

CHAPTER 3: SYNTHETIC 'KERNELS'

“...it should be borne in mind that variation is the basic creative method of folk music, and thus in Bartók’s eyes the natural mode of composition...”

-Bence Szabolcsi, “Man and Nature in Bartók’s World”¹

THEME...

When Zoltán Székely approached Bartók with a commission for a new violin concerto in the fall of 1936, the composer’s first idea was to write a single movement in variation form.² Székely, however, insisted on the form of a traditional concerto. Bartók obliged him with a large scale three-movement composition, but still remained faithful to his original vision: not only is the second movement a set of variations on an original theme, Bartók also derives all of the third movement from the musical material of the first movement through free variations. While the Piano Concerto No. 2 also displays thematic variation between its first and third movements, “the correspondence between the two exterior movements [in the Violin Concerto] goes much further than the simple re-use of materials: the architecture is duplicated almost section by section. Both are large sonata-form movements, with two main thematic groups and a number of pertinent

¹ Bence Szabolcsi, “Man and Nature in Bartók’s World,” in *Bartók Studies*, ed. Todd Crow (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1976), 72.

² Lampert cites Somfai, *Tizennyolc Bartók tanulmány* (1981).

associates with the form.”³ In light of Bartók’s proclivity for the variation principle in his free composition,⁴ it is remarkable that the second movement of the Violin Concerto represents his only large-scale essay in the form of theme and variations. Stevens speculates on the strange absence of any companion pieces in the form:

Although Bartók had not previously written a large set of variations – there are small ones in *For Children*, the Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs, and the *Mikrokosmos* – the variational spirit had always been strong in his music, and the arch-forms of the 1920’s and 1930’s are motivated by it. So it was natural that Bartók should have wanted to crown his efforts in this direction with such a work as the Violin Concerto; and it is characteristic that in it he so completely carried through his ideas that he was never afterward impelled to write a variation-form.⁵

Rather than make the unlikely assumption that Bartók was entirely satisfied in his execution of the form, it seems more probable that the repetitive reference of a single theme imposes too much structure upon Bartók’s ideal of “unconscious” variation.⁶ Indeed, the theme and variations form demands procedural consistency on two levels: first, that each variation refers back to the same theme; second, that each variation remains consistent within itself. Despite the virtually infinite range of potential

³ Stevens, 245.

⁴ See n.85. Processes of variation saturate Bartók’s compositional expression, but also surface in his piano playing as spontaneous improvisation. Demény writes about Bartók’s performances of “Evening with the Szeklers” from the *Ten Easy Pieces* (1908): “In his performances of this early piece in later periods of his life Bartók started to make spontaneous, arbitrary little changes in the rhythm, distinguishing his performance from what is in the printed score” [Janos Demény, “The Pianist,” trans. Malcolm Gillies, in *The Bartók Companion*, ed. Malcolm Gillies (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 74].

⁵ Stevens, 244.

⁶ “Hungarian Folk Music” (1933), in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 71.

variational methods, even accounting for internally consistent variations,⁷ these procedural constants of the form obstruct the free and spontaneous expression so important to Bartók. As we shall see, Bartók almost maintains a consistent variation procedure throughout the movement, deviating from that in only a single significant instance. It is this single deviation that creates a new rhetoric for the second movement of the Violin Concerto, blending the structure of the form with the freedom of variation, and simultaneously merging the Theme and Variations form with Bartók's previously established symmetric concerto form.

In his 1928 monograph *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp attempts to explain the “two-fold quality of a tale: its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition.”⁸ He accounts for this dilemma by means of an ordered list of 31 “functions”, defined as “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action.”⁹ Not all thirty-one functions occur within any single story, but the narrative of each story consists of a selection of functions from among the ordered list. Fred Everett Maus suggests that, while direct application of specific theories of narrative may have no more utility than other types of descriptive metaphor, the abstract narrative patterns identified by Propp and others may provide musical scholars with a model for distilling similar

⁷ For a roughly contemporaneous example from the violin literature, see the third movement of the Sonata No. 2 for violin solo by Eugene Ysaÿe.

⁸ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd ed, rev. and ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 20-21. Note that his observation is equally valid for the theme and variations form.

⁹ Ibid., 21. The functions range from number one, “one of the members of a family absents himself from home,” to thirty-one, “the hero is married and ascends the throne.”

patterns from music.¹⁰ Such a process applied to the theme of the second movement of the Violin Concerto results in the following “functions”:

¹⁰ Fred Everett Maus, “Music as Narrative,” in *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 17. The application of Propp in this context can go beyond a useful musical analysis. His “functions” require dramatic agents, “dramatic personae” as he calls them, to perform them; while I have adapted the abstraction of musical elements from the theme from his abstraction of dramatic events, one should not confuse the variations themselves with musical agents. Such a reading reflects a literal mentality completely absent from Bartók’s composition.

- 1) a short, simple descent, with one significant leaping melodic interval...



Example 3.1

- 2) ...is followed by an equally short ascent that retraces the original path, complete with the same significant intervallic leap, back to its starting point...



