

## THE PLACE OF BARTÓK'S THE MIRACULOUS MANDARIN IN THE CONTEXT OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY MUSIC

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**SUMMARY.** *The Miraculous Mandarin* takes a special place in Bartók's oeuvre. It is clashing in it with an ancestral force the mythical pureness of the human ideal and our decayed world fell into a deep moral crisis. This contrast appears symbolically in the contrast of East and West, experienced by Bartók as a geographical and mainly as a cultural tension in his own life and artistic faith. This crossroad brought into life that musical representation, which contrasts the primary force of primitive music with the avant-garde trepidations. *The Miraculous Mandarin* well illustrates that creative ideal, which lines up the compositional techniques for its aesthetical value. Thus, the musical language of this pantomime could become extremely novel, exceeding in its progressive character many works of the contemporary avant-garde tendencies.

Our study is focused on three moments of *The Miraculous Mandarin* ("Introduction", "The decoy games" and "The chase") examining its main style elements such as the problem of sonority surfaces, the phenomenon of central sonorities, the dynamic of exposition-densification-saturation, the moving cluster, the use of contrasting musical plans, the rubato-technique etc. Throughout our analysis, we recall some contemporary and later composers (like Debussy, Webern, Varèse, Stravinsky, Lutosławski, Ligeti) and their masterworks, which musical language is related to the achievements of *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

**Keywords:** Bartók, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, style elements, sonority surface, central sonorities, moving cluster, contrasting musical plan, rubato-technique.

The last scenic work of Béla Bartók has been investigated by several scholars, in both stylistic and the aesthetic perspectives as well. First, we have to mention the study<sup>2</sup> of the Hungarian musicologist, Bence Szabolcsi, which represented a turning point in the early reception of *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Further, his pupil, György Kroó, offered an accurate and deep analysis of the pantomime in his book entitled *The Stage Works of Béla Bartók*.<sup>3</sup> Both of

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<sup>2</sup> Szabolcsi, Bence, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Musicological Studies in the memory of Liszt and Bartók, vol. III., Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1955, pp. 519-533.

<sup>3</sup> Kroó, György, *The Stage Works of Béla Bartók*, Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, 1962.

them emphasize the prominent role of this work in Bartók's oeuvre. Vera Lampert wrote another study focused on the pantomime's genesis circumstances (*The Miraculous Mandarin: Melchior Lengyel, His Pantomime, and His Connections to Béla Bartók*).<sup>4</sup> We also cite here the book of the Bartók scholar, Ernő Lendvai (*Bartók's Dramaturgy: Stage works and Cantata Profana*)<sup>5</sup> and that of Körtvélyes Géza (*On the Ways of Modern Dance Art*)<sup>6</sup> concerning the staging aspects of the pantomime.

Thus, in our study we try to focus on a wider aesthetic and stylistic context of this Bartókian masterwork, which has received – in our opinion – a much less attention than the other work of the same author.

As it is known, the music of *The Miraculous Mandarin* was written between 1918 and 1925 based on Lengyel Menyhért's pantomime with the same title, piece read by Bartók in the notorious Hungarian avant-garde journal of his time, *Nyugat*. Initially, the composer intended to make a setting of a Sándor Bródy libretto, but the uncertainties occur in the delivering of the libretto made Bartók to give up this project for other subjects. Concerning the musical setting of *The Miraculous Mandarin* text-book originally appeared also the name of Ernő Dohnányi, but he finally renounced in the favor of Bartók. Though it is doubtful to find a certain expectant of the Mandarin-subject, we mention – as a point of interest – the name of Serge Diaghilev among them, who was stationing by that time with his well-known dance company at Budapest.

One could wonder on the composer's interest concerning this playbook of a strange thematic and message. For Bartók it certainly represented a creative starting-point, which was called for expressionistic composing tools. This was the allegoric structure of the story, its gesture based, movie-like character<sup>7</sup>, the conciseness of the plot, the suddenness and elementary force of musical changes, the paradoxical nature of the personages. One can understand that the composer was carried away by this pantomime, not only by its philosophical deepness, but certainly also in the perspective that was opening to a musical elaboration. However, *The Miraculous Mandarin* proved to be attractive to several other reasons, as its thematic was closely attached to his outlook, historical-geographical context and artistic attitude. That is to say, Bartók was not led in the framing of his solely eastern character by an interest towards of a pure exoticism, as it happened in the case of impressionists,

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<sup>4</sup> Lampert, Vera, *The Miraculous Mandarin: Melchior Lengyel, His Pantomime, and His Connections to Béla Bartók*, In: Péter Laki (ed.): *Bartók and His World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, pp. 149-171.

<sup>5</sup> Lendvai, Ernő, *Bartók's Dramaturgy: Stage works and Cantata Profana*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Körtvélyes, Géza, *On the Ways of Modern Dance Art*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> The generic term of Lengyel's work is *grotesque pantomime*, a genre without words, in vogue at that time. This builds upon the expression of body and it's appearance coincides approximately with the born of the silent movie, cultivated by Lengyel as a screenwriter in his American years.

