Analysis:
Bartók's *Divertimento for String Orchestra*

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Introduction: Overview

Bartók's *Divertimento for String Orchestra* was commissioned by Swiss conductor Paul Sacher for the Basle Chamber Orchestra, the same group for which the composer wrote the *Music for Strings Percussion and Celesta* three years earlier.[1] Completed in just over two weeks during August, 1939, not long before Bartók emigrated to the United States, the *Divertimento* had its première in Basle on June 11, 1940. The published score, issued by Boosey & Hawkes the same year as the work's première, indicates the minimum number of players as six each of first and second violins, four each of violas and cellos, and two basses, also stating that a "full

[1] Walker cites a letter from Bartók to Ralph Hawkes on July 8, 1939, in which he explains that "In August I have to write a kind of suite for string orchestra for Mr. Sacher… heavy task, for it has to be easy to play!" David Robert Walker, "Bartók Analysis: A Critical Examination and Application," (Master's thesis, McMaster University, 1996), Open Access Dissertations and Theses, Paper 5954, http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/opendissertations/5954236 (accessed March 1, 2012), 147. Walker's introduction indicates that he was in direct personal communication with Gillies, Somfai, Antokoletz, Kárpáti, Paul Wilson, and Peter Bartók, among others, to acquire and verify his information.

body of strings" might be used.[2]

Not much of an analytic nature has been written about the *Divertimento*,[3] beyond basic descriptive facts such as its apparent use of the Baroque concerto grosso as a model,[4] with ripieno and concertino divisions, ritornello-like sections, and certain characteristic elements of style such as pedal tones and sections of full unison. Its title recalls another popular eighteenth-century genre, one that seems well-suited to the unusually accessible style of the two outer movements, with their clear tonalities, diatonicism, frequent use of tertian harmonies, and driving, ebullient rhythms interspersed with elements of lyricism and humor. Amanda Bayley suggests that this "adoption of a loosely tonal idiom within a Baroque structure suggests a marked attempt to remain conventional, even to be consciously neoclassical."[5] The inner movement (of three), on the other hand, ranks among Bartók's most dissonant and chromatic—one might even say tortured—works, with little of the neoclassical impulse that evidently motivates the rest of the work. In all three movements, the writing is highly episodic, with frequent changes of texture, register, dynamics, and character, in addition to the alternating solo and tutti sections, all of which lend it a dialogic, and therefore inescapably dramatic, character throughout.

I: Allegro non troppo[6]

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[2] Bartók sent the printer's copy to Boosey and Hawkes in October 1939; engraving was underway by early November and finished by January 1940, just as Bartók was preparing to leave for the United States. Ibid., 148.
[3] The one exception being Walker's thesis, cited above, in which the second movement is minutely analyzed.
[4] Among the several sources that connect the *Divertimento* with the Baroque concerto grosso are Malcolm Gillies, "Final Chamber Works," in *The Bartók Companion,* ed. Malcolm Gillies (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), 332; and Amanda Bayley, "The String Quartets and Works for Chamber Orchestra," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bartók,* ed. Amanda Bayley, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 152-53.
[5] Bayley, 152-53.
[6] Béla Bartók, *Divertimento for String Orchestra* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1940).

The work opens with bouncing F-major chords irregularly accented on interspersed Gs and Bs, over which Bartók unfurls one of his longest, most lyrical and memorable melodies. Amanda Bayley writes that "compared with the gradual development of thematic material [in earlier works], the announcement of an entire theme at the outset of a piece, as in the Sixth String Quartet, is exceptional. [. . .] Bartók reverses his established process of arriving at a theme through motivic transformations: he here begins with a theme which he later fragments."[7] Much of this movement is Bartók at his most diatonically uncomplicated, with chromaticism largely reserved for clearly delineated developmental sections. The concerto grosso model is clear when solo and tutti sections interchange in swift succession, first at m. 10, and then throughout the remainder of the movement and the work as a whole. Beginning at m. 14, the first melody is repeated up a fifth, heightening the vivacious character of the opening.