Example 3.2

- 3) ...where we briefly continue to ascend before reversing direction, moving to greater levels of rhythmic and harmonic complexity as we descend, ending on the lowest point of the original descent after doubling the duration of the first two functions;



Example 3.3

- 4) then, a combination of something old – a familiar rhythm (exactly the same as function 2) in the same short space, with a single significant leaping interval; and something new – the leaping interval is larger than the original one, and the statement has an almost neutral contour, with no net ascent or descent...



Example 3.4

- 5) ...the repetition of the rhythm and shape at the beginning of the last function seems to signal a relationship similar to the one between functions 1 and 2; but the sudden ascending detour on the last note of the measure brings with it the realization in hindsight that the apparently neutral contour of the shape simply allows it to act as an element of contour on a larger scale (i.e., the stepwise ascent between functions 4 and 5), establishing a broad ascending motion that ultimately accelerates through the last ascending interval...



Example 3.5

- 6) ...to the highest note in the melody, the climax of the phrase, and the only function that sounds immediately upon the beginning of the measure, from which a long descent begins, equal to function 4 in length but harmonically simpler and more straightforward in direction.



Example 3.6

- 7) [optional reprise of function 6 with altered orchestration]

This abstract description of narrative functions has special relevance for the theme and variations form because the aspects of a theme that a composer chooses to retain through a course of variations provide reference for the variation processes. In other words, variation is meaningless in the absence of some consistent relationship to the theme. We will show that this movement achieves a consistent realization of these six abstract

melodic functions throughout each variation with one significant exception, thus tying the music of each variation firmly to the theme.

EXAMPLE 3.7
FUNCTIONS AS REALIZED IN VARIATIONS 1 AND 2

	Variation 1 (mm.12-22)	Variation 2 (mm.23-42)
Function 1		
Function 2		
Function 3		
Function 4		
Function 5		
Function 6		
Function 7 (optional)		

...AND VARIATIONS

Bartók does not explicitly label the second movement as a Theme and Variations; he does indicate each variation with a double bar, however. Frank Michael attributes the absence of the traditional label to the “exceedingly free and fantastic” nature of the variations, “wherein each individual variation forms a characteristic small universe in itself.”¹¹ The movement ends with a nearly exact reprise of the theme transposed higher by one octave. Between the opening and this reprise lie six variations, easily distinguished by their tonal centers, orchestration, and violin idiom.¹² It is not the purpose of this document to conduct an exhaustive discussion of the variations and their relationships; many such studies already exist, including thorough readings by László Somfai and Frank Michael.¹³ Instead, here we shall show how the manipulation of the phrase narrative of the theme in the context of the theme and variations form has particular relevance for the formation of musical identity in the Violin Concerto.¹⁴

In typical fashion for the theme and variations form, the first variation stays closest to the theme in most respects, including tonality, tessitura (for the solo violin), and minimal accompaniment. In fact, Somfai calls this variation a “double” of the theme,¹⁵ a

¹¹ Frank Michael, *Béla Bartók's Variationstechnik: dargestellt im Rahmen einer Analyse seines 2. Violinkonzertes* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1976), 40: “...außerordentlich frei und phantasievoll... wobei jede Einzelvariation einen charakteristischen kleinen Kosmos in sich bildet.”

¹² The theme ends after m.11; variation 1 occupies mm.12-22; variation 2 mm.23-42; variation 3 mm. 43-57; variation 4 mm.58-82; variation 5 mm.83-104; variation 6 mm.105-117; the reprise begins in m.118.

¹³ Somfai (“Strategies of Variation”) discusses the variations as independent entities, concentrating on tonality, phrase structure, instrumentation, and registral formation; Michael Frank (op. cit.) treats variation technique in the concerto as a whole, discussing the outer movements first, after which he describes the relationships between individual variations as well as between the second movement and the outer movements.

¹⁴ Please refer to Example 3.7 above throughout the following discussion.

¹⁵ Somfai (“Strategies of Variation”), 184.

diminution variation technique typical in Baroque dance suites. The two-note groupings in this variation do resemble the articulations in the first “double” in the B minor Partita of J.S. Bach (BWV 1001). In addition to these other similarities to the theme, the first variation adheres strictly to the pattern of abstract functions, even retaining the same meter and durations of functions as the theme. The first bar of the variation (m.12) matches function 1, featuring a descending contour covering roughly the same range. However, it is difficult to recognize a significant melodic interval because the diminution technique obscures shapes and fills in leaps. The next bar matches function 2, filling the same duration as the previous bar with a contour retrograde; here there is more intervallic definition, with the largest interval of a perfect fourth near the end of the bar matching the intervallic significance of the perfect fourth at the end of m.3 (although while intervallic activity increases, neither the theme nor this variation feature two successive leaps in the same direction at this point). Function 3 specifies a longer duration, and the third and fourth measures of the variation (mm.14-15) fit the description, the sixteenth-note rest at the beginning of m.15 notwithstanding: the rest articulates the repetition of the D-C and G#-F dyads, mirroring the brief deviation from the descending contour in the theme on the same D-C dyad (m.4.3 D-C and m.5.1 D-C). The varying meter of the next two measures (mm.16-17) visually obscures the auditory reality that the respective realizations of functions 4 and 5 are of equal lengths, both 8 eighth-notes in duration. The G#-A# ascent across these two measures in timpani and double bass preserves the broad ascending relationship of functions 4 and 5, while successive leaps in the same direction combined with increasing chromaticism in the solo diminution take the place of

the larger significant leaping intervals in the theme. Function 6 again preserves the same duration as the theme, occurring in this variation across mm.18-19. While the beginning of the function does not happen on the downbeat, Bartók introduces a new articulation directly upon the highest point, C³, grouping six notes under a slur four times in a row. The emphasis this phrase indication creates on the first note of each group of six (reiterated by the dash on these initial tones) realizes the steadily descending contour of the function: beginning on m.17.2, C³ leads to F², which then leads to Eβ² after the F² suspends across to m.18.1. The optional seventh function clarifies this descending voice leading, altering the orchestration slightly by raising the solo violin into a completely new tessitura and introducing tutti violins for the first time in the variation.

