A PERFORMING ANALYSIS OF
BÉLA BARTÓK'S
THREE BURLESQUES, OP.8c

by

ERIKA CRINÓ

B.Mus., The University of Victoria, 2000
M.Mus., The University of British Columbia, 2002

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Music)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October 2006

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Between 1908-1911 Béla Bartók composed over one hundred pieces, considering only the piano solo repertoire. Bartók was particularly attached to many of these early works: he performed them throughout his career, he included some of them in his 1929 recording and, twenty years later, he also orchestrated five of the piano pieces from this period as the Hungarian Pictures. At the time of the composition of the Three Burlesques, Bartók had recently graduated from the Budapest Academy both in piano and composition. A young composer in his twenties, he was still very much in search of his own voice. Accordingly, most of these early works are quite short, and many are character pieces that explore a single compositional device.

An extremely gifted pianist, Bartók was at the time in need for repertoire to perform during his many concert tours, and many of these pieces were in fact born from this need. In the period just preceding the composition of the Three Burlesques, Bartók discovered and started studying the musical traditions native to the rural areas of his country, later expanding his field of interest to include Bulgaria and Slovakia. The influence of folk-songs, evident in all of his mature musical output, is already manifest here.

The Three Burlesques, Op.8c, unfortunately not very often performed today, are three short descriptive pieces, each experimenting harmonically within a traditional ABA form. They are technically demanding and successful in performance, and the second piece of the set, "Slightly Tipsy", clearly shows the influence of Bartók's folk-song research.

This thesis addresses issues of particular interest to a performer, such as very practical problems of balance between the hands, harmonic consequences created by alternative choices in voicing, and problems in the interpretation of melodic material. This thesis explores also some practical observations that are evoked by the physical act of playing these pieces at the piano and goes on to connect this commentary on gestural aspects to the programmatic content described by each title.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My infinite gratitude goes to Dr. W. Benjamin, who not only helped and encouraged me immensely in every stage of this thesis, through many discussions and great wisdom in his comments and advice, but who also was extremely influential, throughout my degree, in expanding my ways of thinking and reading, as well as teaching me how to listen differently to music.

Many thanks to Robert Silverman who tirelessly taught me, among many other things, never to be satisfied with what comes easy at the piano, but to shape and direct what one has first created in his mind.

Special thanks to Mrs. Laurenda Daniells for her generosity and greatly contagious enthusiasm. Her infinite passion and love for anything alive will continue inspiring everybody who meets her.

And finally, a great thanks goes to Brett, who has shared a long and important journey with me.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

It is a generally accepted that the year 1926 serves as a landmark in Béla Bartók’s musical output: the beginning of his new, second phase. After the composition of the Dance Suite in 1923, a silence, interrupted only by the Dorfszenen of 1924, preceded the creation of the Piano Sonata, the Out of Doors suite, the Nine Little Pieces and the beginning of the Mikrokosmos, all composed in 1926. Similar periods of silence that led to intensely creative years occurred at other moments of his life. One such followed the great disappointment he experienced in 1905 at the Rubinstein Competition in Paris, which he had entered both as a performer and a composer (this second category with his Lisztian Rhapsody, Op.1, and his piano quintet), and which saw Backhaus and Brugnoli as winners in the two categories. The sense of a complete failure in Paris threw Bartók into a deep depression which only the acquaintance with Zoltán Kodály the following year could dispel. This friendship opened a new world of interests, experiences, and research opportunities for Bartók, who found new inspiration in the peasant music of the countryside, with its directness of expression, its modal scales and irregular rhythms. Between 1908 and 1911 this new outburst of creative activity produced an enormous volume of piano music: 14 Bagatelles, Op. 6, Ten Easy Pieces, eighty-five pieces in the set For Children, Two Elegies, Op. 8b, Three Burlesques, Op. 8c, Seven Sketches, Op. 9b, Two Rumanian Dances, Op. 8a, Four Dirges, Op. 9a, Deux Images and the Allegro Barbaro.

The composition of the Three Burlesques, which are the object of this study, spanned this entire period. The first Burlesque was composed in 1908, that which became the third, in 1910, and the second, in 1911. The three pieces were published together as a set in 1912 by
Rózsavölgyi and republished by Boosey & Hawkes in 1950. Bartók was particularly attached to these pieces, performing them throughout his life, either as a set or more often two at a time or individually. The second one, “A Little Tipsy”, appears to have been a particular favorite. It is included in his 1929 recording for His Master’s Voice and was also transcribed by him for orchestra as the fourth of the Hungarian Pictures in 1931 (his 1944 proposal of recording the whole set in New York unfortunately never materialized).

Most of the general literature on Bartók’s works for piano almost completely ignores this early period, with the exception of a number of studies on the Bagatelles and Allegro Barbaro, preferring rather to focus on later works, mostly those written after the Suite, Op.14, of 1916. Even a comprehensive study of Bartók’s piano music from a performer’s perspective, such as Barbara Nissman’s Bartók and the Piano, concentrates only “on the major piano works”, each chapter including a mere “overview and more general discussion of Bartók’s related minor works.” The book limits itself to some brief historical information about the composition of the Three Burlesques followed by some very concise performing suggestions regarding the use of a particular fingering or the importance of making the melody audible at all times. Benjamin Suchoff’s contribution to The Bartók Companion, which focuses specifically on the composer’s piano output between 1908 and 1911, gives a very brief historical introduction to the set before spending two paragraphs supporting his analysis of the first Burlesque as being based on a C Phrygian/Lydian polymode. No further mention of this work is made nor is any analysis given of

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1 Antokoletz, p. 12-13.
2 see, for instance, the programs quoted in his letters. Béla Bartók Letters, p. 159 and 186.
3 ibid., p. 339.
4 Nissman, p. xi.
5 ibid., p. 201-206.
the other two pieces.6 Another comprehensive source on Bartók’s piano music is David Yeomans’ *Bartók for Piano*, in which there is but a single paragraph on each piece composing the *Three Burlesques*. Each describes general features of key center and character, and then lists some of the most immediate performing issues, such as tempos and technical difficulties.7 A comprehensive analysis of Bartók’s own recordings, specifically aimed towards the performing aspects of his music, is found in Steven Earl Gray’s DMA dissertation. It makes no mention of the second *Burlesque*, except for including it in the bibliography. A more detailed theoretical analysis of the *Three Burlesques* is found in Edwin von der Nüll’s work of 1930. Aspects of the music’s bitonality and bimodality are explored, particularly in the codas of each piece, and a very general overview of form is also presented.8

A close study of the *Three Burlesques* is therefore warranted, with the need for commentary focusing on aspects of relevance for the performer being especially obvious. Accordingly, this essay deals with issues of primary importance for the pianist, such as possible resolutions of ambiguities in both the horizontal (formal) and vertical (harmonic) dimensions. At the level of the section, this essay will investigate ways of grouping the material within particular sections, while, at a more local level, it will analyze the bases for choosing among different articulations and dynamics in contexts where the hands clash harmonically, and very different composite effects may be produced.

The general title given to the set immediately implies a connection with a theatrical scene depicted on stage. The specific titles bring into focus more precise situations and personalities which, as will be explored, are expressed in this music almost visually. Observing how

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7 Yeomans, p. 63-65.
determinate physical gestures are imposed on the performer and how these both effect and symbolize the grotesque content implied by the burlesques' individual titles, will also allow for a more physical analysis of Bartók’s methods of characterization.

**Three Burlesques**

The *Three Burlesques* were composed between 1908 and 1911, a period during which Bartók was traveling extensively, giving concerts or collecting folk material. During these trips he wrote numerous postcards and letters to his family and friends. These letters are uniquely useful in shedding light on the strong beliefs of this young man in his twenties, since it was only later in life that he begun to write prolifically, in essay form, on music and society. One such letter, sent to his wife in 1909, is particularly telling of his philosophy at the time, a real credo of a young artist:

I strongly believe and profess that every true art is manifested and created under the influence of "experiences", those impressions that we absorb into ourselves from the surrounding world...I cannot imagine that an artwork could be anything but the manifestation of the infinite enthusiasm, despair, sorrow, vengeful anger, distorting and sarcastic irony of its creator. Before I experienced it in myself, I did not believe that one's works could signal - more precisely than one's autobiography - the important events, the governing passions of his life. ..It is strange that in music the basis of motivation has so far been only enthusiasm, love, sorrow, or, at most, despair - that is, only the so-called lofty feelings. It is only in our times that there is place for the painting of the feeling of vengeance, the grotesque, and the sarcastic...the music of today...extends with honesty to all real human emotions without excluding any.⁹

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⁹ quoted in Frigyesi, p. 120.
It is then not surprising that Bartók’s musical output between 1908 and 1911, more than 100 pieces for the solo piano, bears titles such as *Elegies, Bagatelles, Burlesques, Sketches, Dirges, Images*, ... all collections of small pieces, often only one page long, whose extra-musical associations, as implied by their titles, allow for manifold “paintings” of a wide range of “experiences from the surrounding world.” A title such as *Sketches*, for example, evokes the image of something made of small, private and spontaneous gestures, with some visual overtones and suggesting the possibility of hidden or obscure details. These traits allow for a series of pictures of vivid character, some very explicitly personal, such as the first one, “Portrait of a girl” (1908), where his future wife Mártia is depicted through little gestures, as if with small brush strokes.

