Discoveries on the Donau

—or—

The Danube Runs Through It

On its 1785 mile course from the Black Forest to the Black Sea through ten countries and the watersheds of nine more, the Danube passes downstream from Vienna to Budapest, connecting the twin capitals of Austria-Hungary. Already in the 17th century the exotic musics of the eastern parts of the Hapsburg Empire began to influence composers in Vienna, for instance, J. H. Schmelzer who was the first German to serve as *Hofkapellmeister*. Our own tutelary protector, Joseph Haydn, was born in Rohrau, just south of the Danube. For much of his life he worked east of Vienna, and the dance and song he heard outside the walls of the Esterházy palaces in Eisenstadt and Esterháza was surely saturated with rhythmic and melodic contours of the Roma, Magyars, Croatians, and numerous other groups that lived and traveled along the Danube's length. Listen for a Gypsy fiddler in the Finale of Haydn's Op. 33, No. 1.

From the incorporation of an outlandish style of playing in a quartet movement to composing in the voice of a people utterly foreign to the Austrian folk tradition is a distance in time and the imagination greater than the physical length of the Danube. Yet from the birth of Haydn's Op. 33 it was a mere 100 years until the birth of Béla Bartók, and from Haydn's death again a mere 100 years until Bartók's First String Quartet appeared. The stylistic development that made this transformation possible is difficult to trace. Austro-German political and economic influence dominated Hungary in the 19th century, and so its cultural hegemony was pervasive as well. Most Hungarian composers were essentially writing German music with an Hungarian accent.

Imre Székely's *Quatuor Hongrois* should not be viewed as some sort of missing link between Haydn's ethnic exoticism and Bartók's internalized Hungarian idiom. Instead of Bartók's peasant music, sung by people with tanned necks and calloused hands or danced in clogs, we have cultured and citified Hungarians who seem not to get further into the countryside than the suburbs. Indeed, we do seem to spend some quality time in the Palm Court of the Hotel Budapest. Nevertheless, the *Quatuor Hongrois* is not Germanic, nor does it take itself seriously. Its charm and naiveté are a real discovery and we trust you will enjoy this West Coast (and very possibly American) premiere.

A traditional portrait of Bartók gleaned from liner notes and concert programs highlights fragile years of childhood illness, early fame as a musical prodigy and piano virtuoso, academic training in Budapest, and the defining passion for ethno-musicological field work, preserving traditional folk melodies from Transylvania, Romania and the Middle East on wax cylinders. He is seen as the champion of an authentic Hungarian national style in his compositions, fusing Western classical tradition with folk idioms. His wartime flight to America and the years of sickness and professional exile before his early death in 1945 cast a somber, even tragic shade over a life marked by difficulty.

Bringing the focus closer to the man himself, Bartók is revealed in his letters and in the memoirs of those who knew him best as an extraordinary intellectual and freethinker, a humane and vulnerable empath, and a serious workaholic. His older son reported that, "He had no recreations in the conventional sense of the word…His principal pastime was—work." Universally described as modest and self-effacing, he was by nature and habit an ascetic, caring little for personal comfort: "Please give me ordinary meals; it distresses me to know that anyone is putting himself out for me." Troubled by injustices he perceived in the teachings of his Catholic upbringing, he pursued a study of philosophy and theology which led him at a young age to atheism: "…it is man who created God in his own likeness." He was an ardent amateur naturalist and astronomer, a collector of plants and insects, devoted to woods and wild places: "…if I ever crossed myself, it would be in the name of Nature, Art and Science." A passionate humanitarian and anti-fascist, he came to America in 1940 because he could not bear to stay and witness the horrors of WW2 in Hungary. But as his son explains, "He wanted in every way to come home and finish his life here, because he did not emigrate…He left all his belongings here, and went abroad only for a year; it turned out later that he had to stay longer, and finally he could never return."

During his 26th year, Bartok was deeply in love with the Hungarian violinist Stefi Geyer. A letter he wrote to her in 1907 contained a 4-bar musical impression of "the lively girl I got to know… St(efi), when she is smoking a pipe." Bartok used this melody in his first violin concerto, which was dedicated to Geyer. Later, desolate after she had rejected him and broken off the relationship, Bartok adapted the same melody for the opening of the Quartet No. 1, and in his last letter to Stefi called the transformed melody "my funeral dirge".

Even to those more familiar with Haydn's expressive language, Bartók's emotional state in this quartet is communicated clearly. As did Haydn, Bartók instinctively understood the compositional sorcery which allows a particular interval or harmony to pull at the heart, and the process of preparing his music for performance requires essentially the same approach. Formal structure (and its variation) provides the architecture; articulations, sound quality, dynamics, and phrasing decisions provide the building materials for expression. For insight regarding appropriate performance style, later music offers distinct advantages—Bartók himself made recordings of his works, and members of NEQ have studied with some of his most renowned musical colleagues. Bartók steadfastly avoided any theoretical agenda in his compositions, striving instead to elucidate what he called "the spirit of the new work". Whether for Haydn or Bartók, we also strive to bring forth that spirit.