In the same way that the repetition of certain elements of the first function in the second creates a rhetorical emphasis on those elements of the theme,¹⁶ the relationship of the first variation to the theme establishes the salient commonalities in the variations process. This leaves Bartók free to enact drastic changes in the surface features of the next variation. Let us address these superficial novelties first: marked *sonoro, espr.*, the violin melody in a tenor register combines operatic gestures (movement by leaps of intervals up to and including an octave, appoggiaturas) with holdovers from the original theme (short-long descending fourths); the woodwinds enter the texture for the first time within the six main functions (their entrance with the tutti in mm.10-11 is part of function 7, an anomaly within the theme); and diatonic triplet sixteenth scalar figures in the harp

¹⁶ For example, the elements of mono-directional contour (either solely ascending or solely descending) and duration.

add color and connection between solo violin statements.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the variation still retains the ordered functions, in many cases with greater accuracy than in the first variation, despite the addition of so many new surface elements. The solo violin statement in mm.23-25 realizes function 1; the answering statement in mm.27-28 meets the contour, duration, and intervallic properties of function 2 exactly. The function 3 material in mm.30-32 does not fill a metric interval twice as long as the first two statements: both of the first two statements total 11 eighth notes of moving melody, whereas the material in this statement only totals 14. However, the repetition of the same dotted rhythmic pattern with the same contour at the beginnings of m.30 and m.31 preserves the quality that function 3 should have twice the content of functions 1 or 2; since functions 1 and 2 have no internal repetition, the double statement of function 3 keeps the correct proportion to the single statements of functions 1 and 2, even though the literal durations do not correspond to that relationship.

To continue, mm.34-35 realize function 4, but the realization of function 5 in mm. 36-37 modifies the whole-step transposition, retaining the abstract concept of an ascending operation in a combined transposition/intervallic expansion of the function 4 statement. Where functions 1 and 2 placed emphasis on the perfect fourth, now functions 4 and 5 emphasize the tritone. The realization of function 6 (mm.38-40) makes the same play as the function 3 realization, substituting the double rhythmic reference to functions 4 and 5 in place of a literal metric doubling. The optional 7th function here does not reprise the material of function 6, but acts instead as a transitional modulation to the next

¹⁷ This last is reminiscent of a similar coloristic device in the timpani during the *parlando-rubato* melody of the second movement of the Piano Concerto no. 2, for example in m.24 and m.26.

variation, yet still features the characteristic change in instrumentation with melodic harmonics doubling celesta in the solo violin, pedal harmonics in tutti violins and principal cello, and a soli group of violas.¹⁸

We have seen how the first two variations realize the abstract narrative pattern of the theme in rather different styles. Having illustrated something of the range of this process with two contrasting examples, the exposition of each of the remaining variations in such detail is not necessary to continue this discussion. Before turning to the single variation that deviates from the abstract model, variation 4, we can simply map out the functions as they are realized in the remaining variations:

Variation 3¹⁹

- Function 1: mm.43-44
- Function 2: mm.45-46
- Function 3: mm.47-51; in contrast to variation 2, here function 3 fills a longer metric interval than expected, with a motoric intervallic expansion towards the three cadential *allargando* octaves in m.51.
- Function 4: m.52
- Function 5: m.53
- Function 6: mm.54-57; again, the intervallic content distinguishes the longer functions. Here, we have constant minor sixths for most of two measures, whereas no interval remained constant for more than a single beat previously.
- Function 7: Variation 3 has no seventh function.

Variation 5²⁰

- Function 1: mm.83-85

¹⁸ Note the growth of a tutti persona throughout the variation. Both the theme and the first variation featured very little motivic activity in the accompaniment. In the second variation, the woodwinds begin to respond to the solo violin line with derived contrapuntal fragments in m.27. This grows into more marked counterpoint at m.34, the beginning of the consequent phrase; finally at m.38, the climax of the variation, we have a distinct voice in the celesta against the solo violin.

¹⁹ Note the consistent delineation of functions by timpani strokes, and complete absence of tutti strings.

²⁰ This variation features the first appearance of non-pitched percussion (triangle and side drum), with sparing use of *pizzicati* in tutti strings; here the brass are absent.