The title *Burlesque* also evokes small and colorful images, more directly relating in particular to the feelings of the grotesque and the mood of sarcastic irony that Bartók referred to in his letter to his wife. The title recalls a sharp-edged light-heartiness similar to that of the *Bagatelles*, but also suggests episodes close to the theatrical world of the *Commedia dell’arte*: scenes that portray in some ironic and exaggerated way some common, profoundly human and not necessarily pleasant life event.

Historically, the term *burlesque* is often associated in its origins with the world of literature and theatre as a form analogous to that of the pantomime, where serious and established conventions are grotesquely exaggerated and parodied.\(^1\) Although the term is found in connection with keyboard music already in the eighteenth century, for example in J.S. Bach’s

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\(^1\) *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2nd ed.*, and *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 2nd ed.*, s.v. “*burlesque*”.

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Partita in A minor and in some of François Couperin’s ordres, more recent and probably more direct influences on Bartók’s choice of title for his op. 8c were Strauss’ Burleske for piano and orchestra (1885-6) and his own Scherzo, Op. 2 (1904), also for piano and orchestra, the original title of which was also Burlesque.
CHAPTER 2: QUARREL

The mood of the grotesque, the rhetoric of sarcasm and negative emotions like vengeful anger, all mentioned in Bartók’s letter to his future wife, find colorful expression in this set. The fact that the first two pieces bear also a title of their own comes as a useful aid to direct our imagination. In addition, Bartók’s personal connections with the first Burlesque are made further explicit and more detailed by the fact that, originally, it carried more than one title to choose from. The first draft read “please choose one of the titles: “anger because of an interrupted visit” or “rondoletto a capriccio” or “vengeance is sweet” or “play it if you can” or “November 27”.”

All these were successively removed and the piece acquired the new title “Quarrel” when submitted for publication. The discarded titles, as well as the one chosen for publication, are closely related to the expressive possibilities suggested in Bartók’s letter: lust for revenge, anger and sarcastic irony are all emotions explored and depicted in this first piece. “Quarrel“, finished on November 27, 1908, is dedicated to Mártá Ziegler, a piano student of Bartók at the time, who was to become his first wife in November of the following year. Whether a quarrel did indeed occur between the two is not known, but any such testimony is unnecessary as the music portrays an argument almost visually in this first picture. The colorful indications that were added to the original sketches, and later removed when the piece was published, reinforce our imagination in depicting this private event: the sketches carried directions such as “angrily” for the opening, “with weeping voice” for the section between m. 60 and m. 72 and “sorrowfully” for the section

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between m. 88 and m. 103.\textsuperscript{13}

The characteristic atmosphere of tension and contrast that occurs in a quarrel is portrayed in several ways in this piece, each operating on different levels. From a superficial point of view, the general aspect of repetitiveness that often occurs in an argument is introduced already at the very beginning by the incessant and “angry” recurrence of the opening gesture. This then becomes a quasi-circular motive in mm. 9-10 (ex.2.1), its “circular” character given by the fact that its two halves are opposed in contour but similar in sonority. The issues raised by the unresolved qualities of this motive permeate the whole piece, creating dramatic energy and an obsessive character.

Example 2.1: m. 9-10

Example 2.2: reduction of m. 9-10

The very essence of the quarrel can be seen, in fact, as growing out of the contrasts enclosed in mm. 9-10. The two halves of the motive, if the two measures are divided vertically, are opposed in contour and, viewed as trichords, involve chromatic displacement (ex. 2.2); at the same time they are built from the same octatonic scale and share a similar intervallic structure, of unstable sonority. The second section of this chapter will explore the harmonic and motivic

\textsuperscript{13} ibid.
implications embedded in these two measures and how they concur in portraying a sense of a quarrel.

As will be discussed in detail in the last section of this chapter, the physical aspect of playing this piece introduces yet another dimension to the musical expression of this lively scene. A quarrel represented as a confrontation between the hands comes to mind observing that, in the opening measures, the “angry” left hand feels more comfortable than the right hand and that, when the opening gesture is completed in m. 10, this “oppression” of the right hand is enhanced even further. Therefore, thinking horizontally, the unison of the two hands appears not to be a spiritual one, but rather masks an uneasy relationship of possible repression of one hand (the right) by the other.

**Harmonic/motivic portrayal of quarrel**

When approaching the opening measure, as a performer as well as a listener, it is quite difficult to settle on how to interpret this initial cloud of sound, especially as it alternates between the hands in the low register, *pianissimo* and *presto*. At first, the pitch that stands out the most is probably the A, as it is slightly accented and is reiterated on the first two beats of each measure. A sense of unresolved harmony arises from the continuation to (Db, G), a tritone which can be understood as the upper part of an A7 chord. In m. 10, the opening pitches (A, G, Db) move to (E, Bb, Gb, C), some kind of C7 with a lowered fifth. These two dominant-like harmonies are related in sound, by sharing the same octatonic scale and by having similar intervallic makeup (inversionally related 026 chords). M. 10 is therefore not heard as a resolution for m. 9, but rather as an equally unstable opponent in the quarrel. The two measures bear equal importance in this
opening section, although the accent on the A of m. 9 and the slurring of mm. 9-10 at first create
an emphasis on the descending half of this motive. However, as the piece proceeds through
successive phases, equal weight is given to the ascending half. This shift in accent and emphasis
causes one to hear the quarrel, in its overall ascent to m. 39, as sometimes being pulled up from
above, at other times being pushed up from below. The stages through which the two hands
ascend to the cadence on B♭ (mm. 43-44) can be sketched by following the lower tritones of each
figure (ex. 2.3).

Examples 2.3 and 2.4: reduction of m. 9-52

![Musical notation image]

The opening tritone (Db, G) moves initially down by semitone to the tritone on C in m.10;
the same tritone is then recalled in inversion in m. 21,\(^{14}\) and this time progresses upwards. Here,
in mm. 21-22, the melodic two-bar motive of mm. 9-10 is inverted, giving predominance to the
ascending part of the figure. After a quick ascent in thirds, the melodic figure is restored to its

\(^{14}\) M. 21, rather than m. 17 where the tritone is first found in inversion, is structurally more important, since here the
original two-bar motive is found complete and in inversion.
original shape (mm. 29-32), while the tritone (Gb, C) returns (in m. 29), moving immediately
down to (F, Cb). In m. 32 the accent is given, for the first time, to the middle of the motive, the
ascending half on (F, Cb). The overall fundamental motion of tritones by descending chromatic
steps, as shown in ex. 2.4, harmonically portrays a feeling of sliding into an argument, rather than
progressing towards a resolution.

The piece ends unequivocally on C and a cadence on G would traditionally be expected in
the central section and would bring some feeling of approaching a tonal agreement in the quarrel.
Instead, after the first cadence on Bb (mm. 43-44), there is a slide down to Ab (mm. 49-50), and a
continuing descent to F#, executed with progressing disagreement between the hands. F# is
introduced melodically by the right hand in mm. 52 and 60, and both times is opposed by an
insistent C chord in the left hand. As the right hand repeats the motive centered on F# in mm. 60-72,
the left hand slides down as if from the tonic to the dominant of a C minor scale. After
reaching G, the left hand eventually joins the F# in m. 73. In the section marked “sorrowfully”
(mm. 88-103) the G is again touched by the left hand, but it quickly slides up chromatically to the
opening A.

The argument resumes in m.104, in a manner identical to the beginning, but slightly
pushed forward by the omission of four bars (corresponding to mm. 17-20). When the tritone (F,
Cb) is again reached, it is now reinterpreted as part of the dominant arpeggiation (mm. 133-142)
leading to a big dominant pedal on G (m. 144) (ex. 2.5). An harmonic agreement is reached, as
the two hands independently prolong the dominant pedal, one through a whole-tone, and the
other through a chromatic scale, and meet on the C in m. 152.

