist had performed the first movement, Bartók rose from his chair and said:

"I did not think music could be played like that until long after the composer was dead.¹⁷" From that day on, their friendship lasted until the composer's death.

The commission

In November 1943, during the meeting between Bartók Béla and Yehudi Menuhin, the young violinist was well aware that the composer's health was fragile, and he also knew that his financial circumstances were far from favorable. After performing the First Violin Sonata together with Adolph Baller¹⁸ for Bartók, Menuhin asked the composer whether he would write a piece for him, thereby helping to ease his already strained financial situation. Bartók never accepted financial loans from anyone, he was too proud for that¹⁹. We do not know what Yehudi Menuhin might have expected. Perhaps he thought he would receive another sonata with piano accompaniment, or possibly a rhapsody, as Székely Zoltán or Szigeti József had earlier²⁰. At that time, Menuhin could not yet have suspected that he would probably receive one of the masterpieces of the twentieth century from Bartók Béla. Four months after the commission, in March 1944, Yehudi Menuhin received the first letter from the composer, enclosing a four-movement sonata for solo violin. Menuhin later stated that when he first looked through the work, he began to tremble, thinking it was unplayable.

¹⁷ Yehudi, Menuhin. „Unfinished Journey” . Great Britain: *Macdonald and Jane's Publishers Limited*, 1976. p.169

¹⁸ Adolph Baller (1898-1994) – Austrian-born American pianist, chamber musician and teacher.

¹⁹ Yehudi, Menuhin. „Unfinished Journey” . Great Britain: *Macdonald and Jane's Publishers Limited*, 1976. p. 171

²⁰ Bartók composed in 1924 (Sz.86, BB 94) for Székely Zoltán and Szigeti József. These pieces are celebrated for their virtuosic violin writing, intricate rhythms, and folk-inspired melodic language.

Later, however, he realized that he had drawn a hasty and mistaken conclusion at first, and that the piece was indeed playable on the violin - dramatic yet deeply satisfying. He also added: since the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin by Johann Sebastian Bach, no one had written a work of such caliber for solo violin. Menuhin paid for Bartók 500 US dollars for the Solo Sonata, 250 as an advance and another 250 after the work was completed. And before we think that this might seem like a rather small amount for a work of such caliber, I looked into it and converted the 500 dollars from 1944 into today's value in 2026, naturally taking inflation into account. So what was 500 dollars in 1944 would be approximately 9,000 US dollars today. I believe that this was therefore quite a substantial and fair sum at the time as well. At the same time, I would like to present a list — that very list (which many of you have probably already seen or are familiar with) — compiled by Dr. Herbert R. Axelrod²¹ and Todd M. Axelrod²² in the famous Heifetz biography. The list below was published by the New York Philharmonic for its 1949–1950 season.

Figure 1²³

Fees Paid by N.Y. Philharmonic Society to Assisting Artists		
Date	Soloist	Fee
Nov. 17, 18, 1949	Ginette Martenot	\$200
Nov. 24, 25, 27, 1949	Jacques Abram	\$2150
Dec. 1, 2, 4, 1949	Isaac Stern	\$2800
Dec. 15, 16, 18, 1949	Joseph Szigeti	\$2800
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Elinor Warren (singer)	\$150
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Astrid Varnay	\$1200
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Frederick Jagel	\$1000
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Herbert Janasen	\$1000
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Irene Jessner	\$950
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Elena Nikolaidi	\$1200
Dec. 22, 23, 25, 1949	Michael Rhodes	\$350
Dec. 29, 30, 1949	Oscar Levant	\$3500
Jan. 5, 6, 7, 8, 1950	Rudolf Serkin	\$4100
Jan. 14, 15, 1950	Szymon Goldberg	\$1350
Jan. 19, 20, 22, 1950	Zino Francescatti	\$3600
Jan. 21, 1950	Leonard Pennario	\$300
Jan. 26, 27, 29, 1950	Casadesus	\$4150
Feb. 2, 3, 5, 1950	Myra Hess	\$7000
Feb. 5, 1950	Rudolf Firkusny	\$350
Feb. 11, 1950	Nikita Magaloff	\$300
Feb. 16, 17, 19, 1950	Jascha Heifetz	\$9500
Feb. 23, 24, 26, 1950	Lukas Foss	\$550
March 16, 17, 19, 1950	Nathan Milstein	\$3800
March 18, 1950	Miriam Solovieff	\$250
March 23, 24, 26, 1950	Artur Rubinstein	\$8000
March 25, 1950	Moura Lympany	\$300
April 1, 1950	Joseph Battista	\$250
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Camilla Williams	\$500
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Carlos Alexander	\$450
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Uta Graf	\$500
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Frances Yeend	\$700
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	George London	\$500
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Louise Bernhardt	\$400
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Martha Lipton	\$600
April 6, 7, 9, 1950	Eugene Conley	\$700
April 13, 1950	Adolph Andersen	\$100
April 22, 1950	Leonid Hambro	\$200

