AQA AoS4: orchestral music of Bartók and Kodály

KS4

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Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály met as young men in 1905 in Budapest, and formed a lifelong friendship. They shared a passionate interest in the folk music of Hungary and wanted to incorporate it into their own music and teaching methods.

They began by researching and collecting Hungarian folk songs, often travelling to remote villages and making recordings on early phonographic devices. These songs became part of their musical language, and their orchestral pieces provide examples of using folk music within classical forms and styles. In this resource, we'll look at Bartók's *Romanian Folk Dances, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* and Concerto for Orchestra, as well as Kodály's *Peacock Variations.* (For more on Kodály's orchestral music, see *Music Teacher*, February 2017 and August 2021.)

Both men influenced and championed each other's work, and saw themselves as researchers and educators as well as composers, but their careers had very different impacts on music history. Bartók's orchestral music was more influential and groundbreaking, while Kodály's contribution to methods of teaching music (still widely followed to this day) is arguably a far bigger legacy than his music. Kodály's orchestral pieces are a vibrant and colourful celebration of folk music. Like Bartók's scores, they are innovative in their integration of folk melodies, rhythms and instruments into the classical tradition, but they lack the experimentation and ambition of Bartók, who would greatly influence the development of orchestral music further into the 20th century.

It can be helpful to analyse the orchestral music of Bartók and Kodály in terms of the two traditions of Western classical music and folk music fusing together. From their early experiences, interest in these two passions were ignited. Bartók describes listening to an influential piece of orchestral music, Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra,* as being 'roused as by a lightning strike'. At the same time, Bartók was promising to 'collect the finest Hungarian folksongs and to raise them to the level of art-song'. The dialogue between these two traditions folk and classical, the blurring of 'low art' and 'high art' boundaries, is at the heart of the orchestral music of these two composers.

Bartók and Kodály's styles in a nutshell

- **Rhythms**: strong, memorable gestures, dance rhythms, syncopations and dotted rhythms, often changing time signatures.
- **Tempo**: fast and unpredictable switches of tempo, sometimes a heavy fixed pulse, use of rubato.
- **Melody**: often modal or using unusual scales and intervals, lyrical but angular folk melodies, grace notes, repeating short cells of melody, unusual phrase lengths.
- **Harmony**: freer use of dissonance and chromaticism, bitonality, polytonality, a lack of key centre at times, unpredictability.
- **Texture**: based on late-Romantic orchestra with more extremes, abrupt contrasts and unusual textures adding in new instruments and extended techniques.

Characteristics of early 20th-century orchestral music

- Influences from other cultures and folk music.
- Inclusion of new and unusual instruments into the orchestra (eg piano, celesta, saxophone).
- Unusual ways of playing the instruments (extended techniques).
- Wider use of percussion with more important roles.
- Focus on timbre with finer details of colour.
- Greater extremes and more abrupt changes of dynamics, pitch, tempo and texture.
- More virtuosic writing across the whole orchestra.

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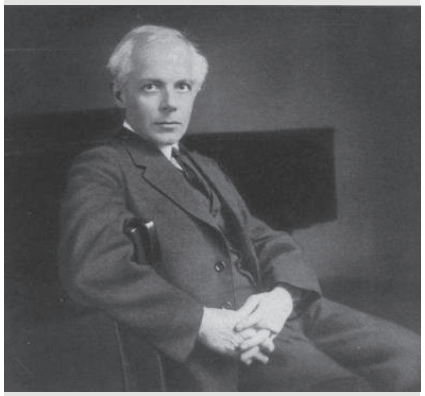


Béla Bartók in 1927

Bartók: Romanian Folk Dances (1917)

This piece is a good starting point for an accessible illustration of using folk melodies within early 20th-century orchestral music, combining the two traditions in a simple but effective way. The piece lays out the foundational ideas that Bartók and Kodály would both explore throughout their music and teaching.

Different ways of using folk music

Bartók talked about different ways in which he arranged folk melodies. First, he presented them simply and plainly, which he described as 'mounted like a jewel'. Secondly, melody and accompaniment would almost be equal in importance. Thirdly, the folk melody acts as a kind of inspirational 'motto' to be creatively developed. He then distinguished these approaches from original compositions that take the general spirit of the style, or imitate features of folk melodies.