In the coda of the piece, a last glimpse is given in m. 170 to the unresolved harmony of m.
9. The descending part of the motive is now, more than just sliding down to an equal and opposed figure, resolving to the accented and prolonged ascending arpeggiation on C in m. 173. Both the harmonic and the motivic disagreements are thus concluded.

Example 2.5: mm. 133-144

Quarrel between two hands

The fact that a large part of "Quarrel" is played by the hands in unison could suggest, at first glance, a representation of agreement. One might be tempted then to search for a sense of contrast between sections or motives, but each distinct part of this piece, although sometimes providing a contrast in mood, seems to grow out of the previous one, anticipated and prepared by, rather than being in opposition to it. When physically approaching the piece, the resentment underlying the quarrel can perhaps be sensed in the way that most of the unisone figures are more suited to one hand than the other. When the hands do differ from each other, in the middle
sections and in the coda, they seem to express their own individual personality: they are both comfortable but quite in opposition in character. Generally, the more "sorrowful" and "weeping" lines belong to the character of the right hand, while the left hand usually plays more stubborn and less pathetic figures.

The very first motive, when heard for the first time or analyzed by itself out of context, appears to have the characteristics of a left hand motive: its character being more that of an accompaniment, with its opening trill and its treatment, at least initially, as an ostinato.\(^{15}\) Physically too, it fits well into the left hand, particularly so at the beginning, when it is in such a low register. The trill-like portion of it, which is also the loudest part of the measure, is played by the strongest fingers and the tritone falls easily under the fingers, with a natural diminuendo given by the rotation of the hand outwards, while lifting it. The right hand, which seems to be forced here to imitate the left hand, has to be held in a slightly more uncomfortable position, partially because of having to play Db with the thumb, so that the quiet release of the figure has to be slightly more cautious. This "oppression" of the right hand is even more pronounced when the motive is completed in mm. 9-10: the tritones fall well into the left hand (especially if the thumb plays the G on m. 9.3) and the low semitone, Db-C, can be easily controlled. This same passage feels quite differently for the right hand: the thumb needs to slide over the low Db-C semitone, which makes it slightly more difficult to control the sound, and the fingering needs to be somewhat more deliberate in the last three notes of m. 10, when the hand prepares to leap to restart the motive.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) This motive is somewhat reminiscent of the left hand ostinato in the second movement of Bartók's *Suite*, Op. 14.

\(^{16}\) The fingerings 2-1 can be used, in the right hand, on Db-C a the end of m. 10: this naturally produces the break in the slur and the accent on the following A.
As the figure rises from the low register, the situation changes and the right hand becomes more comfortable. As an example, mm. 17-21 all end with the fingerings 5-4-3 starting on a white key and followed by two black ones. This is more suited to the hand than the parallel situation at the end of m. 10, and allows to keep the right hand open so that it can easily leap down with its thumb on the next downbeat. When the two-bar motive is inverted in mm. 21-22, it is now more suited to the right hand than the left (in György Sandor’s recording, the left hand is here even dropped at moments). As the hemiolas that begun in m. 35 rise by step, the left hand moves out of its natural register and has to turn slightly more to enunciate its higher arpeggios.

During the whole middle part (mm. 51-103), the right hand acquires a more independent character and plays more idiosyncratic figures. The diversity between personalities reaches a maximum in the “sorrowfully” section (mm. 88-103) where the two hands perform what they are most comfortable doing: a rolled melody in octaves in the right hand (made more easily cantabile by the downwards rolls) accompanied by ascending arpeggios in the left hand. Even in a section where the hands play mostly the same chords, such as mm. 73-80, the material given to each reflects, in subtle ways, their distinct nature: the left hand plays the solid chords that the right hand more elegantly arpeggiates throughout.

When the hands diverge the next time, on the dominant pedal of m. 144, they are equally comfortable outlining a common cadence; they start on G and reach, each through its own path, the common C (m. 152). This time they mirror, rather than imitate, each other’s figures, through comfortable outwards arpeggios.

In the last important cadence of the piece, mm. 175-176, the two hands combine, helping each other to reach the common tritone that will resolve to the final two sforzatissimo Cs, one in each hand’s natural range.
Conclusions

By reading Bartók's letters from this period, one perceives a clear vision of a highly sarcastic and yet very resolute young man, full of strong and unbending opinions and with a powerful urge to constantly investigate and analyze various aspects of the human soul.\textsuperscript{17} It is not surprising, then, that he would be both familiar with the details characterizing a quarrel, and able to describe them accurately and ironically in his music.

In his sarcastic way, Bartók unfolds here a situation of conflict, such as a quarrel, or an act of revenge or a challenge, all of which were at one point considered as potential titles for the piece. As has been discussed, through harmonic, motivic and physical means Bartók manages to create a sense of an argument that grows, then develops and finally brusquely ends.

In the opening section, the repetition of the first motive and its circular shape recall some obsessive aspects commonly generated by a contrast of opinions. The hands produce at first a confused cloud of sound and, although in unison, present the contrast between one gesture and its equal opponent both harmonically and physically.

The argument proceeds through a sliding voice-leading by step, and reaches a moment of maximum separation and contrast in the middle section where each hand tries to express itself independently by bringing forth its strengths, one being more sentimental and the other more determined. This central section, characterized by shorter motives and more varied emotional states, does not lead to an understanding.

In the final part, the "motives" of the argument are recalled but, in an attempt to achieve

\textsuperscript{17} See, in particular, the letters written to Stefi Geyer in 1907, just a year before "Quarrel". \textit{Béla Bartók Letters}, pp. 75-87.
clarification, a new cadence is introduced to prepare C as a central and common tonality. The hands, in unison, agree and are both comfortable in this cadential passage. Both the harmonic and motivic arguments are also resolved towards the end. It might be noted, though, that the concluding motive is that of the beginning, a left hand motive, and on another, more emotional level the final C sounds more like an imposition, rather than a peaceful resolution of a contrast. This might suggest, perhaps, that the left hand character was all along stronger than the other and that they were never really equal partners in the argument, which is then left potentially unresolved.
CHAPTER 3: SLIGHTLY TIPSY

It is a well-known fact that our notation records on music paper, more or less inadequately, the idea of the composer; hence the existence of contrivances with which one can record precisely every intention and idea of the composer is indeed of great importance. On the other hand, the composer himself, when he is the performer of his own composition, does not always perform his work in exactly the same way. Why? Because he lives; because perpetual variability is a trait of a living creature's character. Therefore, even if one succeeded in perfectly preserving with a perfect process the composer's works according to his own idea at a given moment, it would not be advisable to listen to these compositions perpetually like that. Because it would cover the composition with boredom. Because it is conceivable that the composer himself would have performed his compositions better or less well at some other time - but in any case, otherwise.18

The second piece of the set was composed in May 1911. During the same year Bartók also orchestrated his Two Pictures, Op. 10 and composed both his opera Duke Bluebeard's Castle, Op. 11, and the popular Allegro Barbaro. His folk music research had begun in 1905 through his association with Kodály and had, by this time, taken over a substantial part of his life. By 1907, Bartók had traveled extensively and his broad collection of folk melodies of Hungarian, Slovakian and Rumanian origin had already led to a joint publication, together with Kodály, of twenty arrangements of folk songs. At first, the ethnomusicological interests had remained somewhat separate from his creative activity. It was not long, though, until these two worlds started to overlap and interact, and his ethnomusicological research begun to influence his work as a composer. All the sets of pieces that Bartók composed for piano in 1909 already incorporate

folk music material: *Fourteen Bagatelles, Op.6, Ten Easy Pieces* and *For Children*.

In 1941, in one of his essays on folk music, Bartók explicitly stated: “...in my original works they [peasant tunes] have never been used. I do have many transcriptions of folk tunes; they are discernible either by their titles or by some added subtitle or footnote indicating the origin of the themes...If there is no indication of origin, then there have been no folk melodies used at all. These are my original works”.¹⁹ As there is no indication of the origin of the themes in “Slightly Tipsy”, this is an original work, although clearly influenced by the world and “spirit” of folk music in the accents and character of its melodies. In almost every essay that Bartók wrote on the influence of folk music on contemporary art music, he refers to the expression and interpretation of the folk “spirit”. He admits it is an influence difficult to describe with words, but that the perfect and unaffected characteristics of folk music deeply manifest themselves in many of his own works and similarly permeate those of Kodály, Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky.²⁰

Bartók’s particular fondness for this piece is attested by the fact that he performed it several times throughout his life and that it was the only one of the *Three Burlesques* to be included in his recording for His Master’s Voice in 1929. It was also the only one to be orchestrated, this in 1931, as the fourth of the *Hungarian Pictures*. Both these documents, the recording and the orchestration, offer extremely valuable interpretative suggestions for the performance of this piece.

