

The Music of Words in Béla Bartók's Twenty-Seven Choruses*

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Abstract: Bartók's two- and three-part choruses for children's and female voices are his best-known choral works worldwide. Nevertheless, the cycle as a whole does not enjoy a wide popularity outside of Hungary. The reason for this lies in the fact that, being a textually inspired composition written in an inaccessible language, it is internationally rarely performed due to difficulties of pronunciation and accentuation – not to mention the difficulties of translation. Text has a very special role in Bartók's vocal works, where words do not act only through their meaning, nor do they function merely as a supplementary element of music, but are both an essential shaping force in the field of rhythm and a fundamental factor of timbre. The subject of this paper is a survey of some difficulties in performing the Twenty-Seven Choruses with particular emphasis on the role of the text in the pieces' rhythmic style. The relation between words and timbre and, in connection with that, the orchestral version of seven choruses are also examined.

Keywords: Bartók, Twenty-Seven Choruses, text, timbre, prosody, rhythm

The Twenty-Seven Choruses arranged by the composer into eight volumes consisting of three (I, V–VIII) or four (II–IV) pieces is the sister work of Béla Bartók's last great textual composition, *Elmúlt időkből* (*From Olden Times*), a cycle for male choir. Bartók himself wrote about the cycle for children's voices to his English publisher in 1939: "This is a very important work of mine."¹ Nevertheless, the cycle as a whole does not enjoy a wide popularity outside of Hungary. The reason for this lies in the fact that it is rarely performed due to dif-

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1. Letter, Bartók to Ralph Hawkes, 17 April 1939. Photocopy in the Budapest Bartók Archives.

difficulties of pronunciation, the text being written in an internationally almost inaccessible language – seemingly insurmountable handicaps for a work in which the connection between text and music is particularly strong.

The year preceding the composition of the choruses had brought an important change to Bartók's career: in 1934, at his repeated request, he was released from his duties as a piano teacher at the Budapest Music Academy, and was transferred to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences with the commission to prepare for publication the *Hungarian Folk Songs. Complete Edition*. One of his tasks was to analyze folk poetry and categorize the texts according to poetic *topoi*. To this purpose Bartók studied the volumes of *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény (Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry)*, the first important text-edition of Hungarian folk poetry as well as other publications which gave the words of folk songs without melody. From these sources Bartók began to select texts suitable for setting to music.² Thus, his encounter with folk texts directly motivated his decision to compose vocal music. Most of the difficulties in performing Bartók's choruses discussed in this paper arise from the specific character of the folk texts.

Text plays something of a peculiar role in Bartók's vocal works. Not only did he have a special relationship to words, all his vocal compositions testifying for a strong emotional prompting and a desire for direct communication,³ but he also recognized that the poetic text as it was pronounced had distinct musical features. As attested by a sentence in his first lecture at Harvard University, Bartók tended to regard poetic text as music:

In poetry, where rhythm and the contrast or similarity of word sounds (or, I would say, the musical harmonies produced by words) are sometimes more important factors than word sense.⁴

When he began to select texts to set to music one of his main criteria might have been the sound of words. In the homogeneous vocal timbre the sound effects of the texts like onomatopoeia, alliteration, plosives, spirants, repetition, and resonance provide the only opportunity to “orchestration.” Therefore in spite of all technical limitations of an *a cappella* ensemble Bartók did not have to renounce entirely the sound effects of his instrumental music, especially the two elements which have most strongly fired his imagination during the years of his maturity: the sound of strings and that of percussion.⁵

2. See László Somfai, “Bartók egyenemű kórusainak szövegforrásairól,” [On the Text Sources of Bartók's Choruses for Equal Voices] in *Magyar Zenei Történelmi Tanulmányok Szabolcsi Bence 70. születésnapjára* [Studies in Hungarian Music History for the 70th Birthday of Bence Szabolcsi], ed. Ferenc Bónis (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1969), 359–376.

3. See Tibor Tallián, “Bartók and Words,” in *Arion. Almanach International de Poésie*, ed. György Somlyó, vol. 13 (Budapest: Corvina, 1982), 78–83.

4. “Harvard Lectures,” in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 357.

