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A Tribute to Nature: The Evolution of the Night-Music Style in Bartók's Music

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In his published memoirs, Béla Bartók's son writes that his father "loved nature in all its manifestations."[1] Musicologist David E. Schneider adds that the composer also held nature in close relation to the Hungarian tradition.[2] In addition to his customary folk style, Bartók developed a musical style that reflected his love for nature and its importance to the Hungarian tradition: the "night-music" style, named after Bartók's piano piece, "The Night's Music." Notwithstanding some exceptional cases in which he replicates the melodies of certain bird calls,[3] Bartók's "night music" generally does not imitate the sounds of nature. Instead, Bartók evokes the atmosphere of nocturnal nature by musically conveying its quiet energy.[4]

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[1] Béla Bartók Jr., quoted in Bence Szabolcsi, "Man and Nature in Bartók's World," in *Bartók Studies*, 63-75, ed. Todd Crow (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1976), 65-66.

[2] David E. Schneider, *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition: Case studies in the intersection of modernity and nationality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 118.

[3] Maria Anna Harley, "Birds in Concert: North American birdsong in Bartók's piano concerto no. 3," *Tempo*, New Series, No. 189 (June 1994): 8-16, 8.

[4] Szabolcsi, "Man and Nature," 66.

Bartók established his "night-music" style in the fourth movement of his suite for piano, *Out of Doors* (1926), "The Night's Music," whose distinctive sounds and stylistic components reappear in many of Bartók's later works.[5] The term "night music" applies to Bartók's compositions featuring stylistic characteristics similar to that of "The Night's Music." Indeed, due to its distinct techniques, the "night-music" style remains identifiable in Bartók's music up to his final composition in 1945, even despite Bartók's frequent compositional and stylistic developments.[6] For instance, the second movement of Bartók's Third Piano Concerto (1945) begins and ends with a chorale but contains a middle section in "night-music" style.

Characteristics of the "night-music" style include soft, repeated clusters of notes and short melodic motives that occur at irregular intervals. The recurring clusters create a constant backdrop, depicting the sounds of wind or crickets, while the melodic motives portray irregular sounds of nature, such as the call of an animal.[7] "Night music" often sounds haphazard – like nature, which is unpredictable – but a closer examination of Bartók's scores reveals his careful organization of the music.[8] The following discussion examines the defining characteristics of Bartók's "night music" and the evolution of the style through a comparison of two of Bartók's piano pieces from different stages of the composer's career: the first example of such music, "The Night's Music," and an excerpt from Bartók's

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[5] John Weissmann, "Bartók's Piano Music," *Tempo*, New Series, No. 14 (Winter 1949-1950): 60-71, 67.

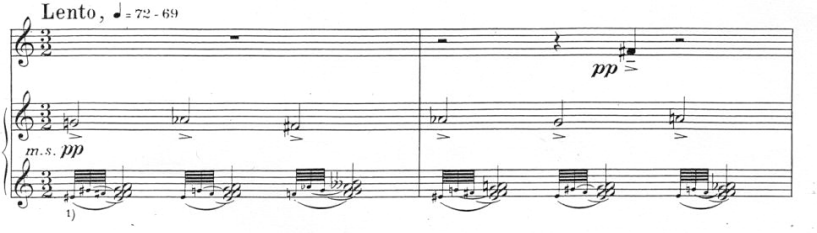
[6] Schneider, *Bartók, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition*, 84.

[7] Barbara Nissman, *Bartók and the Piano: A Performer's View* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 160.

[8] See László Somfai, "Analytical Notes on Bartók's Piano Year of 1926," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, T. 26, Fasc. 1/4 (1984): 5-58, 6. See Somfai's comments on Bartók's structural organization of these works. Ibid., 6-10.

final work, the Third Piano Concerto. The nature sounds and folk melodies characteristic of the "night-music" style appear in both these works; however, Bartók takes creative liberties in his last composition, integrating the components of "night music" more subtly into his work.

Bartók establishes an atmosphere of static energy in the opening of both "The Night's Music" and the middle section of the "Adagio religioso" from the Third Piano Concerto. While "The Night's Music" has little melodic progression, it is infused with motivic vitality. An ostinato of four-note clusters pulses quietly, building energy with its unresolved dissonances.