Compared with the first piece of the set, “Slightly Tipsy” is much less fluid and less continuous in form and texture, with its melodic stumbling, off-beat accents and with well-
defined sections of opposed character. As I hope to show, an inebriate quality is portrayed here not only in strictly musical terms, but is called up in the performer’s body by a sort of concrete metonymy, the conditions of the player’s hand representing those of the drunkard’s body as a whole.

**Physically tipsy in performance**

The opening texture of this piece consists of two parallel triadic streams, a situation that at first might seem to suggest harmonic consistency. However, as will be discussed, this harmonic structure is not consistent even throughout the first few lines and this observation was what first suggested a physical analysis for this piece. When performing “Slightly Tipsy”, in fact, one has the impression that its overall shape as well as its minute details are strongly driven by the physical feeling they produce in the pianist.

At first, it might seem that the left hand plays first-inversion (6/3) major triads with roots\(^{21}\) lying pc interval 4 above the accompanied melody pitch, as is consistently the case until m. 4.3. But this pattern is soon abandoned as minor triads, with roots pc interval 6 away (m. 4.4, m. 5.3), and augmented triads (m. 6.2) start to appear in the left hand. Ernő Lendvai, in his description of hexatonic collections\(^{22}\) explored by Bartók in his compositions, includes the very first beat of this movement among his examples.\(^{23}\) But hexatonic structure is even less consistent than the types of triads in the lower (left hand) stream, since already on the second beat of m. 1

\(^{21}\) The root concept is invoked here only to identify the triads in question, and not to suggest that they need to be heard as having roots.

\(^{22}\) Lendvai calls these collections 1:3 scalar models, thus describing the alternation of semitones and minor thirds.

\(^{23}\) Lendvai, p. 372.
there is a \{B, D, F\} triad in the upper stream, and diminished triads do not fall within the hexatonic system.

However, one aspect of the music that seems consciously sought after and consistent throughout the opening measures is the position and feeling of the left hand. Because of the necessity of overlapping the two streams, the left hand is forced to play from a higher position than usual while the right hand has to remain close to the keyboard and is quite limited in its freedom of motion, thus producing in the performer a feeling of restraint. It is awkward for the left hand to remain properly poised over the three notes of its triad when it needs to leave room for two notes of the right hand to sneak underneath its thumb.

In the melody of the first four bars, the last beat of each measure is emphasized both metrically, being the first quarter-note after a series of eight-notes, and by its dynamic marking. This produces an odd interruption in the rhythm that was established by the three accented weak beats, evoking a sense of stumbling, as if the ground was suddenly missing underneath one’s feet.\(^{24}\) The irregular rhythm, therefore, is not only encouraged by the indication *molto rubato*, but is also provoked in the performer physically.

The fast *acciaccatura* which characterizes the first part of the piece, with the hands in this awkward position, enhances this sense of stumbling, while the corresponding arpeggios in the recapitulation of the opening melody (m. 42 and ff.) evoke more a feeling of sliding, especially when they alternate direction, which makes it more difficult to keep a steady pulse here.

The attempt to keep a sense of balance seems to become more arduous starting with the swaying of m. 10 (see ex. 3.1) (emphasized in the orchestral score by the markings

\(^{24}\) Bartók’s own recording strongly emphasizes a sense of stumbling and then falling on the last beat of each measure, by taking some time here to slightly separate the right hand chord from its *acciaccatura*.\(^\)
accelerando/rallentando that parallel the molto crescendo/diminuendo of the piano version).

Here the left hand thumb remains blocked on G# (spelled also as Ab) for five eighth-notes and the whole hand has, for the first time, to leave its already uncomfortable position and contract as it approaches the middle of the measure.

Example 3.1: m. 10

A sense of tipping over oneself is called forth as the left hand needs to move quickly on top of the right hand and back under, on the third beat of m. 12. The orchestral version has the beginning of an accelerando here, not present in the piano score, which leads hastily to the first big cadence of m. 16. In the version for piano, a feeling of falling into this cadence is produced in two stages: one more static, where the sense of balance starts to be seriously challenged, and the other more dynamic. For the first time black keys appear in the right hand in mm. 12-13 and this evokes in the pianist a feeling comparable to that of someone, slightly tipsy, losing his balance and needing to bounce off a wall to regain the initial, more balanced, position. The following two descending measures acquire more a sense of direction steadily descending through a whole-tone scale: the drunk person leaves the position of precarious balance around B and heads for the
cadence. The uncoordinated descent develops first by having the right hand heavily landing on black keys, while standing on top of the left hand, and then by suddenly inverting the situation in the following measure. The unaccompanied D# of m. 15 finally falls heavily on the tritone below. This feeling of uncontrolled falling into the cadence, accompanied by the plunging of the left hand into the low register, is followed, as might be expected, by a moment of stasis (mm. 16-17) throughout which the right hand sits inertly on the octave A for a measure and a half, as if physically blocked.

The descending section between m. 25 and m. 29 opposes a bottom-heavy left hand that regularly plunges from middle-register chords onto low octaves with a right hand descending in circular gestures. It is interesting to notice how the fall of the right hand seems to reflect an underlying kinesthetic disorganization: in mm. 25-26 the descending sections of a whole-tone scale between tritones encourage a clock-wise motion of the arm, while, starting in m. 27, the local chromatic ascents involve a reversal of this movement (see ex. 3.2).

Example 3.2: m. 25-28

The following section sees a confused attempt to find a way back to the opening melody: the left hand transposes the same offbeat chord through all the semitones of a perfect fifth, as if
searching for the right place to play, both in space and time. The helter-skelter quality of this transition is increased by the awkward slurs and accents in the right hand: the \textit{sf} marking, in fact, occurs on the last off-beat of each measure or half-measure and conflicts with the natural instinct of playing the end of a slur softer than the beginning (see ex. 3.3).

The last figure of the piece (mm. 54-55) reproduces all the physical characteristics of someone stumbling (on the A in m. 54.4) and crashing with all his weight on the held final fifth (see ex. 3.4).

Example 3.3: m. 34

Example 3.4: m. 54-55

\textit{poco sostenuto}

Tipsiness in form, melodic structure, harmony and rhythm

From a more traditional analytical perspective, which focuses on form, melodic structure, harmony and rhythm, “Slightly Tipsy” also presents irregular and unbalanced choices, consistent with the programmatic expectations raised by its title.

23
At first, the general form of the piece seems to be a rather common tripartite ABA, with a middle section of contrasting material starting in m. 16 and a reprise of the opening music in m. 42. Upon further analysis, the middle section proves to be made of only three little segments of what sounds like a folk song (mm. 18, 21 and 24) followed by a descending and an ascending progression (mm. 25-29 and mm. 30-41): there is no complete theme, only short recollections of motives that can mostly be traced back to the opening section (m. 18 is a transposition of m. 12 and the descending segments of a whole-tone scale of mm. 25-26 recall similar figures in mm. 5, 14, and 15).

Tonally, the opening melody is quite undefined and uncertain, leaping up and down through symmetric perfect fourths. Almost equal weight is given to the pitches E, B and A and the harmonization of the melody, in identical parallel chords, does not help to define any hierarchy among the melodic pitches of the right-hand chords.

As the piece proceeds, B seems to be predominant, being the focal pitch for both the hiccup figures of mm. 9 and 11 and the dizzy swaying of mm. 10, 12, and 13. At the end of the first A section, though, when the first important cadence occurs in m. 16, the falling tritone lunges onto what sounds like a wrong note, A, which then reappears as a central pitch in the most important moments of the middle section (mm. 18, 22, and 25). The two progressions that lead to the reprise of the principal tune (mm. 25-41) completely lose any sense of a key center, as well as undermining the pulse.

When the opening melody is repeated in the closing section, it skips certain figures that appeared earlier, as will be discussed below in detail, and it proceeds on a new path starting in m.

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25 The cadence would be expected here to end perhaps on B, the central pitch, still memorable, of the whole previous section.
48. Although m. 48 superficially appears to carry on the pattern established by the two previous measures, the music here is suddenly distorted: the right hand shifts to a six-flats signature (a tritone transposition of the previous white-note collection) and the left hand abandons the triadic pattern for narrower chords full of semitones. Finally, the very last cadence is tonally unequivocal (mm. 54-55), the only such moment in the piece, but even this feels like a surprising and sudden plunge back to E, and thus home, following the unexpected and undermining iterations of G and D.