The *Romanian Folk Dances* demonstrate Bartók's first two ways of arranging folk melodies. At times (eg No. 2 'Brâul' or 'Sash dance'), the folk song is 'mounted like a jewel' shining in the foreground, with very spare and simple background accompaniment. In No. 1, 'Bot tánc' (or 'Stick dance'), Bartók creates a distinct and original instrumental sound by combining the violins and clarinets in the unison melody, varying the ornamentation between clarinets and violins to create an unusual combined sound. (It's like inventing a new instrument: the 'violarinet' perhaps?) This gives a more folky and improvisatory feel to the melody.

The accompaniment is largely tonal, and with a simple, earthy pulse. Bartók shifts back and forth from the minor to major tonic at times to reflect an Eastern European folk influence.

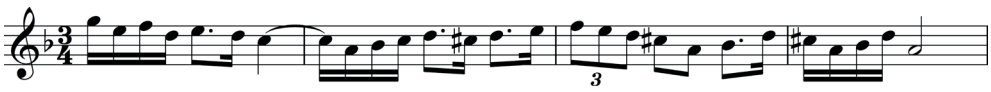
In the third ('Topogó' or 'In one spot'), the piccolo tune sounds like an authentic folk melody drifting in the evening air from a Romanian village. Bartók deliberately exploits the informal nature of folk music by having the melody stuttering and cutting off abruptly at the end, playfully undermining the formality of the classical orchestral tradition. Folk music is a catalyst to find new and original ideas for the classical orchestra.

Influence of folk music in Bartók's orchestration

- The static, drone-like chords in the strings, swapping between notes to change colour.
- Choosing deliberately thinner and 'rougher' sound qualities at times (eg solo piccolo instead of flute).
- Moving in parallel 5ths (descending chromatically in the final few bars).
- Repetitive block structures, without traditional cadences or smooth transitions.
- Irregular phrase lengths and rhythmic patterns.

His own classically rooted harmonic language is present in this piece, including chromatic basslines and richer chords. This demonstrates his second way of arranging a folk melody, where melody and accompaniment are almost equal in importance. For example, in No. 4 ('Bucsumí tánc' or 'Dance from Bucsum'), Bartók reharmonises the same D minor folk melody using a sophisticated bitonal harmonic language.

In the six bars before figure 4, both four-bar phrases have the identical melody:



The first version is harmonised around C7(d) and Gmin7 chords. The second time it swaps to Bb7 and a tonally ambiguous F#-E-G# chord. Listen to how this harmony clashes with the fixed modal melody line and changes the emotion of the phrase when it repeats.

This work doesn't 'creatively develop' (Bartók's third approach) the folk melodies themselves, and we need to look at a later work for an example of Bartók moving into the other ways of using folk music where its general spirit becomes woven into the style.

Bartók: Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta (1936)

Bartók's music of the 1930s integrates folk music and art music together in a more innovative and complex way. This piece is one of his most influential and forward-looking works.

Soon after he wrote the piece, he talked about the way he never repeats an idea unchanged, and his style was influenced by the extreme variety that characterises folk music. You can hear that in the way that *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* develops a short opening theme in the first movement: it constantly changes and varies the idea using transposition, inversion, stretching the intervals and rhythms, etc.

This piece also shows influences of traditional music from other cultures including North African folk music. The piece can be heard as a bubbling three-way conversation between older classical styles, folk music and newer, 20th-century ideas. This conversation creates a fascinating and dramatic argument through the piece. Here are examples of how the three elements are found in parts of the piece.

Second movement: Allegro

Classical elements:

- Represented by the V-I 'perfect cadence', especially the prominent timpani V-I figure that you hear through the movement.
- Development of a motif, transposing and extending it.
- Use of fugue entries (from bar 310) (see also the extended fugue that starts the first movement).
- The antiphonal string groups, like a Baroque concerto grosso, creating a 'call and response' texture.

Folk elements (for example, from the piano entry at bar 158):

- Insistent repeated notes and grace notes.
- Modal melodies.
- Driving, heavy rhythms with syncopated stresses.
- Short ostinato figures.

Modern elements (focus on the section from bar 180):

- Different orchestral colours (combining strings with piano, harp and celesta).
- Triads and extended chords moving in parallel motion (similar to Debussy and Messiaen).
- Bitonality and polytonality.
- Unusual scales, modes and chromaticism.
- Different length rhythms that go against the barline (eg five against four) creating overlapping patterns.
- Dividing the strings in more detailed ways; extreme variety in the string texture.

This three-way conversation is also evident in the slower, more reflective music of this piece.

Third movement: Adagio

Classical elements:

- Fugal entries of the upper strings.
- Focus on symmetry, the arch structure of this movement (ABCBA).
- The traditional four-movement form of the whole piece.

Folk elements:

- The primitive speeding up/slowing down xylophone motif on one note.
- Short bursts of percussive 5/8 dance rhythms (eg bar 51).
- Use of a drone.