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²¹ Dr. Herbert R. Axelrod (1927-2017) – American publisher and philanthropist.

²² Todd M. Axelrod (1949) – American businessman and autograph dealer.

²³ Dr. Herbert R. Axelrod & Todd M. Axelrod: HEIFETZ, Published by PAGANINIANA PUBLICATIONS, INC. 211 West Sylvania Avenue, Neptune City, NJ 07753, p.12

The solo sonata

Tempo di Ciaccona

At that particular New York concert, when Béla Bartók heard Yehudi Menuhin perform, the program (in addition to the already mentioned First Violin Sonata) also included the Solo Sonata in C major by Johann Sebastian Bach. It is likely that Bartók modeled the structure of his own work on this sonata. In the Baroque period, a shorter introductory movement — a kind of quasi-fantasia — was typically written before a fugue²⁴. In Bartók's case, this is omitted, and he begins immediately with a *Tempo di Ciaccona* movement, thereby paying homage to Bach's D minor *Chaconne*. It is also worth mentioning that Bartók's work is in G minor, just like Bach's First Solo Sonata²⁵. Like every "classical" Ciaccona, this one is likewise in 3/4, and it is based on the Sarabande dance movement. Johann Sebastian Bach's Chaconne, however, begins with a rest on the downbeat, therefore, in effect, the emphasis always falls on the second beat of the measure.

E.g. 1



Johann Sebastian Bach: *Ciaccona*, BWV1004, mm. 1-5

E.g. 2



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, 1st mvt., mm. 1-3

²⁴ Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Georg Pisendel, and even Georg Philipp Telemann wrote works for solo violin. Almost without exception, each of them composed a slower, fantasy-like movement preceding the fugue that followed. In many cases, these fugues already contain the "DNA" of the preceding movements, carrying forward their musical ideas and motifs.

²⁵ First sonata for solo violin – BWV1001

But as I already mentioned, fundamentally it is based on the Sarabande dance movement.

E.g. 3



Johann Sebastian Bach: *Sarabanda*, BWV1004, mm. 1-4

In the examples presented above, Bartók's homage to Bach is clearly evident. After the first section of the main theme already discussed, Bartók continues with a highly rhythmic counterpoint, which he had in fact already introduced on the second beat of the third measure. It may not be an exaggeration to say that in this counterpoint he very skillfully incorporated a distinctly Hungarian character as well.

E.g. 4



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 9-11

The somewhat contorted main theme comes together into a symmetrical whole over the course of sixteen measures. From measure seventeen onward, the secondary theme appears, which - like the main theme - is another homage to Johann Sebastian Bach. The latent polyphony beginning with pizzicato strongly resembles Johann Sebastian Bach's d-minor Harpsichord Concerto²⁶, BWV 1052 (it is worth noting here that contemporary musicological research tends to regard this concerto as originally a violin concerto).

