

Bartók's Hidden Narrative: The Composer’s Recordings of 15 Hungarian Peasant Songs

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Bartók’s Performing Style

In Bartók’s recordings of his compositions, there is a considerable gap between the written notes and the musical sounds. This is also characteristic of twentieth-century recordings by other composer-performers, like Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Francis Poulenc.¹ However, the gap is particularly significant in Bartók’s renditions. Bartók believed that conventional musical notation was unable to express his exact intentions; hence the advantages of recording over written composition, especially when a composer performs his own work. This view is articulated clearly in his article “Mechanical Music”:

It is a well-known fact that our notation on music paper records more or less inadequately the idea of the composer; hence the existence of contrivances with which one can record precisely every intention and idea of the composer is indeed of great importance.²

Bartók’s recordings of his compositions are invaluable documentations of his unique performing style and its characteristics, which cannot be deduced from the scores—especially when these are interpreted according to modern conventions. Bartók and his contemporaries in fact anticipated certain practices that might seem to us conventions in light of contemporary piano performance—like deviations from the score. By analyzing two of Bartók’s own recordings of Pieces 7-10, 12, 14, 15 from *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* for piano (1914-18, BB 79/Sz 71), this paper argues that Bartók conceived the sequence of arrangements as a narrative process. Each individual piece has its own musical character, necessitating a particular performing style or a particular way of deviating from written notation. My goal in this paper is to unmask the narrative qualities of Bartók’s performance style and to evaluate his aesthetics in the light of the narrative approach.

Bartók’s performing style is characterized by tempo fluctuations, rhythmic flexibility, and agogic accents. However, this study reveals that apparent discrepancies or deviations from the notation are never accidental, but rather constitute an integral part of his performing style. Moreover, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pianism, a performance without these deviations would have

¹ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91-92.

² Béla Bartók, “Mechanical Music” (1937). In *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 289-98.

been considered “intolerably monotonous, [and] absurdly pedantic,”³ according to Ignacy Paderewski, one of the foremost pianists of that period. Paderewski emphasizes the improvisatory nature of piano performance as another outstanding feature of the pianism of his era: “...A great artist’s performance of a noble work ought to sound like spontaneous improvisation...”⁴ It must be noted that an improvisatory approach—such as described by Paderewski—is a prominent characteristic of Bartók’s own performing style; in this respect, Bartók is a typical representative of late Romantic pianism, which emphasized the expression of the musical text rather than the accuracy of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics.

Bartók the Pianist

During the 1920s and 1930s, Bartók became increasingly significant in Hungary and throughout Western Europe, not only as a composer but also as a concert pianist. He went on dozens of concert tours all over the continent and three tours to the United States (to which he immigrated in 1940), enjoying wide—though by no means universal—acclaim.⁵ Players, conductors, and scholars—both among his contemporaries and in later generations—have expressed admiration for Bartók’s performance style, especially of his own works. András Schiff, one of the distinguished present-day interpreters of Bartók’s piano compositions,⁶ described the composer’s playing as “unbelievably lyrical and romantic, tender and rhythmically subtle.” He especially points out Bartók’s style of playing chords: “The way he arpeggiates them is very distinctive; he very seldom plays chords together.” Here Schiff emphasizes one of Bartók’s most characteristic performance practices, especially in his Romantic and Classical repertoire. In the 1940 Library of Congress recording of Beethoven’s *Kreutzer Sonata* (with József Szigeti on the violin),⁷ he played almost every chord in the opening theme of the *Andante con Variazioni* movement with a slight arpeggio. Arpeggiated chords were also a common feature of the late Romantic pianism.⁸

The conductor Otto Klemperer vividly described Bartók’s unique rhythmical style of playing in *Piano Concerto No. 2*:

He was a wonderful pianist and musician. The beauty of his tone, the energy and lightness of his playing were unforgettable. It was almost

³ Timothy Day, *A Century of Recorded Music: Listening to Musical History* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2000), 154.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁵ János Demény, “The Pianist.” In *The Bartók Companion*, ed. Malcolm Gillies (London: Faber & Faber), 64-78.

⁶ András Schiff, notes to the album *Schiff Plays Bartók* (Denon HCD B0000034MC, 1993).

⁷ László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (Budapest: Hungaroton HCD 12326-31, 1991), CD No. 5.

⁸ Vera Lampert, “Bartók at the Piano: Lessons from the Composer’s Sound Recordings.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 237-38.

painfully beautiful. He played with great freedom, which was what was so wonderful.⁹

Robert Philip notes that, as in many of his other recordings, Bartók’s rhythmic flexibility in the 1929 HMV recording of *Allegro Barbaro* “... suggests the swirl and fluidity of dance much more vividly than the more controlled clarity of modern performance.”¹⁰ Regarding the first movement of *Suite*, Op. 14 (also recorded in 1929), Philip notes that the “... slurred groups of semiquavers in the opening theme are played as fast and light swirls, again suggesting dance movement.”¹¹ This rhythmic elasticity, a typical feature of Bartók’s recordings, is part of the informality and rhetorical unpredictability that characterizes early twentieth-century playing.¹²

However, Bartók’s performances were not always favorably received. For example, a recital held in London on Friday, 24 March 1922 drew extreme reactions from critics.¹³ In his review of the recital in *The Observer* (26 March 1922), Percy Scholes wrote:

This great and much-misunderstood composer gave a recital on Friday, and I am one of those who misunderstood him!... [there was] a hard, cold rattle of a keyboard, violently attacked in chance combinations of keys and notes, with the stiffened metal muscles of a jerkily rhythmic automaton.

Another controversial aspect of Bartók’s playing was the contradiction between his performance style and the meticulous notational instructions, especially concerning articulations and dynamics, included in some of his scores and in four of his performing editions of keyboard compositions by Bach and Beethoven.¹⁴ This contradiction stimulated a discussion on Bartók’s attitude to the performer’s relationship with the musical score. The conductor Antal Dorati—Bartók’s former student at the music academy in Budapest, who recorded most of Bartók’s orchestral works¹⁵—states that although he was meticulous in marking his scores, “Bartók was very liberal in accepting liberties dictated by the performer’s temperament and never expected great consistency in tempi, dynamics, etc.”¹⁶

Bartók expressed his view of his own performing style in the article “Mechanical Music” (1937).¹⁷ In spite of his belief that, in the spirit of late Romantic

⁹ Hamish Milne, *Bartók* (London: Omnibus Press, 1987), 67.

¹⁰ Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2004), 173.

¹¹ Robert Philip, “Pianists on Record in the Early Twentieth Century.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano*, ed. David Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 82.

¹² Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (above, n. 1), 5-70, 92-93.

¹³ Malcolm Gillies, “Bartók in Britain: 1922,” in *Music and Letters* 63 (1982): 213-25.

¹⁴ See the Preface and the Appendix to Bach, *Das wohltemperierte Klavier, Bd. 1* (R.k.246), 1907; the “Zeichenerklärung” to each sonata in Beethoven, *Sonaten für Pianoforte* (Rv. 3281, etc.), 1909; the new Appendix to the “revised second edition” of Bach, *Das wohltemperierte Klavier, Bd. 1* (R.k.246), ±1913; the Preface to the twelve pieces selected from Bach, *Notenbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach* (Rv. 3681), 1916.

¹⁵ *Bartók: Orchestral Works*, conducted by Antal Dorati (Mercury Living Presence Audio dc, 2004).