- Function 2: mm.86-89; the first example of a function 2 realization that alters the relationship to the function 1 pattern before it. Where the solo violin passed the sixteenth-note tetrachord at the end of m.84 to the woodwinds in m.85, here the violin keeps the sixteenth-notes through m.89.
- Function 3: mm.90-94; the violin only plays for four measures here, scarcely longer than either function 1 or function 2, but the harp glissando in m.93 passing to the flute scale in m.94 both extends and punctuates this function.
- Function 4: mm.95-96
- Function 5: mm.97-98
- Function 6: mm.99-102
- Function 7: mm.103-104; possibly included with function 6, as these bars do not recapitulate any material from function 6, but the instrumental changes in overall contour, *stretto* technique in upper woodwinds, and remarkably high tessitura for tutti violin *pizzicati* combine to set these measures apart.

Variation 6²¹

- Function 1: m.105
- Function 2: m.106; although the solo violin figure extends into m.107, the solo violin has an ornamental role throughout the antecedent, and the musical material of the function is carried by the *pizzicato* strings.
- Function 3: mm.107-110
- Function 4: m.111; a significant change in texture between antecedent and consequent for the first time (other than the anomalous variation 4): the “Bartók” or snap *pizzicati* disappear, the solo violin changes from a *leggerissimo* figuration in thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes to legato *semplice* eighth notes, and the imitative entrances in the tutti strings enter in transposition. The idea of canonic imitation organizes both antecedent and consequent, giving unity across the textural divide.
- Function 5: m.112
- Function 6: mm.113-117.1-2
- Function 7: mm.117.3-4; a vestigial function 7, this octave transposition and rhythmic expansion of the D-C# dyad serve as a transition to the register, tempo, and opening pitches of the reprise.

²¹ In this last variation before the reprise, the tutti finally bears the responsibility for musical direction, leaving the solo violin in an embellishing role; even in the more melodic style of the consequent phrase, the solo violin line is a canonic variation of the first violin *pizzicato* material. Bartók clearly marks the beginning of each function during the antecedent with canonic entrances in the string *pizzicati*, beginning always with first violin followed by second violin (with the order and inclusion of viola, cello, and double bass inconsistent); a “Bartók” or snap *pizzicato* sequence marks the end of each function of the antecedent.

AN ANOMALOUS VARIATION

Bartók reserves a unique sound for variation 4, beginning with the tonal center of $D\beta$, farthest removed from the G center of the theme.²² The stillness of the “Hungarian nocturno”²³ comes as a shock after the activity of the *Più mosso ruvido* of variation 3. With the metronome marking of $\theta = 66$, the Lento variation 4 is the only variation with a basic quarter-note pulse, and has by far the slowest pulse of any of the variations.²⁴ All the variations except variation 6 (which changes texture for the consequent phrase, as discussed above) maintain internal textural unity, while variation 4 features no less than three different textures – the parallel quarter-note lines in tutti strings under solo violin trills and scalar figuration (mm.58-67); a *rubato* unaccompanied improvisatory solo extension on the scalar figures (m.68); and a slightly faster ($\theta = 74$) imitative counterpoint (mm.69-79).

More significant than these immediate irregularities, the fourth variation makes the only significant departure from the pattern of abstract functions. It begins within the pattern, with a descending line dependent on melodic perfect fourths in cello and double bass (mm.58-59) answered with an ascending line in the exact same rhythm (mm.60-61). During these respective realizations of functions 1 and 2, the solo violin decorates $D\beta^1$ and $A\beta^1$ with a combination of trills and thirty-second-note figuration. The realization of function 3 (mm.62-67) in this style proceeds smoothly. Second violin and viola enter

²² The other variations center on the more closely related areas of G, E, B, and $B\beta$. See Somfai (“Strategies of Variation”), 176-182.

²³ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁴ The theme is marked $\epsilon = 92$; all variations except variation 4 have a faster metronome indication for their respective pulse values. All variations except variations 4 and 6 have eighth-note time signatures.

with a canonic imitation of the lower strings, and the movement of the solo violin up to $E\beta^2$ continues the previous sequence of ascending fifths in the solo violin. The first hint of deviation comes with the arrival on $E\nu^3$ at the beginning of m.66, coinciding with the cadential $D\beta-A\beta$ falling fourth at the end of the antecedent phrase in the lower strings. The chromatic alteration of the previous $E\beta$ has no precedent within the solo writing of this variation. The next unprepared change is the expansion of the last $G\beta-D\beta-A\beta$ ending the canon in the upper strings from quarter notes to half notes. While the tutti runs out of energy in this way, the solo violin seems to become even more energetic, no longer stopping to pause on trilled notes in the course of an unmetered run of thirty-second notes. The emphases indicated by the articulation of these thirty-second-note octatonic scale fragments, marked *rubato* after motion ceases altogether in the tutti strings, project a whole-tone descent from that original $E\nu^3$ until the $A\beta^2$ falls only a half step to G^2 ; at this point, the G^2 remains as a soprano pedal while the descent continues from the inner voice $D\#^2$ by half-step until the A^1 that returns in m.69 to a melody with regular meter.

The image shows a voice-leading reduction of a violin passage from measures 68-69. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff is labeled 'Whole-tone Scale' and begins on E. The second staff is labeled 'Chromatic Scale' and begins on C. The third staff begins on (D-sharp) and ends on A. Various notes are marked with boxes containing their letter names: D, B-flat, A-flat, G, E, D-sharp, D, (D-sharp), (D), C-sharp, C, B, B-flat, A.