but he also projected his ideal of the strongly nature-related man (*homo naturalis*) on this strange character. This interpretation of the East-concept appears in the study of the Transylvanian musicologist, Ferenc László, *Béla Bartók and the East*. „In this symbolical system we can discover Bartók's entire world view. His own sense of foreignness, the consciousness of his own alternation in contrast to the inhumane, modern western world and also its belief in the existence of a true and straighten humanity; even it is rare, strange and fearful a little bit, like the Mandarin.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the Hungarian musicologist Bence Szabolcsi, the pantomime's first competent analyst: „the Mandarin announces an epochal turning-point in Bartók's evolution, showing the departure of the composer towards a novel steep way – and this departure coincides exactly with the first significant crisis, with the moment when throughout the world the fever curve of the European music was highly raised. The third and the last stage work of Bartók represent its most passionate, most flashing encounter with this world crisis and at the same time the reckoning with this crisis and his turn away from it.”<sup>9</sup>

The conditions of his showdown with the past drew up in *The Miraculous Mandarin*, were given to some extent in his two former stage works, since they also focus on the man-woman relationship: the *Bluebeard's Castle* formulates the hopelessness of approaching, while *The Wooden Prince* drafts the fairytale-like optimistic finding of each other. The problematic of *The Miraculous Mandarin* stretches between these alternatives, as it does not seek for the dissolving of desire in the terrestrial hopelessness or in a celestial illusion, but in a radical metamorphose beyond death.

If one survey, the message and the expressive mechanisms of *The Miraculous Mandarin* in the panoramic context of modernist musical trends, the pantomime seems to denote many relationships not only with the expressionism, but also with several artistic behaviors, although externally adhered to the proper expressionism, however tangentially connected with the latter. Bartók is also situated among those, who were linked with expressionism in such a manner, without undertaking of its artistic program.

The shocking force of *The Miraculous Mandarin* – like several other Twentieth-Century works' – roots in the paradoxical idea of defending the ideal of humaneness through extreme artistic representations. Therefore, the expressive techniques of music and sister arts took shape on this manner, frequently giving rise to the conservative audience's disagreement. Mainly the expressionists gave the ground-note of these innovations, but the revolutionary renewal of music has gone far beyond them. Though the stage and chamber works of A. Schoenberg and A. Berg, like *Erwartung* or *Pierrot Lunaire*, respectively

<sup>8</sup> László Ferenc, *Bartók Béla and the East*, „Forrás”, 1998/4.

<sup>9</sup> Szabolcsi Bence, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

*Wozzeck* or *Lulu* are undoubtedly remarkable, we cannot forget the masterworks of other contemporary composers. The world of primitive music is reviving with extremely novel tools in Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, as Edgar Varèse elaborates the futurist sounding ideals of metropolitan tumult not infrequently with primitive intonation elements. However, since the Bartókian employment of primitive musical elements in *The Miraculous Mandarin* is motivated by a wider moral context, Stravinsky and Varèse as a purpose in itself, to obtain musical tension, use the same elementary force.

Though Bartók's pantomime is connected with the above-mentioned works concerning its subject and expression, it remains profoundly original in spite of these links. One can say that he sums up the achievements of modern music in a unique synthesis. Moreover, he prefigures some of the compositional solutions widely used only decades later.

A major component of its originality resides undoubtedly in his compositional thought developed in the spirit of folk music, which is though less obvious in *The Miraculous Mandarin*, yet we feel its presence in the rubato, the eastern melodic, and above all in the immense force rising from the primitive music. Though scholars link – rather disputable – the sonorities of this pantomime to the atonalism (emphasizing on the twelve-tone themes guided by the complementary principle, or the fourth-based melodic), yet it seems, that the real basic pillars of this work are the complex sonority surfaces which rise from the subtle tonal and rhythmic interplay of the central-elements and other musical components. These, however, are considerably alien to the music of Schoenberg, which pre-dodecaphonic period is often – curiously – considered as an antecedent of *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

The difficulties encountered in the staging process denote a conservative and sometimes hypocrite attitude of the contemporary public, manifested also toward other progressive compositions: "the difficulties encountered in the musical and choreographic performance represented an obstacle even in those situations when moral impediments didn't occur."<sup>10</sup> – wrote Szabolcsi. As it is known, the composer has been already faced with the objection that his works' interpretation – so to say – is impossible. Vera Lampert noticed, "Although Bartók later called the story marvellously beautiful, its shocking subject of crime and prostitution is often singled out in the Bartók literature as the main obstacle to the work's success."<sup>11</sup>

His insistence on this subject though he probably was aware of the staging difficulties shows that Bartók found in this textbook remarkable possibilities of innovation and a creative challenge. Gyula Harangozó mention in his notes that "the Mandarin would have been one of his favorite compositions, since the conversations about this subject could distract his sorrowful thoughts."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *idem*, p. 523.

<sup>11</sup> Lampert, Vera, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> The notes of Gyula Harangozó, "Táncművészet", febr. 1955, cited by Szabolcsi, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

Though he undertook with this subject such a creative process, which successful staging was doubtful to happen during his life, it became obvious for the posterity, that he was aware of his pantomime's importance and its necessity. Szabolcsi considers "Bartók in his first creative period until 1920 or more afterwards, maybe until the *Cantata Profana*, didn't write such a symphonic work, which could be comparable in force, courage and dramatic veracity to *Mandarin*."<sup>13</sup>

Hereinafter, we emphasize three episodes concerning *The Miraculous Mandarin*, which in our opinion properly illustrates the remarkable novelty and prefiguring character of the compositional solutions employed in this pantomime. Our examples are based on three distinct moments according to the threefold structure of the dramaturgy: the presentation of the aggressive, wild western world, the girl's metamorphose in the mirror of decoy games, and the fearful, but human presence of the Mandarin in his ecstatic dance ("The chase"). Throughout of our analysis we try to point at those composers and compositions, which show a certain affinity with this pantomime, let it be composers who lived before or after Bartók.