¹⁶ Marilyn M. Garst, “How Bartók Performed his own Compositions,” in *Tempo* 155 (1985): 15-21.

¹⁷ Béla Bartók, “Mechanical Music” (above, n. 2), 289-98.

pianism, every performance of the composition should sound different,¹⁸ he was very enthusiastic regarding the possibility of preserving personal interpretations—that is, the composer’s interpretation—of some of his compositions to the listeners through his recording:

Recordings [offer] the possibility for composers to pass on to the world their compositions not only as musical scores but in the form of their personal appearance or in a presentation which conforms to their ideas.¹⁹

Yet, significantly, Bartók adds an interesting reservation in the same paragraph, indicating his awareness of the notion that no single interpretation, even his own, could be the only ideal representation of a work. He thereby reveals his tolerant attitude toward other musicians’ performances of his compositions:

Therefore, even if one succeeded in perfectly preserving with a perfect process a composer’s works according to his own idea at a given moment, it would not be advisable to listen to these compositions perpetually like that. Because it would cover the composition with boredom. Because it is conceivable that the composer himself would have performed his compositions better or less well at some other time....²⁰

Taking all these diverse aspects of Bartók’s renditions into consideration, I present my analysis of his two recordings of *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* for piano, using two sources as raw materials for this study: the written notes of his arrangements, as documented in the published editions,²¹ and his realizations of the same pieces in performance, as documented in his sound recordings.²² Several scholars and performers have already argued that a proper understanding of Bartók’s notation must take into account his surviving sound recordings.²³ This paper aims further to enhance the arguments for this view.

¹⁸Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (above, n. 10), 22.

¹⁹ Béla Bartók, “Mechanical Music” (above, n. 2), 298

²⁰ Ibid., 298.

²¹Béla Bartók, *15 Ungarische Bauernlieder* (Wien: Universal Edition nr. 6370, 1920); Neuausgabe/New Edition 1994 Revision of UE nr. 6370: Peter Bartók.

²²See in László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (above, n. 7), CD No. 1.

²³ See “The Significance of Bartók’s own Recordings,” in László Somfai, *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 279-95; László Somfai, “The Centenary Edition of Bartók’s Records,” in *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945*, ed. László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (above, n. 7), 19-32 (commentaries); Victoria Fischer, “Piano Music: Teaching Pieces and Folksong Arrangements,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 92-103; Vera Lampert, “Bartók at the Piano: Lessons from the Composer’s Sound Recordings” (above, n. 8), 231-42; Ron Atar, “Form Created by Performance: Bartók’s Recording of his *Improvisation* op. 20,” *Studia Musicologica* 48 (2007):103-111.

The Significance of Bartók’s Recordings of the 15 Hungarian Peasant Songs

15 Hungarian Peasant Songs was one of the few compositions Bartók recorded twice. Although the two recordings—by Welte (New York, 1928)²⁴ and by Patria (Budapest, 1936)²⁵—were made eight years apart, they share many characteristics. As noted above, Bartók accepted the view that a composition is rewritten in every performance. However, the similarity between the performance styles documented in the two recordings—notwithstanding the eight-year gap between them—can facilitate the formulation of a clear view of Bartók’s performing style. In addition, these recordings reveal Bartók’s attitude toward his folk song arrangements: his approach to performing these pieces is clearly influenced by his belief in their artistic value and in their importance within his *oeuvre*.

Bartók’s arrangements, as represented by his notation, seem to suggest that he did not want to interfere with the simplicity of the folk songs in this collection, and tried to preserve the peasant songs’ original rustic ambience. He did so in two different ways: by remaining very faithful to the original songs, by refraining from adding any introductions or endings to these pieces despite their brevity, and by introducing minimal performance instructions into the notated score. In most of the pieces, instructions appear only next to the first measure of the piece. Furthermore, he did not include any transitional sections within or between the arrangements (with the exception of Pieces 7 and 14).

However, in both recordings, through his interpretation, Bartók changed this apparently simple, unassuming sequence of discrete arrangements into a continuous cycle of short, expressive concert pieces. This continuity was achieved, *inter alia*, by omitting Pieces 11 and 13 from the written sequence and thus shortening the movement entitled “Old Dance Tunes.”²⁶ Table 1 below shows that this omission strengthens the overall organization of the fourth movement, and does not affect the overall modal organization. In his rendition (see Table 2 below for the organization of scales), Bartók creates a much more concise and effective work than the composition in its written form (see Table 1 below).²⁷ In this new sequence, Pieces 7, 8, 12 and 14

²⁴ The correction of the dating from c. 1920 in Berlin to 1928 in New York, and the type of recording—studio recording instead of piano-roll recording—as printed in the László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (above, n. 7), CD No.1, is first presented in László Somfai’s study, “Written and Performed Form in Bartók’s Piano Works of 1915-1920,” in *Music as Text—Bericht den International Congress der Gesellschaft für Musikforschung* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1993), 103-107. The other recording (Patria-Budapest, 1936) is also a studio recording. Both recordings are in relatively good technical condition.

²⁵ Both recordings are included in László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (above, n. 7), CD No. 1.

²⁶ The four movements of the setting are: Four Old Tunes (Pieces 1-4), Scherzo (Piece 5), Ballad (Piece 6) and Old Dance Tunes (Pieces 7-15).

²⁷ We should keep in mind Bartók’s general habit of selecting, cutting, and mixing movements from longer sets into colorful blocks in his recitals and recordings. For instance, in the first public performance of the *Fourteen Bagatelles* Op. 6 in Hungary (Budapest, 19 March 1910), he played the sequence of pieces omitting nos. 6, 8, 11 and 13. See Victoria Fischer, “Bartók’s Fourteen Bagatelles Op. 6, for Piano,” in *Bartók Perspectives: Man, Composer, Ethnomusicologist*, ed. Elliott Antokoletz, Victoria Fischer & Benjamin Suchoff (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 274; László Somfai, “Experimenting with Folk Music-Based Concert Sets: Béla Bartók’s Arrangements Reconsidered,” in *Melos* 12-13 (1995): 66-76.

are symmetrically organized around a single three-part unit (in which Pieces 9-10-9 are played in this order). Piece 15 functions as a separate unit at the end, and is played as a rapid suite of bagpipe dances. In the recordings, Bartók does not follow his own written tempos and performance instructions. Instead, he creates a coherent sequence by alternating pieces played in a dramatic manner—which can be described as a vigorous or brilliant performance style (Pieces 7, 9 and 15)—with pieces performed in more delicate and expressive style (which I defined with the term *dolce*), as illustrated in Table 2 below.²⁸

Table 1 Performance instructions and tempo organization in Pieces 7-15 (“Old Dance Tunes”) according to the published score

No.	Piece 7	Piece 8	Pieces 9-10-9	Piece 11	Pieces 12-13-12	Piece 14	Piece 15
Key	C Dorian	G Dorian	E-B-E Dorian	A Dorian	A-D-A Aeolian	C sharp Phrygian	B flat Mixolydian, Ionian
Tempo and Performance Instructions	Allegro	Allegretto	Allegretto- L’istesso Tempo- Allegretto	Assai Moderato	Allegretto- Poco piu vivo- Allegretto	Allegro	Allegro

Table 2 The new organization of Pieces 7-15 (“Old Dance Tunes”) according to Bartók’s recordings

No.	Piece 7	Piece 8	Pieces 9-10-9	Piece 12	Piece 14	Piece 15
Key	C Dorian	G Dorian	E-B-E Dorian	A Aeolian	C sharp Phrygian	B flat Mixolydian, Ionian
Performing Style	Vigorous/ brilliant performance style	Dolce	Vigorous/ brilliant performance style (9)– Dolce (10)- vigorous/ brilliant performance style (9)	Dolce	Dolce	Vigorous/ brilliant performance style

The tables above, however, only offer a generalized description of Bartók’s performance style. In order to offer a more detailed and comprehensive understanding, this paper will present analyses of several representative pieces from the collections (nos. 12, 10 and 7), and their role within the overall sequence. These analyses were informed by a narrative approach to analysis, and employ the empirical tools offered by the Sonic Visualiser computer program. This dual methodological framework is presented below.