Example 3.8: Violin Concerto, mvt. 2, mm.68-69, voice-leading reduction

While the violin begins this melody alone, the tutti strings soon enter in imitation, but under various transpositions and intervallic augmentations/contractions. Before long, however, they break away from the solo violin material one at a time, turning to

descending scalar lines in steady quarter-note motion. The solo violin seems to attempt to change the direction of the stepwise lines with an ascending scale of its own in m.76, but finally parallels the remaining lower strings as they join forces for the cadence.²⁵

SYMMETRICAL READINGS BY SOMFAI AND MICHAEL

László Somfai and Frank Michael both identify the fourth variation as the center of a symmetric form. In his exhaustive analysis of this theme and variations, László Somfai identifies numerous musical relationships between variations that create a number of dissimilar structural readings across the movement as a whole. For example, he recognizes two double variations composed as diminutions of the variations that preceded them: “the TH and I, as an introductory ‘*Air & Double*’, as well as V and VI as ‘*Scherzo & Double*’, are really in pairs.”²⁶ He goes on to discuss other correspondences:

variations I and III, as two sorts of *rubato solo* variations; II and (the first half of) IV, as two typical slow Bartók *nocturnos*, one rather a nature picture, the other of a Hungarian tone; as well as the (second half of) IV and VI, as emphatically *contrapuntal* sections, with two kinds of texture – each of these pairs are “Theme and Double”-like.²⁷

²⁵ The fourth variation closes with this singular instance of the orchestra influencing the solo, rather than vice versa. At every other point in the movement when a tutti voice has some prominent material, that material derives directly from a previous solo statement. The celesta counterpoint in the second variation (mm.38-42; see n.108 above) combines the violin material from the first half of m.34 and the second half of m.30. The woodwind sixteenth-note descending tetrachords in m.84 of the fifth variation simply echo the solo violin in the previous bar. Even the percussion imitate the violin: the timpani and side drum dialogue in m.106 of the sixth variation echoes the *ricochet* stroke in the previous bar. In the sixth variation, where the orchestra has the primary material and the solo embellishment is secondary, we have independent parts, but still not a relationship wherein the orchestra influences the solo. Thus the fourth variation example of the orchestral mass compelling the lone voice to join its choir stands out from the rest of the movement

²⁶ Somfai (“Strategies of Variation”), 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

However, his analytical schemes based on tonal structure and phrase length give a central place to the fourth variation. Regarding the former, he notes that variations either retain the same tonal center as the variation immediately preceding, or fall to a new, lower center; the only exception is the fourth variation, which moves up to D β from the B tonality of the third variation.²⁸ As for the phrase length analysis, Somfai writes, “*Variation IV* represents the extreme point of removal from the original *Lied* structure... the *deviation – re-approach* model of Theme < variation IV > Recapitulation, as a compositional design, is most consistently realized with regard to the variation of the length of the phrases.”²⁹

Frank Michael (1976) also sees the fourth variation as a pivot point in the structure of the movement. His analysis of the entire concerto identifies three main themes initially presented in the first movement from which Bartók derives all musical material in each of the three movements:

- The first theme begins with the upbeat to m.7.³⁰
- The second theme proceeds from m.56; Michael calls it a “Fortspinnungstypus.”³¹
- The third theme is the “twelve-tone theme”, beginning in m.73. Michael points out that the dodecaphony is unlike Schoenberg’s music in that it “relates only to the melody, not to the harmony.”³²

He adds a fourth category of hybrid themes “arising from the direct merger of particular segments of two or all three main themes in the sense of an integrative developing

²⁸ Ibid., 178.

²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³⁰ Michael, 4.

³¹ Ibid., 6.

³² Ibid., 7: “Die Zwölftönigkeit bezieht allein auf die Melodik, nicht jedoch auf die Harmonik.”

variation.”³³ This thematic analysis of the entire concerto leads him to an arch model for the second movement based on thematic transformations and reprises. He identifies a correlation between each variation in the second movement and some other incarnation of one of the three themes or a hybrid theme. In his scheme, the fourth variation begins by prefiguring a hybrid theme in m.556 ff. of the third movement, and spins the virtuoso oscillations of the opening solo violin material into a cadenza. What he labels as a cadenza is the only part of the movement he does not derive from the three main themes. The fourth variation thus emerges as the capstone for an arch in which he bases all other relationships on typical Bartók reprise processes: “To compress the reprise with fugatos, imitations, etc., is one of Bartók’s commonly used techniques.”³⁴ In this way he reads the theme and the first three variations as sequential incarnations of the first movement’s three main themes and a hybrid theme, the fifth and sixth variations as reprising aspects of other appearances of these themes, and the end of the movement as a literal reprise of the theme.³⁵

³³ Ibid., 9: “entstanden aus der direkten Verschmelzung einzelner Teile von zwei oder allen drei Hauptthemen in Sinne einer Contamination.”

³⁴ Ibid., 45: “Reprisen mit Fugati, Imitationen etc. zu verdichten, ist eine häufig von Bartók verwendete Technik.”

³⁵ Ibid., 46.