### Introduction

Among the stylistic elements of *The Miraculous Mandarin*, it raises above the problematic of the sonority surfaces. This consists of the mutually generative relationship between melody and harmony, thus they are organically rooted in the same phenomenon, that is to say, in an inseparable manner. The importance of the moment in the context of the sonority surface is second- or third-rate, as the verticality is not defined by a single moment, but all those musical events that are sounding together span several moments of the musical time and space. This idea appeared – not accidentally – simultaneously at Bartók, Stravinsky and Varèse, but also can be found in the works of other composers, like the fourth movement of Webern's *Six Pieces for the Orchestra* (op. 6, 1909) for example (see ex. 1).

In the above-mentioned work one can notice, as the block consists of rhythmically repeated notes is built upon a percussive noise-carpet (in the former one may recognize a later Varèse-technique), giving rise to a sonority surface.

Though many scholars considered the sonorities of the *Second Viennese School* as being the most progressive, the use of sound surfaces wasn't a characteristic of this tendency, rather appeared in the later evolving phases of the serialization. Though the *Six pieces for orchestra* is one of Webern's pre-serialization works, we can safely assert that its sonorities are much progressive than ones of his many serialization works. Namely, the series

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<sup>13</sup> Szabolcsi, Bence, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

cut up the musical structure in smaller unities, which produce frequently a contrary effect to the sonority surfaces. For these and other reasons, we consider that *The Miraculous Mandarin* as all those Varèse works, which are based on sonority surfaces, is much “modern” than those of the *Second Viennese School’s* composers’. If we also consider, that the sonority surfaces are present mainly in the first creative period of Stravinsky, we have to detail the concept of “modernity” from this perspective. First, we have to point out that “modernity” means necessarily neither atonality nor tonality in the traditional sense of the word.

Ex. 1

Anton Webern, *Six Pieces for the Orchestra*, 4<sup>th</sup> movement

The image shows a page of a musical score for Anton Webern's *Six Pieces for the Orchestra*, 4<sup>th</sup> movement. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for Flute I and II, Oboe I and II, Clarinet I and II, Bassoon I and II, Trumpet I and II, Trombone I and II, Percussion, Piano, and Tuba. The tempo is marked 'Tempo I'. The score shows a complex, rhythmic texture with many notes and rests, characteristic of Webern's style. Dynamics range from 'mf' to 'fff'. The score is written in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

In Varèse's works, like in Stravinsky's or in Bartók's the sonority surface goes hand in hand with a special type of tonality: the phenomenon of central-sound, central-interval, central-harmony or central-sonority. This means, that the above-mentioned sounding qualities have an accentuated presence related to the others, without having an increased importance. In Varèse case, the central- or pivot-note means that a melodic line is returning to the same note repeated with several rhythm formulas, thus it becomes naturally emphasized. In relation to this sound, several other sounds enter in the musical space-giving rise to complex space sonority, and in such a way, they finalize the exposition of the musical material, preparing the apparition of a new musical quality (contrast). In the case of such a sonority block, one note is giving rise to multiple notes. In the so-called dead-point moments, when the central-note is held without being rhythmically repeated, the musical material is sustained by complex percussion entries in order to prepare and calling for the phase of saturation.

The sonority surfaces are based on a simple formula, consisting of the following movements: exposition, densification or gradation, and saturation. The same scheme represented the base of Mozart's or Beethoven's music in the threefold phases of exposition-fragmentation-totalizing.

Hereinafter, we examine the presence and functioning of these basic principles in the opening of *The Miraculous Mandarin*, which musical evolution is based on a sonority surface. This opening, as it is known, sensitizes the inhumanity of the western world, so antipathetic to Bartók, which is contrasted by the composer with the chilly, but threatening character of Mandarin. This section plays an essential role in the formal architecture of the entire work, being present at the murdering attempts and having a major impact on the pantomime's prevailing atmosphere.

Contrary to Varèse's sonority surfaces, Bartók prefers the central-sounds, central-harmonies and, finally, the central-sound groups. If at Varèse the percussion entries appear in the death-point phase of sustained notes, many times similar to the alternating movements of Baroque music, in Bartók's case, there is a steady motion and the densification-saturation process produces a different effect. This conception is much closer to those of Stravinsky's, but the expositive phases are still very different.

In Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) prevails obviously the montage-technique in such a manner, that the certain montage-elements occur later simultaneously instead of their succession. The continuous shortening of the cuts and the increasing frequency of fresh musical materials occurrence suits with the densification phase, while the superposition of them represents the saturation process:

Ex. 2

Igor Stravinsky, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Première Partie,  
Les augures printaniers - Danses des adolescentes

The image shows a page of a musical score for Igor Stravinsky's 'Le Sacre du Printemps'. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in G (Cl. Ing.), Clarinet in D (Cl. ploc. (D)), Clarinet in Bb (Cl. (B)), Cor, Trumpet in C (Tr. be (C)), and Archi (Archi). A blue box highlights a passage in the Flute part starting at measure 15. A green box highlights a passage in the Clarinet in G part. A red box highlights a passage in the Archi part. There are also some handwritten annotations like 'come sopra' and 'I solo più ard.'.

In the opening of *The Miraculous Mandarin* there is no montage-technique, meanwhile the intensity of the musical work is enhanced by the immediately occurrence of superposition and the use of different musical plans already in the exposition.

