The String Quartets of Bartók

1949

This article was originally published in *The Musical Quarterly* 35 (1949): 377–85. The dates of composition of the six String Quartets of Bartók are as follows: No. 1, Op.7, 1908–9; No. 2, Op. 17, 1914–17; No. 3, 1927; No. 4, 1928; No. 5, 1934; and No. 6, 1939.

The recent performance of the String Quartets of Béla Bartók by the Juilliard String Quartet served, by virtue of the stylistic unity of the presentation and the fortuity of nonchronological programming, to emphasize above all the homogeneity and consistent single-mindedness of Bartók's achievement in his works for this medium.[1] The superficially striking idiomatic differences between the first two quartets and the later four appeared entirely secondary to the basic unity of purpose that invested all six with the character of a single, self-contained creative act. For all that these works span an entire creative career, there is, throughout, a single conceptual attitude, and, from the Second Quartet on, a personal sound is present, through which this conception is disclosed. Most important, the unity of purpose emerges in all its significance as the identification of the personal exigency with the fundamental musical exigency of the epoch, emphasizing the impossibility of divorcing the qualitative aspect of the musical achievement from its strategic aspect. For it is in this respect that Bartók's music is so completely of its time, and achieves a contemporaneity far transcending mere considerations of style or idiom. It is nonprovincial music that reveals a thorough awareness of the crucial problems confronting contemporary musical composition, and attempts to achieve a total and personally unique solution of these problems.

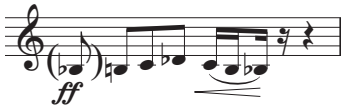
Bartók, from the outset of his career, and throughout all the observable stages of formulation and eventual fulfillment (and this certainly appears to be the relationship between the Third and Fourth Quartets) remained a "traditionalist," in that he was unwilling to abandon completely the employment of generalized functional tonal relationships, existing prior to a specific composition; yet he was aware of the hazards inherent in the use of a language overladen with connotations, in which the scarcely suggested is perceived as the explicitly stated. At the same time, the exclusive employment of unique, internally defined relationships, which can avoid this danger, leads to a considerable sacrifice of tonal motivation. Bartók's problem was that of achieving an assimilated balance between these two methods, without oversimplifying the problem by assigning discrete re-

gions of control to each, for such a solution is indeed no solution, substituting as it does segmentation for integration. Yet, since the connotative is most dangerously explicit in the small, and the self-defined least structurally explicit in the large, there is, in a general sense, an inverse relationship between harmonic definition and temporal span in Bartók's Quartets, but the relationship is revealed through virtually nonperceptible phases of change in the relative autonomy of the two organizational principles. There is, however, no avoiding, on the one hand, a highly attenuated functionality, or, on the other, a constant mutation, rather than more easily perceived reiterations, of the thematic elements. In this resides the difficulty and apparent complexity of Bartók's music.

Bartók's concern for the total composition, and the resultant evolution of the maximum structure from a minimum assumption, makes it irrelevant whether one initiates a consideration of his music with the detail or the entirety. In Bartók's case, to consider thematic structure is quite a different thing from "thematic analysis"; rather, it is a means of entering the total composition.

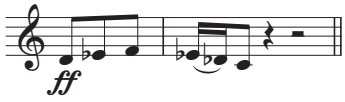
Bartók's thematic material, for the reasons indicated above, is in no sense unequivocal in tonal orientation; it consists, characteristically, of a small number of chromatically related tones stated in their minimal linear span. Such a theme can, by alterations of relative durations, metrical placement, and dynamic emphases, serve as the elaboration of almost any one of its component elements, without sacrificing its initial character. Then, rather than functioning as a fixed unit that is acted upon, such a theme can itself act as a generator, avoiding redundancy through continual variation, but creating, at the same time, continuous phases of association. An important element in the first and last movements of the Fourth Quartet has the following form on its first appearance:

Example 1.



Only the external factors of dynamics and pause cause the last note to predominate. But, when true finality is to be achieved with this motif, at the end of the first and last movements, it is altered to the following form:

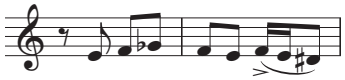
Example 2.



great emphasis being placed on the upper third of the final note.