MODIFIED SYMMETRIC FORM

A consideration of these approaches in combination with our own observations regarding the pattern of abstract functions argues for a symmetrical reading of the entirety of the theme and variations movement, pivoting around the central fourth variation. It is now possible to read the movement as both a theme and variations and an arch form. Such a reading has one obvious asymmetry: the initial A section encompasses three variations, while the closing A section has only two. Nevertheless, the fourth variation imposes such a reading on the movement for two main reasons: 1) its greater length compared to the other variations;³⁶ 2) and it is the only variation to deviate, and deviate significantly, from the pattern of abstract functions established by the theme. Reading the movement as a symmetrical form with a central pivot on the fourth variation makes possible a network of relationships with the central movements of the Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3.

SYNTHETIC DESIGN IN THE PIANO CONCERTOS NOS. 2 AND 3

“Debussy’s great service to music was to reawaken among all musicians an awareness of harmony and its possibilities. In that, he was just as important as Beethoven, who revealed to us the meaning of progressive form, and as Bach, who showed us the transcendent significance of counterpoint.... Now, what I am always asking myself is this: is it possible to make a synthesis of these three great masters, a living synthesis that will be valid for our own time?”

-Béla Bartók, quoted by Serge Moreux³⁷

³⁶ Somfai (“Strategies of Variation”) includes a chart based on the timings provided by Bartók on p.183. Especially notable that the fifth and sixth variations together last only eleven seconds longer than the fourth variation alone.

³⁷ Serge Moreux, *Béla Bartók*, trans. G.S. Fraser and Erik de Mauny (London: The Harvill Press, 1953), 92.

The Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3 lie fourteen years apart in Bartók's life, yet their respective middle movements have much in common, especially with regard to the formal expression of structure. Both movements feature clearly defined ABA structure. In the Piano Concerto No. 2, the dialogue between the muted string chorale and the *parlando-rubato* piano comprises the opening A section (mm.1-63); at the double bar that ends this section, the measure numbers begin again, as if the B section were an independent movement, and again at the return of the A section. Bartók indicates as much in his "Analysis of the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra": "Movement II. is a scherzo within the frame of an adagio or, if you prefer, an adagio containing a scherzo as its nucleus."³⁸ Bartók nests the symmetrical second movement within the larger symmetry of the entire concerto: "Thus the entire work shows symmetrical form: Movement I., adagio, scherzo (as nucleus), variation of the adagio, variation of Movement I. A similar construction was used in my String Quartets Nos. 4 and 5 also."³⁹ In other words, the second movement 'kernel'⁴⁰ holds a kernel of its own, the B section scherzo.

While the Piano Concerto No. 3 does not exhibit this type of multi-movement symmetrical form wherein the third movement is a free variation of the first, the middle movement of this concerto still exhibits the 'scherzo within the frame of an adagio' shape. Besides this formal outline, one observes several other parallel features in the

³⁸ "Analysis of the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" (1939), in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 422. The integration of the traditional middle movements of the four-movement form into a single structure has precedents in Beethoven (third movement of the String Quartet, op. 132) and Brahms (second movement of the Violin Sonata in A major, op. 100).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 423.

⁴⁰ See n.80.

construction of these middle movements. Both begin with *adagio* dialogues between a string group and the piano, and the reprise of this opening section features the piano in a decorative obligato above the returning music.⁴¹ Bartók deploys a chorale texture to opposite effect in the two respective movements. In the Piano Concerto No. 2, the string chorale creates an impersonal, faceless mass that contrasts with the *parlando-rubato* solo piano song; in the Piano Concerto No. 3, Ujfalussy hears ‘piety’ in the chorale invocation by the solo piano,⁴² while the imitative string tutti texture evokes an even earlier polyphony, the *stile antico* of Palestrina.⁴³ Significantly, both scherzo sections exemplify a special type of sound world in the Bartók oeuvre, a recurring invocation of the sounds of nature (typically at night). Halsey Stevens⁴⁴ was the first English writer to adopt the terminology of “night music” for this sound world, taken perhaps from the fourth movement of the *Out of Doors Suite* (1926), “Musiques nocturnes.” Based on a set of five “configural archetypes,”⁴⁵ Gary Danchenka tabulates no more than 13 representative examples of the type, including the complete scherzo from the second movement of the

⁴¹ For the Piano Concerto No. 2, the obligato trills, held over from the texture of the preceding scherzo, are laid on top of the string chorale, returning in *sul ponticello* tremolo; in the Piano Concerto No. 3, the chorale material that initially appeared in the solo piano returns in the woodwind section (again, a sound element present in the preceding scherzo but not in the original A section), while the piano obligato appears in the manner of a 2-part invention on diminutions of the chorale melody.

⁴² József Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, trans. Ruth Pataki, rev. Elisabeth West (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Company, 1972), 382. Jacques de Menasce [“The Classicism of Béla Bartók: A Study of the Late Works,” in *Modern Music* 23/2 (Spring 1946): 87] hears a connection to a significant chorale appearance in the last composition of another 20th century composer, the “Es ist genug” chorale in the last movement of the Violin Concerto (1935) of Alban Berg.

⁴³ Stella Cheng-Yu Sung, “Absorption of Divergent Musical Sources and Compositional Techniques into Béla Bartók’s Third Piano Concerto,” (DMA treatise, University of Texas at Austin, 1991), 48.

