

GUIDE TO
BARTÓK'S
MIKROKOSMOS

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Benjamin Suchoff

New introduction by
György Sandor

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INTRODUCTION

by György Sandor

C lose to fifty years have gone by since I huffed and puffed my way up the street, high on the hilly Buda side of the Danube River in Budapest, eagerly looking forward to my piano lesson with Béla Bartók in his studio at the Bartók house on Csalán Street. How well I remember his concentrated attention to my playing, fussy about details but polite and reserved and sometimes showing the sense of humor that he accorded only to those people with whom he had more than just ordinary contact.

Of course I held him in awe, as would any aspiring young piano student of the most famous musician in Hungary, even then recognized internationally as one of the outstanding twentieth-century composers and an equally gifted pianist. I particularly recall the fantastic experience of hearing him demonstrate for me some of the music of Bach, Scarlatti, Beethoven, Debussy, and his own works, in his inimitable, strongly personal and inspired way.

Today my teacher Bartók has become a legendary figure and the house on Csalán Street a national shrine dedicated to his memory.

*

During those earlier days the *Mikrokosmos* was but a small collection (subsequently expanded) of miscellaneous piano pieces Bartók composed primarily for his personal use, to meet the growing demand for his appearance as performer. My impressions and evaluation of this work have been strongly guided by him in my public performances (for instance, the première of the complete *Mikrokosmos* in Town Hall, New York) and in my several recordings (Columbia Masterworks SL-229 and Vox SVBX 425).

There are a number of published commentaries on the *Mikrokosmos*, in particular those by Dr. Suchoff, author of this Guide, and other well-informed Bartók scholars. Because of the relevance of these studies I briefly summarize their contents here, as a reflection of my own concepts about Bartók's masterpiece for the piano student and recitalist.

Above all the *Mikrokosmos* is a kind of encyclopedia and anthology of various piano styles, probably the best approach to Bartók's music. As Hugo Leichtentritt remarked, "The volumes constitute a sort of *Gradus ad Parnassum* of modern music in general and of the Bartók idiom in particular. Although a number of the little pieces and exercises seem musically insignificant, all have a decidedly instructive and technical value from the pianistic viewpoint."

Bartók was a master of the keyboard, thoroughly conversant with all aspects of modern piano technique and with the harmonic and rhythmic innovations of his contemporaries. In the *Mikrokosmos* Bartók skillfully reduces musical principles to simple formulae. By treating them in an interesting and vital way, he readies the student for their absorption. Some of the pieces seem like Czerny études or Bach inventions transformed into twentieth-century idiomatic form; others give the appearance of a miniaturized Scarlatti sonata or Chopin mazurka. All of them, however, even the short five-finger exercises, have the absolutely unmistakable Bartók musical signature. And as Nicolas Slonimsky has pointed out, the titles of the pieces are self-explanatory indicators of the wide-ranging content of the six volumes comprising the complete work: particular problems concerned with syncopation, the sound-configurations of the old ecclesiastical modes and ancient pentatonic scales, different national styles such as the relatively unfamiliar East European folk music material, descriptive so-called programmatic pieces, and the fascinating classical and national dance music.

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It was approximately eight or nine years after Bartók died in New York's West Side Hospital, in 1945, that Benjamin Suchoff interviewed me about Bartók as man and musician, during the preparation of his doctoral dissertation at New York University. At that time Bartók did not have wide recognition as a composer outside of European cultural centers, and the *Mikrokosmos* was either little known or viewed with skepticism by the American piano teacher accustomed to comprehensive annotations in pedagogic materials. Now, at the close of the 1981 Bartók Centenary Year, celebrated by festivals or special programs all over the world, Bartók is acclaimed as a colossus of composition and his *Mikrokosmos* as a representative compendium alongside Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Schumann's *Album for Youth*. And *Guide to the Mikrokosmos*, here in its third edition, has taken its place in the standard teaching literature for the piano, as an indispensable Bartók reference work.

GYÖRGY SANDOR

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Benjamin Suchoff

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To My Wife

ELEANOR

this work is gratefully dedicated.