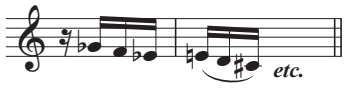
The final note may function merely as a neighboring tone in an expansion of the motif which emphasizes the second note:

Example 3.



or the span of the motif may be extended to a fourth:

Example 4.



or, finally, the motif may assume an extended form in which only the general rhythmic characteristics of the original are present:[2]

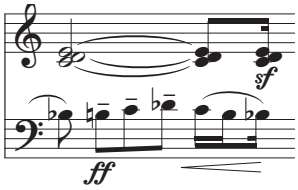
Example 5.

From his thematic assumption arises Bartók's polyphony, every line of which is a thematic variation and expansion, progressing tonally in terms of the successive elaborations of the tonal area controlled by single thematic elements. At the same time, the polyphonic lines are coordinated and given unified harmonic direction through the relationships existing among the simultaneously elaborated central tones. This procedure often appears to be an organic employment of what has been mistermed "polytonality," a self-contradictory expression which, if it is to possess any meaning at all, can only be used as a label to designate a certain degree of expansion of the individual elements of a well-defined harmonic or voice-leading unit.

In general, it is impossible to determine the harmonic orientation of a Bartók quartet from the implications of a single harmonic event. Rather, the harmonic region is revealed through polyphonic unfolding, while the specifically harmonic events serve often merely to state secondary relationships which make it possible for certain "dissonant" polyphonic events to acquire a relative stability arising not from their inherent structure, but from their relationships to these harmonic statements. Thus is the polyphony functionally framed, but deriving its internal character from the nature of the thematic assumption. The effect of true harmonic

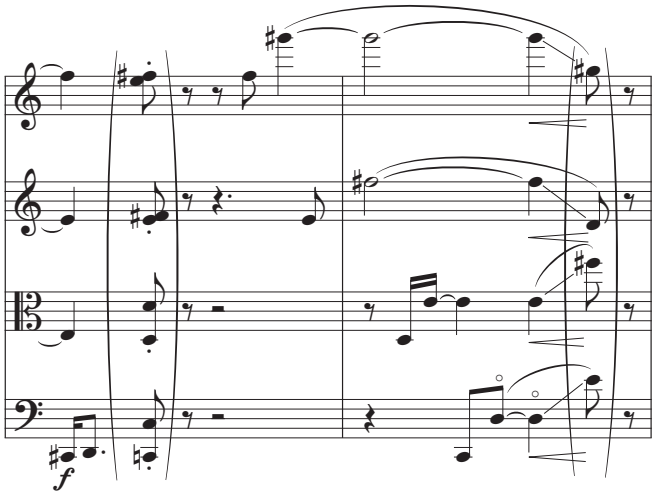
progression is often achieved analogically rather than absolutely, through the transposition of a harmonically indefinite unit, where the harmonic relationship associated with the interval of transposition affects the total harmonic relationship. This type of progression by translation is one of tonal association rather than of tonal function. It also serves to articulate sections through the return and restatement of such characteristic, fundamental combinations. In the first movement of the Fourth Quartet, the first strong harmonic emphasis is placed upon the following harmonically ambiguous whole-tone chord:

Example 6.



At what may be considered the end of the "exposition," or the beginning of the "development," the following passage appears:

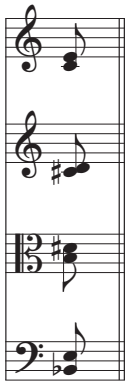
Example 7.



which has the effect of moving the original harmony, in its "root" position, up a major third through whole-tone steps, that is, in terms of its own components.[3] So, in spite of the lack of a decisive absolute tonal level, the first harmonic section contains the second, and is expanded by

it, as surely as the tonic contains the dominant. It is also interesting to note that, following the initial statement of this whole-tone chord, an elaboration of its elements follows, ending with the following chord:

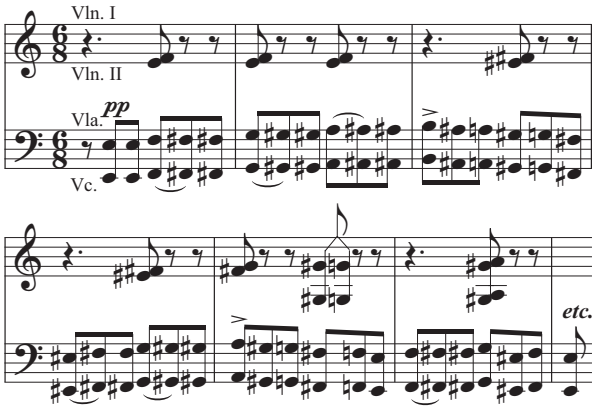
Example 8.



