

EXPRESSION OF THE ROMANIAN FOLK STYLE IN BÉLA BARTÓK'S STRING QUARTET NO. 1¹

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SUMMARY. Bartók's string quartets play an important role in his overall output, as they represent a stylistic universe encompassing almost his entire oeuvre. In his *String Quartet No. 1*, Bartók aimed at reworking and expanding the folk elements as well as at developing his own personal expression. Despite being deeply rooted in folklore, this is not a folkloric work, but an expression that goes beyond folklore, which the composer placed in a new relationship to art-music. The aim of this research paper is to explore the aspects of language, the content conforming to the preoccupations of the modern era and the types of writing used, with a focus on the use of the melodic and rhythmic elements of folk music. The musical stylistics of this work is based precisely on the intertwining and fusion of the two great creative principles: folk and art.

Keywords: Béla Bartók, string quartet, folk elements.

1. Introduction

The musical language of Béla Bartók's six quartets encompasses the stylistic changes applied over the course of thirty-one years³, offering a blend of Late Romantic elements (in particular, the early quartets are often compared to Beethoven's and are considered to be under the influence of the French music, reflecting the influence of Debussy's music), a synthesis of folk elements, modern language and others. In fact, besides his creative work in which the genre of the quartet held an important place throughout

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³ The First String Quartet was composed in 1908, and the last one in 1939.

his life, ethnomusicological research was another one of his areas of particular interest. Therefore, in most of the bibliographic sources consulted, chamber music is regarded as being most representative of his music. Moreover, by expressing the folk spirit in its essentialized, idealized form in instrumental music, the quartets are considered one of the major contributions to the chamber genre in the 20th century.

The style of Bartók's quartets is based on conciseness and clarity and is expressed with the utmost economy of means. The main stages of his creative development are steered in two directions: the former can be characterized by the modernization of the means of musical expression, while the latter by the absorption of folk music elements into his own musical language. These two combined result in the composer's development of a personal creative style, materialized in the tendencies of the epoch, such as⁴: a prospective, investigative attitude, open to experimentation, a product of his methodical spirit and boldness that shape most of his folk songs into expressions of the new musical language.

Of the types of writing used in his string quartets we will further focus our attention on the free use of melodic and rhythmic elements of the Romanian popular music, where the popular "transpires" as a spiritual model of style.

Below we provide a synoptic table (see Table 1) that brings together general information about the string quartets (identification data, number of movements – name, year of composition, year of first performance and dedication, if known, approximate duration), which should give an overall view of these works.

Table 1

Work	Quartet No. 1	Quartet No. 2	Quartet No. 3	Quartet No. 4	Quartet No. 5	Quartet No. 6
Opus/ Catalogue	Op. 7 Sz. 40 BB 52	Op. 17 Sz. 67 BB 75	Sz. 85 BB 93	Sz. 91 BB 95	Sz. 102 BB 110	Sz. 114 BB 119
No. of parts and movements	I. <i>Lento</i> II. <i>Allegretto</i> <i>Introduzione: Allegro</i> III. <i>Allegro vivace</i>	I. <i>Moderato</i> II. <i>Allegro molto capriccioso</i> III. <i>Lento</i>	I. <i>Prima parte: Moderato</i> II. <i>Seconda parte: Allegro</i> III. <i>Recapitazione della prima parte: Moderato</i>	I. <i>Allegro</i> II. <i>Prestissimo, con sordino</i> III. <i>Non troppo lento</i> IV. <i>Allegretto</i>	I. <i>Allegro</i> II. <i>Adagio molto</i> III. <i>Scherzo alla bulgarese</i> IV. <i>Andante</i> V. <i>Finale:</i>	I. <i>Mesto. Più mosso, pesante.</i> <i>Vivace</i> II. <i>Mesto.</i> <i>Marcia</i> III. <i>Mesto.</i> <i>Burletta:</i>

⁴ Firca, Clemansa Liliana, *Modernitate și avangardă în muzica ante și interbelică a secolului XX (1900-1940)* [Modernity and Avant-Garde in the Pre- and Interwar Music of the 20th Century (1900-1940)], Doctoral thesis, "Gheorghe Dima" Academy of Music, Cluj-Napoca, 1998, p. 67.