²⁸ Listening to Bartók’s recordings together with the notes reveals that the performance instructions “Dolce,” “con sentimento,” “tranquillo,” and obviously “espressivo” imply a rhythmically unrestricted and expressive performance style. For further discussion about the meaning of these performance instructions and rubato instructions in Bartók’s performances, see in László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (above, n. 7), 30.

Method

1) The Narrative Approach

In this article, I adapt Anthony Newcomb’s term “narrative approach” (see explanation below) to describe the representation of a musical composition as a sequence of musical characters that continually change as the composition unfolds in time. Newcomb’s terminology, conceived in the context of analyzing musical composition, is here adapted to the analysis of musical performance.

A unique characteristic of Bartók’s piano playing is that every musical character is represented by a different style of performance. The alternations between these performance styles are what make Bartók’s performances of these compositions so vibrant and appealing. Moreover, this constant shifting between performance styles, that I will term the narrative performance style, serves to lead the listener through a micro-drama of associations, and to merge the individual songs and pieces into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Narrativity is considered “an important avenue to the understanding of much of nineteenth-century music.”²⁹ Moreover, the strong connections between the literature and the music of the nineteenth century serve to support the definition of music as a narrative, as a “composed novel, as a “psychologically true course of ideas.”³⁰ This applies not only to the written music of the nineteenth century, but also to Bartók’s personal and unique performance style, which evolved from late Romantic pianism.³¹

Newcomb—who is perhaps the most influential musicologist to draw on narratology in his analysis—claims that narrative aspects in music relate directly to the extramusical world, even though their expression is purely musical.³² He suggests a type of narratology—originating in the reader or the listener—that includes a series of strategies through which the listener recognizes, locates, and interprets various aspects of music. The explanations and definitions draw on the listener’s—or the performer’s—emotional world of associations, receiving a musical identity.

In Bartók’s recordings, this mode of interpretation was possible thanks to an impressive assortment of musical characters, easily identifiable through consistent repetition. Every musical character has its own distinct performing practice and style. For instance, the character who is “a bit drunk” is reflected in an unsteady rhythmic texture, bringing to mind the image of a person walking in uneven steps, and is one of Bartók’s personal performance types. This persona appears in Bartók’s recording of his second Burlesque (from *Three Burlesques*, op. 8/c), entitled “A bit drunk” ([Audio Example 1](#)). This type of performance recurs in many of Bartók’s other recordings without connection to musical genre or category, for instance in *Improvisation*, Piece 2 (mm. 30-36), and in *Mikrokosmos* no. 151 (*Dance in Bulgarian Rhythm* no. 4, mm.

²⁹Anthony Newcomb, “Once More between Absolute and Program Music: Schumann’s Second Symphony,” in *19th-Century Music* 7 (3) (1984): 234.

³⁰Ibid., 234.

³¹Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (above, n. 1), 235.

³²Anthony Newcomb, “The Polonaise-Fantasy and Issues of Musical Narrative.” In *Chopin Studies* 2, ed. John Rink & Jim Samson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85-86.

59-66). Further examples will be cited in my analyses below. Another prevalent musical character in Bartók’s performances is the “Grandiose” character. Bartók uses this performance style primarily before the conclusion of a piece. It is revealed through a re-shaping of the piece’s primary thematic materials, expanding their rhythmic durations and increasing their dynamics; a unique blurring effect is sometimes added. A more detailed analysis of the “Grandiose” style is presented in the analysis of Piece 7 from *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* below.

In addition to the “Grandiose” style, I found two more performance characters that are often used at the ending of pieces, presented here in ascending order of intensity: “Capriccio” and “Bravura”. The clearest example of the “Capriccioso” character can be heard in Bartók’s recording of *Improvisation*, Piece 6, especially the last part of the piece (mm. 25-32).³³ The “Bravura” performance style—characterized by its extremely impressive, virtuosic playing—can be heard in the final bars (mm. 53-60) of Piece 148 (no. 1 of *6 Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*).³⁴

2) Sonic Visualiser

The graphs in this paper were produced by *Sonic Visualiser* software (www.sonicvisualiser.org), which I used to analyze WAV files taken from the CD re-issue of Bartók’s recordings, as well as files documenting a literal performance by a piano student, prepared especially for this study (see Figure 3). First, I listened to the music while tapping on the computer keyboard, logging tapping instances and checking them against the recording using *Sonic Visualiser*.³⁵ Then I imported the timings into a spreadsheet and turned them into a tempo graph. In this graph, time (in this case, beats along the piece—e.g. 1.1, 1.2; 2.1, 2.2) is represented in the horizontal dimension, and tempo is represented on the vertical dimension (in metronome values). Metronome values for each measure were calculated from beat durations using *Sonic Visualiser*. Since tempo and timing fluctuation are among the most important dimensions in Bartók’s performative style and expression, an analysis of the resulting graphs can illuminate significant aspects of his performance.³⁶

Performance Analysis. In my opinion, two main approaches can be discerned in Bartók’s performance of Pieces 7-15 in the recordings made in 1928 and in 1936, which might be termed “*the contrastive approach*” and “*the agogic alteration approach*.” Both terms refer to the relationship between individual characters, in pieces and sequences that present alternating characters. Bartók did not explicitly

³³ László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (above, n. 7), CD No. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, CD No. 4.

³⁵ On the advantages of measurements carried out in MIDI and Sonic Visualiser environments, see Eric Clarke, “Empirical Methods in the Study of Performance,” in *Empirical Musicology: Aims, Methods, Prospects*, ed. Eric Clarke & Nicolas Cook (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 89-90; Nicholas Cook, “Methods for Analysing Recordings,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson & John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 231-32.

³⁶ For an in-depth explanation concerning the creation of conventional, printed graphs and using of the data from Sonic Visualiser for analytical purposes, see Nicholas Cook & Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “A Musicologist’s Guide to Sonic Visualiser” (London: Kings College, 2009), http://www.charm.kcl.ac.uk/analysing/p9_3.html, accessed on 5 October 2011.

refer to these two approaches in his writings, but they are clearly apparent in his performances, and particularly in his shaping of an overall performance narrative, which extends beyond individual characters.

The *contrastive approach* is apparent, for instance, in Bartók’s performances of Piece 10. At the beginning of this piece, Bartók adheres to the original performance style of rustic folk songs, which he termed the *giusto* style³⁷: his relative rhythmic accuracy and steadiness contributes to an associative connection with the rustic vocal performance style of this song. He then switches abruptly to a more expressive and emotional style, characterized by its rhythmic flexibility. The alternation between these two is realized by means of a clear-cut switch from one style to the other (see analysis of Piece 10 below).