1. Exposition

The first musical plan, which represents at the same time an ostinato-material, is the following:

Ex. 3

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, "Introduction", 1<sup>st</sup> plan

The image shows a single melodic line in 6/8 time, marked 'Allegro' with a tempo of quarter note = 120. The line consists of a series of seven measures, each containing a seven-note chromatic pattern. The notes are: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The pattern is repeated seven times. The first measure starts with a forte (f) dynamic. The instruction 'sempre simile' is written below the line.

The use of the obsessive repetition is very suitable for expressing an increased and embossed rhythm of life, since such an opening lead – musically speak – to a tumult. The above mentioned ostinato background sonority is based on a central-interval structure rarely used by Bartók, the augmented octave, which is an essential interval of the Bartókian chromatic<sup>14</sup> harmony conception. It

<sup>14</sup> We use this concept conform to the classification of the Hungarian musicologist Lendvai Ernő, which discerns two basic harmonic systems used by Bartók: 1. the diatonic – which represents the totality of both traditional diatonic and acoustic systems; 2. the chromatics – the totality of sound-systems based on the Fibonacci sequence, the axial system and alfa-structures. cf: Lendvai Ernő, *The Harmonic World of Bartók and Kodály*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1975.



THE PLACE OF BARTÓK'S *THE MIRACULOUS MANDARIN*...

is not only the carrier of the bi- and polytonality, but also a central-interval, since the ostinato repeating permanently emphasizes this interval.

On this plan is built on a second and a third contrasting plan. The second plan consists of a central-harmony derived by the *g-e-a sharp-d sharp* alpha sonority:

Ex. 4

**Bartók Béla, The Miraculous Mandarin, "Introduction",  
1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> plans**

2nd plan: central-harmony

Allegro  $\text{♩} = 120$

1.2. a 2

3 Flauti

3 Oboi

3 Clarinetti in Sib

3 Fagotti

Tambour picc.

Pianoforte

Violino

Violino II

Allegro  $\text{♩} = 120$

1st plan: ostinato, central-interval

This harmony alternates more and more with other harmonies; meanwhile these deflections recur to the same basic central-harmony:

Ex. 5

**Bartók Béla, The Miraculous Mandarin, Introduction,  
Deflections from the central-harmony**

Fl.

Ob.

Cl. in sib

Fg.

Tamb. picc.

Pft.

Vi. II

The *c sharp* note of the third plan, which occurs at the outset on the trombone, completes the *g-e-a sharp-d sharp* central-harmony to a more complete alpha harmony. Then, it enters in a counter-pole relationship with the bass of this harmony and with the lower note of the ostinato material:

Ex. 6

**Bartók Béla, The Miraculous Mandarin, “Introduction”, 3<sup>rd</sup> plan**

The signal-like repeating of the *c sharp* central-note rises in frequency, then two other notes will alternate with it (*e* and *d*), increasing therefore the densification and diversifying the signals:

Ex. 7

**Bartók Béla, The Miraculous Mandarin, “Introduction”**

## 2. Densification

The beginning of this phase is announced by the drastic change of the harmony content occurred in the second plan, which is transformed into an *a flat – b – e flat – g* structure (which is also a central-harmony), followed by the

Ex. 8

### Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, "Introduction"

The musical score for Bartók Béla's "Introduction" from *The Miraculous Mandarin* is presented in 6/8 time. The score includes parts for the following instruments:

- Flute (Fl.):** Features two melodic lines with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *ff*.
- Oboe (Ob.):** Features two melodic lines with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *ff*.
- Clarinet in Si (Cl. in Si):** Features two melodic lines with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *ff*.
- Bassoon (Fg.):** Features two melodic lines with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *ff*.
- Trumpet in D (Trb. in Do):** Features two melodic lines with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *f* and *ff*.
- Trombone (Trbn.):** Features two melodic lines with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *f* and *ff*.
- Piccolo (Tamb. picc.):** Features a rhythmic pattern starting with a *p* dynamic.
- Piano (Pft.):** Features a complex harmonic structure with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *f*.
- Violin I (VI. I):** Features a melodic line with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *ff*.
- Violin II (VI. II):** Features a rhythmic pattern with first and second endings, and a third ending. Dynamics include *ff*.

densification of the alternative harmonic jumps as well. Its extreme notes constitute a diminished octave just like the ostinato-plans' completing them acoustically with a chromatic solution. This may apparently lead to a decrease of the sonority intensity, but the *c sharp* centre of the third plan is completed to a *c sharp-h* central-interval.

This time the trumpet backs up the trombone.

The trombone and trumpet are moving in an *e – c sharp – d – b – c* symmetrical structure, producing meanwhile a cluster-effect, which component notes are thrown all over in the space by the composer. This is one of the first occurrences of moving cluster-structures in the music of the Twentieth-Century, which plays an essential role just in the opening of *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

The musical development presented up to this point, inevitable produces a tumult-effect, as the goal is to evoke the intensified pulsation of the metropolitan life: we recognize in it the signals of the hooters (trombone and trumpet), the rushing of masses and the mercilessness of tramping each other. Though Varèse's music also raises the metropolitan atmosphere, nevertheless, is concentrating on the grimness of the general impression. The Bartókian solution is more tinged, seizing the bustle in its aesthetical quality, expressing its suffocating, devastating force (see ex. 8).

### 3. Saturation

In the saturation phase, the rhythm is dense by the quadruplets of the horns, and the sonority is completed by the chromatics of the moving cluster. So, in this phase, the triplet, quadruplet, sextuplet, septuplet are sounding together (see ex. 9).