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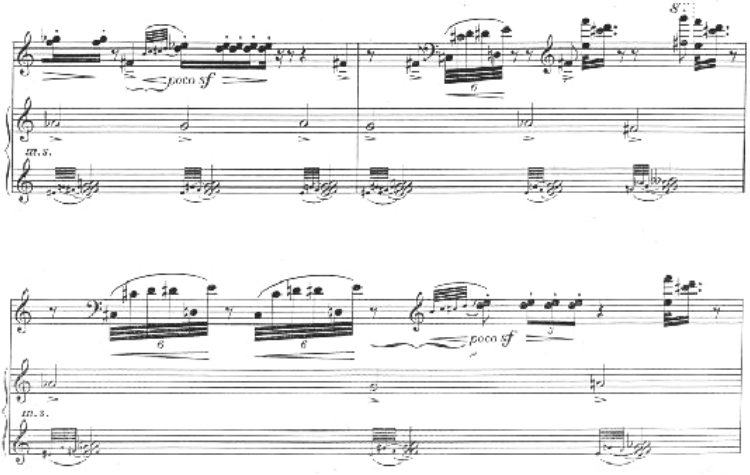
Gradually, Bartók adds other motivic figures in the higher registers of the piano. Three distinct motives repeat (mostly on the same pitches) at irregular intervals over the ostinato. The combination of the clusters and the short motives is an integral part of the nocturnal character that defines Bartók's "night music."[9] The irregular occurrences of the motives make the 3/2 time signature indiscernible, so that while the ostinato defines a constant beat, the meter is obscure.

[9] Halsey Stevens, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 135.



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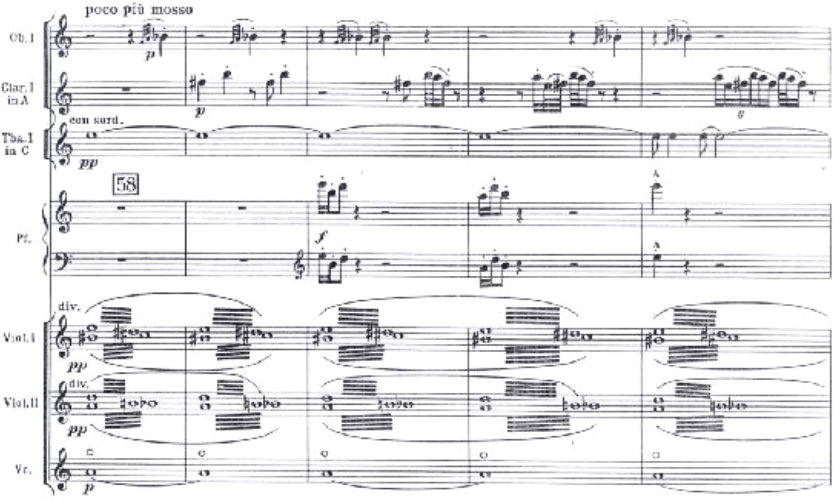
Having thus established the nocturnal atmosphere, Bartók writes two folk-like melodies overtop, one beginning in measure 17, and the other in measure 37, as László Somfai confirms.[10] While the melodies make the musical structure more audible by defining the phrases, the meter changes frequently with the new melodies, stretching and compressing to accommodate phrases of varying lengths. Even after the initial cluster ostinato ends in measure 17, similar clusters recur throughout the piece. The motives from the opening also reappear, but Bartók clearly separates the folk melody from the background nature sounds. The second folk melody is in a different key from the rest of the piece, and the inconsistent rhythms and meter in the folk melodies lend them independence from the nature sounds. Somfai also suggests

[10] Somfai, "Analytical Notes," 5.

that Bartók associates the relationship between the different sounds in his "night-music" style with man's interaction with nature.[11] For instance, the folk melody symbolizes human activity; both melody and nature sounds coexist but do not necessarily agree.[12] The ambiguous meter of the opening and the changing meter beginning in measure 17 create a lack of rhythmic drive that mimics the nocturnal stillness; melody and nature seem to exist together in suspended time, independent of a constant meter. The rhythmic stillness is not lifeless, however; Bartók's use of dissonance gives the music energy despite the lack of motion. The "night music" section in the "Adagio religioso" from Bartók's Third Piano Concerto shares many structural components with "The Night's Music," including clusters, nature motives and differentiated melodies.

