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## **Music as a gesture - musicking as emotional communication<sup>1</sup>**

### **A piece of Bartók as an emotional message**

The following piece of music is one of the 44 Duos for two violins, which Béla Bartók contributed in the early thirties of the last century to the violin school of the German pedagogue Frich Doflein. These beautiful pieces are all based on folk tunes which Bartók collected himself at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is the revised version of a cross-instrumental lecture which was given by the author in February 2006 at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama London. The revision tries to keep the character of a spoken text.

GRAM / SORROW / BÁNKÓDÁS

*Einleitung*  
Lento, poco rubato, ♩ = 72-69

*1. Strophe*  
poco rit. a tempo  
*f subito*

9

*Zwischen spiel*  
poco rit. a tempo  
*p* 1

*2. Strophe*

25

32

*Nachspiel*  
poco rit. -  
*pp*

39

We could now listen to a recording which seems to be very authentic (the two players, Josef Suk and Andre Gertler, worked with Bartók!) and we would meet a strong and powerful manner of violin playing – the musical figures are animated, they increase and pass away, we are involved in the musical process and touched by the vividness of the interpretation.

But still I'm not totally convinced and content: What I do miss is a variation of the sound, a wider range of timbre. The music is just beautiful all the time, the sound is full and ringing - but it tells me so little about the concrete emotional contents of that particular piece or about the emotions of the players; there is no message and no personal meaning which could deeply affect me.

And that's a pity – especially as just this piece was meant as a communication of a particular emotional state. You have to know that normally the titles of the duos refer to their geographic origin (Hungary, Bulgaria...) or to the function as a dance or cradle song. This particular one Bartók called “Bánkódás” which could be translated as sorrow or sadness or even better as grief (literally grief gnaws or nibbles at your heart).

If you now look again at the score you might be a bit confused: There is not only “Bánkódás” in the piece – my feeling is that the forte passages (=the former tune) are talking about something different, that is to say about despair. I imagine somebody who feels totally desperate because of the futility of his actions. Saying this I know what is in the song Bartók recorded 1911 in a small Hungarian village. A young peasant sang into Bartók's recorders a song about “Love in vain” - this is the German text published by Bartók in 1925:

1. „Blank die Kupferhufe meines Braunen sind,  
Schmuck der Madarascher Wirtin schönes Kind!  
Schmuck ihr Stiefel, Stiefelfetzen (sic!),  
- Mußt mein ganzes Geld dran setzen, rein für nichts!

2. Hin und her den Kopf mein Brauner wirft voll Mut, -  
Gestern nacht so sehnlich harrt' ich dein voll Glut.  
Sag, wo bist du hingegangen?  
Abends zweimal schon voll Bangen harrt ich hier.“

And also Bartók published his transcription which tries to catch the authentic manner of singing. It's very close to basic ways of human emotional expression, these glissandos remind me of sighing or groaning.

Muz. F. 978 b); I. Felsőiregh (Tolna), Vörös Ignác (50), 1907.; B

Parlando,  $\text{♩} = \text{cca } 166.$

280.

1. *N* Pej pa-ri-pám réz - pat - kó - ja de fé - nyés, *M* -

- ma-da-ra-si csár-dás lá - nya de ké - nyés! *N* Ké-nyés ci - pő -

je, kap-cá - ja, De sok pén - zö - met kós - tál - ja, hi - á - ba.

It's thrilling to find out what Bartók's composition makes out of it. First – under the analytic or compositional point of view - there is literally no note which cannot be derived from the given folk tune. For instance: motif a in the folk tune is directed downwards, establishes the major space of the fifth and exposes that characteristic “Hungarian” syncopated rhythm – in the introduction the first motif has the same direction and the interval structure of melody motif a, however it appears in the minor mode and presents a constant rhythm instead of syncopation. Motif b in the folk tune goes upwards through the minor space of a fourth and is the cancer of a in terms of rhythm. In the introduction the tetrachord of motif b is transformed into “a- b flat- c/c sharp – d sharp”. And the same way as the folk tune searches a tonal centre (is it a or d?) the introduction switches between a and d as fundamental tones. Finally: What comes successive in the tune happens simultaneously in the introduction. So it seems to be true what Bartók wrote on his compositional intentions: „Immer ist es (aber) sehr wichtig, daß das Musikgewand, in welches wir die Melodie kleiden, sich vom Charakter der Melodie, von den in der Melodie offen oder verhüllt enthaltenen musikalischen Eigentümlichkeiten ableiten lässt, bzw. daß die Melodie und alles Hinzugefügte den Eindruck einer untrennbaren Einheit erwecken.“

But second – and this is more important for our subject today – it's fascinating to see how Bartók transforms the emotional substance of the song by compositional means: The variant of motif a is not just a structural variant – what was despair and outcry is now talking about the hopelessness of love; in the middle of the piece (bars 22-24) this takes my breath away and makes my heart stand still and the same happens at the end, but now – possibly – with a glimmer of hope...