²⁶ In the official catalogue, this work is listed as a harpsichord concerto, however, many Bach scholars question the authenticity of this designation. According to certain theories, it was originally written for violin and orchestra and only later transcribed for harpsichord. Nowadays, an increasing number of performers play the concerto on the violin as well, under the catalogue number BWV 1052R (Reconstruction).

E.g. 5



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 15-17

E.g. 6



Johann Sebastian Bach: Harpsichord concerto, *Allegro*, BWV1052, mm. 60-62

Bartók also concludes the secondary theme with a sharply articulated, distinctly Hungarian rhythm²⁷.

E.g. 7



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 30-31

He introduces the third and final theme in measure 32 with a very gentle triplet figure (Bartók even explicitly indicates a piano dynamic marking). Four measures later, he presents the same closing theme a fifth higher, in much the same way as Hungarian folk songs are traditionally structured.

²⁷ Similarly to the Hungarian language, the accent generally falls on the first syllable of the word.



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 30-37

And since we are speaking of a closing theme, it is worth mentioning that here Bartók employs the large-scale sonata form that Joseph Haydn began to shape freely, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart consolidated, and which Ludwig van Beethoven ultimately developed further - one might even say that under Beethoven this form truly reached its full maturity. In fact, the formal structures of Beethoven's late string quartets seem to resonate here. All this clearly shows that the Solo Sonata is constructed in a truly "classical" manner. It was no coincidence that I mentioned Beethoven a moment ago, since the development section of the movement also bears a strong resemblance to Beethoven's treatment of development. I am referring in particular to the very first measure of the development section.



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 53-54

It is sufficient to look at the main theme of the solo part in Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto and the beginning of its development section. The main theme, as we know, is in D major, whereas the development continues in C major. But the formal structure is the same.

E.g. 10,11



Ludwig van Beethoven: *Violin concerto in D major*, op. 61, 1st mvm.,
mm. 89-90; 279-285

What follows is also particularly interesting, as Bartók, making use of the main theme, inserts a canon.

E.g. 12



Bartók Béla: *Sonata for solo violin, Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 56-61

Subsequently, the composer introduces a highly interesting “dialogue,” juxtaposing a shimmering legato character that moves in sixths with a raw and a brutal character built from triplet seconds. Here, the composer even explicitly marks the character as *ruvido*²⁸ (rough) - an indication one does not encounter every day.

²⁸ In string playing, it suggests a slightly gritty, strongly articulated sound quality rather than a smooth, lyrical one.

E.g. 13



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 75-76

This is followed by the recapitulation. In the recapitulation, Bartók once again brings back the main theme, the secondary theme, and the closing theme - naturally not in exactly the same way as in the exposition. Before moving on to the coda, a very dear friend of mine pointed out that in measure 108 the sixths closely resemble the opening theme of the Fifth String Quartet.

E.g. 14



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 107-109

E.g. 15

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Violoncello

M. 138 - 132

Bartók Béla: *String Quartet no. 5*, 1st mvm., mm. 1-3

The composer concludes the coda with the motif already introduced in the main theme, and, as there, one could say that he intended to provide the work with a kind of summary or framing.

E.g. 16



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Tempo di Ciaccona*, mm. 137-140

Fuga

Just as in Bach's C major solo sonata, the second movement here is also a fugue. The only difference is that while Bach's fugue is in three voices, Bartók here experiments with a four-voice fugue, and does so with considerable success. Menuhin uses the following words to introduce the fugue: "*Then comes the violence of the Fuga, perhaps the most aggressive, even brutal, music I play.*"²⁹

The main subject of the fugue is essentially based on the coexistence of major and minor thirds, that is, at the beginning we cannot really decide whether it is in C major or C minor.