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Mikrokosmos of Béla Bartók

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PREFACE

WHEN Béla Bartók began the composition of the **Mikrokosmos** in 1926, he continued the tradition of important composers writing characteristic and consequential works in the form of teaching pieces (for example, the Bach Inventions). Certain compositions such as the *Études* of Schumann, Chopin, and Debussy were sparsely annotated by their creators, and this led to the posthumous publication of these works in the form of performing editions and teaching guides which were designed to aid the pianist and piano teacher.

Bartók himself edited works from the standard keyboard repertory; his editions of Bach and Beethoven contain lengthy instructions written in considerable detail.¹ The **Mikrokosmos**, however, is in the category of unedited music although it contains some instructions in its Preface and Notes. In fact, Bartók states in the Preface that "the first three volumes differ from a 'Piano Method' in the traditional sense by the absence of any technical and theoretical description and instruction." Bartók adds that every teacher knows what is required in that respect and is able to give the earliest instruction "without reference to a book or method."

In apparent contradiction to this statement of the composer is the fact that shortly before his death he complied with the request of his publisher (Boosey and Hawkes) to analyze the complete **Mikrokosmos** for a leading piano teacher² who was then to disseminate the information by means of lectures to colleagues in the United States. Further, examination of the selected bibliography will disclose the large number of books, theses, and articles devoted to the **Mikrokosmos**, a considerable number of them concerned with pedagogical aspects of the work.

Hence this Guide, written in the form of a manual for pianists and piano teachers. In addition to technical and musical analyses of the entire **Mikrokosmos**, as collated from various sources, are Bartók's comments on his *oeuvre* and my own suggestions on performance and instructional procedures. Preliminary chapters sketch Bartók's career as performer and teacher, present his ideas concerning the way the piano should be played and taught, record and illustrate his objectives in the composition of the **Mikrokosmos**, and relate the work to current educational theory and trends in piano teaching.

¹ Note also that in collaboration with Alexander Reschofsky he wrote *Zongora Iskola* (Piano School), intended as a manual for teachers of beginning pianists.

² Ann Chenece, then President of the Piano Teachers Congress of New York.

One of the more important functions of the Index is to serve as a point of reference for the aspiring composer who may be interested in twentieth-century compositional techniques. It should be noted that for practical reasons a complete listing of all the pieces that could serve as examples under each heading or subheading is not given.

It is perhaps worthy of mention here that the Guide represents the combined result of my experience in teaching the **Mikrokosmos** and the findings of my doctoral dissertation **Béla Bartók and a Guide to the Mikrokosmos** (see listing in the Bibliography below).

Some years ago, as a result of a comparison of the various drafts of the **Mikrokosmos** with the published version, my article entitled "Errata in the **Mikrokosmos** Publication" was published in **Piano Quarterly Newsletter** (Summer, 1956). The same information is contained in Volume I of my dissertation. It is to the credit of Boosey and Hawkes, publishers of the **Mikrokosmos**, that the necessary corrections were made in reprinted editions upon exhaustion of original stocks. Owners of the original (1940) edition are advised, therefore, to consult either of the two mentioned sources.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Ernő Balogh, Ann Cheneé, Walter Kob, John Ogden, Halsey Stevens and Susanne Waage. It gives me great pleasure, furthermore, to make special mention of the achievement of my mentor and predecessor—trustee of the Estate of Béla Bartók, the late Victor Bator, who, beginning in 1963, established the New York Bartók Archives. It was my good fortune to serve there as Curator, an experience without which this work might never have reached its present form.

BENJAMIN SUCHOFF

Cedarhurst, New York
July, 1970

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BÉLA BARTÓK

TO commemorate the end of the first fifty years of the twentieth century, the editors of *Etude* magazine canvassed the opinion of musical figures from all parts of the United States to determine the most potent musical forces in this century. The Hungarian composer Béla Bartók was one of the ten musicians selected. Now, only two decades later, Bartók stands astride the twentieth century as its colossus of music, a veritable giant in the three major areas toward which he turned his genius: performance, composition and ethnomusicology.