Perhaps the most unbalancing feature of this piece is the phrasing of the folk-like melody in the opening section, up to m. 16. Benjamin Suchoff, in his description of Bartók’s ethnomusicological research, recognizes in these first four measures the structure of an Hungarian folk song in the new style (originating around the middle of the nineteenth century) and brings as a direct model a melody that was collected by Bartók in 1910, similarly composed of four 7-syllable units in a symmetric ABAB structure, in duple meter and isometric.26 As Judit Frigyesi points out, these songs, mostly in tempo giusto, are often based on a basic rhythmic structure derived from kolomeika-type melodies of Carpatian Ukraine: J J J J An important observation for the present discussion is that upbeats never occur in this kind of Hungarian folk song.28 This might account for the feeling, at the end of m. 4, that new material starts too soon, this feeling being especially emphasized by its forceful accented entry, mf.

Most of this first section is characterized by a general feeling of losing track of what one was saying and of constantly interrupting oneself trying to set things straight, all this perhaps

26 Suchoff, 2001, p. 74. It might be worth noticing, though, that while Suchoff’s melody ends clearly on the tonic, Bartók’s sounds open in m. 4.
27 Frigyesi, p. 123.
28 ibid., p. 126.

25
caused by the inebriated state of the singer. The dynamic marking of \textit{mf} and the accents over the \textit{tenuto} signs connect the motive in m. 5 with that of m. 7, both including an upbeat. This is especially evident in the orchestral version, where an \textit{accelerando} followed by a \textit{ritardando} in the two 2/4 measures, mm. 6 and 8, sets these measures apart, like parenthetical afterthoughts, from what seems to be the main melody (mm. 5 and 7). It is important to notice that, although these tempo markings are missing completely in the piano score, they are very clearly present in Bartok’s own recording.

Supporting this feeling of something being superfluous or not quite in the right place in this opening section, is the observation that most of the unsettling elements are “normalized” in the reprise of m. 42. The measures in this closing section are all single units, without upbeats, all of the same length and connected by an homogeneous dynamic level. Surprisingly, though, the measures that are left out are not the parenthetical figures, but those corresponding to m. 5 and m. 7: mm. 46-47 are equivalent to m. 6 and m. 8 with their upbeats. The addition of the new arpeggio in m. 48 and the cadential m. 49 makes it easy to hear a standard two-groups-of-four measures starting in m. 42. Mm. 50-51 repeat the cadence in different octaves, forming a regular two-bar group, while the following three measures strip the (tonally surprising) cadence down to its most bare elements (mm. 52-54).

Mm. 10, 12 and 13 also have a dynamic marking that differs from the surrounding material and, like mm. 6 and 8, these measures too have \textit{accelerando}/\textit{rallentando} indications in the orchestral score. This might suggest that they also are slippery insertions. The resemblance between the motive of m. 5 and that of mm. 14-15 connects the two and supports also such an hypothesis of intrusive material in the middle.

The discussion of one last aspect of imbalance might be useful from a performing point
of view, that of the relationship between the hands in the opening section. Bartók was infamous with his editors for the precision that he required when printing his music, even using arrows to indicate more precisely where dynamics started and ended.29 The fact that the indication \textit{mp} is printed above the right hand and not between the lines as is more common, leaves no doubt on the fact that the melody should be brought out clearly. Whether the other notes are just a cloud of sound or there is a search for a distinctive harmony, on the other hand, is less obvious. The left hand chords are mostly made of major or minor triads, but the enharmonic spelling of each fifth consistently avoids a habituated reading by the eye. The observation, furthermore, that in the orchestral version Bartók changed the main triad of each beat into a four-note chord by subposing a new “root” under it, might lead one to think that the sound he had in mind in the piano version was just that of the right hand triad supported by the pitch a third below, that found at the bottom of the left hand acciaccatura, while the other two notes of the left hand are there just to blur the sound. To support an impression of the fortuitousness of these two little notes, it might be noted that in the orchestral score, when they come back in m. 42, they are different from those of m. 1 (ex.3.5).

Example 3.5: reduction of mm. 1 and 42 of the orchestral version, transposed to E minor

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{example3.5}
\caption{Example 3.5: reduction of mm. 1 and 42 of the orchestral version, transposed to E minor}
\end{figure}

29 Vinton, p. 228.
In the orchestral score, the chords on the downbeats of m. 42 are still connected to the upbeats by sustained basses, but in the piano version the previously blurred chords of the left hand now acquire the possibility for equal status with the former melody line. The fact that descending arpeggios allow for different voices to be brought out might suggest to the pianist interesting contrapuntal possibilities in the reprise of m. 42. The right hand melody, although still on top and memorable enough to be picked up by the listener, is rhythmically no longer as strong, placed mostly on upbeats, nor is it highlighted by different dynamic or articulation markings. One could, for example, bring out the left-hand thumb, so that the melody perceived would be in four flats, thus preparing the ear for the six flats of m. 48.

Conclusions

"Slightly Tipsy" is an early example of Bartók's absorption of the spirit of folk music into his own artistic world. As it is well known, Bartók had an enormous interest in the various aspects of peasant culture, which led him to collect pieces of furniture and utensils along with folk songs during his trips in the country. What he mostly admired was the unaffectedness of the peasant life. For him "peasant music itself plays the part in composition that natural objects play in painting...or again, in order to illustrate this point from the art of writing, popular music is to the composer what Nature herself is to the writer". An unsophisticated quality and a sense of directness pervade this work: most of the piece is strongly melody-driven with little or no counterpoint, in fact, it can be easily sung unlike the other two pieces of the set. The melody

30 Béla Bartók Essays, p. 324.
itself is very simple in its intervals (most of the melodic material is made out of scales and triads, along with the perfect fourths of the opening), rhythm (it uses only quarter- or eighth-notes) and structure (although the opening section is interspersed by “intrusions”, the melody is mostly built in two- or four-bar groups).

This unaffectedness of expression is also manifested in the directness through which the inebriate state is portrayed, as it has been discussed, both physically and strictly musically.

“Slightly Tipsy” is an honest picture, albeit sarcastic, of someone singing on his way to a final fall, through a path full of false steps, interruptions and unbalanced sways.
CHAPTER 4: [CAPRICCIOSO]

The last piece of the set was composed sometime during 1910, a year in which Bartók was giving numerous concerts and was trying to become better known as a composer. Being in need of pieces to perform, in this same year he completed most of his other early sets for piano: Deux Images, Op. 10, Seven Sketches, Op. 9, Two Rumanian Dances, Op. 8a, and Four Dirges. Unlike the other two pieces of the set, this one has no title. The tempo indication at the head of the score is “molto vivo, capriccioso” and Suchoff’s edition of Bartók’s piano music reproduces this last adjective, in square brackets to mark the editorial addition, in lieu of a title. The term “Burlesque”, as discussed earlier, evokes images of theatrical scenes that evolve in front of an audience, like those of a quarrel or of a swaying drunk person. This piece too seems to represent a scene, that of a capricious young character, surprisingly inconstant and whimsical, experiencing unexpected and sudden changes of mood and direction. Gestures and expressions are brought forth here whose meanings, initially obscure, are either explored and partially clarified subsequently, or else keep their ambiguity as the music moves on to other things. This inconstancy and absence of lucid development makes Suchoff’s appropriation of “capriccioso” suitable for this piece.

Capriccioso

One of the elements that participates in portraying a character of inconstancy in this piece is the use of a sudden silence, marked by a fermata, as found in mm. 21, 91, 161 and 194. In each case, the effect of these is to interrupt the otherwise constant and regular pulse of 3/8. The first
three fermatas all occur after a cartwheel-like ostinato pattern has been established, making the sudden silence even more unexpected. The short fermata at m. 21 is of particular effect in that it does not define an important sectional division of the music: instead of introducing a change in character, mood, sound, tempo or texture, it serves the purpose of unexpectedly reinvigorating Eb as an important melodic pitch, thus making the sudden silence more whimsical.

Another element that produces a sense of disruptive fickleness, in a way that is quite distinctive of this piece, is the insertion of fast one-measure figures that interrupt, through a rapid change of texture and register, the melodic flow. These are found in mm. 57 and 59, in mm. 94, 98 and 100, and constantly interrupting the waltz-like section that starts in m. 114. These sudden intrusions give the impression of a character unable to concentrate on a single (melodic) discourse, whose joking personality surfaces in the most disparate and unexpected moments.