5. See Tibor Tallián, *Béla Bartók, The Man and His Work* (Budapest: Corvina, 1988), 189.

As elements of timbre words and their repetition are especially important in the final sections of the movements. The prominent role of alliteration is conspicuous in almost all pieces. The repetition of the Hungarian voiceless spirant “s” [ʃ] as well as the Hungarian voiceless affricate “cs” [tʃ] combined with voiced spirants “z” [z] and “zs” [ʒ] enriches the timbre with a celesta-like brilliance (Example 1a–b).

The preponderance of voiceless spirants “s” [ʃ] and “sz” [s] make a kind of *sul ponticello* effect (Example 2).

Affricates “c” [ts], “cs” [tʃ] with plosives “p” [p], “t” [t], “ty” [tj], “k” [k], and g [g]⁶ produce *pizzicato*-like effects – sometimes even similar to the so-called “Bartók” *pizzicato*; at other times they emulate percussion or piano effects.

EXAMPLE 1a VIII/1, *Párnás táncdal* (Pillow dance), 13–25

rall. all - - - - - **Un poco**
p. con duolo

Mért sírsz, mért sírsz te Ba-goly asz-szony - ka? Hogy is ne
 Mért sírsz, mért sírsz te Ba-goly asz-szony - ka?
 ger - li - ce: Mért sírsz, Ba-goly asz - szony - ka? Mért

meno mosso. ♩ = 84

sír - nék, Fe - hér kis ger - le, Honn fe - lej - tet - tem Zã - rog lá - dá
p. con duolo
 Hogy is ne sír - nék, Fe - hér ger - li - ce, Honn fe - lej - tet
 sírsz mért sírsz,

6. The phonetic classification of Hungarian consonants is based upon Mária Gósy, *Fonetika, a beszéd tudománya* [Phonetics, the Science of Speech] (Budapest: Osiris, 2005), 70–77. The source of phonetic symbols is *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Second revised edition ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xviii.

EXAMPLE 1b III/3, *Senkim a világon (I've no one in the world)*, 15–27

Più andante, ♩ = 152

Csen - des fo - lyó - viz - nek Csak zú - gá - sát hal - lom.

Hej

poco allarg.

Csen - des fo - lyó - viz - nek Csak zú - gá - sát hal - lom.

EXAMPLE 2 II/1, *Levél az otthoniakhoz (Letter to those at home)*, 26–32

Un poco meno mosso
rall. - - - - - al ♩ = 92

Szi - ve - te - ket go - ha, go - ha - sem, Szi - ve - te - ket go - ha

go - ha, go - ha, Szi - ve - te - ket go - ha, go - ha - sem,

p

bá - nat - ba ne ejt - se, Nem - ze - te - met go - ha sem - mi - baj ne ér - je, go - ha sem - mi,

cresc.

Szi - ve - te - ket go - ha bá - nat - ba ne ejt - se, Nem - ze - te - met go - ha, go - ha sem - mi

cresc.

f

Soon after the composition of the *a cappella* choruses, at the request of Benjámín Rajeczky, the choirmaster of the Cistercian grammar school in Budapest, Bartók provided chamber orchestra accompaniment for five pieces. Two more choruses were orchestrated probably in 1941. In all seven pieces the instrumental scoring seems to aim mainly at the accentuation of the music of words (*Example 3*).

EXAMPLE 3 Seven Choruses with Orchestral Accompaniment, V,
Cipósütés (Breadbaking), 49–51

----- al **50** Moderato ♩ = 104 **p** poi accel. poco a poco -----

I.

Coro II.

Pf. I.

Pf. II.

VI. I.

VI. II.

Vle.

Vlc.

Cb.

In the closing section of the first movement of the Piano Concerto no. 3 – obviously an allusion to the *stretto* at the end of *Breadbaking*⁷ – the sounds of consonants are substituted by *pizzicati* (Example 4).

7. See Ferenc Bónis, “Quotations in Bartók’s Music. A Contribution to Bartók’s Psychology of Composition,” *Studia Musicologica* 5/1–4 (1963), 378–379.