E.g. 17



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Fuga*, mm. 1-4

²⁹ Yehudi, Menuhin. „Unfinished Journey” . Great Britain: Macdonald and Jane's Publishers Limited, 1976. p. 171

Essentially, here too the composer contrasts two characters: first, the brutal, *risoluto*³⁰ character of the main theme, which lasts for four full measures, and in the final measure (which still belongs to the main theme), it concludes the subject with a legato character. In fact, after each statement of the fugue subject, it is always the legato that ultimately prevails.

E.g. 18



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Fuga*, mm. 1-8

It is also worth noting that Bartók introduces each voice into the fugue in a very classical manner. The first, of course, appears in the home key, the second enters a fifth higher (as Johann Sebastian Bach so often does in his fugues) the third returns to the home key, only an octave higher, and the last - that is, the fourth voice - again enters a fifth higher than the third voice. With the presentation of the subjects at the fifth, I can only repeat what I mentioned about the first movement: the stylistic features of folk music are very strongly perceptible.

I would also consider it worth highlighting the pizzicatos in one of the fugue's episodes. We all know that Bartók could not play the violin at all, however, just like other pianist-composers, he had outstanding violinist friends. It is enough to mention Szigeti József and Székely Zoltán. Similarly, in the case of Johannes Brahms - who was also a pianist composer - he played extensively with Reményi Ede³¹ and, of course, with Joseph Joachim³² as well. I considered this important to mention because, although they were

³⁰ Like most musical terms, this one also originates from the Italian language. Its meaning is: resolute, determined, or firm. In performance, it indicates that a passage should be played with strong character, confidence, and decisiveness. Giacomo Puccini makes frequent use of this character in his operas.

³¹ Ede Reményi (1828-1898) – Hungarian violinist and composer. He had an important role in the early career of Johannes Brahms.

³² Joseph Joachim (1831-1907) – Hungarian violonist, violist, composer and teacher. Many premieres of romantic violin concertos are associated with his name.

not violinists themselves (unlike earlier composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart), they nevertheless had a very clear understanding of what could and could not be effectively written for the violin.

Returning to the previously mentioned pizzicatos, Bartók uses them very boldly. At a fairly fast tempo, immediately after passages of sixteenth-note motion, he suddenly writes double-stop pizzicatos. Often, they move in octaves, but there are also instances where the upper voice moves downward while the lower voice moves upward.

E.g.19



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Fuga*, mm.65-67

It is also worth mentioning what is nowadays commonly referred to as the *Bartók pizzicato*. This means that the string must be plucked much more forcefully and from a different angle, so that it snaps back against the fingerboard of the violin. In this way, it creates a truly authentic folk-like atmosphere. Here I would add that it seems quite possible that the composer may have had in mind the so-called *ÜTŐGARDON*³³, an instrument used primarily in the Gyimes³⁴ region in Transylvania.

E.g. 20



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Fuga*, mm. 68-70

³³ Its shape resembles that of a cello, yet it is played in a completely different way. The body of the instrument is carved from a single piece of solid wood. The player holds it between their legs, and sometimes a strap is attached so it can also be played in a standing position. It has four strings, usually made of sheep gut. The instrument is played by striking the strings with a wooden stick in the right hand, while the left hand plucks the top string simultaneously. It primarily serves a rhythmic role in Hungarian folk music. Its tuning is D–D–D–d.

³⁴ Gyimes (Ghimeş) - is a region in the Eastern Carpathians, traditionally inhabited by ethnic Hungarians known as Csángós.

Listening to Yehudi Menuhin's recording of this work, I noticed that from measure 95 of the fugue movement, in the paired sixteenth-note passages, he plays these notes with a certain asymmetry. There is no indication in the score referring to this, yet I find it interesting, since in the Baroque period - especially in French-speaking regions - the so-called *notes inégales* style was used very frequently. That is, a strong hierarchy was applied between the notes. Of course, we do not know whether we are simply hearing the performer's personal taste, or whether it is possible that Bartók himself may have suggested this approach to the then young violinist.

