

Bela Bartok

Background

Bela Bartok (1881-1945) has a distinctive musical style which has its roots in folk music. His compositions range from the aggressively energetic to slow and austere, creating a unique twentieth-century take on the folk music that inspired him.

His music is very contrapuntal and based on a range of folk and synthetic scales. He wrote a large number of pieces for beginners that explore his musical language in a relatively simple context, which is very useful both for understanding his more complex compositions and also for finding ideas that you can use.

Song of the Harvest (violin duet)

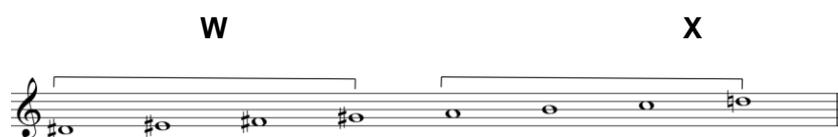
Like many of Bartok's compositions, this simple duet is quite systematic in the way it is written, exploring the octatonic scale (see below) and also various different contrapuntal textures.

Inspiration: counterpoint based on octatonic scale

The octatonic scale is made up of alternating tones and semitones and composers have explored it in many different ways (see notes on Messiaen in this section and also the handout on alternative scales -

http://moodle1.kedst.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/35835/mod_resource/content/0/Alternative_scales.pdf)

Bartok is interested in this piece in exploring the way in which the octatonic scale divides into two identical four-note segments (or tetrachords) marked W and X in this octatonic scale on D#:



Bartok often explores symmetrical patterns such as this and in the Harvest Song, he gives each violin one of the tetrachords as in this opening idea (A):





at King Ed's

Bela Bartok

In the next section (**B**) Bartok uses a different octatonic scale starting on G#, again giving one tetrachord to each of the violins. Rather than the freer contrapuntal writing of the A section, Bartok uses strict imitation in this section, imitating at the interval of a tritone to keep within the octatonic scale. This is the beginning of the B section, which continues on the next line.

Notice how Bartok is not really worrying too much about the harmony, concentrating more on line. He lets the imitation take care of the harmonic details and the relationship between the two tetrachords take care of the overall harmonic effect.

The table below shows how the whole duet works (see score in this folder), including the initial A and B sections shown above. Note how Bartok finishes the duet with the more 'natural' Dorian mode, which resolves the tensions of the octatonic scale with its two tetrachords a tritone apart.

A	1-5	Octatonic scale on D#	Free counterpoint
B	6-15	Octatonic scale on G#	Imitation at distance of a bar
A'	16-20	Octatonic scale on B	First violin plays inversion of second violin part from beginning and second violin plays inversion of first violin part from the beginning
B'	21-29	Octatonic scale on A	Same idea as b. 6 but imitation is two beats closer
A	30-33	Ab Dorian mode	As opening



at King Ed's

Bela Bartok

Whole tone from Mikrokosmos

Inspiration: counterpoint based on whole-tone scale

In this piano piece, which is part of a series written for students, Bartok explores the whole-tone scale in a similar contrapuntal fashion. Where Debussy and other composers quite often use one of the two whole-tone scales to create an ambiguous harmonic wash, Bartok combines segments of both scales to create a very different effect. In the first three sections of this piece, he develops the piece as follows:

- **A** - first introduces whole tone scale one (WT1) before shadowing the same melody in thirds in bar 7 using WT2.
- **B** - introduces a new melodic idea, again in thirds and with WT1 in right hand and WT2 in left
- **A'** – back to the original melody but this time using imitation and with WT1 in both hands.

WT1

WT2



A WT1

B

A'



at King Ed's

Bela Bartok

Bartok continues in a similar vein for the rest of the piece (see folder). See if you can work out what he is doing in each section.

ACTION: try using segments of octatonic and/or whole tone scales, concentrating on contrapuntal writing rather than harmony. Don't worry too much about dissonance, try imitation at different intervals (i.e. starting a fifth apart or a second apart etc.) and using different segments and see how it works out.

When Bartok uses imitation the new part is often in inversion, contrary motion or retrograde (backwards) in relation to the original. Bartok sometimes increases or decreases the note lengths as well (augmentation and diminution).

String Quartet No. 4

This is more substantial than the two short pieces analysed above and is one of Bartok's most fiercely modern and dissonant works. There are many aspects of this piece that you could explore, some of which are highlighted below. If you are interested, you should listen to the whole piece with the score and see what else seems interesting and inspiring.

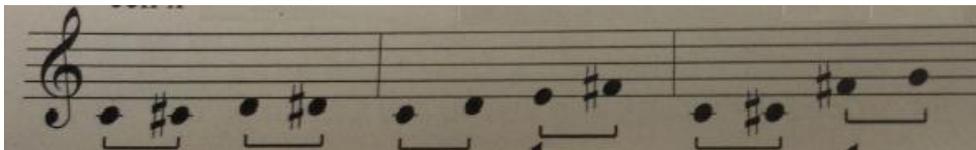
Inspiration: symmetrical cells

The first movement is highly chromatic with lots of contrapuntal writing. The very dissonant harmony mostly arises from this counterpoint and there are particular motifs that recur both as chords and as melodies. These motifs are called cells and there are three that appear particularly often both in this piece and others. Bartok was very interested in symmetry and his cells are all made up of two pairs arranged symmetrically:

X

Y

Z



Two pairs of
semitones

Two pairs of
tones

Two pairs of
semitones

Over the page are some examples near the beginning of the first movement of these cells. This is by no means the only thing going on in this music, which is dominated by imitative entries, particularly from bar 5. If you listen to the rest of the quartet, you will hear that the presentation of cell X in bar 7 is an important motif throughout the whole work.



at King Ed's

Bela Bartok

Inspiration: 'night music'

The third movement of the fourth string quartet is very different and follows a style that Bartok uses in a number of pieces that is sometimes called 'night music'. It is characterised by relatively diatonic but dissonant held chords forming the backdrop to rhapsodic solos that are part folk inspired and also recall natural sounds like bird song. Notice how at the beginning of this movement, Bartok also plays with the difference between vibrato and non-vibrato in the accompaniment.

Opening of third movement

Non troppo lento. ♩. 60

non vibrato *pp* vibrato

non vibrato *pp* non vibrato *pp* vibrato

vibrato

5

(sempre vibr.)

p esp.

Bela Bartok

Inspiration: experimental use of string techniques

Bartok's made much more use of special playing techniques in his quartets than previous composers in this genre including:

- Glissando (sliding)
- Ponticello (playing on the bridge to get a thin, harsh sound)
- 'Bartok' pizz (pinched pizzicato causing the string to slap back onto the fingerboard)

The first two of these can be heard in this extract from the end of the second movement, but note also his use of trills, double stopping and harmonics, as well as extreme dynamics in this fast and furious movement:



B & H 9043