EXAMPLE 4 Piano Concerto no. 3, I, 179–182

The musical score for Example 4, Piano Concerto no. 3, I, 179–182, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 179–182) includes parts for Flute I, Oboe I, Clarinet I in A, Cor I. III in F, and Piano (Pf.). The second system (measures 180–182) includes parts for Violin I, Violin II, Viola (Vc.), and Cello (Cb.). The score is marked with dynamics such as *p*, *pp*, and *pizz.* (pizzicato). A box labeled '180' is placed above the first measure of the second system.

The basic tone-colour of the cycle is very closely related to that of the strings (*Example 5*).

The fascination with the timbre of strings was the main reason for Bartók's intent to transcribe some choral movements for two violins, similar to the pieces of the Forty Four Duos.⁸ However his plan was never realized.

The rules of prosody did not occupy a central role in Bartók's compositional thinking; at least not to the extent they did in Kodály's compositional practice and in Lajos Bárdos's theory of Hungarian prosody which is based on the system of Hungarian linguistic accentuation. The fact that Bartók did not accept Kodály's advices on prosody written in one of the copies of the first edition of the choral

8. See note 1.

EXAMPLE 5 Seven Choruses with Orchestral Accompaniment, II,
Ne menj el! (Don't leave me), 1–5

Molto tranquillo, ♩ = 58

p, dolce

5

I. Coro
 Ne menj el, el ne menj, Ne hagy - jál
 Blei - be hier, geh nicht fort, Hör auf mein

II. Coro
 Ne menj el, el ne menj,
 Blei - be hier, geh nicht fort,

Violini I.
p

Violini II.
p

Violenze
p

Violoncelli
p

cycle confirms this assumption. In consequence, in Bartók's vocal writing there is a permanent tension between musical and textual rhythm. It is not easy to decide which has the priority at a given moment or how to balance both rhythms in the performance.⁹

Parlando instruction only appears in two pieces of the cycle: in *Héjja, héjja, karahéjja* (*Hey, you hawk*), the final movement of the second volume and in the last piece of the entire series *Isten veled!* (*God be with you*). However, *parlando* as a mode of performance has to be observed also in some pieces where it was not prescribed by the composer. Several choruses require a speech-like presentation even though the written musical notes suggest strict rhythm. In the third piece of the third volume, *Senkim a világon* (*I have no one in the world*), the rhythmical interpretation has to follow the natural rhythm of speech, a fact also borne out by the *poco rubato* instruction at the beginning (*Example 6*).

In spite of the inscription *Tempo di marcia*, even the opening movement of the fourth chorus-suite, *Huszárnóta* (*Hussar*) allows for some rhythmic freedom in the performance. This piece is to be sung in strict but not in rigid rhythm. In this

9. Kodály's remarks were analyzed by the conductor of the Győr Girls' Choir, Miklós Szabó in 1995. See Miklós Szabó, "Kodály széljegyzetei Bartók Béla kórusműveéhez" [Kodály's Marginal Notes on the Choral Works of Béla Bartók], *Muzsika* 38/9 (September 1995), 27–33; 38/10 (October 1995), 16–22.

EXAMPLE 6 III/3, *Senkim a világon (I've no one in the world)*, 1–6

Tranquillo, poco rubato, ♩ = 138–126

He-gyek közt la-ká-som,

He-gyek közt la-ká-som,

EXAMPLE 7 IV/1, *Huszárnóta (Hussar)*, 1–6

Tempo di marcia, ♩ = 136

Ez a fa-lu be va-gyon ke-rit-ve haj, De ha-le-het, ki-me-gyek be-lő-le, háj!

(Kis zenekari kíséret ad lib.)

De ha-le-het, ki-me-gyek be-lő-le, háj!

EXAMPLE 8 II/3, *Leánynéző (Courting)*, 25–28

Ne ha-jolj az ő mé-zes sza-vá-ra,

Ne ha-jolj az ő mé-zes sza-vá-ra,

Ne ha-jolj az ő mé-zes sza-vá-ra,

type of performance the rhythm is “neither *rubato* nor strict dance-step, and it often comes nearer to a *parlando* performance”¹⁰ (*Example 7*).

In his ethnomusicological studies Bartók wrote often and in detail about the so-called “dance-words ... which are shouted during dancing without melody, but in strong rhythm.”¹¹ In an essay from 1911 he called this phenomenon “sound speaking in rhythm.”¹² Repetitions of a single note appear very often in Bartók’s music both in strict and free rhythm. A *parlando* type of the “sound speaking in

10. “The Folklore of Instruments and their Music in Eastern Europe,” in *Béla Bartók Essays*, 273.