An important link between the contrastive approach and the “A bit drunk” performance character (see above) can be discerned in Bartók’s performances of Piece 12. In these renditions, Bartók exploited and highlighted the unique metric structure of this Hungarian peasant song. In this song, a minimal melodic motif serves as a theme for a series of metric variations: First, the motif appears in 3/4 (m. 1), then in 2/4 (m. 2) and again in 3/4 (m. 3).

Example 1 Piece 12 mm. 1-3



However, in both of his recordings (especially the 1928 version), Bartók plays this minimal motif first in hesitant *rallentando* (m.1), then with an energetic *accelerando* (m. 2), and again in *rallentando* (m. 3). Through this exaggeration of the metric alternation, Bartók creates a specific rhythmical instability that characterizes his “A bit drunk” performance character. However, in the second statement of the peasant song (mm. 11-21), this performance character becomes extremely expressive. From m. 11, Bartók makes intensive and effective use of accents and gradual dynamics (neither of which are indicated in the printed edition), eventually turning the chromatic augmented seventh chord at the second quarter of m. 13 into the climax of the second statement of the song and indeed of the entire piece.³⁸ The combination of the contrastive approach with the “A bit drunk” performance character transforms the latter into an expressive performance character, as can easily be heard by listening to Bartók’s rendition of this piece in 1928 recording (listen to [Audio Example 2](#)).

³⁷ According to Bartók, the *giusto* style “is the more or less rigid rhythm, with regularly set bars, generally in 2/4 time.” See in “Harvard Lectures No. 4” (1943), *Béla Bartók Essays* (above, note 2), 383.

³⁸ Taking into consideration the meaning of this sentence in the text, “Huzd meg nekem” (“draw it for me, gypsy lad” or “draw the bow on the strings of the fiddle”), we can find a correlation between the movement of the bow toward the strings and the first sound of the fiddle playing with the *rallentando* from m.11 to the second quarter of m.13. In the original 1907 recording, however, the song was performed in a very natural manner, with no attempt at expressing the meaning of the text through the vocal performance.

The original performance of the song³⁹ contains a level of metric ambiguity, especially in the transition from bar 2 (2/4) to bar 3 (3/4). Bartók, in his performance of Piece 12, might have been trying to recapture aspects of rhythm and tempo in the original performance that he was forced to ignore in his attempt to fit the song into the straitjacket of Western notation. The 3/4+2/4+3/4 structure in the notated version can probably be viewed as a necessary oversimplification, which Bartók sought to rectify in his performance.⁴⁰

The *agogic alteration approach*, on the other hand, can be demonstrated through Bartók’s performances of Piece 7. The piece (like most of the other pieces in this collection) is built around a simple rhythmic and metric pattern, typical of specific *old style*⁴¹ Hungarian folk songs that Bartók referred to as “bagpipe songs”⁴² (apparently because they are mostly sung by peasants with bagpipe accompaniment). In his playing, Bartók makes agogic changes within these patterns (changes that have no equivalents in the written notation) in order to create his own distinctive interpretation (see the detailed analysis below). Moreover, the last two statements of this piece reveal a link between the “Grandiose” performance character (see above) and the agogic alteration approach. However, this approach, in contradistinction with the *contrastive approach*, features no prominent, clear-cut changes in performance style, but rather a unique local flexibility of sound durations.

Performance Analysis of Piece 10. In Pieces 7-15, Bartók introduced a clearly defined group of old-style *tempo giusto* “bagpipe tunes” (see above). These songs are characterized by the 2/4 meter and similar (repeated) vocal lines, notable for their simple rhythmic patterns consisting of four eighth-notes and two quarter-notes or six eighth-notes and one quarter-note. According to Bartók, the Hungarian peasants performed these songs in a simple style and mostly without any vocal embellishments. The rhythm of the words and the flow of the vocal line were always simple: the folk song’s musical phrases (three or four phrases at the most) were usually sung without any hesitations or artificial emphasis, or, in Bartók’s words, with “[a] complete absence of any sentimentality or exaggeration of expression.”⁴³ Moreover, the most prominent characteristic of these folk songs is the subtle, nuanced variability of the rhythmic components. Consider, for example, the folk song “In the green forest, the *prücsök* is getting ready to get married” (a *prücsök* is a small green cricket). In the original vocal performance, which Bartók recorded in Köröstárkány in

³⁹ Available on the CD accompanying Vera Lampert’s book *Folk Music in Bartok’s Compositions: A Source Catalog: Arab, Hungarian, Rumanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, and Slovak Melodies* (Budapest: Helicon Publisher, 2008), 193v_MH1194b.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this paper for this observation.

⁴¹ In 1920, Bartók categorized the peasant music material into two main groups: “melodies of an older or ancient style and melodies of a recent style.” See “Hungarian Peasant Music” (1920) in *Béla Bartók Essays* (above, n. 2), 304-15. Later, he named the ancient style “old style” and the recent style “new Hungarian style,” and defined one more group of Hungarian peasant melodies that “does not exhibit a uniform style” (mixed style or miscellaneous class). For detailed information about the evolution of Bartók’s classification, see in http://db.zti.hu/nza/br_en.asp—Béla Bartók Hungarian Folk Song (complete collection) online publication of The Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Musicology.

⁴² Béla Bartók, “The Folklore of Instruments and their Music in Eastern Europe” (1911-31), in *Béla Bartók Essays* (above, n. 2), 239-84.

⁴³ Béla Bartók, “Hungarian Music” (1944), in *ibid.*, 393-96.

the Bihar district in 1912⁴⁴ ([Audio Example 3](#)), the syllables on the eighth-notes were sung in a slightly uneven way, while the quarter-notes are sung with a subtle accent.

Example 2 The original 1912 recording (Audio Example 3)

Original Voice Recording (1912)



Zöld er-dő-ben a pü-csök Há-za-sod-ni ké-szül, Ó-lel-ge-ti a le-gyet, El a-kar-ja ven-ni.

In Bartók’s renditions of his arrangement of this piece (no. 10 from *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs*, [Audio Examples 4](#) and [5](#)), he communicates the tenderness of the original vocal version through light and calm playing, with a very gentle touch. He similarly conveys the variability of the rhythmic components by playing the eighth-notes inconsistently. Although Bartók played the quarter-notes with accents (more moderately in the 1936 recording), it appears that in mm. 1-8 of this piece he viewed the rustic vocal performance and its atmosphere as a model.

Example 3 1928 and 1936 recordings (right hand only)



Welte 1928 Recording

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

p *mp* *p* *mp* *p* *mp*

Patria 1936 Recording

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

p *mp* *p* *p* *mp*

Welte 1928 Recording

9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

p *rall.* *rall.* *piu mosso*

Patria 1936 Recording

9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

rall. *rall.*

However, the second statement of the arrangement (mm. 9-16) reveals a different sound picture. Compared to mm. 1-8 in both recordings, mm. 9-12 are performed in a

⁴⁴ By the informant Ileana Kovács, Phon.Aufn.MF 1620a. See in Vera Lampert “Quellenkatalog der Volksliedbearbeitungen von Bartók,” *Documenta Bartókiana* 6 (1981): 102.

slower tempo (± 112 in 1928, ± 134 in 1936) than mm. 1-8 (± 156 in 1928, ± 161 in 1936). However, in mm. 13-16 Bartók returns to *piu mosso* and the opening tempo is revised (± 167 in 1928, ± 157 in 1936). Furthermore, comparison of the 1928 recording and the literal performance⁴⁵ (see Figure 3) shows that Bartók played the second statement of the folk song (mm. 9-16) with relatively large rhythmic fluctuations and tempo oscillations.