The second theme enters at m. 25, a lilting, Viennese-waltz-like tune in thirds and horn fifths, leading into the first truly chromatic passage of the piece, mm. 29-31, and a ritornello-like reworking of the beginning of the first them at mm. 33-35. M. 33 might be identified as the beginning of a development section in a loose sonata or sonata-rondo form. At m. 40, a full unison F natural (minus basses) introduces a palindromic rhythmic figures, consisting of an eighth note, a quarter, a dotted quarter, another quarter, and a final eighth note, which will be modified and developed in various ways through the remainder of the movement.[8] M. 72 brings the return of Tempo I and a restatement of the first them, much varied in character, now on B flat. Continued development of a highly chromatic character, alternating solo and tutti textures, persists throughout.

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[7] Ibid., 172.
[8] Gillies, 336.

If one is seeking a recapitulation section, m. 131 would seem its most likely beginning, since this is the last time the first theme is presented in a clear form. Lendvai, to illustrate his now-famous theory of the Golden Section in Bartók's work, cites this moment as one example of the composer's placement of a decisive musical event at the point of "golden section."[9] Though the F pedal of the opening is present in the bass here, the theme itself is up a fifth and an octave from its original statement. After this, development resumes. The second theme is finally heard again at m. 157, though now down a tritone, on G. The opening theme, dramatically altered, and now *tranquillo*, is recalled a final time at m. 181, in imitative counterpoint, with its contours reshaped, but just enough of its original melodic and rhythmic profile to allow recognition. At m. 187, an inverted version reverses the melodic decent of the previous few measure, sending the melody back up to the high registers, before dissipating quietly in fragmentary reminiscences of all the movement's main musical events, along with a return to the opening tonal area (F).

II: Molto adagio

With the second movement, Bartók returns to a more characteristic chromaticism in what Gillies describes as "the spiritual kin of the [. . .] third movement of the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,*" with a "twisted, gnarled theme," and elements of the composer's so-called "night music," such as the grace note-trill figures in mm. 40-46.[10] Bartók included the opening theme of this movement in a list of examples illustrating what he called his "melodic

[9] Ernő Lendvai, *Bela Bartók: An Analysis of His Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1971), 18.
[10] Gillies, 339. One might also note in this movement kinship with the first movement of the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,* especially in the winding chromaticism of the main theme, and the dense mass of sound that constitutes the movement's climax (*Divertimento*, mm. 41-44).

chromaticism." He told an interviewer, "I can't remember having met such kinds of melodic chromaticism deliberately developed to such a degree in any other contemporary music."[11]

Elsewhere, the composer identified the form as "roughly A-BA."[12] C-sharp may be identified as the overall tonal foundation of the movement, with G and G-sharp serving as important secondary tonal realms. Based upon Bartók's own assessment of the movement's ternary form, the opening A section may be identified as mm. 1-32. The three lowest parts begin *con sordino,* alternating slow C-sharps and Ds, then the first theme starts in the second measure, played by Violins II, also muted, as the lower parts begin to wind gradually farther afield. The theme is restated by the violas, beginning at m. 6, in canon with the first violins at the fourth above (displaced up an octave), as the second violins join the winding accompaniment. M. 10 introduces a second theme in the first violins, a countermelody in the cellos, and a thinning of the texture as the other parts hold longer note values. On a high unison D at m. 19, the three upper part begin a new melodic-rhythmic element, including a double (or triple) dotted "scotch snap" figure that will reappear later in the movement. The change here is sufficiently abrupt and dramatic that one might be tempted (but for the composer's own words) to locate a new formal division at this point (m. 19), were it not for the fact that the new rhythmic material is soon incorporated into a strongly dissonant contrapuntal texture similar to the opening. At m. 27, the first violins alone remove their mutes. The sudden arrival at a luminous B-major chord in m. 30 is striking. Another clear tertian sonority, E-flat major, follows as the work transitions to the B section via several iterations of the scotch snap figure on a

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[11] Bartók, as quoted in John Vinton, "Bartók On His Own Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society,* 19/2 (Summer, 1966): 240.