E.g. 21



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Fuga*, mm. 93-96

The composer closes the fugue movement in a similar way, with a broad legato passage lasting two measures, beginning in forte and gradually diminishing to piano pianissimo. At the same time, he incorporates a diminuendo, a left-hand pizzicato, and even a long glissando. After this, as a surprise, the head of the fugue subject appears once again.

E.g. 22



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Fuga*, mm. 101-107

Melodia

The movement following the third fugue of the solo sonata is the *Melodia*, and just like Baroque (solo) sonatas in general, it is a slow movement. The movement is built on a ternary A-B-A form; therefore, it can be considered completely classical in structure. If we take a closer look at

section A, we can observe that it essentially consists of a four-line melody, which is followed by a small extension at the end. In order to understand it better, I feel that it is absolutely necessary to show it in the score. I will mark the melodic line with one color and the extension with another.

E.g. 23

Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Melodia*, mm. 1-27

I find it interesting that the *Melodia* movement begins in the same way as Double Concerto for Violin and Cello by Johannes Brahms, except that Béla Bartók starts it a semitone higher.

E.g. 24, 25

Johannes Brahms: Double concerto For Violin, Cello and orchestra, 2nd mvm., mm. 1-4

Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Melodia*, mm. 1-2

The structure of section B is similar as well: there is always a given melody followed by a short extension. Here I would like to note that the development section of this movement bears a striking resemblance to the development section of Piano Concerto No. 3 by Béla Bartók. Researchers dealing with Bartók's works often refer to this passage as "birdsong."

E.g. 26



Bartók Béla: Sonata for violin solo, *Melodia*, mm. 28-33

Measure 49, that is, the returning A section, begins with a variation similar to the main theme, but here the composer already asks for *sordino*³⁵.

I consider it important to highlight that in the sixteenth-note motion written in the second and third beats of measure 51, the composer - just as in the fugue - requests an *inégal* style of playing from the performer. The folk-like construction is present here as well, namely the already mentioned melody–extension structure.

At the end of the movement, he repeats the "birdsong" motif, which he concludes with a *poco rallentando*³⁶. *Melodia* closes with pure, transparent harmonics, and the composer writes in a diminuendo lasting for two measures.

Presto

The fourth *Presto* movement begins with a repetitive introduction built on sixteenth-note motion. If we think back to the ending of the third movement (*Melodia*), it almost makes sense why the composer asks for a

³⁵ The sordino, historically made of wood and nowadays often made of rubber or even aluminum, is placed on the bridge of the instrument by the player. This prevents vibrations from being transmitted as strongly to the body of the instrument, producing a much quieter and more intimate sound. Composers usually request it to change the tone color rather than to reduce volume.

³⁶ Less extreme than a full *rallentando* or *ritardando*, suggesting only a subtle deceleration to add expressiveness or emphasis to a passage.

mute (*con sordino*) at the beginning of the *Presto*. Moreover, Bartók even instructs the performer to play *punta d'arco*, which means playing on the upper half of the bow, with a less defined tone and more in the string. This also shows that although Bartók was a pianist, he knew very well what could and could not be effectively composed for the violin. Incidentally, when Menuhin first received the initial copy of the sonata, it was the fourth movement that seemed unplayable to him, mainly because of the passages involving quarter-tone motion. I would now like to quote from one of the letters that Béla Bartók wrote to Yehudi Menuhin on April 21, 1944:

"The quarter-tones in the 4th movement have only colour-giving character, i.e. they are not 'structural' features, and therefore may be eliminated, as I tried to do so in the alternatives on the last page, which you may use if you don't feel inclined to worry about quarter-tone playing.³⁷"

So that the reader can better perceive the significant difference between the two scores, I will include one example from each. The first is a Russian edition containing the version approved by Yehudi Menuhin, while the second is the Urtext version published by Péter Bartók, which is based directly and entirely on the original manuscript.

E.g. 27

Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Presto*, mm. 1-7

E.g. 28

Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Presto*, mm. 1-7

³⁷ Preface from the Sonata for solo violin, Urtext Edition, *Boosey and Hawkes*, Copyright 1994 by Péter Bartók.