Plain Talk about Playing Bartók

AM: Could it be historically inappropriate, perhaps presumptuous, and even risky to play a great 20th century master on instruments set up to interpret "Haydn as Haydn heard Haydn"? Well, yes, but...we are emboldened by the example of many distinguished quartets from the Pro Arte, Budapest, Julliard, and Guarneri, forward to the Emerson and the Alban Berg. They play Haydn without compunction using the same instruments they use for Bartók, playing in their own manner, that is, in accord with their own musical values. That is just what we propose—to bring to Bartók our musical values, using the instruments with which we have learned to play together. We attempt to illuminate Haydn's structures and ideas by our own articulations, colors, blend, and intonation, and we make them work for Bartók as well. In certain respects there is a greater gulf between Haydn and late Beethoven than between late Beethoven and Bartók. Our instruments of exploration are as good as any for investigating those gulfs, and for reporting back via performance to our listeners.

WS: If our goal is to perform repertoire on appropriate equipment (i.e. gut-strung violins and bows from the period or copies thereof), then our performance of Bartók's first string quartet is directly in line with our mission. In 1909 the standard stringing for fiddles was gut, and even if a very few chose to use metal strings, those strings were generally considered to have an inferior tone. As I have heard, gut was the way to go until at least the 1940s. My own 'modern' cello teacher, Ronald Leonard—the epitome of the modern American style of cello playing—says that he played on gut until 1950.

LW: NEQ had been joking about playing Bartók for years before we started to think in a serious way about the connections between Haydn's musical sphere and Bartók's. We discovered two remarkable anniversaries linking string quartets of our composers: Haydn's opus 33 were written in 1781, just 100 years before Bartók's birth, and Bartók's first quartet was written in 1909, only 100 years after the death of Haydn. The concept for our April program (*The Danube Runs Through It*) is based on the double-centenary connection between those works. With the generous assistance of the Hungarian National Library, we were able to find a "midway" composition to complete the program, the *Quatuor Hongrois* by a little-known Hungarian composer, Imre Székely (1823–1887).

We were fortunate to have the highest level of international assistance in locating the manuscript parts for Székely's quartet. Our search for a Hungarian work dating from approximately 1850 led us to Mr. Balázs Mikusi, Director of the Music Department of the National Széchényi Library in Budapest. Mr. Mikusi proved to be a wonderful correspondent—gracious, witty, and extremely knowledgeable. When NEQ learned that the Library housed Székely's original quartet manuscripts, Mr. Mikusi generously arranged for us to obtain electronic scans of the handwritten parts with the assistance of Library staff members Boglárka Illyés and Ildiko Türmer. After we had read through the quartets and asked for the Library's permission to perform the *Quatuor Hongrois*, we received much enthusiastic encouragement and support from Mr. Mikusi, including the following:

> "I am very happy if all our efforts eventually proved successful, and you found a work appropriate for your program. Besides, it is also great news if at least one of these obscure Székely quartets has proved good enough for public performance—I very much look forward to listening to your performance of it!
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> "Needless to say, we are all delighted if you will play the work, and so the permission for performance is herewith granted without any special requirement (other than that I indeed eagerly expect to receive a recording of your concert, which we shall duly enter into our

collection).

"I should repeat that reading your email presented me with some delightful minutes. It is always good to see some of the sources we preserve here in the Music Collection being rediscovered after decades, or even centuries, of silence—and if this is achieved by non-Hungarians, that even adds a special awe."

AM: We will record the *Quatuor Hongrois* before a live audience in the historic San Francisco studio Coast Recorders, produced by Lolly Lewis, on this Monday evening. To attend, receive a glass of wine and your own copy of the Székely quartet, please ask any of us for details.

LW: For me, it's very exciting to approach Bartók after six seasons of immersion in Haydn with NEQ. Our first Haydn cycle, the three years we spent studying and performing his 68 quartets for the first time, changed the way I hear almost all later music—I seem to hear Haydn's illuminating influence everywhere I listen, even in works I've known all my life. Bartók is no exception; the first time I listened to his "Quartet No. 1" after NEQ's Haydn study, I experienced the piece in a completely new way, as if I could perceive more of the musical forest through the harmonic and motivic trees.

I also feel that our instruments are peculiarly well-suited to the "Quartet No. 1" from a purely aesthetic standpoint. The inwardness and intimacy of much of the piece come across beautifully, and the lean, searching gestures are translated very naturally with our gut-strung fiddles. As an experience in sound, I hope our performances on "old" instruments will illuminate the work in a surprising new way.

KK: We are the luckiest quartet in all the world, I feel, to have the luxury of compatibility, common musical language and indefatigable enthusiasm for the music we play. Whether it's to Haydn, the progenitor of the string quartet and our guardian angel, or to Bartók, we bring clarity, thoughtfulness and passion to our performances and our gut strings and lighter bows serve to highlight our musical approach.