The very opening figure, a fast and tonally ambiguous ascending gesture followed by a measure of rest, evokes in my imagination the entrance on stage of a theatrical figure, suddenly appearing from behind the curtains, with a character similar to that of Till Eulenspiegel. In fact, Strauss’s tone poem, undoubtedly well known to Bartók,\(^ \text{31} \) shares many musical features with this piece. As an example, the lightness of ex. 4.1, expressed by the strings through grazioso skipping gestures that quickly change direction, resembles Bartók’s scherzando figures in mm. 91-92. What follows, in both cases, is a more linear cadential answer (Strauss’ mm. 115-116 and Bartók’s m. 93) and a sequential repetition of both figures. Each of the two characters is sketched by means of short cadential figures and sudden changes of register.

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\(^ {31} \) In his autobiography of 1921, Bartók describes how his discovery of Strauss’ music in 1902 led him “to throw [himself] into the study of all Strauss’s scores” (Béla Bartók Essays, p. 409).
In the first section of Bartók’s score a frequent indication is that of ‘leggiero’ and ‘leggierissimo’. A lightness of sound recalling the ‘presto leggiero’ of another capricious piece, Mendelssohn’s Rondo Capriccioso, seems to be called forth in staccato passages such as the opening, the ending, and the scherzando section (m. 91).

Another characteristic of this piece is that the traditional structuring of melodies in terms of antecedent and consequent is mostly missing here. Instead, most of the melodic material is built out of short triadic cadential gestures that end on a long-held note (e.g., mm. 9-14, mm. 28-35, mm. 38-40, mm. 79-80, and mm. 83-84). This characteristic is shared also by the last of Bartók’s fourteen Bagatelles (composed two years earlier): its opening page’s melodic material is made of three one-measure long gestures (the first one is an ascending triadic arpeggiation not unlike mm. 5-6 of the Burlesque) that each end on a held note. The analogy might seem incidental, but the two pieces have more than these melodic arpeggios and sustained notes in common: the Burlesque’s insistent turns, starting in m. 67, have parallels in similar passages from the Bagatelle, mm. 22-26 and mm. 29-34. The Bagatelle is clearly a distorted and grotesque waltz, portraying the wild dance of Bartók’s “dancing sweetheart”. It is then easy to recognize in the Burlesque as well, starting in m. 114, the character of an unruly dance over accented
downbeats every two measures. The dancing sweetheart of the Bagatelles was manifestly Stefi Geyer, the violinist with whom Bartók had a relationship at the time. While there is no dedicatee for this last Burlesque, identifying its capricious dancer with Bartók’s wife Mártá would provide a unifying, if admittedly speculative, connection to the quarrelsome protagonist of the first Burlesque.

Another character that comes into mind in association with this piece, is that pertaining to yet another burlesque: Petrushka. The second part of the ballet, which introduces Petrushka in his cell, opens with the clarinets playing two ascending triads on top of each other, much as in the opening measure of Bartók’s Burlesque (see ex. 4.2). The same passage continues with the repetition of a descending-second figure, one that resembles the left-hand figures in m. 12-14 of the Bartók, where the second is minor. In both works, these are followed by a sudden descending outburst in a contrasting dynamic. This is not to imply that there was any actual connection between the creation of these two pieces, but it does suggest overtones of a pantomime-like atmosphere in this capricious piece.

Example 4.2: Stravinsky, Petrushka, reduction of R.n. 95-95+4 and 96+2

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32 “Ma Mie qui danse” (“my dancing sweetheart”) was composed in May 1908, and it was orchestrated in 1911 as the second of the Two Portraits op. 5 with a subtitle of “Grotesque portrait”, in contrast with the first “Ideal” portrait. The first Burlesque was dedicated to his wife to be Mártá Ziegler, which suggests her as the likely antagonist in the quarrel.

33 The complete title for the ballet is “Petrushka: Burlesque in four scenes”.

34 Stravinsky performed two movements of the ballet to Diaghilev in 1910. According to David Schneider, who explored the connections between the two composers, Bartók had no knowledge of any music by Stravinsky other than the “Rite of Spring”, “Rossignol” and “Three Japanese Lyrics” until 1920 (Schneider, p. 178).
To sustain this hypothesis one might recall that, not many years later, Bartók was going to write a ballet as well (1914-16), and that the capricious Princess in The Wooden Prince bears a marked musical resemblance to the character of this Burlesque (compare the music between rehearsal numbers 142-143 in the ballet, ex.4.3, with the scherzando section). This piece, in fact, with its very visual gestures (like those of the opening page, as will be discussed in the next section), with its lack of a traditional melody (even a distorted or interrupted one, like that of the preceding Burlesque), and with insistent quasi-mechanical repetitions both in melodic figures (mm. 67-78) and in the accompanying runs, evokes a sense of a pantomime. If one were to agree with these impressions, then extra levels of distance are added between the music and what it represents: the listener is not experiencing capriciousness in the abstract, or even capricious behavior, but sees someone acting the silent role of a capricious young woman.

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A sense of mechanical artificiality is given here by the difficulty in properly voicing the melodic left hand. From a physical point of view, the left hand needs to stand quite high in order to leave space for the right hand to play its runs underneath. The fact that the left hand at the same time needs to reach on top of the right hand to the G#, forces an uncomfortable turn in the wrist of the former. From a rhythmical point of view too, playing triplets in the left hand while keeping the right hand thirty-seconds regular needs an especially conscious effort.
Capriccioso: its sounds, its structure

...polytonality exists only for the eye when one looks at such music, but our mental hearing again [as in the so-called atonality] will select on a key as a fundamental key, and will project the tones of the other keys in relation to the one selected. The parts in different keys will be interpreted as consisting of altered tones of the chosen key. I will use a simile: our two eyes cannot simultaneously perceive two totally different pictures; they have to concentrate their direction on one picture (the slight difference caused by the distance between the eyes is of no consequence)...similarly, our hearing cannot perceive two or more different keys with two or more different fundamental tones, as such; it will simplify matters by reducing the maze of keys to one principal key...incidentally, much of Stravinsky's music, and also of my music, looks as if it is bitonal or polytonal.37

Without question, the most distinctive and characteristic sound in this piece is that produced by the figures similar to those of the opening gesture: light runs of sixteenths or thirtyseconds, full of semitonal dissonances, with a clear ascending or arch-like shape (in one instance only, they occur in a U-shape as well). The aural impression is either that of an overall ascending motion, such as in m. 1, or that of a stretching associated with an elastic medium, as in m. 62. From a pianistic point of view, these gestures have physical characteristics that can be related to the domain of mechanics. The ascending sounds are generated through a gesture similar to that of pulling up an object, a sort of movement against force of gravity (as in m. 1).38

In fact, in order to be able to give the proper dynamic shape to m. 1, one has to drop the hands

38 here the rhythmic subdivision of the gesture, with its 3+2+1 pattern, encourages a hearing of slowing down while moving up, in opposition to the parallel figure in m. 175, where the energy is directed towards the Eb chord of m. 176.
together on the downbeat and pull them up at the end of the measure, making an arc with the wrists. Other shapes, such as that of m. 62, seem to be governed more by a force of elastic nature. Again, this is encouraged by its dynamic marking: the double wedge of these figures forces the left hand to “spring” from the low note, bounce off a louder sound with its thumb over the right hand and quickly return to its initial still place. Since these types of figures have very different and defined shapes and are required mostly to be very soft, it is important to think of them, while practicing, as unified physical gestures rather than made of separate elements.

To the eye, these gestures look like they have strong harmonic implications, built out of fragments of scales and arpeggiated triads, but to the ear they tend to be just clouds of confused sound. It is interesting and of extreme importance for a performer to try to analyze some of the characteristics of these figures and their implications case by case, since their inherently confused harmonic effects need to be sorted out variously, according to each figure’s shape and its surroundings.

In fact, for both performer and listener, one of the first questions to arise when confronted with the first measure of this piece is whether this should appear just a cloud of sound or rather as having important harmonic implications. The eye sees a clear Eb minor 6/4 chord in the right hand over a D minor triad in the same inversion. According to Bartók’s above-cited comment on bitonality, the eye can easily follow these two keys through the first couple of lines of this music. Playing the two hands separately, the top line arpeggiates an Eb minor triad, cadencing on it in m. 12, while the other hand, through a slightly more varied harmonic path, implies D minor.

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39 von der Nüll's study of Bartok's early piano music cites this piece as a clear example of explorations of bitonality (between Eb and D and later in the piece between C and Db), as well as bimodality (between Eb minor and major), p. 24-25.
as its harmonic center. The opening A major run in the left hand can be heard as V of D (or I6/4), alternating with a Neapolitan 6th (made complete by the right hand’s B♭) in mm. 6, 8 and 10. A more explicit V chord is touched upon in m. 11, and a D chord, although in second inversion, is found enharmonically disguised in m. 14, giving a weak sense of tonic arrival.