[12] Bartók, as quoted in Walker, 147.

unison B natural. Mm. 30-32 also reintroduce the ripieno-concertino texture briefly, a contrast that appears only occasionally in this movement.

The B section, mm. 33-55, constitutes the climax of the work, a climax that builds in volume and thickening texture (*divisi* lower parts), as the first violins traverse a long chromatic ascent of ornamented trills over an essentially pentatonic ostinato that emphasizes the sonorities of perfect fourths and fifths in folk-like character. At m. 41, the instruction "poco a poco senza sordino" (remove mutes at different times) in the lower parts, coupled with a *poco stringendo,* assists the general amplification and intensification occurring as the music accretes relentlessly to its monumental apex at m. 44. The climax, however, is short-lived and the summit of sound abandoned as soon as it is achieved, dying away over the next five measure to a haunting E-minor chord at m. 49. Another section of brief dialogue between solo and tutti sections, highly contrasting in character, and incorporating a significant interplay of G naturals and G sharps, leads to the return of material from the A section, and the "tonic" tonal area on C sharp.

The closing section of the movement (mm. 56-74) brings back the opening material, this time in a character much more obviously akin to Bartók's "night music," with tremolos in the lower strings, and the opening theme, at a different pitch level, partly inverted, and otherwise reworked, played by the violins at the distance of two octaves. A section of lushly Wagnerian tonality (mm. 62-68),[13] centering on clear E-major sonorities, leads back to the opening tonal area, C#, in a pointillistic tracing of the C# triad, both major and minor, before a final Phrygian

[13] Following Somfai, Walker identifies this section as an example of Bartók's "Hungarian culmination" technique. Lázló Somfai, "A Characteristic Culmination Point in Bartók's Instrumental Forms," in Jozsef Ujfalussy, and Janos Bruer, eds., *International Musicological Conference in Commemoration of Béla Bartók 1971* (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1972), 55; as cited in Walker, 99. As of the writing of this paper, I have been unable to obtain a copy of Somfai's article.

scale descends to the final unison C# in the four lower parts.

III: Allegro assai

Gillies suggests this movement may be perceived as either a sonata or sonata-rondo form.[14] Given the prominent ritornello-like recurrences of the opening material, coupled with Bartók's characteristically pervasive developmental techniques, I have chosen to base the present analysis on an assumption of loose sonata-rondo form:[15]

A	mm. 1-91
B (A)	mm. 92-183
C	mm. 184-256
A	mm. 257-263
Development (A/B/C)	mm. 264-402
A	mm. 403-509
D	mm. 510-545
A	mm. 546-588

The movement begins with a flourish, a typically Bartókian wedge between ascending violins and descending violas and cellos, each playing a scale comprising a symmetrical arrangement of half and whole steps. A driving ostinato of stacked fourths, D flat/G flat/B natural, is established, in rhythmic patterns (quarter-eighth-eight; quarter followed by six eighths) the elements of which will figure not only directly in the first theme but in various guises throughout the movement. A solo violin announces the "bright Mixolydian opening theme,"[16] at m. 14, which Imre Olsvai identifies as a free variation on trans-Danubian folk

[14] Gillies, 338.
[15] This assessment is supported by Lendvai's assertion that the principal theme appears in 5 variations. Lendvai, 36.
[16] Gillies, 334.

tunes.[17] Like the opening of the first movement, the first section of the third movement is clearly on F, with unambiguous C major 7 chords firmly establishing tonic and dominant. Each successive phrase of the first theme is introduced by a solo violin, followed by tutti first violins. Pizzicato, trills, and glissandi in the lower parts add timbral and textural variety (mm. 36-61) and heighten the folk-festival atmosphere. At m. 62, material from the opening returns, to be developed in imitative counterpoint, again alternating between ripieno and concertino, as the movement races to a full unison at m. 82.