Modern elements:

- Unusual ways of playing the instruments (glissando timpani, extensive tremolo strings).
- The opening tritone drone avoiding a sense of key.
- Focus on texture and colour rather than tonality or harmony (eg from bar 35).
- The influence of 12-note, fully chromatic melodies used by composers such as Schoenberg.

Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra (1943, revised 1945)

Bartók had emigrated to USA by the time he composed this piece. Here, folk music has become part of the wider language of Bartók's music, an 'ingredient' that blends into a more general classical orchestral style. In this piece, Bartók often returns to a more traditional late-Romantic orchestral sound, instead of that of the more experimental *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. However, the fact that the piece is a 'concerto' for orchestra shows the more modern idea of writing challenging, soloistic parts for all players.

Bartók maintains a complex harmonic language, with chords and melody based on intervals rather than tonal keys or major/minor scales (for example, the string melodies moving in 4ths at the start of the piece). The folk music that was in the foreground in his *Romanian Folk Dances* is here subsumed into a rich, eclectic style that includes musical techniques from the past and present. There are chorales, fanfares, elegies and dances, as well as quotations of popular songs and even Shostakovich's recently composed Seventh Symphony.

Snapshot: first movement, bars 342-440

This section starts with a fugal brass fanfare with dramatic interjections from the rest of the orchestra. This sound world is similar to that of Wagner or Mahler. You can see how Bartók develops an idea: the rising 4ths that begin each brass phrase become inverted into descending 4ths. The harmony has aspects of tonality, but is restless and chromatic until the *marcato* entries at bar 364. Here the looping stack of 4ths (B flat, E flat, A flat) sounds more modern and 20th-century (similar to the brass loops in Janacek's Sinfonietta of 1926, **www.youtube.com/watch?v=JV6GI3ROj8c**). After the climactic tutti, the music becomes more delicate and folk-influenced, with background drone chords, insistent two-note theme, dance-like dotted rhythms, modal melodic shapes, and 'raw' sounds created by unusual techniques (eg the harp strummed with sticks at bar 438).

It's like a journey from the Romantic concert hall to 20th-century art music, and further on to the world of folk music.

Film music connections

Bartók didn't compose music for film, but his orchestral music is used in film scores to this day and exerted a big influence on film composers. As a composer living in the United States, his music had close links with the early movie music of fellow American-based composers, particular those also escaping Nazi persecution in Europe. Bartók's eclectic and colourful style, bringing together into a mixing pot the large orchestral forces and high melodrama of late romantic music, 20th-century experimentation, and folk music from different cultures, became a template for a lot of film music scores.

Fifth movement: Finale

The Finale is a breathless celebration of different themes and folk-style melodies, moving abruptly between extremes of dynamic, texture and style. This movement is fast-paced and complex, but can be great for analysis and listening activities to demonstrate Bartók's orchestral style.

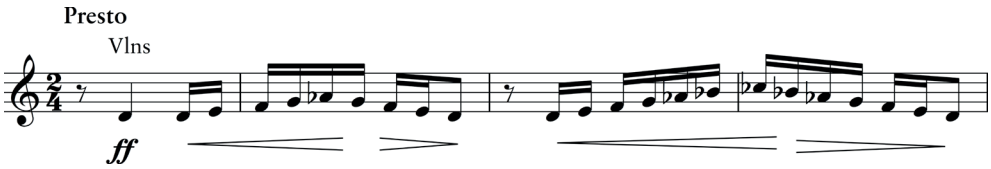
The opening: energy, drama and new ways of playing instruments

The fifth movement begins with the string players strumming chords like guitars. There are scurrying modal melodies moving through the orchestra, syncopated dance rhythms and dramatic interjections.

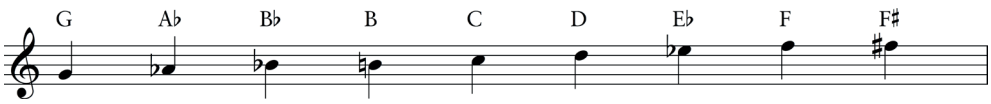
New scales

In the early 20th century, composers wanted to move away from traditional tonality. Chromatic harmony had pushed major and minor scales to their limits, so composers often looked for alternative scales. Bartók borrowed the scales and modes of folk music as well as scales built on different interval patterns.

