

GYORGY SANDOR

in Defense of Bartók

BY JOSEPH SMITH



Gyorgy Sandor (seated) with Béla Bartók

“Don’t let anyone tell you that Bartók’s music is bitonal or atonal!” Gyorgy Sandor begins our conversation, not apropos of anything I’ve said, but in reaction to an article which has upset him. “Bartók’s music is always tonal—there are never two systems and never no system, even in the most challenging works, like the Three Etudes,” he claims.

The pianist, who was referred to in a letter by Béla

Bartók as the composer’s “favorite student,” has recorded the entire corpus of Bartók’s solo piano music (winning a *Grand Prix de Disque*) as well as the works for piano and orchestra. Now in his eighties, he continues to perform all over the world. He has taught at the University of Michigan, and is currently on the faculty of the Juilliard School. His publications include editions, transcriptions, and a book on playing the piano.

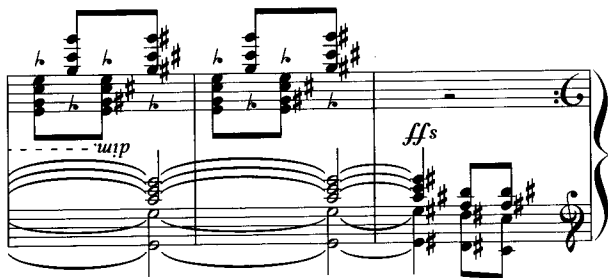
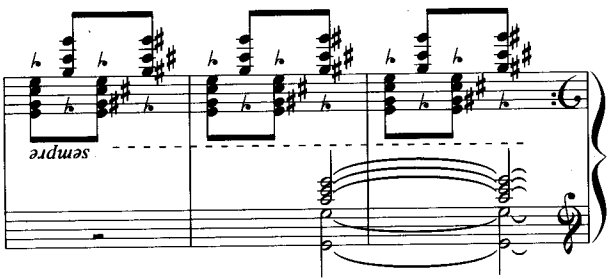
But Gyorgy Sandor is more interested in discussing

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Tempo giusto. (♩ = 76-84)

"The important thing, of course, is the long *diminuendo*. By the way, the *fortissimo* in bar five of the piece clearly applies to the beginning of the melody—only the melody octaves should be *fortissimo*, not the whole texture.



"For instance, in the *Allegro Barbaro*, he actually asked me to add repeats of this figure ad libitum:

As I listened to his CD, I wondered how the side drum solo which opens the second movement would be rendered. What in fact *was* the unpitched tapping sound on his CD? Sandor responds by tapping with his pen. "I tap it myself in recitals. To be honest, a former student of mine helped me by tapping it on the recording." Knowing Bartok's special interest in percussion sonorities, I can't resist asking if he specified in his score whether the tapping should be executed by pencil or by pen. Although he knows that I am joking, Sandor replies, "Really, he was so much less doctrinaire than people seem to think.

should urge Boosey and Hawkes to hasten publication. score of the piano version. Interested *Piano Today* readers recording, pianists all over the world are eager for the original text." As a result of his performances and something, it can appear as an *ossia* to distinguish it from

music than in talking about himself, and he is a man of strong convictions. Throughout our conversation, his abiding concern is in countering myths and misconceptions about his former teacher. In explaining Bartok's tonality, Sandor identifies his dissonances as either "grace notes" or "derived tones." To prove the point, he compares the sustained half-step which opens Bartok's second *Improvisation* from Op. 20 with the beginning of Mozart's A minor Sonata, K. 310.



Mozart
Allegro maestoso



Bartok
Molto capriccioso. (♩ = 63)

I mention that I have been unable to locate a published score to this version. He sighs deeply. "I had a contract with Boosey and Hawkes stipulating that my edition would appear within two years after I submitted it. That, my dear Mr. Smith, was six years ago! Because I added some additional orchestral voices, they say it is not Bartok's version. What is the problem? When I have added

orchestration. realize—the density and timbral contrasts of Bartok's the piano can be made to suggest what it cannot literally impressive tour de force, displaying just how effectively trial in complexity). György Sandor's performance is an poser's estate (in Sandor's words, they rivaled the O.J. forty years, a victim of the legal disputes over the com- Although Bartok made this version in 1945 (for rehearsal use for a projected ballet), it has remained in oblivion for of Bartok's previously unknown piano version of the Among Sandor's many recordings is a fascinating CD attention to my book than to the other six hundred?" has the time?" he asks. "And would anyone pay more that he should write about tonal structure in Bartok. "Who tones to jazz's "blue notes." He shrugs off the suggestion scalar degree). Sandor smiles as he likens the derived the fifth degree of the scale (and similarly with every sharp or G flat, but that all three nevertheless represent C, for instance, Bartok will interchange G natural with G heard in relation to the structure of the music."

Sandor uses the term "derived tones" to mean that in those in the Bartok are simultaneous, the structural signif- While the two notes in the Mozart are consecutive and

Bartók *continued from page 15*

"The title of the piece has misled so many," he continues. "It was originally simply 'Allegro in F sharp,' not F sharp major or F sharp minor—just F sharp. A review had appeared calling Bartók and his circle 'young barbarians,' so he added the *Barbaro* as a joking afterthought."

How had Sandor come to premiere the Third Piano Concerto, which Bartók had intended for performance by his wife, Ditta? "The existence of a third piano concerto came as a complete surprise to me," he relates. "At the time of Bartók's final illness, he had asked me to correct proofs of the *Concerto for Orchestra*, but I did not know that he was working on a piano concerto. He was, of course, reserving it for use by Ditta. After his death she became ill, and I learned it in about six weeks, for its premiere with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra."

It is often asserted that, in this work, Bartók softens his style as a concession to Ditta's playing—or to American taste. Sandor totally rejects this view. "Ditta performed works like Bartók's two-piano concerto with him—why would she have needed a less virtuosic or forceful work? Is not the Finale, in fact, as vigorous as anything in Bartók? If Bartók had softened his style in his last years, how does one explain the Sonata for solo violin—one of his

most challenging pieces?" Did Sandor, then, feel that the third was no different from the previous two piano concertos? "The content of the first is expressed primarily in octaves; the second—a lighter, more cheerful work (although not always played that way!)—is primarily chordal; and the third is more spare. The difference is one of texture," he explains, "not content."

As I am leaving, Sandor asks me to allow him to check the text of the interview before it appears in print. Justifying his concern, he shows me a shocking example of a misquotation in print. Sandor has published a transcription of the *Tempo di Ciaccona* and *Fuga* from Bartók's Sonata for solo violin. Yehudi Menuhin, who had commissioned the original sonata from Bartók, wrote to Sandor praising the transcription. I saw this letter, which reads in part: "You have read into the Sonata so much of the implied background that was in Bartók's mind and which of course will never be as fully realized on the violin as on the piano." Then, Sandor shows me an article where the writer, presumably blinded by a prejudice against transcriptions, has misquoted the letter: "...will never be fully realized on the piano as the violin"—completely reversing Menuhin's meaning. I, of course, have complied with the request. ■

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