

PRIMITIVISM IN PIANO MUSIC OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WITH REFERENCE TO *14 BAGATELLES OP. 6* BY BÉLA BARTÓK

Vincenzo De Martino

1. Primitivism in music: common guidelines and different approaches

Over the twentieth century, a variety of artistic tendencies arose in response to people's astonishment towards and dismay about deep changes to the political and socio-economical balance, scientific and technological progress, and way of life. Primitivism radically distanced modernity in favor of a return to a more authentic and people-oriented dimension, such as that experienced by our ancestors, so embodied by the manners of life of native populations from Asia, Africa, and Oceania at that time.

Composers were not exempt from being fascinated by such an undiscovered world of myth and legend, exotic landscapes, and ancient rituals as well as thousand-year-long local music traditions, simple in content but carrying fierce power and dynamism. However, Primitivism never existed as a unitary movement in the field of music; it rather appeared as a cross-tendency within the work of different composers in the course of several major artistic currents during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To find a definition of Primitivism in relation to the field of music, therefore, represents quite a challenging task, as the term itself is suited to many different possible interpretations.

A rather systematic approach comes to our aid from the field of visual arts. In 1984, the MOMA exhibition *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, attempted to redefine the boundaries between "primitive" and "modern" in art, pointing out "direct influences," "coincidental resemblances," and "basic shared characteristics" among contemporary and primitive artworks. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue summarizing the influence of several tribal objects from North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe on works by Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, and others (Berman 2002: 21).

On a similar basis, at least five possible interpretations of the idea of "primitive" arise in the realm of music creation, as revealed by Dario Martinelli, Italian musicologist, in his own classification (Martinelli forth. 2021):

- *Geographical/anthropological, referring to any human civilization or culture perceived as having remained at an earlier stage of evolution than modern society.*

This concept may sound discriminatory now; nevertheless, it was deeply rooted during the twentieth century, due to several solid pseudo-scientific argumentations. Diversely, composers and artists in general revealed a sincere interest in exotic scenarios and cultures as a source of inspiration for their creative input.

- *Ontogenetic* (Gre. ον: “body” + γένεσις: “origin”), referring to an earlier stage of development of the human being, such as childhood. Composers fostering this trend were inspired by memories from their childhood or, in wider terms, from the infants’ world, filtering musical representation through a child’s perception of reality, their language, and their psychological dimension. Consequently, musical form and content happen to be deliberately naïve and child-like and the overall atmosphere to evoke innocence, genuineness, and spontaneity typical of early youth.
- *Historical*, referring to a prior stage of human history, represented by any earlier epoch than the current age. Composers gazed upon the music and culture from the past ages as a source of inspiration in terms of stylistic features and formal construction, operating an authentic revival which was far distant from the Romantic idealization but rather experienced with clever estrangement and merged into their own musical vocabulary.
- *Phylogenetic* (Gre. Φυλή: “species” + γένεσις: “origin”), referring to an earlier stage of the evolution of the human species or, eventually, to different animal species. One of the most outstanding cases is represented by the attempt to imitate birdsong.
- *Purely formal*, referring to the essential elements of music creation, such as rhythm and sound/silence alternation, emphasizing them both as content and structural elements, not necessarily bearing any connection with the other categories, but eventually taking inspiration from different fields of representation.

2. Characteristics of Béla Bartók’s 14 Bagatelles Op. 6 for piano conveying his adherence to Primitivism

The piano works by Béla Bartók represent one of the most outstanding cases of expression of a primeval character on a modern instrument, leading to considerable changes and developments in instrumental writing and technique. The style of his music went through several different phases during his creative life, in which a significant turning point is represented by his discovery of folk music in 1904 and following ethnomusicological activity until 1917–18 (Ritchie 1986: 7). His fieldwork led to a recollection of three-hundred and twenty strophic items as representative of over a

thousand folk songs, classified by tune, range, rhythms, metrics, ratio of variation, performance peculiarities, and other parameters.

Bartók's compositional activity during the years between 1908 and 1910, while he carried out meticulous fieldwork in Transylvanian villages, led to the progressive disclosure of a truly innovative musical language rather than the simple arrangement of pre-existing melodies, incorporating them into more elaborated compositional schemes and conveying their essential primeval character towards new ways of pitch organization. *Ten Easy Pieces* (1908), *Two Elegies* (1908–09), *Two Romanian Dances* Op. 8a (1910) and *14 Bagatelles* Op. 6 (1908–10) are among the most representative works of this period (Dobszay 1981: 303).

In *14 Bagatelles* Op. 6, a collection of short free-standing piano pieces, Bartók takes quite different approaches to the instrument in the logic of his own compositional style, aiming at “a reaction against the exuberance of the Romantic piano music of the nineteenth century, a style stripped of all unessential decorative elements, deliberately using only the most restricted technical means,” (Suchoff 1981: Introduction) as he himself wrote in the introduction to the set. In other words, he relies on the purest, most essential elements of pianistic technique, depriving them of any pretentiousness of virtuosity, but rather considering them as constructive parts of music. In addition, he merges them into the qualifying traits (melodic, rhythmic, textural, structural, etc.) of the authentic folk music heritage, also variously processed by him. Hence, *Bagatelles* ultimately brings to the front the fundamental procedures of piano playing (scales, chords, passages in octaves, double thirds, and sixths, etc.) as well as the key features of music itself, such as sound and rhythm, merged into a significant peasant flavor, consequent to the employment of traditional folk tunes.

Such aspects, which find expression in most of Bartók's music, provide the key to comprehending the primeval character in his vast pianistic outcome. Bagatelle No. 1 quite convincingly supports this assumption:

- Simple scales act as the main structural elements. The C# Eolian scale is hidden in the ascending motif at the right hand, while fragments of the descending C Phrygian scale always respond at the left hand.
- The modal character derives from the combined use of the two previously mentioned modes, generating an inclusive octatonic mode, whose alternation of tones and semitones defines a symmetry. However, the two intervallic constructions are always perceived as separated, as they never merge. Furthermore, the quite strict association between each of the two modes

and a specific set of sound attacks (rather diversified for C# Eolian at the right hand and rigorously *tenuto* / *staccato* for C Phrygian at the left hand) utterly clarify such distinction.

- Intervals and direction of the melody serve as the main diversifying traits of the composition, making use of the two alternating modal scales and either rising or descending movements of the two melodic lines.

A similar approach reveals quite an accomplished systematization in *Mikrokosmos*, a set of 153 progressive piano pieces in six volumes written between 1926 and 1939, representing the common ground for Bartók's experimentalism, his interest in local music heritage, and his pedagogic effort. Here the composer operates a perfect synthesis between the essential elements of pianistic technique and of music in general, with the usual glance at folksong tradition.

In conclusion¹, the adherence to Primitivism in piano works by Béla Bartók is a quite elaborate phenomenon, to be generally approached from three main perspectives:

1. The reference to the folksong repertoire and its morphological features (rhythmical, melodic, textural, syntactical, and formal), entirely belonging to the sphere of orality and, therefore, prior to Western music tradition.
2. The exploitation of the prime, simplest elements of music, such as rhythmic pulse, sound/silence alternation, dynamic oppositions, interval, and pitch successions.
3. The emphasis on primarily pianistic tasks such as constructive elements of the musical discourse.

References

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¹ Editor's note: a thorough performer's analysis of Primitivism in the twentieth-century piano music is presented in the author's doctoral thesis *Interpreting Primitivism in Piano Music of the Twentieth Century*, which was defended at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in the course of preparing this publication.

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