Devoted son to his widowed mother, husband, father, ardent nationalist, and writer of a voluminous correspondence, Bartók was, in addition, able to pursue a varied musical career. He was active as a concert pianist, composer, student of musical folklore and languages, author of books and articles on music and musicians, and music educator. Any one or two such interests might have been sufficient for a musician of lesser ambition and creative energy. Bartók, however, despite a frail constitution and slowness of acclaim, worked at all with fervor and imagination.

Bartók's career as a pianist began on May 1, 1892, when he appeared at the age of eleven to play his own compositions and a Beethoven sonata in Nagyszőllos, Hungary. As the result of an audition played six years later, Bartók was offered a scholarship at the conservatory in Vienna. This he refused upon the advice of his young mentor, Ernst von Dohnányi, and in 1899 he was admitted to the advanced piano class at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, Hungary.

It was during this time, Bartók later related, that he received a special accolade from his teacher, István Thomán, who was considered one of the outstanding piano teachers in Hungary. It seems that when Thomán was a pupil of Liszt, the latter kissed him on the forehead after Thomán had played particularly well. In similar fashion, Thomán kissed the young Bartók, saying, "This kiss is handed down from Liszt!"

After graduation Bartók gave concerts, went on tour as an accompanist, and participated in 1905 in the **Prix Rubinstein** competition as pianist and composer (Wilhelm Backhaus won the piano prize). Due to the apathetic reception accorded to his compositions, Bartók absented himself from public life for a period of eight years beginning in 1912. Then, in 1920, he returned to the concert stage and quickly established a reputation as one of Hungary's ranking pianists. He played Beethoven and Liszt for the most part, few of his own works. His recitals were sell-outs; tickets had to be procured weeks in advance for good seats.

In 1922 Bartók commenced the first of his tours abroad, this time as composer-pianist. Excellent reviews and return engagements attested to his success as a virtuoso. Occasionally he met with mishaps and setbacks in the form of unexpected public reactions. An Italian audience punctuated the close of his Piano Sonata (1926) with a barrage of tomatoes, and several of his performances of the First Piano Concerto were received either in silence punctuated by a few handclaps here and there (Cincinnati, 1928) or by cold applause and boos (Berlin, 1928).

Bartók's self-imposed exile from his native land in 1940 was due to the imminence of a Hungarian alliance with the Axis. He could not remain in a country "so very near to the clutches of the Nazis," and he played his last Hungarian concert in October just prior to sailing for the United States. Gone were his royalties, his pension, and his income from an established concert career. He came to the United States only to find himself still virtually unknown, his works "boycotted" by conductors. He managed to secure a number of concerts and lecture-recitals for the 1940-41 season. These became more and more difficult to obtain and, finally, beset by illness which had plagued him most of his life, and bewildered perhaps by the unfriendly reviews of provincial critics, he played his last public concert on January 21, 1943, at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

It has been in comparatively recent years, and after his death, that Bartók has been equated as a pianist with Walter Gieseking and Alexander Borowsky, or referred to as a piano virtuoso who could have become one of the world's foremost pianists had he not chosen to devote the major portion of his time and energy to composition and ethnomusicology.

To most persons the name Bartók brings to mind a picture of the man as composer. In fact, it has been remarked that not since Mozart has a composer come so quickly into general recognition solely as the

result of the interest in his music stirred up by the accident of his death in 1945.

He composed or transcribed more than 100 works for the various musical media and, within ten years after his death, few of them remained which had not been published or recorded. Outstanding are the six string quartets, the three concertos for piano and the two for violin, the opera **Duke Bluebeard's Castle**, the ballets **Miraculous Mandarin** and **Wooden Prince**, the **Concerto for Orchestra**, **Cantata Profana**, **For Children**, and **Mikrokosmos**. The last-named work is considered by a number of sources to be Bartók's musical testament.