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Work	Quartet No. 1	Quartet No. 2	Quartet No. 3	Quartet No. 4	Quartet No. 5	Quartet No. 6
			IV. Coda: <i>Allegro molto</i>	<i>pizzicato</i> V. <i>Allegro molto</i>	<i>Allegro vivace.</i> <i>Presto</i>	<i>Moderato</i> IV. <i>Mesto</i>
Year of comp.	1908-1909	1915-1917	1927	1928	1934	1939
First performance	March 19, 1910	March 3, 1918	-	-	-	-
Dedication	-	Quatuor Hongrois Waldbauer	The Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia	Quatuor Pro Arte	Mrs. Sprague-Coolidge	-
Approx. duration	30'	27'	15'	25'	31'	30'

The following table (see Table 2) completes this image with the other works composed during the same period as the String Quartets No. 1.

Table 2

Year of composition	Title of work	Instrumentation
1907-08	<i>Two Portraits for Orchestra, Op. 5</i>	instrumental ensemble
1908	<i>14 Bagatelles for Piano, Op. 6</i>	piano
1908	<i>Ten Easy Piano Pieces</i>	piano
1908-09	<i>String Quartet No. 1, Op. 7</i>	two violins, viola, cello
1908-09	<i>Two Elegies for Piano, Op. 8/b</i>	piano
1908-09	<i>85 Hungarian and Slovak Folk Songs for Piano (for children)</i>	piano

2. Analytical insight

In this chapter we will not adopt an exhaustive analytical strategy on the syntactic and morphological elements but will focus instead on a general structural analysis of the key aspects of the formal, thematic, rhythmic etc. structure.

The first quartet, Op. 7⁵, picks up “the journey from the heights piano music has gradually reached”⁶, although a true expansion and development of chamber music polyphony will be seen in the quartets to come. Composed between 1908 and 1909⁷, it is a work of stylistic transition, inspired by Beethoven’s last quartets⁸ and drawing on various influences that coalesce into a well-rounded “musical organism.” The quartet is also considered a “return to life”⁹, by binding together the second and third movements in an increasingly faster tempo, which became a hallmark of Bartók’s new writing style.

The work is structured in three movements: *Lento*, *Allegretto* and *Allegro vivace*. As the composer himself confesses, the first quartet has a seemingly ordinary form: “the first movement is a common sonata form. The second one is a sort of rondo with a middle part of thematic development. The last movement is the hardest to define: basically, it is an expanded A-B-Av song form”¹⁰. In a letter to violinist Stefi Geyer¹¹, Bartók describes the first movement of his first quartet as a funeral dirge. This mournful atmosphere is musically evoked by a contrapuntal fabric, ornamented with numerous appoggiaturas, beginning with a slow section in *fugato* style.

⁵ The first performance took place in 1910, by the Hungarian string quartet Waldbauer-Kerpely; Wilhelm Georg Berger, *Ghid pentru muzica instrumentală de cameră* [Guide to Instrumental Chamber Music], Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1965, p. 295.

⁶ Szabolcsi, Bence, *Béla Bartók. Viața și opera* [Béla Bartók. Life and Work], Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1962, p. 68 (our translation).

⁷ In Romania, the quartet was first performed on the occasion of the inauguration of the new headquarters of the Romanian Composers’ Society, after the absolute first performance in Budapest had aroused indignation among the Hungarian public; Júlia Szegő, *Cantata Profana. Romanul vieții lui Bartók* [Cantata Profana. The Story of Bartók’s Life], Kriterion, Bucharest, 1972, p. 276.

⁸ It was also called “a tribute to Beethoven”.

⁹ As Kodály said about the *Quartet No. 1*.

¹⁰ Szabolcsi, Bence, *Béla Bartók. Viața și opera* [Béla Bartók. Life and Work], Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1962, p. 110 (our translation).

¹¹ <http://www.classicalarchives.com/work/40155.html#tvf=tracks&tv=about>.