The Eb minor triad starts out at a disadvantage in m. 1 because its notes are so high and so disconnected relative to those of the D minor triad. In their staccato eighth-note rhythm, these right-hand triads tend to fade into a secondary, disruptive role rather than establishing an independently intelligible tonal level. In fact, when the Eb triad is heard explicitly as such in mm. 6, 8 and 10, it confirms the D tonality by acting as a conventional Neapolitan, serving to strengthen the dominance of the D triad over the Eb triad in mm. 7 and 9 although, in mm. 3 and 5, the move into a middle register had threatened to allow for parity of tonal presence between the two triads. Ironically, then, these overt Eb triads do not encourage hearing an Eb level. But, doubly ironically, Eb does predominate after m. 12, as a melodically accented pitch, and, of course, is destined to win out as the tonal center at the end. The element of caprice is thus at work in the very tonal substance of this music.

One might be tempted to sidestep the issue of tonal conflict or ambiguity by focusing, more simply, on the lowest and highest pitches in figures like those of m. 1 and passim; and, as a matter of fact, this turns out to be a good strategy when its results are supported by the surrounding context. Thus, at m. 194, the figure sounds cadential to the Eb triad at m. 195, and it makes sense to isolate the low F♯ and high D as an augmented sixth. By a similar token, the figure in m. 57 is heard as an expansion of the immediately preceding F♯ major triad (prolonged from m. 48), and so, there too, it makes sense to emphasize A♯ and F♯, respectively the lowest
and highest pitches, though both are played here by the left hand. True to the music’s inconstant nature, however, the figure of m. 57, as it gets obsessively repeated beginning in m. 62, quickly loses its tonal identity, becoming instead a blurry accompaniment to the focal A in the left hand. And when this same figure returns in m. 115, somewhat pulled apart in register and with a voice added a third below the left-hand line, context alone dictates that it should be perceived as an expansion of the immediately preceding B major triad (m. 114). Finally, in m. 147, a figure identical to that of m. 115 is probably best perceived as standing in a dominant relation to the C major triad of m. 146.

In addition to the obvious aspect of tonal conflict, there is to this music a dimension of large-scale, horizontal contrast involving an alternation between sharp and flat sides that can be observed between larger sections. The opening, balancing between Eb and D minor, starts unequivocally on flat keys, so that the cadential arrival on F# major in m. 35 is instead perceived as G#. It isn’t until hints of E major appear in mm. 39-40 that the sharps written on the page since m. 35 start to be perceived by the ear as well. The A of m. 61 starts a new melody that shifts between the central pitches of A and A#. At first, the A, representing the sharp side, is perceived as the central pitch, embellished by the little turns of mm. 67-72. However, when the new figure of m. 73 appears, the insistent A# starts to become more prominent, to the point that the cadence on Eb comes as no surprise in m. 80. The cadence is then immediately repeated as if correcting a wrong step, but this time ends on a sharp harmony: a downward arpeggio perceived

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40 The stable feeling of the Eb minor cadence is supported here in several ways: by having the whole triad between the two voices of the left hand with the root in the bass, by having a poco rit. leading into it, and visually, by its “flat” spelling.
either as wanting to resolve to an A chord or as a dominant of E.\textsuperscript{41} It is worth noticing how this whole subsection's contrasts are represented \textit{in nuce} in this last cadential measure: the descending arpeggio of m. 84 contains all the main pitches of the melody since m. 61 (except for the closing Eb), and starts with both main pitches, A and G#, in rapid succession.

The \textit{scherzando} middle section moves abruptly back to the flat side, with a cadence on Ab in m. 101 which is prolonged through arpeggiation until m. 107.\textsuperscript{42} With a subtle and sudden change of accent placement to the downbeat in m. 108, the previous runs are transposed and transformed back to a sharp harmony, opening the wild dance (m. 114: B major, m. 120: E major). That the middle section centers on neutral C major (mm. 146-160) is then only a natural consequence of this opposition between sharps and flats. C major is colored by a Db harmony, perhaps prophetic of the unequivocal flat ending of the piece.

\textbf{Form}

The form of this last piece is yet another ABA structure (mm. 1-90, mm. 91-160, and mm. 161-203), one of Bartók's favorites, but, at the same time, this functions in the service of a more goal-oriented and cumulative linear shape. The tripartite form starts with a linear texture, leggiero and \textit{pp}, defined by short melodic gestures (mm. 1-90); it then moves to the much heavier, louder and more polyphonic dance-like music of mm. 114-160, characterized by its purposeful harmonic rhythm and overall rhythmic drive, and ends with loud blocks of chordal

\textsuperscript{41} The "sharp" feeling is further encouraged by the subsequent prolongation of A and G#, in mm. 85-90, which are at the extremes of the runs.

\textsuperscript{42} Ab major is prolonged here by emphasizing dynamically the top note of each "elastic" gesture.
tonic arpeggiation.

The form is rather continuous, with different sections mutating and melting into one another, even if superficial interruptions, such as abruptly accented notes, sudden rests, and unexpected changes of character might suggest otherwise. One of the main elements concurring in giving a general sense of unity both between and within sections is the above-discussed running figure. This not only gives a sense of textural continuity throughout the piece, but also smoothes transitions by introducing in earlier parts sounds that distinguish a later subsection. The figure of m. 19, for instance, unifies and connects the two moments around the fermata sign of m. 22, while mm. 57 and 59 prefigure the background sound of the whole next part. Also, these "elastic", fast figures in the first A section reappear in different transpositions well into the middle section and are fundamental in concluding it. In the last section, the opening ascending runs are recalled again to bring the piece to a conclusion.

Formal unity is achieved here also by relating sections in various subtle ways, which are often not immediately perceived. For example, the sudden and unexpected sforzatissimo of m. 61 suggests at first the beginning of a new and contrasting section, but a close comparison with the passage starting in m. 22 shows unifying parallels between the two. In both cases, the accented notes, a tritone from each other, are held through the following five measures over ostinato runs in the background and are then repeated and reinterpreted as beginning of melodic lines. Also, both these melodic lines rely on repetition and end on similar gestures in their cadences (see ex. 4.4).
Example 4.4: mm. 34-35 and 79-80

These structural and textural similarities make it possible to see these two sections as being connected, with the second as a continuation or an answer to the first, despite little differences such as the fact that the melody in m. 61 is underneath the ostinato figure, while in the first section it is on top of it.

M. 91 marks the start of the B section, which begins with a fermata sign and is characterized by a new scherzando character and a new texture of hopping thirds. But even here there are cross-sectional links. First, the opening sounds of m. 91 have been previously introduced or prepared. Harmonically, the B half-diminished seventh chord implied in m. 91 is already present in the descending arpeggios of m. 84, and the high A of m. 91, the beginning of the new melodic line, has been prepared and reached through the ascending top notes in the previous arch-like runs (G♭ in m. 82, G♭ in m. 83, and G# in mm. 85-90). Then, the material of the whole middle part is constantly interrupted by runs similar to those of the previous A section: they intrude even well into the waltz-like section, the core of the piece, until they take over completely towards the end.

M. 161 marks the beginning of the final A section: a coda and at the same time a
recapitulation in terms of harmonic definition. These blocked Eb major arpeggios sound quite new, their decisive character strongly contrasting with the more ambiguous variety of preceding passages. At the same time, the brilliant and weighty arpeggiation of the Eb major chords bear a close resemblance, in their register and texture, to the earlier C major chords (mm. 146-154). No new material appears in this last section, which brings together particulars that characterized each earlier part: the short figure at the opening of the piece and the first gesture of the middle section (the B half-diminished chord of m. 91, which reappears unaltered in m. 202).

Conclusions

Looking at this piece it appears evident that Bartók was an extremely gifted pianist. In fact, he was raised as a virtuoso in the wake of Lisztian pianism and was extremely comfortable with the traditional resources of the great romantic generation: fast scales, strong differences of color and dynamics between foreground and background material even when in very close position, fast changes of register, heavy arpeggiated chords, and so on, all of which are foundational to this piece. But one has the impression here that Bartók, although still bound to this conventional approach to the instrument, was more interested in a renewal of musical language, experimenting with new sounds and new harmonic combinations. Traditional chords are here disguised through enharmonic respelling so that the eye can not immediately recognize them, as is the case, for example, for the D major triad in the left hand of m. 14. Even places where one might expect traditionally clear harmonic definition, such as the beginning and end of a piece, are presented

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43 Bartók graduated from the Budapest Academy in the piano class of István Thomán, a pupil of Liszt. During his studies at the Academy, Bartók performed numerous works by Liszt, among which his B minor Sonata, which remained part of his standard repertoire during the following years, when touring as a virtuoso pianist.
through an obscuring veil, causing perplexity. In other moments, certain chords and harmonies appear clearly on the page but one does not hear what is expected. From a performer's point of view, there is generally a great discrepancy between what is heard and what is seen on the page.

