

Bartok' Viola Concerto
Analysis by David Mitchell

There are many aspects of Bela Bartok's *Viola Concerto* that make it an important work for musicians to study. For one, it is arguably the most performed concerto in the viola repertoire. Additionally, it was Bartok's last work. Bartok did not finish this piece because he was suffering from terminal cancer. The circumstances under which it was written and the history of the compilation of Bartok's sketches into a performable score make it an intriguing work for musicologists to study. Theorists will find this piece interesting because it is harmonically more conservative than his earlier pieces, and it demonstrates Bartok's mastery of the compositional process. Composers will find important lessons in this piece regarding the construction and development of thematic material and the use of contrasting sections and repetition. In general, there are many facets of this piece that make it an important work for composers, musicologists, and theorists to study.

There are several aspects of this piece that musicologists should find interesting. One aspect is the history of its compilation into a performable score. Errors in this process led to a misinterpretation of Bartok's sketches. As a result, the end of this piece was performed in the wrong key for many years. It was commissioned by William Primrose a Scottish violist. At the time of Bartok's death, the *Viola concerto* was unfinished. Bartok's pupil Tibor Serly constructed a version from Bartok's sketches which premiered in 1949. For many years, Serly's compilation was the only available version of this piece. Serly eventually made a facsimile of Bartok's original manuscript available to the Bartok archive in Hungary. In the 1990's, Peter Bartok constructed a new version of the *Viola Concerto* based upon his father's sketches. Peter Bartok's version is significantly different from Serly's edition of the score. In Peter Bartok's version, the last section starting at measure 114 is in the key of Ab instead of the key of A natural. According to an article by Peter Bartok,

The music in these bars, sketched by the composer in Ab, appears in the key of A in Tibor Serly's score. In the revised version it was lowered back to Ab, but it seemed desirable to analyze the reason for the choice of key, to determine the probable purpose for the new key in the sketch, and to question whether the composer himself may have raised it to A at the time of final scoring.

The preceding section - up to bar 110 – ends in A; bars 111-114 are a transition arriving to Ab in bar 114. The last movement, up to here, is Rumanian in character, but there is a change of mood at bar 114, where the orchestra accompaniment is a drone-like chord consisting of Ab and Eb and a "new" tune is introduced....

It was concluded, in examining the circumstances, that my father's choice of a new key was probably deliberate: the change of key coincided with a change of mood, as if to accentuate, stress, this change.¹

This is a good example of how the field of musicology can have a real impact on the way music is performed. In this case, Peter Bartok's detailed examination of the score revealed that this piece has been performed in the wrong key for many years. In this article, Peter Bartok also reveals the discovery of a motive from the Scottish tune "Gin a Body Meet a Body, Colmin' Thro' the Rye." This is the "new" tune that Bartok refers to in the above quote. In his article, Bartok compares this new tune at the end of the *Viola Concerto* to the Scottish melody "Gin a Body Meet a Body, Colmin' Thro' the Rye." He demonstrates that it is very similar to this Scottish tune. This is consistent with the fact that this piece was commissioned by William Primrose a Scottish violist. It is also characteristic of Bartok's use of Hungarian like folk tunes throughout his career.

For composers, this piece is a great example of how to develop melodic material. Bartok restates the opening melodic idea many times throughout the first movement, but he avoids directly

¹ Peter Bartok, "The Principle Theme of Bela Bartok's Viola Concerto," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 35, no. 1/3 (1993 - 1994), pp. 45-50

quoting the opening melodic material. The melody is inverted, developed, and extended in many creative ways. Although Bartok does not over develop this theme to the point that is unrecognizable when compared with the opening material. This method of repeating a melody that is slightly varied each time creates continuity and, at the same time, enough variation to keep it interesting.

There is a harmonic aspect of this melody that makes it difficult to determine what key it is in. On a pitch wheel (see page 1 of the attached example), the opening melodic idea appears to be in the key of C melodic or harmonic minor. Although Bartok never lets this melody settle on pitch class C. For example, the B natural note in measure 1 and 4 creates a definite leading tone effect, but the B natural does not resolve to C; therefore, the key of C harmonic/melodic minor is never confirmed. In fact, Bartok avoids the resolution of B to C for the first 14 measures of this piece. This creates the effect of a melody that seems to float harmonically.

Bartok creates rhythmic interest by varying his tempos throughout this piece. He unexpectedly launches into faster sections to create contrast and break up long sections of extended melodic development. The new faster material is generally more percussive, aggressive, and less melodically fluid. This is a great example of how to successfully establish and break textures and tempos in an extended work like this.

There are many aspects of this piece that make it intriguing to musicologists, theorists, and composers. For composers, there are many lessons in this *Viola Concerto* regarding melodic shape and development. The use of contrasting sections is masterful. It is also a beautiful piece of music. It warrants in depth study by musicologists, theorists, and composers.