A somewhat similar solution is used by C. Debussy in the first movement of *La Mer* (1905), when at the end of the slow movement the lineal used musical materials are superposed in the same way as in *The Miraculous Mandarin* or in the *Le Sacre du Printemps*, working out the simultaneity of seven different rhythm pulsations (see ex. 10).

Following the saturation, there are two optimal possibilities of continuing the musical discourse: introducing a contrast, or reintroducing the same material with less density, which latter would produce a decrease in the information flow. To avoid this, Bartók subsequently diversifies the sonority surface, by the superposition of musical plans in the spirit of double counterpoint. Thus, the ostinato plan which has been populated the lower segment of the sonority surface is moved to the upper register, and, naturally, the rest of sounding materials is moved below. Besides, the ostinato-plan is transformed into a moving cluster, a phenomenon linked by the scholars with the name of Ligeti. However, as it is clearly shown in the following example, this stylistic element is already a determining component of Bartók's musical thought (see ex. 11).



Claude Debussy, La Mer, 1<sup>st</sup> mouvement, De l'aube à midi sur la mer

The image shows a page of a musical score for Claude Debussy's 'La Mer, 1st movement'. The score is for a full orchestra and includes parts for woodwinds, brass, strings, and harps. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes parts for Gdes Fl., Htb, Cor A., Cl., Bons (1<sup>o</sup> et 2<sup>o</sup>), Cors, Tromp., 1<sup>re</sup> et 2<sup>e</sup> Tromb., 3<sup>e</sup> Tromb. et Tuba, and 1<sup>re</sup> et 2<sup>de</sup> Harpes. The second system includes parts for the strings and harps. The score is annotated with several colored boxes: a blue box around the Clarinet part, a green box around the Bassoon part, a yellow box around the Horn part, a red box around the Trumpet part, and a red box around the Harp part. The score also includes dynamic markings such as *pp cresc.*, *mf*, *p*, and *ppizz.*, and performance instructions like 'sourdines à 3' and 'p soutenu et en dehors'. A rehearsal mark '8' is present at the beginning of the first system.

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, "Introduction", moving-cluster

1st plan:  
moving-cluster

3rd plan:  
central-sound

2nd plan:  
central-harmony

The image shows a page of a musical score for 'Introduction' from Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. Three specific sections are highlighted with black boxes and labeled on the left:

- 1st plan: moving-cluster:** This section is located at the top of the page, primarily involving the Flute (Fl.) and Clarinet (Cl.) parts. It features a complex, rapidly moving melodic line.
- 3rd plan: central-sound:** This section is in the middle of the page, involving the Bassoon (Fg.), Horns (Cor.), Trumpets (Trb.), and Trombones (Trbn.). It features sustained, block-like sounds.
- 2nd plan: central-harmony:** This section is at the bottom of the page, involving the Violins (Vl. I and II), Violas (Via.), and Cellos/Double Basses (Vlc.). It features a dense, harmonic texture.

Other instruments visible in the score include Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. in Bb.), Bassoon (Fg.), Horn in F (Cor. in Fa), Trumpet in D (Trb. in Do), Trombone (Trbn.), Tambourine (Tamb. gr.), Xylophone (Xyl.), and Piano (Pfl.).

Undoubtedly, *The Miraculous Mandarin* prefigures each Ligeti-, Lutosławski- and Varèse-like saturations, using these posterior solutions simultaneously. Therefore, one can speak of an advanced synthesis. All the three above mentioned saturation methods are based on the following procedure: during the musical discourse a simple, sometimes explicitly, linear material develops into a certain sonority space, while the multiplication of the moving between registers leads to the widening of the musical space. At Lutosławski, this method is functioning also by inversion or in combination, i.e. a larger sonority block is narrowing, and then expanding again. Either Ligeti or Lutosławski is taken as a starting-point, the concept of the moving cluster proves to be a basic phenomenon of such musical works.

In the case of Varèse, the flash-like entry of sustained pedals increasing in numbers shapes up a sonority space which covers huge musical spaces in extremely short periods of time. The prototype of the Varèsian saturation appears clearly in the ending section of *Hyperprism* (1923). This characteristically linear

Ex. 12

Edgar Varèse, *Hyperprism*

The image displays a page of a musical score for Edgar Varèse's *Hyperprism*. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves for different instruments. At the top left, there is a boxed number '10' and the tempo marking 'Allegro mollo'. The score includes parts for Flutes (Fl.), Clarinets (Cl. mi b), Cor Anglais (Cor en fa), Trumpets (Trpts), Trombones (T.), Percussion (P.), and Strings (Str.). The percussion section includes Snare Drum (S.D.), Bass Drum (B.D.), Tom-toms (Tomb.), Cymbals (Cr. Cymb., B. Cymb.), Triangle (T. t.), Gong (Gong), and Snare Drum (S.D.). The string section includes Violins (Vl.), Violas (Vla.), Cellos (Cl.), and Double Basses (Cb.). The score features various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'ff' and 'fff'. There are also performance instructions such as 'ouvert', 'Sans sourd.', and 'avec baguettes tambour (Très serré)'. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, and there are some markings like 'très long' indicating long notes or rests.



exposition consisting of rhythmically repeated notes (as a basic Varèsian style element) is followed by the superposition of several sustained voices, which enter with great rapidness and in extreme registers, leading finally into a brief and extensive population of musical space.