The "night-music" section in the "Adagio religioso" opens with tremolos in the violins, which create *pianissimo* clusters reminiscent of those in "The Night's Music." To complement this texture, the motivic nature sounds played by the oboe, flute, and clarinet also begin in the first measure. In the third measure of the "night-music" section, the piano plays a melody that remains distinct from the nature sounds. In this case, Bartók uses the timbral contrast between the percussive piano and the more earthy woodwinds and strings to separate the two textures, in contrast to the rhythmic and harmonic contrast he employs in "The Night's Music."

[11] Somfai, "Analytical Notes," 5.
[12] Ibid.



PIANO CONCERT NO. 3: II
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Thus, Bartók quickly establishes the familiar nocturnal atmosphere through ostinato clusters, nature motives, and piano melodies. Despite these initial similarities to his earlier composition, however, Bartók condenses the music in order to establish the same "night music" characteristics in only three measures (instead of extending the introduction over seventeen bars, as in "The Night's Music"). Similarly, in contrast to the indeterminate and changing meter in "The Night's Music," the "Adagio religioso" is entirely in 4/4 time. The meter does not stretch to accommodate the piano melody, so the melody must conform to the strict meter. The constant meter provides a sense of motion and direction, giving the "Adagio religioso" an animated character dissimilar to "The Night's Music's" vibrant tranquility.

The absence of *ostinati* in the "Adagio religioso" also contributes to the more animated and dynamic character. The ostinato in "The Night's Music" depicts nature's sounds as a constant background. In the concerto, Bartók uses trills and tremolos to create a similar effect; however, the clusters frequently change voices and pitches, and thus forego the sense of consistency. The absence of an ostinato also makes the reference to nature sounds in the "Adagio religioso" much more subtle than in "The Night's Music." The soft clusters that represent the atmosphere of nocturnal nature in "The Night's Music" reappear in the concerto, but they are changing and unpredictable. In the concerto, Bartók uses the clusters to signify nocturnal nature rather than to imitate the actual sounds of wind and crickets. The ostinato element of Bartók's "night-music" style is used more freely as a compositional tool.

Finally, the musical context of each work (i.e. "The Night's Music" as a suite movement and the "night-music" section within the "Adagio religioso") indicates a stylistic shift in Bartók's opus. As an independent movement within the *Out of Doors* suite, "The Night's Music" is stylistically self-sufficient; for instance, the ostinato clusters reappear in the final five bars, framing the piece and providing effective closure to the seemingly random sounds Bartók introduces in the central portion of the work. In contrast, the "night music" in the "Adagio religioso" is part of a larger ABA form and serves as a contrast to the chorale style that precedes and follows it; in this case, the "night music" is not the focus of the work but a thematic interlude that Bartók incorporates to develop a larger movement.

Prominent stylistic distinctions differentiate Bartók's original use of his "night music" style in "The Night's Music" movement from *Out of Doors* from the middle section of the "Adagio religioso" movement of Bartók's final composition,

the Third Piano Concerto. While both works share many common characteristics, certain modifications add interest and direction to the concerto. In his later work, Bartók no longer explicitly separates and identifies the "night-music" section, but rather integrates a familiar stylistic methodology within a larger, more complex work. Similarly, Bartók expands on his initial conception of "night music" style, introducing a more flexible approach by removing the prominent ostinato. Nevertheless, the similarity in style between the two pieces remains particularly evident in the consistent use of dissonance to create energy and the incorporation of nature sounds and folk melodies. Despite compositional and technical alterations, Bartók's "night-music" retains its recognizable stylistic character.

Describing the folk music he so avidly researched, Bartók identifies "the peasant's song" as "a phenomenon of nature,"[13] suggesting that his love of Hungarian folk music remained the inspiration for the nature sounds and folk melodies permeating his "night music" pieces. Out of the oldest music of his country, Bartók creates a new, modern style that appeals to the intersections between nature and composition.

[13] Béla Bartók, quoted in József Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, trans. Ruth Pataki (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Company 1972), 228.

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