11. *Ibid.*, 253.

12. *Ibid.*, 262.

EXAMPLE 9 VII/2, *Ne láttalak volna!* (*Had I not seen you*), 3–4

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the piece 'Ne láttalak volna!'. Both staves are in 4/4 time and use a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The lyrics 'Ne lát - ta - lak vol - na,' are written below the notes. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature (C), which is then changed to 4/4. The second staff begins with a treble clef, a piano (p) dynamic marking, and a 4/4 time signature. The notes in both staves correspond to the syllables of the lyrics: 'Ne' (quarter note), 'lát' (quarter note), 'ta' (quarter note), 'lak' (quarter note), 'vol' (quarter note), and 'na' (quarter note).

rhythm” can be found in the middle of the movement in the rhythm of the *volta* dance, *Leánynéző* (*Courting*, Example 8).

The melody of the seventh suite’s middle piece, *Ne láttalak volna!* (*Had I not seen you*) reflects the *giusto* rhythm of Hungarian folk music. This type of rhythm, defined by Constantin Brăiloiu as *giusto syllabique*,¹³ leaves little room for individual interpretation. The only attempt at that can be undertaken by way of accentuation. The performance by the Győr Girls’ Choir¹⁴ especially highlights the rhythmic pattern of stressed short–unstressed long values in the third measure, which is one of the basic elements of Bartók’s rhythmic vocabulary. (Example 9)

One of the main difficulties for the translation of the texts was to find suitable verbal equivalents in other languages to this Hungarian *giusto* rhythm pattern derived from the language which is clearly exemplified by the added motive of the violins in *Bolyongás* (*Wandering*, Example 10).

While in *parlando* or *giusto syllabique* sections the textual rhythm plays a crucial role, in the Bartókian vocal *giusto* an independent musical rhythm prevails. In the opening bars of *Bánat* (*Regret*) the mirror rhythm pattern is stronger than the rhythm of the text (Example 11).

There is no place for rhythmic flexibility either in the first piece of the third volume *Ne menj el!* (*Don’t leave me!*) or in *Játék* (*Play song*). The even eighth notes do not allow the so-called “adjustable rhythm” to prevail. In the performance of *Play song* the consonants need to be almost duplicated.¹⁵ In the interpretation of these pieces the preservation of the rhythmic content of the music is more important than the observation of the natural speech rhythm (Example 12 a–b).

According to its title the choral cycle can be performed both by children’s and female voices. Albeit in the first edition of the series the publisher dedicated the seventh and eighth suites solely to female choir, the last six pieces can also be sung by children, since the vocal range is quite narrow. The lowest note of the alto

13. Constantin Brăiloiu, “Le giusto syllabique: Un système rythmique populaire roumain,” in idem, *Problèmes d’ethnomusicologie*, ed. Gilbert Rouget (Genève: Minkoff, 1973), 151–194.

14. Bartók Béla: Gyermek- és nőikarok [Children’s and women’s choruses] Győr Girls’ Choir. Conducted by Miklós Szabó. BIEM-ARTISJUS IART 9601 (Budapest: Sound Express Ltd., 1996).

15. See Miklós Szabó, *Bartók Béla kórusművei* [Béla Bartók’s Choral Works] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981), 75.

EXAMPLE 10 Seven Choruses with Orchestral Accompaniment, IV,
Bolyongás (Wandering), 19–26

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system contains vocal parts I, Coro II, and III, and the beginning of the orchestral parts VI. I, VI. II, Vla., Ve., and Cb. The second system continues the orchestral parts VI. I, VI. II, Vla., Ve., and Cb. The vocal parts have lyrics in Hungarian, German, and English. Dynamic markings include *pp*, *mf*, and *f*. A box highlights a specific musical phrase in the VI. I and VI. II parts between measures 24 and 25.