The gradual expansion of the moving clusters, and frequently their subsequent narrowing, while the chromatic rhythms<sup>15</sup> are ensuring the continuous sonority, represents the basic principle of Ligeti-like saturation. One can observe this procedure at the beginning of the *Second String Quartet* (1968), as in several other works as well. The gradual widening of the register, just as the use of progressively superposing triplet, sixteenth and sixteenth-quintuplet formulas assures the gradation and maintenance of the moving cluster's density. Sometimes, the echo-like sustained notes, which represents several elements of the given cluster – though simultaneously the articulation of the sonority and the work itself – assures on the contrasting basis of stopping moving the alternation and variety of the sounding surfaces:

Ex. 13

Ligeti György, *String Quartet No. 2*, 1st movement, *Allegro nervosa*

<sup>15</sup> Chromatic rhythm - The regular use of progressively increasing rhythm values, used originally on a wider scale by O. Messiaen. For example, a series of a quaver, dotted quaver, half note represents a chromatic rhythm. In the case of Ligeti, this concept has a quite different meaning: i.e. The progressive increase or decrease of the motion's frequency with the superposition of several rhythm groupings.

At Lutosławski, one can observe also the gradual expansion of the diapason, but contrary to Ligeti, he makes use of free rhythms and aleatory procedures, which assures the flexibility of the expansions and the sonority surfaces' of the moving clusters. A good example for this is the beginning of the *Cello Concerto* (1969-70), where the aleatory repeated *d* notes uncontrolled by their numbers represent such a reference point, in comparison with the register is widening gradually and quickly with permanently diversified tools. The returning *d* notes maintain continuously the reference-level:

Ex. 14

Witold Lutosławski, *Cello Concerto*

WITOLD LUTOSŁAWSKI (1970)

The image shows a page of musical notation for a solo cello. The score consists of ten staves of music. The first staff is marked 'VC. solo' and begins with a tempo marking '♩ = ca 141'. Several notes in the first staff are circled in red. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *p*, *pp*, *mp*, *mf*, and *f*. Performance instructions include 'p indifferente', 'grazioso', 'un poco buffo ma con eleganza', 'poco accel.', 'a tempo', 'sub. pp ritardando', 'sub. mf marciale', 'poco più mosso ♩ = ca 112', 'poco accel.', '♩ = ca 144', and 'tempo primo indifferente'. The score ends with a final tempo marking '♩ = ca 144'.

Before the musical tools are being exhausted, enter the brass-lines keeping in such a way the movement of the cluster sonorities. All of them are repeating aleatory two notes with register changes, with two sorts of rhythmic values and with an undetermined caesura (a sixteenth-rest with hold), which assures the de-synchronization. This is necessary because the homogenous sonority space is much more held together by the freedom of its components:

Witold Lutosławski, *Cello Concerto*

The opening of the *Miraculous Mandarin* uses all three sorts of saturation simultaneously. Thus, the signal-sounds rhythmically repeated in space denotes Varèsian principles, the different rhythm-structures synchronically used prefigures the chromatic rhythm of Ligeti, as the gradual expansion of sound systems, the modification of central-harmonies and the multiplication of certain central-sounds is going toward Lutosławski's musical thought.

**The Decoy Game**

While Lengyel focused on the Mandarin's character, almost neglecting the girl, Bartók uses just the latter in order to dissolve the fearful tension between the two forces in the spirit of a deeper metamorphosis. As Kroó formulated "Bartók transformed a street-walker into the heroine of his pantomime."<sup>16</sup> One of the major artistic achievements of *The Miraculous Mandarin* resides exactly in

<sup>16</sup> Kroó György, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

the endowment of this sketchy text-book with a deeper musical meaning in such a way, that the musical images of the characters or symbols always gain an aesthetical value in the context of their otherness. Therefore, the three decoy games and their related dance-movements contribute in each case by their particularities to the shaping of girl's character. Her character musically shaped in this pantomime is attached with complicated threads not only to the two forces, but also the two episodic figures projects indirectly her ambiguous situation. While in the initial moments of urging her theme is identifying with those of the tramps, her sloping melody calls our attention (musically speak) to her disagreement. The decoy games and the following dances show in many nuanced ways her internal metamorphose: the almost grotesque situation of her defenselessness and the pure, innocent love suppressed into the depths of her heart.

The use of rubato-element has been proven extremely useful to express the eroticism of the cheating-moments and to substantiate the internal transformation of the Girl. The third decoy game clashes significantly from the preceding ones, since we hear only some scraps of the decoy-motif, as the forced eroticism of the lure is coupled with frightening. After the decoys, the shaping of her character comes to an end, as her destiny is already sealed: on the one hand, she cuts herself adrift from the tramps (monopolizing their common musical motif), on the other, she involuntarily recognizes – amidst her fluctuating feelings between fear and attraction – her redeeming mission in the tragedy of the Mandarin.