## **Musicking versus making music – the musical transformation of the emotional statement**

Musicking as emotional, gestural communication – it's now hardly necessary to explain what I intended when I chose this as the title of my lecture – but nevertheless allow me to make some additional remarks: The coinage “musicking” was done by Christopher Small in his book: “Musicking. The meanings of performing and listening”. Small had the strong feeling that the verbal form “to make music” is not sufficient for that what we are doing as musicians. We do not only produce musical objects or reproduce musical works, more or less interpreting or just carrying out, executing the composers will (and as you might know: many composers like Stravinsky saw us as their servants or agents and expected our humility in view of the masterwork – once Schoenberg was asked „Is performance necessary?“ and he gave the answer: „Not the author, but the audience only needs it“. Schoenberg also put emphasis on the fact that the musician can at the most be brilliant, but only the composer shares the genius...).

Under my point of view singing and playing is not just making music – first of all (and in the most musical activities all over the world) it is the expression of my inner life (or of the feelings of the community): see it literally – ex-press means to press out something which is in you and actually that is quite a dramatic procedure! Musicking is communication of my affective conditions, of my state of arousal, it reports feelings to others. That's why we make a difference between “Musizieren” and “Musik machen” in German language (and I learned from Small that there has been the word “to music” in old English).

Let's now come back to our Hungarian guy who expresses his despair, his unhappy love story... The question now is: why – for God's sake – is he singing? There are a lot of other possibilities to report his personal tragedy!

- He could talk about it – and I suppose that the sound of his voice, the tempo of his speech, the super- or paralinguistic dimension of communication will be the more important statement than the meaning of the pure words.
- He could make use of the wide range of non-verbal vocal expression: f.i. sighing or groaning.
- He could permit so called interjections to jump into his speech, these short “words” like hmmh or ooh, which Botho Strauss, the German author, calls “die unwillkürlichen Hupfer des Gemüts in den Mund (= the involuntary hoppers of the soul / heart into the mouth)”.
- He could start weeping, burst into tears.
- He could show his emotional realities by facial expression or gestures, through the lacking tension of his body.

There are a lot of possibilities to communicate emotions, but what brings somebody who is sad to the point when he starts singing or playing music? What's the psychic benefit of singing sad songs instead of crying? We now should be aware that we touch the realms of psychoanalysis or anthropology, but let's try.

Singing is consoling: the sound which I produce is my own, it is a part of me, but at the same time it leaves me, goes out in the outer world, it fills the space around me, and therefore: it can come back, can surround me, can cover me, I'm enveloped in my own music – and that can mean: consolation or even encouragement (the German philosopher Hellmut Plesner always spoke in this connection of the “Fern-Nähe der Musik” , “the distant nearness of music”.)

But more than that: A tone is regularly formed and produced (it's not a sigh, a cry or weeping – sounds with lot of noisy components) and this continuously sounding tone goes on and on and resists psychic disorganization. And that means: I keep my voice, I don't allow sadness to make me dumb and to make my words stuck in my throat. I'm not dumbfounded and I can go on with breathing – and whilst singing or playing I begin to have my sadness under control.

Singing or Musicking – that means a powerful, huge transformation of the emotional stuff into a new symbolic realm; it's a transformation – not an abstraction, not a neutralization, not a cooling – it's a transformation managed by the musical system of distinct pitches in melody and harmony and measured and accented beats. It is a transformation in which we don't lose the intensity of the affect but – after the transformation once took place, after f.i. the crying was embedded in the beauty of music - we now can stand these emotions, they are no longer threatening or overwhelming; and more than that: we can store our own undigested emotions in music as if it were a container – that might be the reason why we do enjoy even the most negative situations and feelings when we f.e. listen to an opera (you are witness of jealousy, betrayal, murder... and at the end you resume: how beautiful!).

For me, the epitome of these processes is the music of Mozart: When I listen to Mozart, I have always the feeling of real human beings acting or singing – every instrumental piece is like a little opera – and at the same time I realise: human breathing, dancing, acting was totally transformed into something completely different. For me there is no other music which is so close to everyday life and common feelings and at the same time so far away from that.

