

# HUNGARY FOR THE GOOD LIFE

Spending a week immersed  
in the world of Bartók



We have come to the restaurant in hopes of finding traditional Hungarian food and music. Alas, the food is uninspired—bowls of oily goulash and mounds of meat swimming in sauce—and despite the presence of a cimbalom player in the five-piece house band, the music is equally unimaginative, with Johann Strauss and even *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* played in a lackluster fashion.

Miki, the first violinist of our quartet, vows to improve the musical aspect of the evening. She requests gypsy music and gets a half-hearted response, so when the band comes to serenade our table, she asks to play along. Smilingly, but not a little skeptically, someone hands her a fiddle. When she launches into a high-speed version of the Brahms Hungarian Rhapsody No. 4, fingers and hair flying wildly, the astonished musicians can only follow along. As they receive the biggest applause of the night for this performance, the musicians ask her to play again.

It is pretty unusual for a band to ask a customer for an encore, even in Budapest.

With 31 other string players, I have come to Budapest in chilly January for the Manhattan String Quartet's third annual international workshop. We'll be studying Béla Bartók's First Quartet, a work I've found somewhat daunting. I suspected the other participants feel the same, but by working on the piece for several hours every day with coaching by the MSQ and taking advantage of the well-organized tours and lectures for which the quartet's workshops are known, we will surely leave with some deeper understanding of Bartók and his music.

BY INGE KJEMTRUP

In his First Quartet, written in 1908, Bartók left his Romantic roots behind. "It's as if we get more and more into the 20th century as we go into the piece," says Yale musicologist David Clampitt in his lecture-demonstration. Going through the First Quartet section by section with the aid of the MSQ members, Clampitt adds that the music's refusal to fall into one key makes traditional harmonic analysis difficult. Yet in this piece Bartók harks back to older quartet models. For Clampitt, the work's fugal opening suggests a connection to Beethoven's Op. 131 quartet.

However, MSQ second violinist Cal Wiersma and violist John Dexter claim to find a strong link to Op. 132, especially with the falling sixth, "sighing" motive at the start and the thematic idea of a return to life, Heiliger Dankgesang. Given Bartók's personal history at the time (he was depressed after having been dumped by the object of his affections, violinist Stefi Geyer), this idea has some logic.

## AH, LIBERATION!

This piece also points the way to Bartók's extensive use of folk music. Between 1906 and 1918, Bartók went on extended trips in remote areas of Hungary, Romania, and even Turkey, convincing sometimes-reluctant peasants to record their songs. His folk-song collecting didn't impress many Hungarians, who tended to think of the sentimentalized verbunkos style music as real Hungarian music.

"In the so-called cultured urban circles, the unbelievably rich treasure trove of folk music was entirely unknown," said Bartók. It wasn't just Hungarian identity that drew him to collecting, but also his own compositional aspirations.

He wrote in a 1921 autobiography: "This whole study of folk music was of capital importance in enabling me to free myself from the tyranny, which I had up to then accepted, of the major and minor modal systems."

On a friend's recommendation, I buy a recording by the traditional folk group Muzsikás called *The Bartók Album* (Hannibal, HNCD 1439). This extraordinary 1999 CD juxtaposes Bartók's original field recordings with his own music and Muzsikás' own take on the same tunes. As a beginner's guide to Bartók's folk roots, this album is invaluable. (Muzsikás recently toured with the Takács Quartet to further explore the links between Bartók the ethnomusicologist and Bartók the composer.)

Many of the field recordings on that CD come from the Bartók archive, located in the Museum of Music History in Buda (Budapest

as an entity only dates from 1873, when the cities of Buda, Óbuda, and Pest merged). Archive director László Somfai, author of the groundbreaking *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (University of California Press, 1996) gives us a brief tour and talks about how the composer went from sketches to a complete work. The First Quartet has plenty of folk sources: the third movement, for example, includes a swineherd's song. Often the folk tunes used by Bartók in his own music are in the original key. Somfai spoke of the prevalence of the strong (eighth) and weak (quarter) figure throughout the work—the "Hungarian snap"—that relates to a chief phonetic rule of Hungarian, that the first syllable usually is accented.

Once we learn this, we hear the Hungarian snap everywhere—even in the tune that's played as a Budapest subway train arrives in a station. This sort of thing lends credence to my theory that Budapest is a more innately musical city than Prague. But then Budapest is a bigger city than Prague, a huge symphony whereas Prague is chamber music.

## A BUDAPEST STATE OF MIND

Budapest is a bustling city, and from our hotel room, only two floors above a busy intersection, the sounds of the morning commute, including the rumbles of the streetcars, are noticeable. The Hotel Astoria, where I stay,

dates from the early 1900s and with its overstuffed chairs, duvet-covered beds, high ceilings, and ancient plumbing, it has that feeling of faded splendor that puts me immediately in a central European frame of mind.

Budapest has changed since the end of the Cold War in 1989. The ugly monolithic statues of the heroes of Communism that I recall from a visit two decades ago have been moved to a statue park (Szoborpark) on the outskirts of the city. Should one feel really nostalgic for the "commies," as John Dexter calls them, you can pick up a Hungaroton CD called *The Best of Communism . . . Revolutionary Songs*.

Bartók missed the Communist era, as he fled fascist Hungary in 1940 for America, where he died in 1945. We visit the house, now a museum, where he lived from 1932 until he left Hungary. Designed in the Art Nouveau style, the house sits among trees on a hillside in suburban Budapest. In front of the building there's a life-size bronze statue of Bartók standing rather forlornly. The museum has two floors of exhibits and an 80-seat concert hall. There's a re-creation of the composer's study containing his Bösendorfer piano, the Edison phonograph he used for collecting folk songs, and a painting of Menuhin and Bartók.

There is a certain wistfulness about the place, perhaps because of Bartók's sad ending in America.



MANHATTAN SOUND: Annual guided tours of Europe's great music capitals by Eric Lewis, Calvin Wiersma, Chris Finckel, and John Dexter are the highlight of the year for many adventurous string players.

But the Bartók who was so misunderstood in America was far from the young composer of the First Quartet. Still, the Quartet's first audience thought it "cacophonous," explains László Somfai. No one caught the Romantic nature of the work, even though Bartók's greatest influences at that time were Debussy (the color effects of the first movement), Kodály (a friend and musical advisor), Schoenberg (the 12 tones in the opening of the Quartet), Stravinsky, and Wagner.

If our modern ears are less shocked by this Quartet, we still struggle when trying to figure out what Bartók meant us to play. Somfai claims some of this is Bartók's own fault, since he didn't examine the marks closely enough in the proofs, so some of his marks were lost to the printed edition (^ accents were transposed to >, for example).

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### THE REAL DEAL

At the end of our week in Budapest, we attend the MSQ's concert at the Central European. The small hall is packed and people are standing in the hallway. The MSQ members comport themselves well, especially in the First Quartet, even though they know that at least 32 audience members are closely watching every fingering, every bowing, every phrase.

It is late when the concert ends, but a group of us head out for the Fono folk club in a far district of the city. On an earlier visit, we'd seen a lively folk band play for young dancers; women twirling around as the men jumped higher. There is a live band again this time, but we are intent on visiting the small record shop to find CDs of real Hungarian folk music, none of this schlock stuff. The guy behind the counter isn't sure about our choices and shakes his head at us. "This is not for you," he says. But after a week of immersion in the world of Bartók, it *is* for us.

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*The next MSQ overseas workshop—a Paris/Ravel match—takes place in February 2004. For details, visit [www.manhattanstringquartet.com](http://www.manhattanstringquartet.com). □*

# STRINGS

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