Let's examine briefly one of the *decoy game's* sections: the clarinet solo. Albeit this passage is based on determined rhythm values, it is clear, that we are talking about a totally rubato, which is indicated expressly by the musical score. Here, the rhythm values represent rather approximate, then precise relationships. The frequently used *ritardandos* and tempo changes are significant in this sense. The gradual expansion of the sound system – which is based both on distance and acoustic principles, as the chromatic is combined all the time with the diatonic – gives rise to a very special melody. We have to consider once more, that the gradual expansion of the sound system is not an achievement of the late Twentieth-Century music, since – as it can be seen – it has a multiple presence in *The Miraculous Mandarin*. However, those of fourths replace the fifth sonorities, the acoustic character remains. One of the main components of the melody, the central-note, is enforced as a counter-pole by the pedal (*c sharp-g*), calling forth to an acoustic sonority (*c sharp – g – a*):

Ex. 16

**Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, 1<sup>st</sup> decoy game**

zögernd zum Fenster.  
 s'itation s'instante à la fenêtre.  
 to the window.

calmandosi... (♩ = 96) Moderato (♩ = 116) 13 Rubato  
 (1. Lockspiel)  
 (1<sup>st</sup> jeu de séduction)  
 (1<sup>st</sup> decoy game)

Cl. in La  
 Cl. basso in La  
 Fg.  
 Cor. in Fa  
 Trbn.  
 Tb.  
 Vl. I  
 Vlc.

poco rit. a tempo 14 agitato (*quasi più mosso*)

A similarly conceived rubato melody based on the central-sound – central-harmony technique appears at the beginning of I. Stravinsky's masterwork, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, on the bassoon:

Ex. 17

**Igor Stravinsky, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Première Partie, L'adoration de la Terre, Introduction**

Lento ♩ = 50 tempo rubato

Clarinetti (A)  
 Clarinetto basso (B)  
 Fagotti  
 Corni (F)

colla parte  
 solo ad lib.

1

There are several examples for the blending of acoustic- and distance-based materials in the decoy games. We quote below one of them:

Ex. 18

**Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, 1<sup>st</sup> decoy game**

The musical score shows three staves: Cl. in La (top), Cl. basso in La (middle), and Vlc. (bottom). The top staff has a melodic line with a large arch and chromatic descent. The middle and bottom staves provide harmonic support. Above the staves, the tempo markings are 'a tempo poco rit.', 'a tempo', and 'sempre piu agitato'. A box containing the number '15' is placed above the first measure of the second system.

As we already said, the chromatic in the strict sense of the word, which derives from the world of cluster-sonorities, is also an essential element. This huge melodic arch based on the sudden blending and richness of the sonority systems, as on the obsessively repeated chromatic motives of the Arabian pipes can be described really with a single word: enchantment.

The gradual expansion of the melodic arch in the already cited *decoy game* solo, which circumscribes the sonorities at the same time (namely gradually extending sonorities) it, prefigures a Lutosławskian principle. The huge difference resides in the rubato. That is to say, Lutosławski does not make use of such a rubato. In his case, the rubato is attained with the employment of the aleatory freeness, although most formulas used by him in aleatory are giusto formulas. Nevertheless, the rhythmical restrictions derived from using giusto formulas are liberated by the already mentioned, undefined lengthy caesuras.

***The Chase (Mandarin's dance)***

The musical materials cited up to this point, their richness and variety denote a vision opposed to a monothematic thought. Thus, it seems to be natural, that Bartók sought the possibility of a contrast, in order to increase the musical coherence of his work. However, the monothematic construction – present in “The chase” – offers such a solution not only from a pure musical, but also from a dramaturgical point of view. So, in order to emphasize the distinctness of Mandarin's character, Bartók employs it beside detune a pentatonic structure and the minor-third motif. The monothematic construction naturally asks for the use of *fugato*-technique. György Kroó “the chase”, which terminologically is related to the signification of fugue, calls this section of the pantomime.

THE PLACE OF BARTÓK'S *THE MIRACULOUS MANDARIN*...

The theme of this *fugato* evokes categorically the melodic turns of Arabian folklore. However, the rich percussion background as a well-known characteristic of Northern-African popular music is evoked here less with percussion, as with melodic instruments, which are imitating percussion-effects. In this *fugato*, the themes are used somewhat freer, to facilitate – suchlike a pretext – for densification purposes. The background sonority is based on an *a-e flat-a* central-harmony, which prepares the entry of the *fugato*-theme with the *a* central-sound. This pole-anti pole relationship shows clearly the presence of the axis system, contrary to the fourth and fifth relationships of the traditional *fugato* and fugue structures (score fragment):

Ex. 19

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, “The C chase”

The second thematic entry occurs on the upper minor third (c central-note), which is a characteristic interval of the axis system (score fragment):

Ex. 20

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, “The chase”

By the way, we mention that the minor-third leitmotiv of the Mandarin is being built on the linking materials. This appears in a diminished form, in the root position and inverted, varied naturally with *glissandos* and coloring notes (score fragment):

Ex. 21

**Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, “The chase”**

Musical score fragment for Ex. 21, showing staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabasso. A red box highlights a specific melodic phrase in the Violin I and II staves.

The third thematic entry on the *f sharp* central-note represents the counter-pole of the *c* central-note, so the relationships of the thematic entrances are unambiguously determined by the axis system (score fragment):

Ex. 22

**Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, “The chase”**

Musical score fragment for Ex. 22, showing staves for Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet in Bb, Clarinet in Eb, Bassoon, and Contrabasso. A red box highlights a specific melodic phrase in the Clarinet in Bb and Clarinet in Eb staves.

The *c* central-note of the trumpets, English horn and clarinets, as the fourth thematic entry, indicate the axial relationships as well (score fragment):

Ex. 23

**Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, “The chase”**

Musical score fragment for Ex. 23, showing staves for Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet in Bb, Clarinet in Eb, Bassoon, Contrabasso, English Horn, Trumpet in D, and Trombone. A red box highlights a specific melodic phrase in the Clarinet in Bb and Clarinet in Eb staves.