The fast scales that the strings play as the Finale begins themselves play with shifting patterns of tones and semitones to create unusual modes, often using diminished scales. For example, after the two foghorn blasts from tubas and bassoons in bar 86, Bartók uses a rising and falling diminished scale (tone, semitone, tone, semitone, etc) like surging waves:



Bartók even creates his own unique scales and uses them to create original melodies and harmonies. In the 'Tranquillo' section at bar 469, he uses this scale pattern:

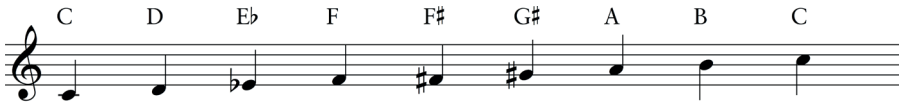


The pattern of the scale is ambiguous and mysterious, as it doesn't fit easily into a key. He makes it sound even richer and stranger by:

- adding layers of the same scale starting on different notes to create atonal parallel chords.
- combining the same scale going up and down in contrary motion.
- underpinning it with a low held bass F sharp using tremolo strings.

Activity: Compose your own mysterious tranquillo music

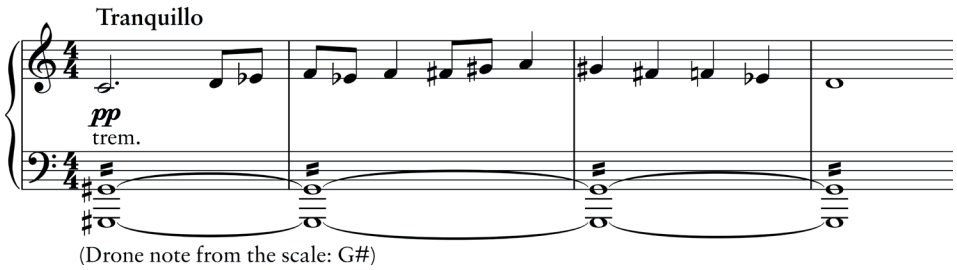
1 Learn a **diminished scale** (or a section from it) by playing or singing it up and down together:



2 Compose a short, slow **melody** that goes up and down that scale.

3 Compose a **drone**: pick **one note from the scale** and play it low down as quietly as possible using tremolo techniques.

Demo example:

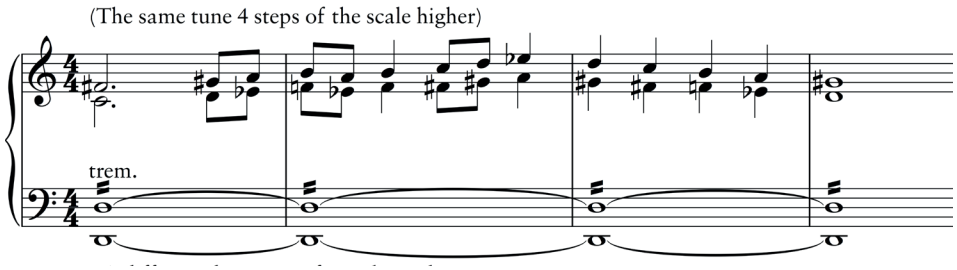


Extension work

4 Create **harmony** by adding the **same** melody starting two, four or six notes higher up the scale.

5 Change the **tonal centre**: pick a **different** note from the scale for the drone but keep the same tune and harmony. Discuss how the emotion or colour of the melody changes when you do this.

Demo example:



Blurring the key

Bartók often uses a tonal centre that gives an important 'root' note to focus on, without his music being in a major or minor key. There are also bold major or minor triads, but the 'key' of the music is often unclear and ever-changing. A good example of this is the fugal woodwind section from bar 148. Bartók takes the theme first heard in the first four bars of this final movement. In this fugal section the theme starts with an octave leap with a Lydian feel, but it quickly loses its sense of a key. Each version of the theme enters a 4th higher, building a sense of excitement. Here are the ways that Bartók undermines the sense of tonality:

- Adding accompaniment in a different key (the countermelodies and viola trills).
- Chromatically altering the mode.
- Abruptly shifting the mode up or down in fixed intervals (moving up in 4ths).

Unexpected shifts

As well as shifting tonality, the genre and style of the music change like shifting sands under our feet. As the music moves into a 'Tranquillo' section at bar 161, Bartók moves into a more chromatic language, losing any sense of modes and keys. For a moment the music is much closer to the expressionistic or serial 12-note techniques of Schoenberg and Webern. We quickly move back into a more modal style, the strings move in major/minor triads and he shifts the music *down* in 4ths this time. Then, at bar 188 the music snaps into a completely tonal style: a D flat major folk tune with perfect 5th drones and a Hungarian dance-style accelerando.