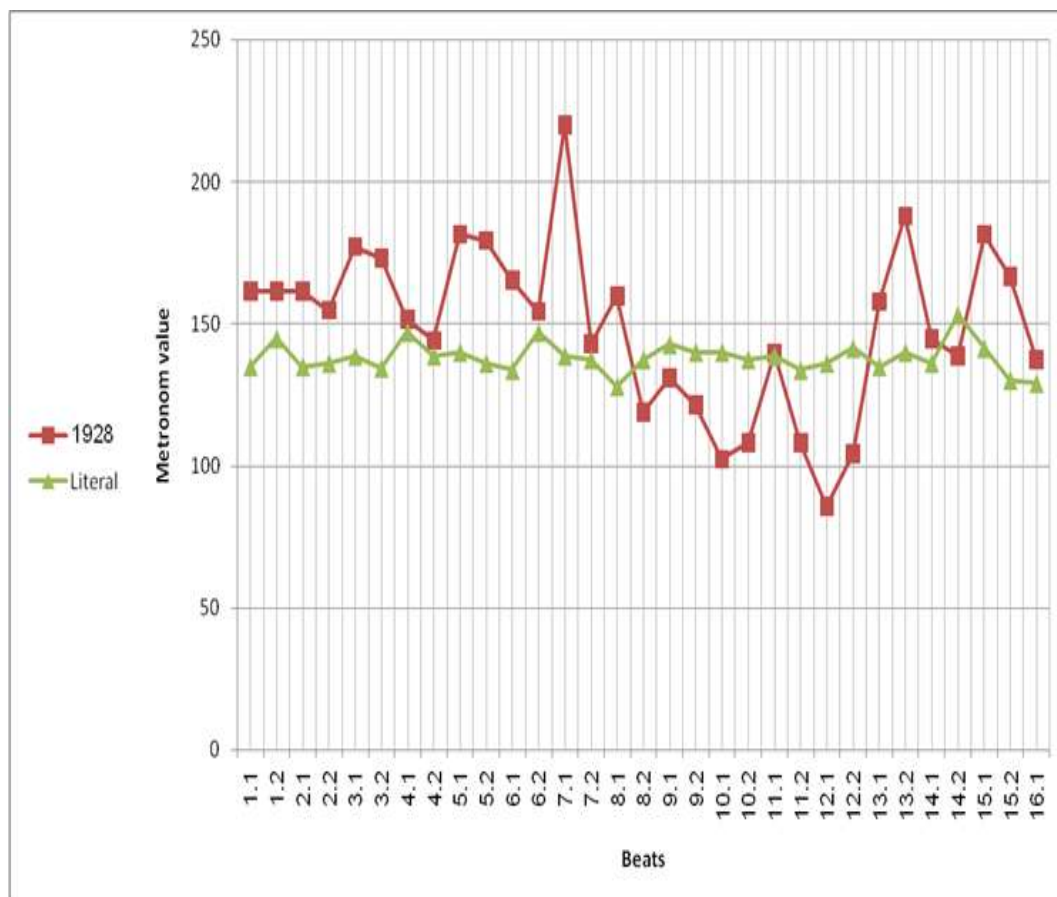


Figure 1 Piece 10—timing variations⁴⁶ of 1928 recording comparing to the literal performance

⁴⁵Literal performance means an accurate performance of the written notes of the composition, with minimal personal interpretation. I asked a piano student (with ten years of experience) to play the music in a literal manner, and then analyzed the recording with Sonic Visualiser, using the same methodology I employed in analyzing Bartók’s recordings (see in the “Method” section above).

⁴⁶Taking into consideration the rhythmic flexibility and the local nature of measurements (at the beats level), I decided to define Figures 1, 2, 4 and 5 in this label. The red curve actually shows the microscopic changes (or, in other words, timing variations) in the consecutive note length of Bartók’s 1928 rendition more than a tempo fluctuation, which can be regarded as a macroscopic change over longer periods of time. For further discussion concerning this distinction, see H. Takeda, H. Nishimoto and S. Sagayama. “Rhythm and Tempo Recognition of Music Performance from a Probabilistic Approach,” paper presented at the 5th Annual International Symposium on Music Information Retrieval (Barcelona: Pompeu Fabra University, 2004).

<http://hil.t.u-tokyo.ac.jp/publications/2004/Takeda2004ISMIR10.pdf>. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for referring him to this paper.

Listening to both of Bartók’s recordings reveals that mm. 9-12 become the expressive climax of the piece. This climax was created through *rallentando* that leads the melodic line toward *tenuto* on F# at the first beat of m. 12 (see 12.1 in Figure 1).

The comparison of the timing variations of both renditions (Figure 2) shows that Bartók retained the same interpretation in both performances—i.e. two statements of the folk song with two different contrastive performance characters: the first in a calm and delicate character and the second in much more emotional performance character. Figure 2 shows that there is a relative correlation between Bartók’s two performances up to 6.2. From this point on, there is a clear slowing-down toward the conclusion of the first statement—more noticeable in the 1928 recording (see beat 7.1 to beat 8.2). After Bartók slows down at the end of the first statement (beats 8.1 and 8.2), he implicitly starts a *rallentando* from m. 9, thereby initiating the second performance character—the expressive, emotional one. However, this *rallentando* in m. 9 is fully presented only in m. 11, before reaching the piece’s expressive climax in 12.1. The change from ± 122 bpm in 11.1 to ± 89 bpm at 12.1 in the 1928 recording clearly indicates the move toward an expressive climax. Figure 2 also shows that the same performance attitude was presented—albeit in a more restrained manner—in the 1936 recording. However, this time Bartók constructed the arrival at the climax in a different way: he arrived at the note F# (12.1) with a drastic change of tempo (see the incline from ± 146 bpm in beat 11.2 to ± 119 bpm in beat 12.1 of the 1936 recording line). The return to *piu mosso* in mm. 13-16 is emphasized through the prominent slowing down of the tempo in beats 11.1, 11.2 and 12.1, especially in 1928 recording.