E.g. 1

Lento $\text{♩} = 60$ (56-63)

VIOLINO I

VIOLINO II

p molto espress.

p molto espress.

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 1st mvt., bars 1-4.

One of the most common resemblances to Beethoven's music occurs at the very beginning of the work, given that this is also how Beethoven begins his *Quartet Op. 131*. Another argument for placing this work within the stylistic framework of late Romanticism is the chromatic harmonic style also found in the works of Wagner, Brahms or Bruckner.

Returning to form structure: the first movement begins with a canonic texture between the two violins, followed by the introduction of the viola and cello in bar 8. The development of the first movement in sonata form also has a late Romantic flavour through the use of "impressionist" harmonies. This section unfolds in several stages, with a *trio* part in the middle (beginning with bar 33). The development is followed by the return of the *fugato* material (recapitulation – bar 53), then by a retransition to the Coda, consisting of a sequence of descending sixths.

E.g. 2

ff tenuto

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 1st mvt., bars 64-65, violin 1.

The coda brings back the opening motif and ends in parallel thirds, as if leaving the tonal frame open and thus creating an *attacca* transition to the second movement. Table 3 illustrates more clearly the structure of the first movement:

Table 3

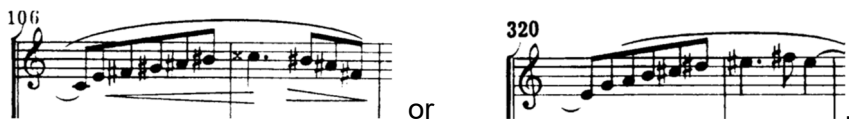
Exposition	Development	Recapitulation	Coda
bars 1 - 14	bars 15 - 52	bars 53 - 67	bars 68 - 71

The second movement is more of an extension of the first, sharing many of its elements. In terms of form, although the composer calls it a rondo, we can consider it a sonata form (see Table 4), on the following grounds:

Table 4

Introduction	Exposition	Development	Recapitulation	Coda
<i>Poco a poco accelerando al'Allegretto</i>	A , bars 18-42 Av , bars 43-69 Bridge , bars 70-90 B , bars 91-102 Trans. 1 , 103-124. Bv , bars 125-139	stage 1 stage 2 (from Bv) stage 3	A , bars 296-304 Av , bars 305-315 Trans. 2 , bars 316-357	<i>Molto sostenuto</i>
bars 1-17	bars 18-139	bars 140-295	bars 296-357	bars 358-367

The Impressionist influence is also evident here, this time in the melody, as illustrated by these whole-tone scales in the transitions 1 and 2:



The link to the third movement – *Allegro vivace* – is created by an *Introduzione* – *Allegro* segment combining melodic passages in a dialogue between a chordal *tutti* (played by the two violins and viola) and the cello playing a *quasi-improvisatory* melodic line, marked *rubato*.

E.g. 3

Musical score for Béla Bartók's Quartet No. 1, Introduzione, bars 7-10. The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves. The tempo markings are 'Meno vivo' and 'Allegro'. The first staff has a 'non rit.' marking. The second staff has a 'Rubato' marking. The music shows a transition from a slower tempo to a faster one.

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1, Introduzione*, bars 7-10

This paves the transition, without pause, to the third movement. *Allegro vivace* starts briskly with the obsessive repetition of a note, then turns into the *D-E-F* cluster followed, from bar 5 onwards, by a thematic motif played by the low strings, which will be frequently repeated and varied throughout the movement, serving as leitmotif.

E.g. 4

Musical score for Béla Bartók's Quartet No. 1, 3rd Mvt., section A, bars 1-9. The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves. The tempo marking is 'Allegro vivace' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 88-92. The music shows a dynamic range from piano (*p*) to fortissimo (*ff*) with a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking.

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1, 3rd Mvt.*, section A, bars 1-9.