which is a chromatic filling of the tritone B♭-E, which had been diatonically filled by the whole-tone chord.[4] This harmony (Ex. 8) recurs at the same tonal level at the end of the next phrase thus fulfilling an articulative role, and demonstrating the possibility of stating a harmonic structure at a fixed tonal level in different contexts in such a way that the harmonic structure itself possesses different implications.

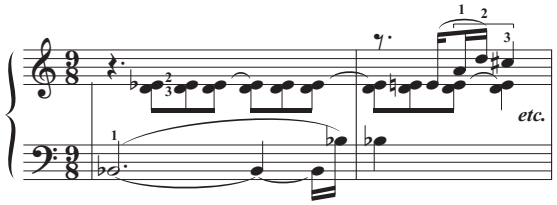
The developmental nature of the motival structure in the work leads to the identification of linear and vertical statements. The following quotation from the opening of the second movement of the Fourth Quartet is a striking example of this:[5]

Example 9.



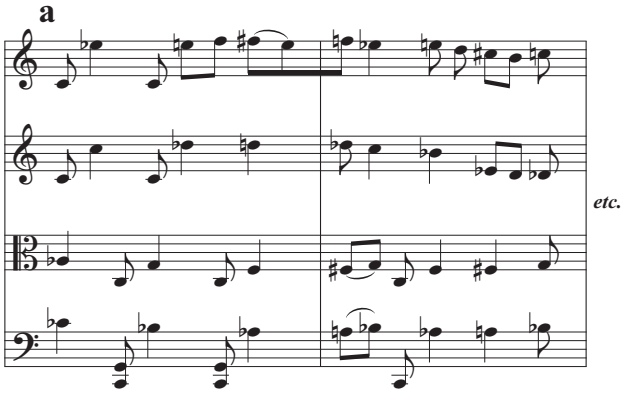
The linear elements stated by the cello and viola are accompanied by the same elements stated in successive pairs by the violins. This "serialization" appears as early as the opening of the Second Quartet:

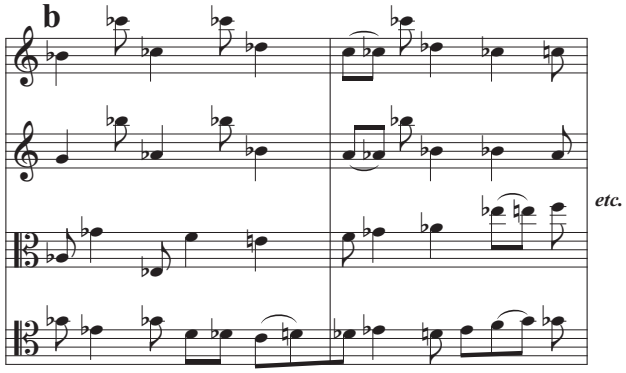
Example 10.



and becomes increasingly characteristic and important;[6] it has also led to a comparison of Bartók's music with that of the school of composers whose music is based entirely upon, or stems from, serial methods. But serialization in Bartók is but one of many integrative methods in the small, and its specific character is determined by the context in which it occurs. Never does it create the context. Likewise, Bartók's considerable use of inversion, retrogression, and free permutation is essentially a traditional one, concerned with varying linear characteristics while preserving their relative contours. Never does he use inversion, for instance, in its abstract structural role of maintaining the harmonic invariance of successive dyads, as is done in twelve-tone music. Even in those rare cases where inversion is employed over a large structural unit, its function is variational and thematically explicit. The following example, from the first movement of the Fifth Quartet, where the entire "recapitulation" is stated in free inversion, indicates how Bartók inverts not only the individual lines, but the entire score:

Example 11.