20 **25** **25** **Agitato**
mf
mf
mf
pp
pp
pp
mf
mf
mf
pp
pp
pp
mf
mf
mf
mf
f
f

I. *tam* *Is - ten* *sem* *kö - nyö - rül* *Há - zam - volt,*
der *Herr - gott,* *ach,* *nim - mer* *nein!* *Ab - ge - brannt*

Coro II. *az* *Úr - is - ten* *sem* *kö - nyö - rül* *Há - zam - volt,*
Herr - gott *den - ket,* *ach,* *nim - mer* *nein!* *Ab - ge - brannt*

III. *c - gye - sül,* *Raj - tam* *az* *Is - ten* *sem* *kö - nyö - rül,* *nem!* *Há - zam - volt,*
ganz *ál - lein,* *Selbst* *der* *Herr - gott* *den - ket,* *nim - mer* *mein,* *nein!* *Ab - ge - brannt*

VI. I. **25**

VI. II. **25**

Vla. **25**

Ve. **25**

Cb. **25**

20

is g, the highest note of the soprano is $f\sharp^2$. In most recordings the cycle is sung by young girls, although some pieces of the earliest recording and the entire content of volumes 1–5 in the most recent recording are performed by children.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the ideal interpreter of some of the children's choruses would be a boys' choir, an assumption corroborated by a letter of Bartók. Referring to a choir that sang the second suite of the choruses at the Budapest premiere, he wrote to Mrs. Müller-Widmann with great enthusiasm of the natural formation of the voices of a boys' choir from the outskirts of Budapest, which reminded him of the singing of peasants:

It was a great experience for me when – at the rehearsal – I heard for the first time my little choruses coming from the lips of these children. I shall never for-

16. Bartók New Series 23. – Choral Works (2). Twenty-Seven Choruses for children's and female voices. Cantemus Children's Choir (Volumes 1–4), Pro Musica Girls' Choir (Volumes 5–8). Conducted by Dénes Szabó. HSACD 32523 (Budapest: Hungaroton Records Ltd., 2008).

EXAMPLE 11 VII/1, *Bánat (Regret)*, 1–2

Adagio, ♩ = 65

Köny - nyebb a kő - szik - lát

Köny - nyebb a kő - szik - lát

Köny - nyebb a kő - szik - lát

EXAMPLE 12a III/1, *Ne menj el! (Don't leave me!)*, 1–4

Molto tranquillo, ♩ = 58

p. dolce

Ne menj el, el ne menj, Ne hagy-jál itt en-gem,

(Kis zenekari kíséret ad lib.) Ne menj el, el ne menj, Ne hagy-jál

EXAMPLE 12b II/2; *Játék (Play song)*, 1–5

Allegretto, ♩ = 120

Ég a gyer-tya ég, El ne a-lud

Ég a gyer-tya ég, ég, El

get this impression of the freshness and gaiety of the little ones' voices. There is something in the natural way these children from schools on the outskirts produce voices, that reminds one of the unspoiled manner of peasant singing.¹⁷

17. "Es war eine grosse Sensation für mich, als ich – während der Proben – meine kleinen Chöre von diesen Kinderschaaren zum erstenmal erklingen hörte. Ich werde diesen Eindruck nie vergessen: wie frisch, wie heiter die Stimme dieser kleinen klang. Es ist etwas in der Natürlichkeit in der Tongebung dieser Kinder, namentlich der Vorortschulen, die an den Klang des noch unverdorbenen Bauergesanges erinnert." Letter to Annie Müller-Widmann, 24 May 1937, in *Béla Bartók. Ausgewählte Briefe*, hrsg. von János Demény (Budapest: Corvina, 1960), 175. English transl. in *Bartók Béla Letters*, ed. János Demény (Budapest: Corvina, 1971), 257. (Translation slightly modified.) Bartók's remark refers to the choir of the boys' school in Liget utca, which consisted of children between the ages of 10 to 14.

Although no recording of the Twenty-Seven Choruses have been made with a boys' choir, the interpretation of *Hussar* performed by children conducted by Ilona Andor might stand very close to the sound Bartók referred to.¹⁸

18. Bartók Béla: Gyermek- és nőikarok [Children's and female choruses] The Zoltán Kodály Choir of the Teacher's Training Institute in Vendel utca, Budapest. Conducted by Ilona Andor. HLPX K 2507/a-b (Budapest: Hungaroton Records Ltd., 1958).