⁴⁴ Stevens, op. cit. He makes reference to “night music” in discussions of *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs*, op. 20, *Out of Doors Suite*, the String Quartets Nos. 3, 4, and 5, *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, *Concerto for Orchestra*, and the Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3.

⁴⁵ Gary Danchenka, “Diatonic Pitch-Class Sets in Bartók’s Night Music,” in *Indiana Theory Review* 8/1 (Spring 1987): 23.

Piano Concerto No. 3, and portions of the scherzo from the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2.⁴⁶ The placement of this invocation of the sounds of nature at the very center of the carefully constructed symmetrical form bears testimony to Bartók's respect for the natural world, especially including primitive man: "[Peasant music] is as much a natural phenomenon as, for instance, the various manifestations of Nature in fauna and flora."⁴⁷

Although the two concertos locate their middle movements within similar formal contexts, as "an ornamental setting for the precious stone,"⁴⁸ the characters of the two scherzo 'gems' are in fact diametrically opposed visions of nature. Szabolcsi notes that nature has a tangible agency for Bartók: "he did not depict, illustrate, or decorate nature, but let it speak for itself, identifying himself with it."⁴⁹ Nature speaks with an unpredictable, wild, nocturnal voice in the scherzo from the Piano Concerto No. 2, breaking free from the world of men, the *adagio* dialogue between the chorale and the *parlando-rubato* monody, into a totally other *presto* world, composed not of dialogue but of vague shapes that hover on the edge of vision. The clusters, trills, and running figures of this voice include a reference to an earlier evocation of nature in Bartók's piano music, "From the Diary of a Fly" from the sixth book of the *Mikrokosmos*. Losseff points out the correspondence between measures 75 to 90 of the scherzo of the concerto with measures 51 to 60 of the piece: "Here, Bartók shifts our gaze from the large-scale

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ "The Relation of Folk Song to the Development of the Art Music of Our Time" (1921), in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 321.

⁴⁸ "The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music" (1931), in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 341.

⁴⁹ Szabolcsi, 66.

evocation of nocturnal signaling to the small-scale scurrying of some insect hunt.” The circular rising and falling of this *Presto* also calls to mind nature’s meteorological fury; regardless of the specific imagery, it is “eine elementarischere, barbarischere, dämonischere Natur”⁵⁰ that speaks to us in the “night music” scherzo from the Piano Concerto No. 2

The scherzo section of the Piano Concerto No. 3, however, gives us a glimpse of an entirely different aspect of Nature. Rather than a Nocturne shrouded in darkness and mystery, here Bartók invokes an altogether different voice: the literal voice of a birdsong. Somfai tells of finding a scrap of tissue paper found among Bartók’s notes, bearing thematic fragments and, in one case, a significant inscription:

...a small piece of tissue paper with Bartók’s handwriting in India ink and pencil. The six “themes” must be birdsongs. The only one of them with a number and title, no. 6, *Parting in peace*, is identical, even in pitch, to the piano motive in mm.60-63 of the *Adagio religioso*. This is a sensational document and an enigma at the same time.⁵¹

Sándor Kovács relates a memory from Bartók’s son Peter: “...while in Asheville his father noted down bird music in a pocket notebook, employing the same precision as was the case with his folksong notations.”⁵² It is likely that Bartók heard and transcribed this song in the woods near Asheville, North Carolina, where he had spent the winter of 1943-4 under the sponsorship of ASCAP, trying to regain his health.⁵³ The sabbatical

⁵⁰ Kovács, J., 30: “an elementary, barbaric, demonic Nature.”

⁵¹ Somfai (*Composition*), 54.

⁵² Sándor Kovács, “Final Concertos,” in *The Bartók Companion*, ed. Malcolm Gillies (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 545.

⁵³ Stevens, 99.

was a success from that point of view, as Bartók wrote from Asheville: “My health suddenly improved at the end of Aug. At present I feel quite well, I have no temperature, my strength has returned, and I am able to take nice walks in the mountain forests – yes, I climb mountains (only very cautiously, of course.)”⁵⁴ The voice of the birdsong would remain attached to Bartók’s memory of Asheville and his recovery from a long illness.

In this context, the ‘gem’ shines all the brighter for its remarkable setting, in which Bartók turns to the music of another convalescent composer: the third movement “Heiliger Dankgesang” of Beethoven’s Op.132 string quartet. Kovács points out correlations on multiple levels: personal,⁵⁵ motivic,⁵⁶ and structural.⁵⁷ Most significant is the structural relationship, for although we have already seen the same type of concerted writing in the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2, here we have the exact Beethovenian parallel of a five-part strophic design alternating between contrapuntal interludes and chorale sections.⁵⁸ In place of Beethoven’s two “neue Kraft fühlenden” (“feeling of new strength”) trios, however, Bartók substitutes only one

⁵⁴ Béla Bartók to József Szigeti on January 30, 1944, in *Béla Bartók Letters*, 330. He continues with either understated sarcasm or happiness, whichever you will: “In March my weight was 87 lbs., now it is 105 lbs. I am getting stout. Too stout. As stout as anything. You will not recognize me.”