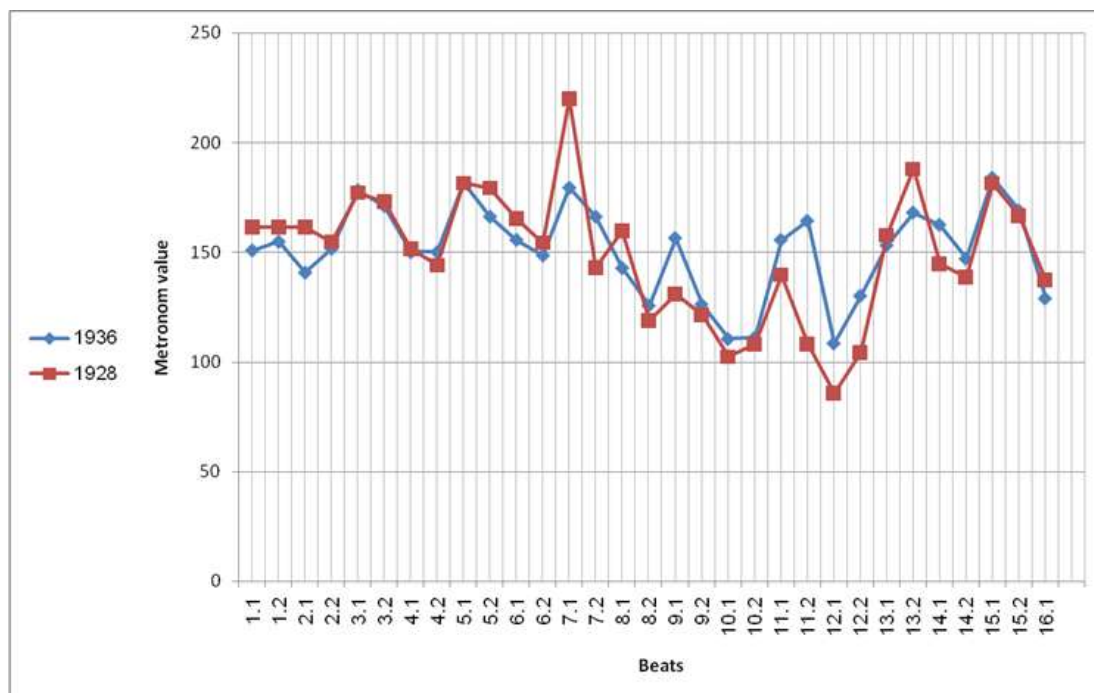


Figure 2 Piece 10—comparison of timing variations in 1928 and 1936 recordings

In both recordings, Bartók turns a short, 16-measure arrangement—for which the printed version includes virtually no performance instructions (except for the *p* and the *leggiero* in the opening measure)—into a dramatic concert piece featuring a

variety of contrasting moods. Bartók accomplishes this by presenting two completely different interpretations of the peasant folk song in consecutive statements, as shown in Table 3 below. This can be regarded as one aspect of Bartók’s hidden narrative, revealed through his performances.

Table 3 Piece 10, different interpretations in consecutive statements of the peasant song (according to 1928 *Welte* and 1936 *Patria* recordings)

Measure Nos.	Section	Character
1-8	First statement in the bagpipe song	Calm and delicate
9-16	Second statement in the bagpipe song	Expressive and emotional (mm.9-12) that changes back to calm and delicate (mm.13-16)

Another aspect of this narrative can be discerned in the song’s text, displayed at the opening page of the index of the collection, along with the incipits.⁴⁷

By placing the text as an integral part of the index, employing a format identical to that of his scientific publications, Bartók sought to bring the performers closer to the sources, and introduce something of the flavor of a live encounter with the original peasant songs, which cannot be described in words.⁴⁸ The text allowed performers—especially Hungarian-speaking ones—to comprehend the connection between the original peasant songs and their arrangements by Bartók. Thus, there is a clear link between the grotesque text of the Scherzo (song no. 5) and Bartók’s humoristic arrangement thereof—or between the tragic tale of the girl Angoli Borbála in the Ballade (song no. 6) and its arrangement. A similar connection with the text can be discerned in Bartók’s performances. Returning to Song no. 10, if we take the ironical text of the song’s two opening strophes (presented along with the incipit at the index pages) into account, the climactic moment in Bartók’s recordings (12.1) acquires a different expressive meaning.

1. Zöld erdőben a prücsök	The cricket in the green woods
Házasodni készül,	Prepares to marry,
Ölelgeti a legyet,	He hugs the fly
El akarja venni.	And would like to wed her.
2. Elvinnélek te kis légy	I would marry you, little fly
Ha kicsi nem volnál,	If you weren’t so little,
Hozzád mennék, te prücsök,	I would marry you, cricket,
Ha görbe nem volnál.	If you weren’t so crooked.

Figure 3 First two verses of “Zöld erdőben”—text and translation⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Like several other collections by Bartók, the printed version of *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* opens with a detailed index. This index includes the incipit and the first two stanzas of each folk song, as well as detailed background information connecting each song with Bartók’s ethnomusicological research: the location and year in which the song was recorded, and an indication of the collection from which it was derived. The other collections to feature such an index are: the two volumes of *Colindas—Rumanian Christmas Songs* (Sz 57/W38, 1915); and *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, op. 20 (Sz74/W50, 1920).

⁴⁸ Béla Bartók, “The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music” (1931), in *Béla Bartók Essays* (above, n. 2), 341.

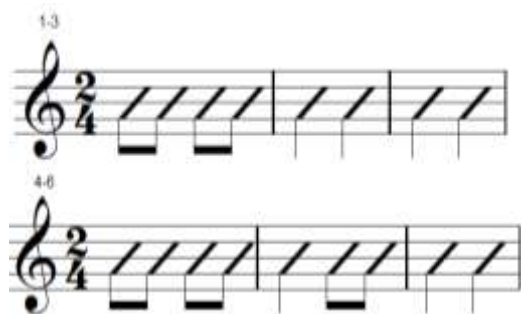
⁴⁹ I would like to extend my thanks to Prof. Judit Frigyesi and Prof. Laszlo Vikárius for the translation of this song.

A cricket would have liked to marry a flea, if only she hadn’t been so small. The flea responds that she would have married the cricket had he not been so crooked. Hence, the noticeable slowing down of mm. 9-12—discussed above—can be interpreted as an emphasis on the ironic words in the first phrase of the second strophe toward the final word of the strophe, “volnál” (12.1), which is pronounced—in the Hungarian original (Audio Example 3)—as two long syllables (i.e. two elongated quarter-notes); after this, a return to the opening tempo at mm. 13-16 (*piu mosso*) is all the more appropriate. Another explanation of Bartók’s slowing down at mm. 9-11, toward 12.1, was his desire to emphasize the pun created by the flea’s teasing response in the second phrase of the second strophe (Ha görbe nem volnál).

The contrast between this text-based analysis of Bartók’s performance and the non-textual analysis offered earlier highlights the gap between the non-Hungarian listener and the native listener. Taking into consideration that many of Bartók’s listeners and performers do not speak or read Hungarian, and that these recordings were designed with non-Hungarian listeners in mind, it seems that both interpretations (textual and non-textual) are appropriate.

Performance Analysis of Piece 7. Bartók’s narrative performance style moves in a different direction in the composer’s recordings of Piece 7. Here, Bartók agogically modified the rhythmic patterns that make up the peasant song. Piece 7 comprises four different statements of the bagpipe song and one transitional passage, located between the second and the third statements. In Bartók’s performance, the alternation between these statements is highlighted through different designs of the rhythmic patterns that constitute this song—one measure of four eighth-notes and two measures of four quarter-notes, with a slight rhythmic variation at the division of the quarter-notes. This is one of the typical rhythmic patterns of the bagpipe tunes.⁵⁰

Example 4 The rhythmic patterns in Piece 7



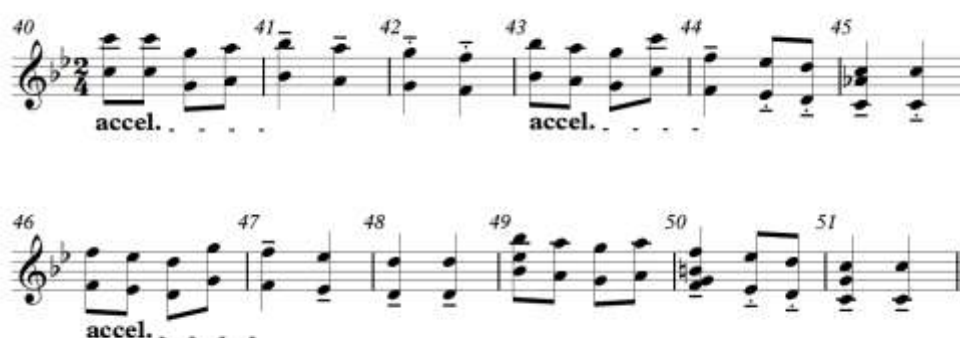
In both recordings, Bartók divides the rhythmic pattern into two units and interprets each one differently. The eighth-notes unit (mm. 1, 4) is played with an *accelerando* and a sense of internal movement, and the quarter-notes unit (mm. 2-3, 5-6) is performed as four slow extended chords ([Audio Examples 6 and 7](#)).