For us as musicians it is extremely important always to be aware that even the most sublime, complicated, structural music has its gestural roots. But that means: we do not only *listen* to music – we also do *feel* the tones; as the Italians know who use the word “sentire” when they deal with music – and sentire means at the same time : Listening and feeling! Obviously a fundamental tone is more than just the part of the tonal system, a fifth is more than just an interval, a distance or a relation of tones and a leading note is more than a phenomenon in

music theory and a harmonic necessity – they are tonal gestures (see later the tonic-solfa-signs)!

### **“Affect attunement” – early musical dialogues**

To illustrate these ideas we shall have a glimpse at the pre-symbolic, non-verbal communication between babies and their parents. Could you imagine the way you would speak to a newborn (and of course, then the *meaning* of the words is totally irrelevant!)? I suppose that you would generally pronounce sentences like “Oh, are you hungry?” or “Hi, my dear, we are you?” by

- raising your voice,
- extending the ambitus of speaking,
- putting emphasis on the vowels in the words (no wonder: vowels transport sound and emotion, consonants meaning...),
- slowing down the tempo of speech,
- choosing a very emotional timbre of the voice
- limiting the dynamics of your speech,
- repeating the short sentences and giving some of them a regular rhythmic form.

What you will produce are forms which own the qualities of good shape like terseness, stability, similarity on one hand and contrast on the other. These forms of sound and action belong to basic types of communicative acting like comforting, calming down, attracting attention or animating. And - did you find out? - what we are talking about are musical figures – not with distinct pitches, of course – , but the contents of communication is totally transported by sound and rhythm and not by symbolic meaning!

We know from psychological research about very young children that the baby has the competence to “answer” or even to start the dialogue. In the end you find intensive human interaction between child and adult, called “affect attunement” by the American psychologist Daniel Stern, and all that is managed by musical means and includes the whole body: every sound is indissolubly connected with movement. That means: The first way in which we communicate with people who are extremely important for us and about “topics” which are decisive for our survival and touch our basic desires, this first way of communication is a musical and physical one! And this then is the basis for spontaneous singing, for inventing little phrases and short melodies in the next steps of development – all these phrases are transformed gestural sounds. And that seems to be right even for the development of mankind in general: musical communication is elder than verbal communication!

## **Musicking and the body: pulse, weight and flow**

Another approach to illuminate the connection of music and body and to demonstrate how musicking is woven into our physical, bodily life. Music is a phenomenon in space and time and has more “horizontal” and more “vertical” aspects. In time (“horizontal”) means that musicians have first to measure and structure time by regular beats, constant meter and stable tempo. This is true for every type of music – and if you play percussive, repetitive music with its tendency to collective trance, this is your main “groovy” business.