In a few seconds of music, we have visited a huge variety of styles from different traditions, like rushing through the rooms of an art gallery.

Listening activity

Listen to one of the movements from the Concerto for Orchestra as a group, and give each half of your group the following tasks. Ask them to select and note down the chosen section of the piece (eg a page of the score or a specific time on the video):

Group 1 listening tasks:

- Choose a section that sounds most like **folk music** and a section that sounds most like **classical music**.
- Explain why you chose those sections.

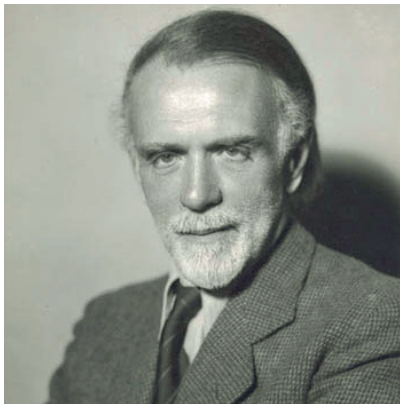
(To help with identifying the classical-sounding section, you could explain the idea of fugues and ask them to listen for sections which use fugal entries.)

Group 2 listening tasks:

- Identify when the music feels like it's most firmly **in a key**, and when it feels like its most clearly **not in a key**.
- Explain why you think this is.

(In other words, are there sections where you can easily sing the tonic or hear a major or minor scale being played, and other places where the chords and scales are very chromatic and unpredictable?)

Kodály: Peacock Variations (1938-39)



Zoltán Kodály in the 1930s

Kodály's *Variations on a Hungarian Folksong* or *Peacock Variations* uses folk music in a closer way to Bartók's third description of arranging folk melodies: 'a kind of inspirational "motto" to be creatively developed'. This piece is a theme and variations using a very old Hungarian melody from a song called 'Fly, Peacock'.

Character and mood

Kodály finds different moods and characterisations in his variations. These range from the first three, which are short, lively and energetic, to the tranquil Calmato variation or the darker, brooding Adagio and the sombre Funeral March ('Tempo di marcia funebre'). The piece ends with a celebratory Finale.

Taking folk music to the concert hall

From the beginning of the piece, Kodály demonstrates how a simple folk theme can be brought into the grand stage of early 20th-century orchestral music. In the opening few seconds of the Tema, Kodály moves from folk-like simplicity to orchestral richness.

The opening timpani roll acts like a drone, the bass instruments quietly begin the tune, made up from just four different pitches. A bare 5th is added as harmony, then the solo clarinet and bassoon play the full four-phrase melody as a canon. These are all techniques associated with folk music.

The music is spare and intimate until the upper strings burst in and Kodály elevates the tune into a grand orchestral theme. Late Romantic and 20th-century ideas here are:

- Rich orchestral colours.
- The sudden dramatic change of texture and dynamic.
- The loss of a clear 'key' with dissonant harmony and a sense of bitonality between the strings and the horn melody.
- The strings moving in parallel modal chords, similar to Debussy or Ravel's orchestral music.

As the piece progresses, we find the same 'conversation' between traditions that was present in Bartók's music:

Classical elements:
- Orchestration rooted in late-Romantic style.
- Traditional roles for instruments with the strings often leading, woodwind and brass providing chords, colour and solo melodies.
- Use of ostinato and ground bass techniques (eg Variation 13).
- Brass fanfares at the end of Variation 16.

Folk elements:
- Use of drones.
- Melodies created from simple four-note or pentatonic scales.
- Decorating melody with grace notes and trills (eg Variation 8).
- Harmonising with parallel 4ths and 5ths (eg the brass in Variation 15).
- Strong, repetitive rhythms often using dance-like syncopation (eg Finale).
- The free and improvisatory flute solo moving up and down pentatonic scales in Variation 14.

Modern elements:
- Dissonant, complex chords and modal harmony creating a blurred sense of tonality.
- Impressionism and the focus on timbre and colour (eg the harp, strings and woodwind texture in Variation 14).

While Kodály's music does share some of the characteristics of the orchestral music of his contemporaries, it doesn't have as many of the 20th-century innovations as Bartók's music has. Kodály uses the folk music he researched and studied to add new sounds and a fresh personality to his late-Romantic orchestral style.

These two composers had different impacts on orchestral music of the 20th century, but their long-term friendship and influence on each other's ideas show how a composer is rarely an isolated 'genius', but instead part of a community who shape and influence each other. Bartók and Kodály's commitment to redefining how music is taught and researched for generations to come shows this even more clearly.