His music is rooted in East European peasant music, particularly that of Bulgaria, Hungary, Rumania, Slovakia and Yugoslavia. The principle underlying his style of composition is the assimilation of the idiom of peasant music to the extent that its use becomes subconscious, a musical mother-tongue. To do so, Bartók has said, one must have lived by direct contact with the peasants in their own environment. His objective as a composer was the fusion of East and West; that is, fusion of folk melody and rhythm with pre-classic contrapuntal treatment, classic progressive form, and the harmonic possibilities of Impressionism. The integrating element: modality.¹ The aim: to avoid the "excesses" of romanticism and, at the same time, to emphasize the expressive ability of tonal music (contrary to the opinion and practice of twelve-tone composers, the so-called "atonalists").

While a student at the Academy, Bartók began the composition of **Kossuth**, a symphonic poem depicting the events in Louis Kossuth's struggle against the Hapsburg Monarchy. Bordering on the Lisztian concept of Hungarian music: gypsy music, **Kossuth** led to a dead end in Bartók's search for a new way to create something specifically Hungarian. He suspected that the gypsy music which was then considered as the true Hungarian music was in reality an urbanization of music of peasant origin. His study of Zoltán Kodály's 1905 publication of Hungarian folk songs confirmed that suspicion and prompted the first of his many field trips to record the peasant music of Hungarian and neighboring peoples.

Bartók's researches in ethnomusicology were important enough to gain for him a position as a member of the Hungarian Academy of Science in 1936. Here he began work on the vast amount of material

¹ But a peculiarly Bartókian modality. Space here does not permit other than the brief mention of Bartók's use of modes bitonally, in alternation, transposed, and as compound structures in which "color" tones are borrowed from several modes built on the same principal tone. A more detailed discussion appears in the next chapter.

collected in the past. Not long after he arrived in the United States he received a grant from Columbia University to investigate the Parry collection of recorded Yugoslav folk music. The work of forty years of research is summarized in five large volumes on Rumanian folk music, and in one or more equally lengthy studies on Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, and Turkish folk music, less than half of them published during his lifetime², and a considerable number of smaller publications and magazine articles. All led to his being known and acclaimed internationally as an outstanding comparative musicologist.³

From time to time Bartók wrote articles on composers such as Liszt, Schoenberg, Kodály, and Richard Strauss, and on contemporary music—Hungarian art music in particular. He was also a contributor to general and music reference books.

As an aid to his folk music studies, since he was involved with the morphology of the language he happened to be working with, Bartók compiled his own dictionaries constructed of foolscap which were folded and crudely bound with cord in the form of notebooks. His interest in linguistics extended to the practice of drawing Arabic and Chinese characters, and to the writing of polyglot letters to his correspondents. Bartók's basic language was, of course, Hungarian, and he had an almost equal command of German and French. Lecture notes, documents, and unpublished books reveal his mastery of the English language which he spoke hesitatingly and with a rather heavy accent. He also read and wrote Rumanian with similar ease, but could not speak the language with any degree of fluency. For his own purposes, he had an adequate knowledge of Slavic tongues and a nodding acquaintanceship with Arabic and Turkish. To these should be added the Spanish language which he took up in 1906 when he accompanied the violin prodigy Ferenc Vecsey to the Iberian peninsula.

First experiences as a music educator occurred prior to the turn of the century when Bartók began teaching the piano privately. As many another neophyte, he soon discovered the financial problems involved in such employment, especially when he needed to augment the funds received from his mother (his father died when Bartók was eight years old) for food and lodging during his student years.

2 Vols. I-III of *Rumanian Folk Music* were published in 1967, Vols. IV-V in 1971 by Martinus Nijhoff (The Hague) and were edited by the present writer.

3 It is perhaps not generally known that Bartók considered his folk music research of more significance than his composition. Much of his concertising was done to secure funds needed to finance his research work and to pay for the publication of certain folk music collections.

He was but twenty-six years of age when he was appointed Professor of Piano at the Academy to succeed his teacher (Thomán) upon the latter's retirement. Here Bartók taught the advanced piano class, and he taught the piano privately in his own home up to the year of his death.