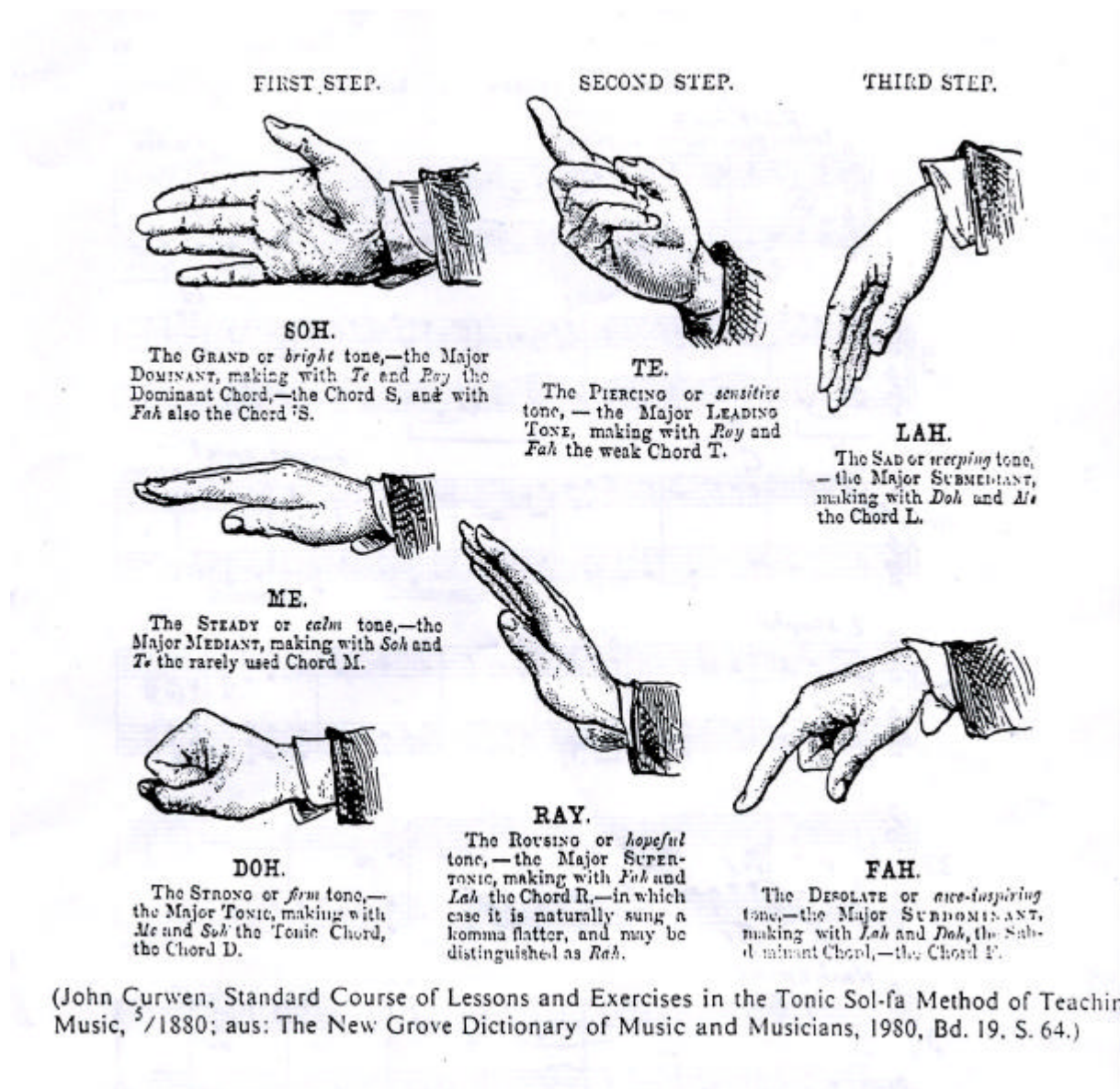
But if you are playing classical music which puts emphasis on the individual expression, your job is – on the fundament of that ordinary beat and meter – to derive from that regularity and to shape time individually, to make time interesting, to form every musical figure differently – this is the art and the secret of affecting phrasing, depending on the particular emotion of that phrase! And as you feel the expression, you let the music flow or you hold it back, you let the phrase increase or pass away, feel tension and relaxation, you accelerate or slow down and so on.

But the beats are not just periodical, even the metronome does not go tac, tac, but tic, tac, doesn't it? And that has to do with the second “vertical” dimension, with space, with earth and gravity: we have develop the feeling for weight in music, we always feel whether a beat is heavy or light, upbeat or downbeat. That's the only way to make every kind of music become swinging...

Obviously this basic experience of music is founded in our body experience: already the unborn child in the belly listens to Mum's heartbeat, every second of our physical life we deal with gravity which wants to pull us down and we have to resist and resurrect, every breath we take is a model for a musical phrase and our whole biological life follows the homeostatic pattern of tension and relaxation! This in mind we can receive a lot of inspiration for instrumental learning and teaching which is focussed on body experience and expression. At the same time I'm convinced, that everybody – to a certain extent – is able to learn musical expression; it's not just a gift or determined by age, biography or culture.

By the way: One of best ways to anchor the connection between listening to the music and feeling their energies is to work with the syllables and gestures of tonic-solfa, established by John Curwen and developed by Zoltan Kodaly. The Kodaly way of relative solmisation establishes from the very beginning the idea that music is always more than just adding one tone to the other – it sharpens our sense for where the tones come from and where they want to go. Producing the gestures consciously we find out that they cause – in a circular reaction – emotions: the clench one's fist, to extend the arms, to spread fingers, that leads to concrete feelings and interacts with facial and general body expression. And so you feel how the power is concentrated in the tonal centre, that singing or playing a fifth is an act of opening and a leading note must be dissolved – at all

costs! And already the musical beginner learns: every tone has a life, intervals are gestures and melodies expressive statements.



## Individual meanings of a Mozart sonata

Tonic Solfa was a collective action – everybody joined in and was forced to have the same feelings and imaginations! Now let's work on a piece of Mozart – and now I'd like you to feel your personal, individual reaction to a certain piece – and this means not only listening to and thinking about the particular piece, this means above all: bring your body into the game, not only as the playing machinery, but your body,

- which is generally able to feel and to express, which is “the stage or the playground” of the emotional life (Antonio Damasio) – with its organic processes, its mime and gesture, its tonus,
- which knows everything about tension and relaxation, arousal and calming,
- which is a conscious body – with ability to react authentically, to mirror our real feelings, to tell us about our emotional truth when listening to a piece or playing one... quite often our body knows much more than we think.