It is an A-B-Av ternary form, with each large section containing developed and evolving thematic ideas. The A section contains 4 such thematic ideas; it is interesting to note that after exposing the 4 thematic ideas (writing techniques), the composer interpolates at some point an overwhelmingly dramatic *Adagio* consisting of mainly Romantic harmonies. At the end of the A section, the main theme reappears (see Example 4) in a

new guise. In section B, two of the segments of the large form (3 segments) are governed by other principles of form such as that of a *trio* or *fugue* (segments 2 and 3). Section Av is a dynamic reprise of the first section, concluding with a coda that brings back the entire initial motif (see Table 5).

Table 5

A	B	Av	Coda
bars 1-120	bars 121-235	bars 236-360	bars 361-375

In terms of tonality, all the sources indicate the piece to be written in *A minor*, but this is rather a tonal centre that occurs more often than other tonalities suggested throughout the work. In this work we notice a characteristic feature of Bartók's music, namely the economy of thematic material, with the entire melodic material being stated already in the first movement. Hence derives the developmental and variational principle of the thematic material in order to create new thematic guises. One of the techniques used is the counterpoint, which leads the discourse towards the above mentioned forms. The tragic colours and "wrenching dissonances"¹² that pervade the *String Quartet No. 1* are the aesthetic reflection of the intertwinement of light and darkness.

Although here Bartók follows the classical structural principles¹³ (sonata form, rondo, ternary form), he realizes them with his own techniques, creating his own stylistic signature. All this was possible due to his power of melodic reinvention by adding new expressions to the inherited ones.

3. Transformation of folk elements

To identify and specify the Romanian folk language elements used by the composer in his first string quartet, we will resort to the intrinsic level of analysis. Thus, we will identify and name the corresponding folk techniques used in a stylized manner in his art music compositions. In this analysis we have established the main guiding principles we will focus on, whose selection

¹² It suggests the emotional loss suffered, Stefi Geyer; from Szegő, Júlia, *Cantata profană. Romanul vieții lui Bartók* [Cantata profana. The Story of Bartók's Life], Kriterion, Bucharest, 1972, p. 132.

¹³ Classical in the sense of established, traditional.

will be justified based on musical examples: melodic theme¹⁴, morphological elements¹⁵ and accompaniment aspects¹⁶.

Melodic themes

As far as folk quotations are concerned, this work does not contain any. The bibliographic sources consulted contain only references to the melodic line of the third movement which, from the Adagio onwards, derives from a song of Hungarian folk origin. This aspect is detailed in the article *Between Folk Music and Wagner: Sources of Inspiration in Bartók's First String Quartet*¹⁷.

E.g. 5

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 3rd mvt., and the song *Romlott testem a bokorba* transcribed by Bartók

All the melodic lines that are founded upon certain folk characteristics, specific turns and morphological elements are composed in popular style. These elements can be found in:

- the *Introduzione* to the third movement, where the cello melody is hinting at the *doina* style of song, is marked *Rubato* and played without instrumental accompaniment.

¹⁴ i.e., the origin of the melodic lines, composition in folk style, the folk quotation (if applicable).

¹⁵ i.e., the construction of form or microstructure, aspects related to the modal or rhythmic system, or to tempo.

¹⁶ i.e., modes of accompaniment, dialogue between instruments.

¹⁷ Alan Anbari, "Between Folk Music and Wagner: Sources of Inspiration in Bartók's First String Quartet", in JSTORE, *International Journal of Musicology*, 2000, Vol. 9 (2000), pp. 179-180.

E.g. 6

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 1st mvt., bars 8-9.

- the last movement, where the folk style is clearly visible after having few references in the previous ones (dance rhythms, rhapsodic passages, ornaments, or the composition of the melodic lines in popular style). This melodic line played by the viola, which becomes the *fugato* theme, meets the characteristics mentioned above:

E.g. 7

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 3rd mvt., bars 158-165.

In terms of phrasing, continuity at a microstructural level is created through dense imitative textures, whereas at a macrostructural level it is achieved by combining the thematic motifs that are subsequently developed and elaborated.