Following his Academy appointment, he edited piano music in the standard keyboard repertory. The list of such editions is impressive: Bach's **Well-Tempered Keyboard**⁴, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, and Scarlatti Sonatas, pieces by Couperin, Purcell, and other Baroque composers, Mendelssohn and Schubert Scherzi, and the Schumann **Album for the Young**. Bartók's efforts were also directed towards the music education of children, and in 1913 he and Alexander Reschofsky collaborated in the writing of a Piano School (**Zongora Iskola**), a method for the teaching of beginners, still in use in Hungary and published in German and Scandinavian editions in 1953, and in English in 1968. The **Mikrokosmos** itself was compiled in the form of a piano method as a result of Bartók's experiences in teaching his son, Peter, the piano.

The composer was honored repeatedly during his career. Outstanding among his awards were Chevalier of the Legion of Honor (France, 1930), the honorary degree of Doctor of Music (Columbia University, 1940), and Member of the New Hungarian Parliament (elected *in absentia* by the people of Budapest, 1945). In Hungary after his death, streets, roads, squares and a music conservatory were named after him, commemorative stamps bearing his likeness were issued, a plaque was placed on the doorway of his former residence, and a motion picture about him released in 1955. In other countries Bartók societies were organized, music festivals held and special magazine issues published. A Bartók archive was established in New York and in Budapest to collect and preserve all matter written by and about the composer. Today, libraries everywhere contain books devoted in whole or in part to the composer's life and music, and television films and programs on Bartók are frequently scheduled in America and Europe.

It has been said that Béla Bartók may well be one of those found to form a major part of the music of the future. In the **Mikrokosmos**, in a most accessible form for amateur and professional musicians alike, are the keys to Bartók's world of music.

⁴ Bartók's own title for "The 48 Preludes and Fugues" which he proposed as the most appropriate translation of Bach's *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*.

THE MIKROKOSMOS

SHORTLY after Bartók's career as a concert pianist became established on an international scale in the 1920's, his need for recital pieces seems to have provided him with the impetus to compose piano works. The **Improvisations**, Op. 20, had been written in 1920, and five more years were to elapse before he was to resume composing for the keyboard. Then, in a burst of creative energy, he wrote the **Piano Sonata**, the **First Piano Concerto**, **Out of Doors**, and **Nine Little Piano Pieces**. The last-named work was assembled from a collection of more than twelve compositions; three of them eventually became part of the **Mikrokosmos**.¹

Bartók's initial concept of the **Mikrokosmos**, therefore, was of the work as a collection of recital pieces, and he gave the first performance of seventeen of them in London on February 9, 1937.

The year before, Bartók began teaching his son Peter the piano, and he wrote little pieces and exercises for the boy. In characteristic fashion the composer became absorbed in the problems involved in the early grades of piano playing. He decided to arrange the **Mikrokosmos** as a collection of pieces in progressive order of technical and musical difficulty, he consulted with at least one Hungarian authority on piano pedagogy, and he used his son as a "guinea pig" until such time as the pieces were composed faster than Peter could learn them (the first two volumes are dedicated to "Péteré"). Then the father composed the **Mikrokosmos** independent of any consideration of its suitability for the son, completing the work in November, 1939.

The **Mikrokosmos** may also be interpreted as a series of pieces in different styles. One can find idioms representative of composers such as Couperin (no. 117), Bach (nos. 79 and 91), Schumann (no. 80), and Gershwin (no. 151. See Index for other listings). Highly chromatic examples have been quoted as compromise solutions from the perspective of the twelve-tone composition principle (nos. 91, 100, 132, and 147). Abstract music (nos. 45 and 81) and program pieces (to mention a few: nos. 15, 72, and 130) are further examples of the eclecticism of the work.

¹ **Unisono** (no. 137), **Wandering** (no. 81), and **Ostinato** (no. 146). Of the three, **Unisono** was the first completed and, therefore, it may be considered to be the first piece composed for the **Mikrokosmos**.