As the B section begins, the F becomes the third of D minor and, again, A major chords clearly establish tonic and dominant. The same driving rhythms as at the beginning of the movement underscore this section and a new theme is introduced by a solo violin (m. 103), then picked up by all. Bartók pizzicati add their characteristically aggressive percussion. The last phrase of the new theme ends with a motive clearly recalling the opening flourish, which is tossed back and forth between soloists and full sections several times, and material from the first theme and the opening added (mm. 146-153), imitated, transposed, and variously developed, before the forward momentum is brought to a sudden halt on a long held chord at m. 177.

The C section opens at m. 184 with a descending fourth, A flat to E flat, foreshadowed in the repeated descending thirds of mm. 171-177. A new theme, in an quasi-English-sounding Aeolian mode, and incorporating elements of the first theme, both melodic and rhythmic, gives way, after one unison statement among all parts, to imitative development. The initial unison statement is echoed, in inversion, at mm. 214-221, after which the inversion is briefly given

[17] Imre Olsvai, "West-Hungarian (Trans-Danubian) Characteristic Features in Bartók's Works," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae,* T. 11, Fasc. 1/4 [These are normally translated.] (Sept. 1969): 343.

fugal treatment. (Bartók has even included a brief but quite Baroque-sounding moment of sequence at mm. 230-233.) This gives way to a rhapsodic cadenza-like passage for the first violin soloist (mm. 248-256), with assistance from the cello—a section that might be heard as birdlike,[18] hyper-Hungarian, ironic, comic, or some of each.[19] A large developmental section, incorporating material from A, B, and C begins at m. 264.

The oscillating pitches at m. 264 recall the opening of the second movement. The theme that begins at m. 268 appears at first to be new, but then reveals itself closely akin, in both substance and feeling, to the first theme. B-section material is introduced into the development at m. 290. Imitative counterpoint involving the ascending scalar material of the opening (m. 317-329) leads into a striking solo section that brings back more B-section material in the viola, enhanced and made new by the addition of humming trills above. Employing fragmentation and recombination, imitation, full unison, and various other transformations, Bartok seems to leave no developmental stone unturned.

When the A material finally takes over again (m. 403), it remains in a highly developmental state for some one hundred measures more, during which it is subjected to an intense chromaticism and a high level of dissonance (in an otherwise notably diatonic movement), including the chromatic transformation of elements from the first theme,[20] coupled with a great deal of imitative counterpoint. A new winding chromatic triplet accompaniment pattern is introduced in this section, one that will appear again at the work's conclusion (m. 533).

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[18] Bayley, 174.

[19] Lázló Somfai, "'Per finire': Some Aspects of the Finale in Bartók's Cyclic Form," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae,* T. 11, Fasc. 1/4 (Sept. 1969): 402.

[20] This technique is used in reverse in the finale of the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,* where the opening (chromatic) fugue subject from the first movement is rendered in a diatonic form.

The next section, which I have labeled D, is Bartók at his most lighthearted. Somfai labels this episode "a bit drunk" and notes that it seems to cry out for programmatic interpretation, though the composer left us nothing upon which to base any such reading.[21] "Grazioso, scherzando, poco rubato," pizzicato in all parts but the violas, who interject the occasional slide-whistle glissandi, it's a moment of inspired silliness, echoing the scalar passage with which the movement opened and containing elements of both the first (A section) and second (B section) themes. The winding material from m. 403 returns suddenly at m. 533, now Vivace, leading to a final Vivacissimo and the last statement of (part of) the opening theme, though it does not return us to the opening tonal area. The headlong motion comes suddenly to a halt at m. 574, as Bartók angles abruptly to return to F for the last note of the work.

[21] Somfai, 402.

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