However, this unique rhythmic flexibility is especially striking in the last two statements of the arrangement. In the first statement, there is no separation between the two units; Bartók’s performance style seems to trace the prosody of the text as it is

⁵⁰ Béla Bartók, “The Folklore of Instruments and their Music in Eastern Europe” (above, n. 42), 247.

presented in the original peasant performance ([Audio Example 8](#)). In the third and fourth statements, however, the differentiation between the two units becomes prominent, particularly in the last statement of the arrangement (mm. 40-51). Here, Bartók accelerates the eighth-notes units and plays them unevenly (mm. 41, 43, 46, 49). However, this acceleration highlights Bartók’s slowing-down of the tempo in the quarter-note units (mm. 41-42, 44-45, 47-48 and 50-51). Moreover, Bartók articulates these quarter-notes through distinctive accentuation—*tenuto* or *half tenuto* (see Example 5). The use of the pedal softens the quarter-note unit chords, producing a quasi-bell-ringing effect and a metric blurring (Audio Example 6, mm. 40-51). All these performance practices generate the performance character that I designated as “Grandiose” (mentioned in the “Method” section above).

Example 5 Piece 7 mm.40-51 according to the 1928 recording (right hand only)



These tempo fluctuations are clarified clearly through a graph that compares a literal rendition of the arrangement with Bartók’s 1928 rendition of mm. 40-51. Analyzing Figure 4 reveals the specific practices through which Bartók’s shapes the ‘grandiose’ character. The first one is the tendency to play the quarter-note units (mm. 44-45, 47-48, 50-51) in slowed-down tempo coupled with a prolongation of individual notes. While the two first units (mm. 41-42, 44-45) last 1.615306 and 1.682653 milliseconds respectively, the third quarter-notes unit (mm. 47-48) lasts 2.02347 milliseconds, and the last unit was expanded to 4.691109 milliseconds. Figure 4 also shows that Bartók tended to play the four quarters that the unit is based on unevenly. This tendency is especially clear when comparing the different note lengths of the first quarter unit: 41.1(B) = 0.481633 millisecond; 41.2(A) = 0.358163; 42.1(G) = 0.415306; 42.2 (F) = 0.360204. Bartók’s deliberate unevenness is clearly visible in the sharp angles of the graph below (see mm. 41-42 in Figure 4).

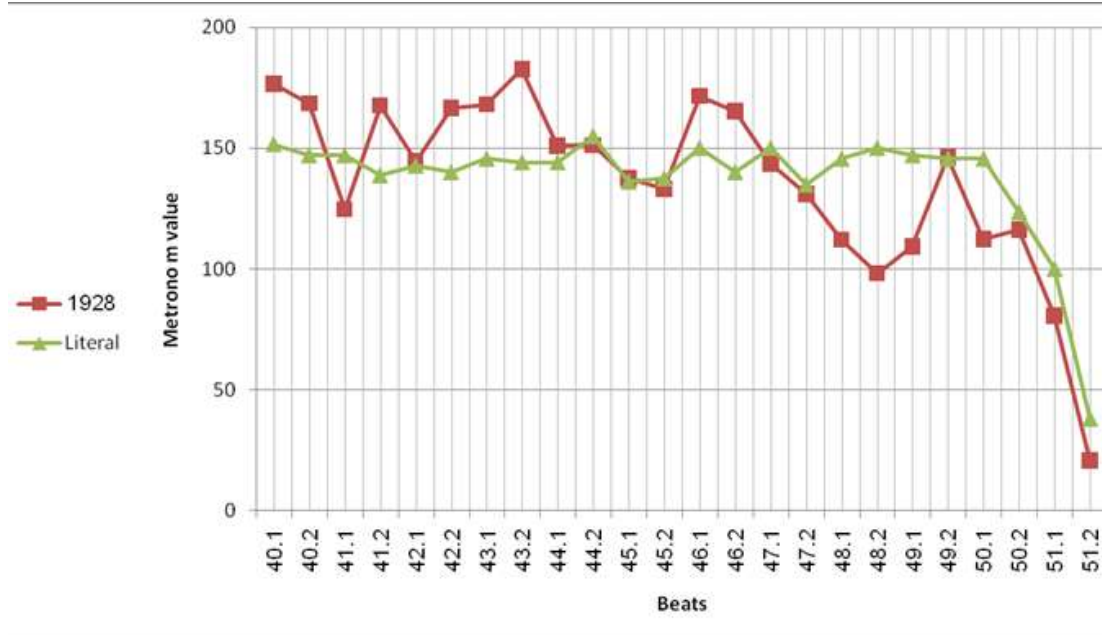


Figure 4 Piece 7, mm. 40-51—timing variations in the 1928 recording compared to a literal performance

Figure 5 again reveals that the 1936 rendition is more moderate compared with the 1928 rendition. This is especially clear when comparing the third quarter-notes unit (mm. 47-48) in the two recordings. In the 1928 recording (Audio Example 6), Bartók reduced the tempo from ± 137 bpm at beat 47.1 to ± 97 bpm at 48.2. In the 1936 version, there is a much more moderate change of tempo; in contrast, the tempo in the 1936 recording (Audio Example 7) accelerates in this quarter-notes unit from ± 119 bpm at 47.1 to ± 123 bpm at ± 48.2 , after strong slowing down to the first note of this unit. These differences are clearly reflected in Figure 4. The surprising sharp curve in 46.2 in the 1936 rendition—from ± 153 bpm to ± 119 bpm at 47.1—is a good example of Bartók’s unsteady playing of the eighth-notes units. As noted above, this performance practice characterizes the “Grandiose” performance character.

Despite the differences between the lines, it is obvious from the graph that the two recordings reveal the same performance attitude. However, it is interesting to note that the only place that the two performances became measurably identical is the last quarter notes unit (mm. 50-51).