⁵⁵ “in der Überschrift ‘religioso’ drückt sich ein Hinweis auf Beethovens vielsagend “religiöse” Satzüberschrift aus – der sich der Illusion seiner Erholung hingebende Bartók schließt sich hier symbolisch dem “Dankgesang eines Genesenen” an”; “in the heading ‘religioso’ is expressed a hint of Beethoven’s meaningful “religious” movement heading – cherishing the illusion of his recovery, Bartók identifies with the symbolism of the “Thanksgiving of a convalescent” (26).

⁵⁶ “bei Beethoven wie bei Bartók ein typisches Cambiata-Motiv mit ähnlicher Bewegung”; “with Beethoven as with Bartók, a typical cambiata motive with similar movement” (26).

⁵⁷ “die imitative Art der Streicherzischenspiele, die abwechselnde Verteilung der Choralzeilen und der Zwischenspiele; und der Aufbau der sowohl bei Beethoven wie auch bei Bartók aus *fünf* Zeilen bestehenden Choralstrophen”; “the imitative means of the string interludes, the alternating distribution of the chorale lines and the interludes; and the construction made of five lines of chorale strophes, in Beethoven as well as Bartók” (26).

⁵⁸ The five strophes in the A section of the second movement of the Piano Concerto No. 3 are found as follows: mm.16-20, mm.24-29, mm.31-35, mm.38-46, and mm.48-54.

“Nature music” scherzo, composed entirely of regular 4-bar settings of the birdsong. While Bartók retains his own ABA form with the formal departure from Beethoven on this point, the birdsong still signifies the recovering convalescent, bringing an added depth to that typically Bartókian form in the middle movement of the Piano Concerto No. 3. Where the scherzo from the piano Concerto No. 2 gave us Bartók’s vision of nature at night, here the morning birdsong of the Concerto No. 3 of 1945 carries Bartók’s hope for the future in two senses, both for his own health and for the health of Europe and the rest of the world.⁵⁹

At the same time that the two movements embody opposite aspects of Bartók’s relationship with nature, they offer similar solutions to a personal problem of compositional synthesis, represented in the citation at the top of this section.⁶⁰ While Bartók certainly felt the influence of folk sources and other non-Western musical traditions, one should not forget or underestimate the strength of his education as a composer in the Western, specifically Germanic, tradition. He notes in an autobiographical account published in 1921, “before I was eighteen I had acquired a fairly thorough knowledge of music from Bach to Brahms.”⁶¹ The inclusion of Debussy in his triumvirate of Western composers signals the cosmopolitan evolution of that Germanic tradition in the 20th century. Bartók achieves a synthesis of the counterpoint of Bach, the progressive form of Beethoven, and the harmonic advances of Debussy in the middle movements of the Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3. These compositional tools are

⁵⁹ Kovács, S., 543.

⁶⁰ See n.127.

⁶¹ “Autobiography” (1921), in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 408. Also see n.87.

not merely on display in these movements, as if listed in a catalogue. In a true synthesis, Bartók infuses each with some of the spirit of the others, resulting in a new musical language. For example, the ‘nature music’ of the B section scherzo in the Piano Concerto No. 3 reveals Bartók’s harmonic and coloristic debt to Debussy;⁶²

Example 3.9: Piano Concerto No. 3, mvt. 3, mm.80-82

⁶² Stella Sung, 69: “As a composer, Bartók was influenced by Debussy’s techniques, especially in the use of whole-tone and pentatonic scales. Bartók had already recognized pentatonicism in folk music, and he became interested in Debussy’s techniques of parallel chord-planing, and blurred sonorities within the framework of whole-tone and pentatonic scalar formations. From these sources, Bartók developed his own particular innovations. The most obvious of these is the so-called “night music,” which is drawn in concept from the Impressionist school, but becomes a personal signature of Bartók’s music because of the specific aim of creating impressions of insect noises, bird calls, and other sounds directly connected to nature.”

while the contrapuntal obligato in the solo piano over the chorale in woodwinds at the return of the A section hearkens back to the 2-part inventions of Bach; and the recollection of those same Debussy-inspired piano figures from the ‘nature music’ scherzo in the improvisatory interludes of the A section reprise exemplify Bartók’s own developmental approach to progressive form, adding his own touch to one of Beethoven’s most innovative formal models.

The image displays a musical score for the second movement of Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3, measures 96 through 104. The score is arranged in systems. The first system includes parts for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in Bb, and Bassoon, with measures 96-100. The second system includes Piano and Percussion (Pno.) parts, with measures 101-102. The third system includes Percussion (Pno.) parts, with measures 103-104. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes. The percussion part includes a snare drum and cymbal, with a 'rapidamente' section starting at measure 104.

Example 3.10: Piano Concerto No. 3, mvt. 2, mm.96-104

In this chapter, we have seen three examples of the expressive ‘kernel’ at the center of a Bartókian symmetrical form: how Bartók was able to construct that kernel, and for what expressive purpose. The Violin Concerto gave us a reconfiguration of the theme and variations concept, while the synthetic ideal in the two Piano Concertos presented diametric visions of Nature in music. The degree of similarity between these

middle movements from the two Piano Concertos almost excludes comparison with any other movement. However, our earlier reading of the theme and variations from the Violin Concerto as an ABA form brings that movement at least within the orbit of these two, allowing us to make certain comparisons. In the next chapter, we will see how the similarities together with the differences between the entire forms of all three concertos finally address the construction of identity in Bartók's music.