The first of these quotations is from the "exposition," the second, from the corresponding point in the "recapitulation."[7]

The evolution of the theme in Bartók is not confined to the region of a single movement. In all of Bartók's Quartets, thematic relationships among movements occur. This, of course, is not a new notion; indeed, it is one that has been employed in the most ingenuous manner as a means of securing a unity of a merely mechanical, quotational sort. In Bartók, this procedure is employed in two basic ways. The first has as its goal the creation of a type of structural climax by the gradual emergence of the theme through various stages of increasing functional importance from movement to movement. This method, which is already used in the First Quartet, is brought to its fulfillment in the last, an essentially monothematic work. The theme of this work, which is stated at the head of the movement, in successive one-, two-, three-, and four-part settings, generates each of the movements, with the entire fourth movement functioning as its most direct and complete expansion. The second technique, rather than associating all of the movements, has as its purpose the revelation of the symmetrical structural conception of the entire work, through the identification of symmetrically disposed movements, as in the Fourth and Fifth Quartets. Naturally, these thematic identifications are seldom exact; the theme is altered to permit quite different exploitations in its development, while the identification functions associatively rather than literally.

The preoccupation with structural completeness through the use of such methods as these has led to Bartók's music being accused of "formalism" and "constructivism." Such a criticism presumably implies that the structure of the work was predetermined without reference to the specific materials. On the contrary, Bartók's formal conception emerges as the ultimate statement of relationships embodied in successive phases of musical growth. The "arch-form" structure of the total Fifth Quartet is explicitly foreshadowed in the structure of the first movement. The

analogous structure of the Fourth Quartet is revealed through a carefully planned symmetry of tonal centers that arise as the goals of harmonic directions established previously. However, it is probably true that these thematic methods, which Bartók is obliged to use to achieve a sense of completeness, are symptomatic of a difficulty inherent in an idiom where independent formalism is inhibited by the presence of functional harmony, but where the tonal functionality itself is too rarified and complex to effect unambiguous formal finality.

In so fluid a harmonic idiom, true cadential articulation can easily lead to textural inconsistency. Bartók employs the instrumental resources of the quartet to achieve phrase and sectional articulation. Extreme shifts in purely sonic effect are used to define large formal relationships, while more subtle shifts in tonal balance, often effected through doublings, define smaller sections. Striking color characteristics associated with a harmonically ambiguous combination of tones may serve to endow it with an individuality that makes it possible for it to function in the role of a "tonic" sonority, at least to the extent of achieving a sense of return.

Perhaps more problematical than any aspect of Bartók's music itself is the future of the attitude it embodies. Bartók's solution was a specific one, it cannot be duplicated, but the question of whether it can be extended depends largely upon whether or not Bartók has reduced the use of generalized functionality to the minimum point at which it can exert structural influence. There is some evidence in Bartók's own work that such an exhaustion may have taken place. The Sixth Quartet is in many respects a retreat from the position of the Fourth and the Fifth. But such a question cannot be answered in the abstract; the answer can be found only in the music that will or will not be written.

Notes

1. The Juilliard Quartet (Robert Mann, first violin; Robert Koff, second violin; Raphael Hillyer, viola; and Arthur Winograd, cello) performed the six String Quartets of Bartók in two concerts in 1949 in Times Hall in New York. At the first concert, on 28 February they played Nos. 3, 2, and 5. At the second concert, on 28 March they played Nos. 4, 1, and 6. (eds.)

2. Examples 1–5 come from the following locations in the Fourth Quartet: Example 1, first movement, m. 7; Example 2, first movement, mm. 160–61, and fifth movement, mm. 391–92; Example 3, fifth movement, mm. 183–84; Example 4, fifth movement, mm. 141–42; Example 5, fifth movement, mm. 160–63. (eds.)

3. Examples 6 and 7 are from the first movement of the Fourth Quartet: m. 11 and mm. 50–51. The chord in Example 6 is {B♭, C, D, E}. The chords in Example 7 are {C, D, E, F♯} and {D, E, F♯, G♯}. (eds.)

4. Example 8 is from the first movement of the Fourth Quartet: m. 13. The

same harmony, {B♭, B, C, C♯, D, E♭, E} returns in m. 26, as Babbitt notes in the following sentence. (eds.)

5. Example 9 is from the second movement of the Fourth Quartet: mm. 1–7. (eds.)

6. Example 10 is from the first movement of the Second Quartet: mm. 1–2. The line B♭-E♭-D, shared among cello, viola, and second violin, returns transposed in the first violin, as A-D-C♯. (eds.)

7. Examples 11a and 11b are from the first movement of the Fifth Quartet: mm. 26–27 and 148–49. (eds.)