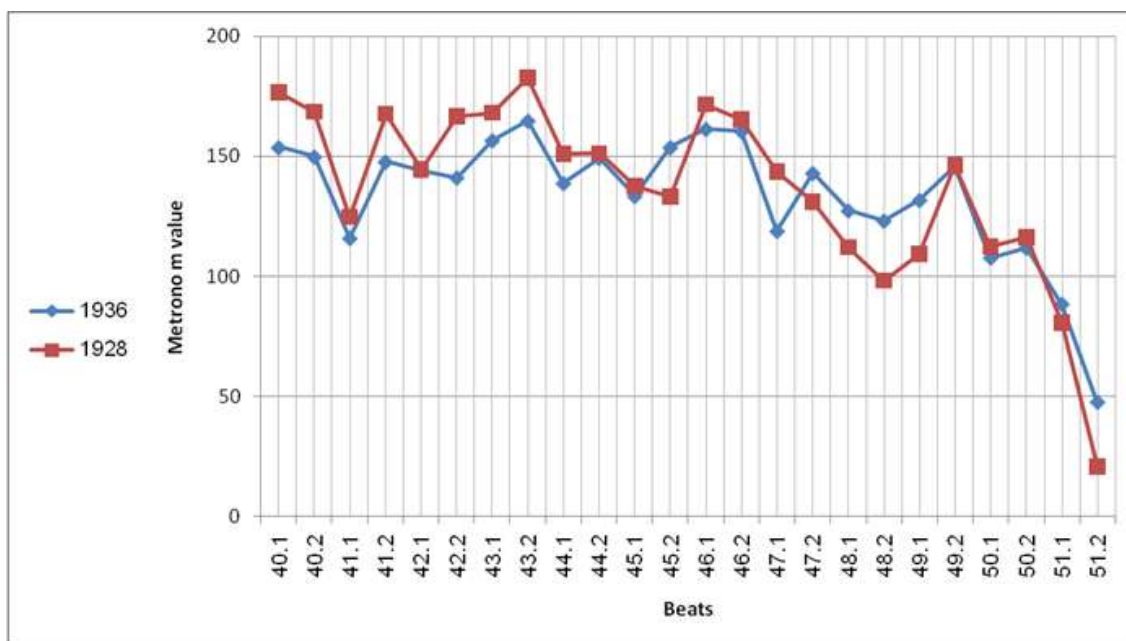


Figure 5 Piece 7, mm. 40-51—comparison of timing variations in 1928 and 1936 recordings

Bartók inserted a more intimate interpretation of the folk song in the second statement. In this statement, which contrasts markedly with the surrounding statements, the eighth-notes units and quarter-notes units are not clearly differentiated. Moreover, Bartók plays this statement with unvarying intensity and without the pedal. He creates a transparent contrapuntal texture, achieving a full balance between the three melodic lines of the quarter-notes unit. This restrained, moderate performing style, devoid of expressive tendencies, also characterizes Bartók’s recordings of Scarlatti’s sonatas.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the second statement in Piece 7 is not completely distinct from the other statements in this performance, since the listener readily discerns the lack of rhythmic stability in the quarter-notes unit (Audio Example 6).

In conclusion, Bartók’s performance of this piece features a gradual transition process between changing performing characters (exemplifying the *agoric alternation* approach)—from a calm and delicate character in the first statement to an exaggerated ‘grandiose’ character. This process, described in detail in the table below, represents an important aspect of Bartók’s shaping of hidden narratives in his performances.

⁵¹ See sonatas in G Major (K.427), A Major (K. 212 and K. 537) and B flat Major (k.70) in László Somfai & Zoltán Kocsis (Eds.), *Bartók at the Piano, 1920-1945* (above, n. 7), CD No. 1. Bartók used to play Scarlatti’s sonatas as a sort “warm-up” in his recitals. See in János Demény, “The Pianist” (above, n. 5), 68.

Measure Nos.	Section	Character
1-12	First introduction of the bagpipe song	Calm and delicate
13-24	Second statement	Restrained and exact
24-27	Bridge	Transitional
28-39	Third statement	Moderate “Grandiose”
40-51	Fourth statement	Intensification of the “Grandiose” character (with blurring effect)

Table 4 Piece 7—different interpretations in consecutive statements of the peasant song (according to the 1928 *Welte* and 1936 *Patria* recordings)

Conclusion

Several scholars and musicians have noted that a familiarity with Bartók’s recordings is essential for present-day performers of his music; this approach has notably influenced Zoltán Kocsis’s integral recording of Bartók’s piano music.⁵² In this paper, I focused on the contribution of Bartók’s recordings to our understanding of his overall shaping of his works, above and beyond our understanding of his characterization of individual, local phrases.

I believe that Bartók’s recordings of *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* exemplify his underlying attitude toward folk songs. In performing the arrangements on the piano, he did not regard them as scientific documents but rather as artistic miniatures; his task as a pianist was to bring them to life as vividly as possible. For this purpose, he renders every statement of the song in a different manner, imbuing it with a distinctive performance character, created through specific performance practice. In this paper, I referred to six such characters—the “a bit drunk,” the “Grandiose,” the “Capriccioso,” the “Bravura,” the “Expressive,” and the “Restrained”—but a comprehensive analysis of these recordings would reveal a much wider repertoire.

However, Bartók was not satisfied in making these individual interpretations, but rather sought to incorporate them into an overall narrative. For this purpose, he devised a performance plan presented in Table 5 below. The rapid, *attacca* transitions from one character to the other (leading to the dramatic conclusion) create a sense of unity, linking the arrangements to each other and turning them into a coherent and continuous movement.

⁵² These recordings were recorded for the first time mainly during the 1990s, but were re-issued in 2010. See Zoltán Kocsis, *Bartók: Complete Solo Piano Works* (Decca B003YMYWW, 2010).

Table 5 Bartók’s performance plan for Pieces 7-15 from *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs*

Piece No.	Character
Piece 7	Restrained changes to “Grandiose” ⁵³
Piece 8	Light and delicate
Pieces 9-10-9	<i>Pesante</i> (9) restrained changes to “Expressive” (10) and back to <i>Pesante</i> (9)
Piece 12	“A bit drunk” ⁵⁴ changes to “Expressive”
Piece 14	“A bit drunk”
Piece 15	“Bravura” ⁵⁵

According to this performance plan, Bartók’s renditions consist of alternation between pieces performed in a lively style and pieces performed in a more expressive and/or improvisatory style. This alternation rivets the listeners and intensifies the listening experience. Furthermore, the quick transition between playing styles—each with its own distinctive, noticeable character—creates a hidden narrative that dramatically culminates in Piece 15.⁵⁶

The narrative approach was used in this article as a framework for exploring and understanding Bartók’s aesthetics. This involved both an interpretation of the combined impact of localized elements (timing variations, articulation, dynamics and so forth) in terms of distinctive performance characters, and an overall interpretation of Bartók’s manner of combining these characters into an overall narrative. The local performance characters serve Bartók the pianist, ultimately, as the building blocks in shaping his overall performance plan. In this way, he sought to transform a series of folksong arrangements into an artistically self-sufficient concert piece. His performances therefore reflect his view that his song arrangements—considered by many to be one of the most artistically problematic compositional areas in his *oeuvre*, and even a “semi-fiasco for Bartók”⁵⁷—deserve to be treated as equals to his original compositions.

⁵³ In using the term “Grandiose” in my classification of the character, I refer to the two last statements of the folk song arrangement, and especially to the last statement (mm. 40-51), played with exaggerated metric blurring effect in both recordings.

⁵⁴ See extended explanation concerning this character on pp. 9-10 above.

⁵⁵ See an explanation for this performance character in the next footnote

⁵⁶ This closing piece is actually a short suite of rapid, virtuosic bagpipe dances that Bartók regarded as “the most beautiful Hungarian bagpipe tune, the most valuable from the musical aspect” (Béla Bartók, “The Folklore of Instruments and their Music in Eastern Europe” [above, n. 42], p. 262). It should be noted that the tendency to conclude the composition in an impressively virtuosic “Bravura” performance style is not peculiar to *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* recordings; rather, it is typical of many of Bartók’s performances.

⁵⁷ See László Somfai, “Experimenting with Folkmusic-Based Concert Sets: Béla Bartók’s Arrangements Reconsidered” (above, n. 27), 76.