Given the capricious character of this piece, a pianist needs to be fully aware of all the small details which mark each moment so as not to obliterate ambiguities implied by them in this music. The left hand subdivision of the first gesture, for example, which creates a rhythmic rallentando and, harmonically, a triad a semitone apart from that in the right hand, needs to be clearly defined in the mind of the performer, but at the same time it has to be presented as an ascending quick gesture of ambiguous harmonic meaning. Both triadic possibilities need to be thought as having equal weight to keep alive the ambiguity that creates the character of this piece.

Accordingly, it is important not to prepare sudden variations or unexpected figures, such as the accented E major presence between m. 39-47, or the two accented beginnings of the first section (mm. 22 and 61); and to be able to quickly completely change character even where the figures appear not to have changed much, as in m. 108.

Although, as has been shown, most of the sections of this piece are joined either through the same or similar sounds and gestures, it is characteristic of a capriccioso nature not to be unified and connected. It is consistent with the depiction of a capricious personality to have meaningful expressions coming out in relief as surprises, appearing as shifts of mood and propensity, while being in reality prepared and present in the background all along, where they are available to be selected and suddenly put into focus.
CHAPTER 5: THE BURLESQUES AS A SET, AND IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO LATER WORKS

Order and unity of the set

It is only in our times that there is place for the painting of the feeling of vengeance, the grotesque, and the sarcastic... 44

It is curious that, in this excerpt from a letter of 1909, already quoted in the introduction to this essay, Bartók describes three subjects for musical painting in an order that recalls their appearances in the *Three Burlesques*: the vengeful feelings aroused by a quarrel, the grotesque movements of a tipsy person, and a sarcastic take on a capricious character. *Three Burlesques* was not conceived from the beginning in this format, though, and it is interesting to speculate briefly on the order chosen for this set, considering in particular two factors: first, that “Quarrel” was originally intended as a companion to “Portrait of a girl”, the first of the *Seven Sketches*, Op. 9b (also composed in 1908 and similarly dedicated to his future wife Márta Ziegler); and second, that the central piece of the set, “Slightly Tipsy”, was composed last, in 1911, after “Capriccioso”. The order in which the pieces appear in the set is therefore not determined by their chronological composition and must be deliberate.

As is well known, Bartók’s love for geometrical organizations and symmetries led to his frequent use of the tripartite arch-form, which he often also applied, on a larger scale, to different movements of a work. In fact, in most of his three-movement pieces, such as the *Sonata for

44 quoted in Frigyesi, p. 120.
piano, the *Sonata for two pianos and percussion*, and the three piano concertos, the outer movements are often related either thematically (as in the second piano concerto) or by having a more extroverted spirit contrasting with a central, more soulful musical core.

In the case of the *Three Burlesques* too, the outer pieces are related in several ways. Superficially, they both share a triple meter, ostinato figures, a quick tempo, and a constant measure-length; and both rely on a steady pulse that at times organically slows down or speeds up. On a deeper level, both pieces' musical content grows out of a cloud of sound, repeated *pp* in different octaves, that is initially intentionally difficult to decipher. Finally, as discussed in chapter four,\(^45\) one might speculate on a common and unifying dedicatee for the two external pieces: Bartók’s first wife, Márta Ziegler. “Slightly Tipsy” therefore stands out, contrasting with the two outer pieces on all these points. It is in duple meter; its tempo is quite a bit slower (the metronome markings imply that one quarter-note of the middle piece corresponds approximately to one full measure of the other two); *tempo rubato*, according with its programmatic content, is one of its most characteristic elements; and the piece is built around an extremely intelligible and singable melody.

Despite these contrasting elements between the middle piece and the others, the set is strongly unified. Its most unifying aspect is signaled by the title, *Burlesques*, which defines a common character of both sarcastic and theatrical nature. All three pieces are created with an experimental harmonic language born out of late-romantic pianism, to depict grotesque situations and sarcastic attitudes to characters. These are quasi-staged scenes with strong programmatic content which, as has been discussed in detail, are reflected on a purely musical level and, for the performer, in the physical dimension. It might be noted, incidentally, that all Bartók’s staged

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\(^45\) see p. 36.
works were composed in the immediately following years: Bluebeard’s Castle in 1911, The Wooden Prince in 1914-16, and The Miraculous Mandarin in 1919.

As has been shown, all three burlesques play with ambiguity, intentionally embedded in their opening sounds: the two outer movements start on confused gestures of fast-moving sound, and the middle movement, with a tonally uncertain melodic line accompanied in parallel, harmonically conflicting chords. Each, through its individual path, arrives at a decisive conclusion only at the very end. Ambiguity, of course, is a determining factor in producing a dynamic plot, and creating contrast, thus it seems quite fitting to have it as a foundational characteristic for theatrical music.

Relations with Bartók’s later piano music

These three early pieces stand out as being quite different from later and better known piano pieces by Bartók in some fundamental ways. When one thinks of Bartók’s piano music, certain characteristic elements come first to mind: a percussive use of the piano, a strong rhythmic drive combined with sudden metrical shifts, humorous passages, and an extensive use of ostinato material.

To a certain degree, some of these elements are present in the Three Burlesques, in the service of programmatic description. Repetitive fast passages, often used to accompany melodic lines in later pieces (to cite only a few examples: the second movement of the Suite, Op. 14; the first two movements of the Piano Concerto No. 2; and “The Chase”, from Out of Doors) are evidently preponderant in the first and third pieces of this set. In “Quarrel”, though, the repetitive passages make up the thematic material instead of being relegated to the background, in support
of a melody, and they serve the function of giving a sense of the circularity of the argument as well as a physical feeling of antagonism between gestures and harmonies. In “Capriccioso”, repetitive passages also have a descriptive function, used to outline a stubborn and whimsical character. Unlike later works, metrical shifts and rhythmic complexities are very rare in these early pieces: Bartók limited his rhythmic explorations to very traditional hemiolas in the first piece, one 5/4 measure in “Slightly Tipsy”, and a single oddly-accented last beat in m. 143 of “Capriccioso”.

The percussive use of the piano, expressing itself through the heavy “barbaric” chords very common in Bartók’s later pieces, such as the first movement of the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and the Piano Concertos Nos. 1 and 2, is present here only in one occasion, in mm. 39-41 and passim of “Quarrel”. Even in this case, tough, these dissonant repeated chords have strong programmatic motivations, portraying a climactic moment of disagreement between clashing personalities.

The humorous character of these pieces, expressed in purely musical terms, serves to represent conditions that support the ironic implications of their titles. But capricious and ironic elements similar to those of the third burlesque are found in many later works, where a programmatic or theatrical intent may be missing. For example, the third theme from the first movement of the Piano Concerto, No. 3 (ex. 5.1), also marked scherzando, shares this burlesque’s lightness of sound and the leaping character of its motives. Sudden changes of mood are, of course, a fundamental feature of Bartók’s style, evident, for example, in the sudden appearance of the second theme in the first movement of the first concerto (ex. 5.2), where the acciaccature are more specifically reminiscent of the middle section of “Slightly Tipsy”.

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On no account would I like to imply programmatic descriptions in Bartók’s later pieces by associating their material with that of the *Three Burlesques*. Nevertheless, just as looking at early paintings by Kandinsky permits the inference that his later abstract lines were born as realistic descriptions of natural objects, studying these early pieces by Bartók provides insight into how he generated and transformed sounds and rhythms that came to define his better known style.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Recital Hall
Sunday, April 23, 2006
5:00 p.m.

DOCTORAL RECITAL*
ERIKA CRINO', Piano

Sonata Op.90 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1820)
I Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck
II Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen

Sonata Op.101 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1820)
I Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung
II Lebhaft. MarschmaBig
III Langsam und sehnsuchtvoll
IV Geschwinde, doch nicht so sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit

- INTERMISSION -

12 Walzer Op.18, D 145 Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Valses nobles et sentimentales Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Waltz from Faust, Concert Paraphrase (Gounod) Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree with a major in Piano Performance.
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Recital Hall
Wednesday, September 27, 2006
8:00 p.m.

DOCTORAL LECTURE-RECITAL*
ERIKA CRINO', Piano

Lecture: A Performer's analysis of Béla Bartók's Three Burlesques, op.8/c

- INTERMISSION -

Quarrel
Béla Bartók
(1881-1945)

A bit Tipsy

[Capriccioso]

*In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree with a major in Piano Performance.