THE PLACE OF BARTÓK'S *THE MIRACULOUS MANDARIN*...

This series of entrances is broken by a fifth thematic entry, which steps out from the axial system: though it is based on the *f* central-note, it remains in acoustic relationship with the last thematic entry (*c-f*) (score fragment):

Ex. 24

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, "The Chase"

The mixtures that accompany the theme are continually growing in density, until the fugato is broken into a block-like horizontal polyphony, based on a short imitation material:

Ex. 25

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, "The Chase"

“The chase”, as an axial fugato structure, which shows a gradually expansion of sonority anticipates a Lutoslawskian technique, as the solo discourse of the two trombones, which precedes this section, is realized in the spirit of the chromatic rhythm<sup>17</sup>, known as a basic Ligeti-principle:

Ex. 26

Bartók Béla, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, “The Chase”

The musical score for "The Chase" from Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* features several instruments. The woodwinds (Flute I, Clarinet in B-flat, and Clarinet in A) play intricate rhythmic patterns with triplets and sixteenth notes. The brass section (Trumpet in D and Trombone) has parts with first and second endings, including a section for the trombone marked "2. con sord.". The Cymbal part is marked with a tremolo. The strings (Violin I and Violin II) play a moving cluster. The tempo is marked "al (♩ = 132)".

Nevertheless, the moving cluster, which accompanies the discourse of trombones, is a certain forerunner of some Ligeti-sonorities present in works like *Continuum* for harpsichord (1968) or *Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet* (1953).

<sup>17</sup> The simultaneous movement of sixteenths and quaver-triplets along with the quaver formulas of the trombones confirms the presence of this phenomenon.

## Conclusions

*The Miraculous Mandarin* takes a special place in Bartók's oeuvre, and one can safely assert that this pantomime is a masterwork of the Twentieth-Century music. A major creative merit of this output resides in the firm expression of a pure world-ideal in his very confused times, by evoking the musical and aesthetical treasures of the East, of the folklore music, which provided to his music a special deepness, originality and straightness. Thus, the language of Bartók would not become similar to his contemporaries, as his creative attitude was based on a double foundation. On the one hand, he had a critical look on the western artistic attitudes, on the other, he proved to be capable of filter-out every valuable element for his own music. As it has been cleared out of our considerations, the *Miraculous Mandarin* not only synthesizes the most progressive musical techniques of his times, but also makes use – in some cases simultaneously – of such a solution, which has been completed by the later avant-garde oriented composers like Varèse, Lutosławski or Ligeti. Though the concept of the exposition, densification and saturation process was given to a certain extent, in some former compositional traditions (for example in the Classical threefold phase of exposition, fragmentation, totalizing), Bartók employs this technique in a special manner, combining it with novel creative devices like the central-elements, the moving cluster or the rubato.

Finally, let us make some brief considerations about Bartók's relationship with his contemporaries. We don't know, if Th. W. Adorno, the eminent representative of the avant-garde musicology, have heard *The Miraculous Mandarin*. In any case, Adorno received his folklore-based music with a skeptical attitude. Thus, as the Transylvanian aesthetician, István Angi set forth<sup>18</sup>, Adorno couldn't find a place for the Bartókian music in his black-white aesthetical system. This is somehow natural, regarding his aesthetical thought, which divides music in two extremely different attitudes: the progression at any price and the valueless repeating of the musical past. The music of Bartók represents in this instance a creative middle way. His critique, formulated about the idol of his youth, Richard Strauss, is eloquent concerning his artistic statement, which queries at the same time all kinds of music inconsequent in expressing its message: "after Salome Electra is a disappointment ... . But one thing I cannot understand in these and other Strauss works: how can get on somebody, who has so many interesting things to say, to express so-called sublime emotions in such a shallow, tepid Kapellmeister-music?"<sup>19</sup>

Concerning the music of two other contemporaries, Bartók remained open, but he could not follow them only to a certain extent. As the mature works of Schoenberg he found interesting, he could not accept his speculative musical

<sup>18</sup> Angi István, *The aesthetical antinomies of Adorno in the mirror of the Frankfurt School's outcomes*, in: *Papers on musicology*, vol. 10-11, Cluj, 1979, pp. 45-63.

<sup>19</sup> Bartók's critique of R. Strauss's *Elektra* published in the 1910 April issue of "Zene"; cited by Szabolcsi, Bence, *op. cit.*, p. 529.

system, and in general the folklore-repudiating attitude of the Second Viennese School. I. Stravinsky's masterworks also aroused his interest, but his *l'art pour l'art* attitude and demagogical slogans were far away from him. It seems to be certitude, that Bartók does not consider the innovation with any price as a major goal of his creative mission. Just *The Miraculous Mandarin* makes us to discover that extraordinary steadiness, emphasized by him all time in the relationship between message and expression. Since the storming energy of this work arose in the strictest sense of the word from his inward, producing such style elements, which would be proven by greatly to the extremist avant-garde composers credit. Thus, instead of sonorous manifests, the music of *The Miraculous Mandarin* bears beside all its fearfulness and wildness something fascinating. The pantomime's unique place in his oeuvre illustrates that he did not intentioned to degrade it to a stereotype. Such were born, as a continuation of his internal fight for humanity, but deeply reformulated, the much austere and nevertheless sublime music of *Cantata Profana*, will regain its eternal peacefulness in the hymn remembrance of the *Third Piano Concerto's* forest prayer.

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