Another stylistic feature is the conciseness of the thematic ideas, observable in all the movements of the quartet and which is also a central characteristic of folk songs;

Morphological elements

The morphological generative technique of repetition of a note is used in the second movement of the *Quartet No. 1*. Here, the rhythmic repetitions on the same note with different durations abound, as in the Romanian *parlando* folk songs. This is a typical feature of the ballad genres, or of the old

proper song. The unequal durations suggest the prosodic rhythm, the inner pulse given by the accents of the words in a recited text; this meaning is extrapolated to the instrumental interpretation. This figure occurs frequently throughout the second movement, also in varied form, with an oscillating note at the upper or lower second. There are many such examples:



The *parlando* character is also strengthened by the solo use, as in the following example (second movement):

E.g. 8



Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 2nd Mvt., bars 213-216.

The modal character resides in the use of scales or structural units that are congruent with it.

For example, in this quartet we find the Locrian heptachord:



, which is also emphasized through repetition.

Ornamentation is one of the most important factors for subsuming the work under the archaic construction principles. Ornaments can be found in most of the work's movements.

The entire *Quartet* is based on the principle of thematic economy, developed and varied by creating new thematic guises; this principle is also found in folklore.

Accompaniment aspects

In the *Quartet No. 1*, we notice the use of accompaniment techniques that are typical of the folk music bands (*taraf*), here morphed into modern expressions. One of them refers to the example from the exposition of the first movement in which, after a sinuous path of the thematic ideas suggesting the continuous flow, the development section is characterized by a standstill on a sustained perfect fifth (A-E), derived from the accompaniment of the second violin of the *taraf*, over which the melody follows its sinuous path, hinting at bitonality.



The same bitonality is further used in the development of the first movement, while the accompaniment of a fifth (C-G) creates a grotesque effect by association with the upper voices and through the accents given by the *sf*.



The mode of attack of the first violin – a chord covering all four strings of the instrument – is also used in the accompaniment of the *taraf*, especially in the Transylvanian trio formula (violin 1, violin 2 (*contră*), double bass (*gordună*)) where the violin 1, in addition to playing the leading role, also plays a harmonic role precisely through this impetus produced by the chordal attack in certain cadential phrases.

E.g. 9

The image shows a musical score for Béla Bartók's String Quartet No. 1, 2nd movement, bars 305-311. The score is in 3/4 time and marked 'Poco sostenuto' with a tempo of 126. It features four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The first violin part has two chords circled in red, highlighting the chordal attack. The double bass part has a 'ff' marking at the beginning.

Béla Bartók, *Quartet No. 1*, 2nd mvt., bars 305-311.

4. Conclusions

The elements of popular origin used in the String Quartet No. 1 are:

- the **melody in folk style** is based on melodic-rhythmic gestures containing no actual folk quotations; specific melodic turns are prevalent, particularly in cadences. The characteristic features of the melody in folk style are also visible in phrase construction, such as the repetition of a note in a different rhythm – *parlando rubato* – or the *Rubato* marking;
- in terms of melodic construction, Bartók makes use of the **modal** scales;
- the **rhythmic** system is rooted in folklore, in twofold ways: firstly, through the use of rhythmic freedom, derived from the *parlando-rubato* style; and secondly, through the exact pulsation of the measured rhythmic systems;
- the **rubato character** of the slow movements;

- **ornamentation** receives a different value than in folklore, being used as a key element of melodic construction – the ornaments used include mordents, appoggiaturas or multiple fast rhythmic formulas preceding the main note;
- the **manners of accompaniment** appear morphed into modern expressions, but some of them are rooted in folklore, corresponding to: the drone accompaniment in fifths, chord over all 4 strings at the beginning of a phrase, drones in double stops, alternative singing imitating the rhythmic movement of the second violin (*braci*) and double bass.

As set forth in the introduction to this paper, Béla Bartók's *String Quartet No. 1*, through its well-crystallized musical language, reveals the assimilation of numerous folk-music influences (from several peoples) and art-music ones (from previous eras), along with the contemporary (impressionist) experience, passed through the filter of the composer's original creative personality. The intertwined principles of form, tempo and musical language create an ethos that has become a cornerstone of Bartók's music.

Translated from Romanian by Marcella Magda

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