After the three-page introduction (depending on which edition one is playing from), a rather virtuosic transition follows, and then the principal motif of the sonata's first movement reappears. I deliberately used the word *virtuosic*, since this previously mentioned main theme must already be played without the mute, and in fact there is no time to remove it from the bridge. Therefore, while plucking an open D string³⁸ (with a left-hand pizzicato, of course), one must gently remove the mute at the same time.

E.g. 29

Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Presto*, mm. 94-107

As we have already come to expect from Béla Bartók, he never writes the same idea twice in exactly the same way. We can observe that he introduces the G minor theme in a 2/8 pulse, even though the movement itself is in 3/8. This creates an interesting hemiola-like effect. After a short interlude, he once again brings back the main theme of the movement with the sixteenth-note motion, again *con sordino* and with the *punta d'arco* character. It is no coincidence that I said he “brings back” the main theme, since we are dealing with a movement that is quite rondo-like in form.

In measure 270, Béla Bartók marks *Tranquillo*³⁹, and this is truly the point where everyone can relax a little — the performer, the listener, and perhaps even Bartók himself. Here the composer introduces a very lyrical, yet at the same time hopeless melody. In the final five measures of this section, he indicates an *accelerando*⁴⁰ and once again brings back the

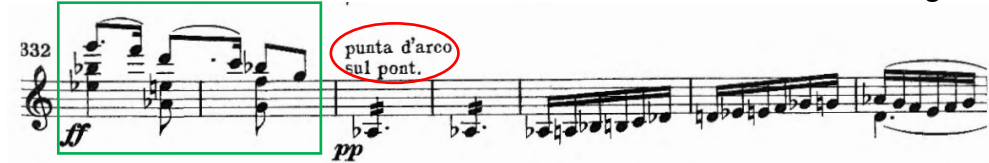
³⁸ This motion is very similar to the pizzicato technique used on the ütőgárdony. And, not incidentally, here too the D string is plucked, just like on the previously mentioned instrument.

³⁹ A passage marked *tranquillo* in a violin piece would be played softly, evenly, and with a sense of calmness.

⁴⁰ Its meaning is a gradual speeding up from a given tempo. Typically, this process lasts for at least two measures and can extend over several more.

previously mentioned G minor theme. This is followed by another interlude, which again begins with sixteenth-note motion, and the composer once more indicates *punta d'arco*, this time accompanied by *sul ponticello*⁴¹.

E.g. 30



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Presto*, mm. 332-338

The movement is concluded with a coda featuring a descending chromatic melody, which ends with the extension already familiar from the *Melodia* movement, played as a harmonic. However, it does not stop there, this is followed by a four-bar passage of sixteenth-note scales that begin pianissimo and culminate in a G major chord played fortissimo.

E.g. 31



Bartók Béla: Sonata for solo violin, *Presto*, mm. 413-419

Conclusions

In my article, I sought to present a more in-depth portrayal of Béla Bartók's uniquely remarkable Sonata for Solo Violin. I consider the publication of this article important because I feel that, even with this small contribution, I can help preserve Bartók's legacy. I aimed to introduce the period before the composer's arrival in America as well as his years in the United States. I also discussed his friendship with Yehudi Menuhin, one of the most outstanding violinists of the twentieth century and addressed the circumstances surrounding the commission of the work to the extent possible.

⁴¹ Just like using *sul tasto* or a *sordino*, this is a type of tone color change in music. As the name suggests, it is played near the bridge to achieve this effect.

Afterwards, I endeavored to provide a comprehensive analysis of all four movements of the piece. Naturally, there are still shortcomings, and I myself have many unanswered questions, however, I intend to find answers to these as soon as possible in the near future.

I hope that my article will assist those readers, researchers, enthusiasts, and, of course, violinists who are interested in Bartók's oeuvre, life path, and compositions.

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