What could we do to mobilize our inner hidden knowledge about the emotional relevance which this piece has to us? I prefer working with a setting used for the training of dancers or actors and called “Authentic movement”: The group forms a circle and some members of the group decide to enter the circle, close their eyes, listen to the music and wait for the reactions of their bodies – maybe they, then, start dancing, or conducting, or wandering around, or waving their arms, or sit down or... do just nothing. The people forming the circle give security and are looked upon as “witnesses” of these explorations and can give a personal feedback afterwards, the “movers” inside the circle can – if they want - talk about their experience.

In the given case: Which pictures arise in front of your inner eye when you listen to Mozart’s Andante grazioso, which associations are floating through your mind? And then observe your body: what does he want to do? Maybe nothing? Maybe carefully or exuberantly dancing, maybe softly rocking? Possibly we can have and explore ideas of “Pastorale” feeling (Corelli, Christmas concert), or of “Siciliano” (slowly sung in 6/8-normally in Minor mode and making use of the Naples chord) or even of “Gigue” movement. You could have the imagination of a cradle song as well as the association of a musical box – little puppet dancers turning and turning around (by the way:

Glenn Gould denied all these approaches and performed a music of stiffness when he recorded this sonata).

What so ever: It is true that I feel that the piece is more like a cradle song... a music which makes people feel safe and secure, but I can't tell you what you have to feel (and as well you principal teacher cannot! – in terms of emotion and expression you are always your own teacher). You have to decide on the basis of your emotional truth which is shown by your body! And only then you can start working the piece – on the track you defined and in the emotional limits given by the piece (of course nobody would suppose Mozart's Andante to be a march).

### **Instrumental pedagogy – orientated towards expression and body**

I have to be honest: the following proposals how to work the piece follow my way of listening, feeling and thinking about the piece. The composition intensifies, clarifies and interprets my emotions: especially the voicing is for me of extreme importance. The “bass” voice accompanies the soprano, disregards tonal necessities and constraints; the tenor takes only part in the pulse, but without melodic movement; – except the end of every phrase: for me this solving gesture is that soft and conciliatory!

Now questions arise like

- How do we have to *breathe* when we want to calm somebody with a song? Observe the breathing reflexes when you imagine a smooth, soft singing or playing!
- What would be the appropriate, in this case sweet, soft *timbre* for the piece? Of course your instrument determines a basic timbre – a violin sounds totally differently from an oboe; and apparently you follow your own ideal conception of sound, your basic idea how your instrument should sound when you play it; but nevertheless you have to find a colour, a timbre which refers to that particular piece of music; and therefore: give up any dogma of “the beautiful tone” (without ignoring that there are limits of the emotional truth: if you play f.i. a musical character of fear or panic – you still have to keep your throat open - as a singer or a wind instrumentalist- or your bow has still to touch the strings in a way that they can swing).
- How do you feel the *weight of the beats* so that the piece starts floating, gliding, sailing? We have to experience or explore the relation of heavy and light on three metric levels: first inside the 3-quaver-group, taking into consideration Mozart's articulation; then inside the 6/8 bar, first half heavy, second light; third considering groups of bars, f.e. first heavy, second light. Conduct the piece!
- What is the *shape of the phrases*, how would you mould the musical waves, when does the music grow, when does it pass away? Explore

without the instrument, moving in the room – my proposal for the first four bars: we move forward by one single impetus, swing back slightly, then go forward deliberately and relax consciously after the “sf”.

- How do you look when you play this piece, what is your *facial and bodily expression*? Of course your core business is to produce sound (and that sets musicians apart from actors), but should not, at least, your gestural behaviour correspond with your music? Have in mind the demand of Carl Philip Emanuel Bach: “I a musician plays a sad piece, you have to hear and to see it!” Therefore it might be helpful to perform a pantomimic version of the Andante, to embody the gestures of the playing person without sound (and feel in every fibre of your body what it means to be calming and consoling).
- Can you find *words, sentences, stories, verbal pictures and associations* to describe what’s going on in terms of the expression you want? Can you make a use of language that supports the opening of your emotional experience, of your affective remembrance and that helps to focus on the expression and not on these thousands and thousands of details of the technical procedure (that’s the way Nikolaus Harnoncourt manages it to inspire orchestras or choirs – once he told the choir which had to perform the Finale of Beethoven IX - “seid umschlungen Millionen” - : “imagine as if you were kissed by a hippopotamus!”

We have to come to end – and should really start a workshop!