

Musical Structures in the First Movement of Bartók's Second Violin Concerto

Béla Bartók (1881-1945), the Hungarian composer perhaps known best for his six string quartets, his Concerto for Orchestra, and his six-volume set of piano pieces *Mikrokosmos*, also wrote two violin concertos, although the first one was only published posthumously. The Second Violin Concerto, written in 1937-8 and premiered in 1939 in Amsterdam, shows Bartók's versatility and mastery of wide-ranging compositional techniques. Two major musical developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the breakdown of tonal harmony and a renewed interest in nationalism, are reflected in Bartók's music, although his distinctive voice shines above his absorption of popular trends. Although Bartók originally wanted to compose a single-movement set of variations, Zoltán Székely, the violinist for whom Bartók wrote the concerto, wanted a three-movement work, so Bartók fulfilled both desires in writing a three-movement work with the middle movement as a rigorous set of variations and the third movement as a variation of the first. This paper will deal primarily with the material of the first movement, which employs tonality, a twelve-tone row, and sonata form. Refer to the chart below for the structure of the movement.

Exposition	mm. 7-114	B → serial → B
First Theme Group	mm. 7-55	B
Bridge Theme	mm. 56-72	non-centric → A
Second Theme Group	mm. 73-91	tone row: [9-e-5-t-6-1-7-3-0-4-8-2]
Closing Theme	mm. 92-114	non-centric → F
Development	mm. 115-212	F → c → B ♭ → G → B
Recapitulation	mm. 213-389	B → serial → B
First Theme Group	mm. 213-247	B
Bridge Theme	mm. 248-254	non-centric → F♯

Second Theme Group	mm. 255-279	tone row: [6-e-5-1-0-9-4-3-t-7-8-2-9]
Closing Theme	mm. 280-363	non-centric → B
Coda	mm. 364-389	B

The concerto opens with the harp playing quarter note B major triads in root position, an explicitly tonal statement that, as one critic at the Dutch premiere put it, seemed to "put the audience in a good mood."¹ This simple harp line recalls *dűvő*, a typical Gypsy accompaniment to *verbunkos* music, a traditional Hungarian dance and music genre characterized by frequent dotted rhythms and virtuosic melodic lines. The ripieno strings pluck an A dominant ninth chord ($\flat VII^{dom9}$ in B major) before settling back to B major triads, and the solo violin enters with a pickup to the seventh bar, playing a dotted-rhythm melody reminiscent of *verbunkos*. The two pickup notes are G-A leading to B, so already there is a hint of modal mixture: perhaps the violin's line is in B Aeolian. The ripieno strings hold a B major chord underneath the solo violin, which plays a four-bar phrase including G, A, B, C \sharp , D, D \sharp , E, and F \sharp , ending the fourth bar of the phrase with an incomplete sixteenth-note quintuplet ending rather strangely on an E \sharp . The ripieno harmonic progression in the last bar of the four-bar phrase (measure 10), analyzed in B major, is $iv \frac{6}{4} - ii^{o7} - \flat VI \frac{6}{4} - ii^{o7}$ (turned briefly into II^{o7} by the E \sharp in the solo violin), but not a single one of these chords is diatonic in B major! Indeed the harmony implies B minor despite the echo of the melodic D \sharp in the previous bar. In measure 11, the solo violin repeats the four-bar phrase a fifth up, now centered around F \sharp . At the end of this four-bar phrase, the solo violin plays a 13-tuplet up to a high E atop a ripieno chord G dominant seventh chord (although the melodic E would make it an $e^{\flat9}$ chord). The solo violin continues virtuosically in a two-bar sequence, stressing the notes E-B in mm. 15-16 and D-A in mm. 17-18 while the ripieno double basses

play G-C and F-B \flat in those measures beneath ambiguous harmonies, showing a preference for fourths and fifths. In measures 19-21, the solo violin plays a descending figure outlining the notes G \sharp -C-E \sharp . The final harmony of m. 21 is an a \sharp ^{o7} chord, indeed functioning as a vii^{o7} chord weakly cadencing to B in the next bar. It can be said with certainty that B is a tonal center here, but the means of achieving it is quite different from the Classical style: there are no perfect authentic cadences, and more strikingly, nearly every chord other than the tonic is borrowed from a closely related mode rather than belonging to B major or minor proper.

In m. 20, the solo violin begins to play cascading lines of sixteenth notes with occasional quarter notes held for emphasis. Because of the frequent lower neighboring tone A, the line is likely in B Aeolian. The ripieno harmonies, analyzed in B major, begin with I- \flat VII^{dom7}-I-(F \sharp -E-G)-vi^o-v but quickly become even more difficult to analyze, clearly showing a tendency to stray from B major but without going too far from it. The secundal chord F \sharp -E-G is not unique as several other secundal and quartal chords appear occasionally, but the harmonic rhythm of the quarter note (at 108-112 bpm) is fast enough that the dissonances of these chords are not felt strongly. In m. 26, the ripieno strings play an E \flat major triad beneath a solo violin figuration that appears to begin in E \flat major but quickly betrays it with a B \natural and A \natural . The music again appears to move in a two-bar harmonic sequence as the two measures of faux E \flat major are followed by a power chord in G \flat (that is, a G \flat major chord missing the third) and violin figurations in “faux G \flat major” for two bars. The sequence continues for a few more bars until the violin begins playing more familiar arpeggiations in m. 34: d \sharp ^{o7} ascending and f \sharp ^{o7} descending beneath ripieno harmonies of double-inflected f \sharp and g \sharp minor-diminished tetrads, perhaps a harmonic arpeggiation of the B major tonic triad (albeit rather unorthodoxly with

diminished and half-diminished seventh chords). M. 36 begins a series of ascents to A#, growing in intensity until finally bursting forth to a *f* orchestral restatement of the opening four-bar theme in m. 43 while the violin rests. In m. 51, the violin returns with a slight variation of the four-bar verbunkos theme played around F, adding on a fifth bar of quarter notes leading into the next theme group in m. 56. The main impression of the first theme group is a lively and fast-moving exposition of a verbunkos-inspired theme, laden with tonal references and structures (i.e. chords and sequences) while freely employing non-diatonic harmonies.

Bars 56-72 are dominated by the solo violin playing a “theme” not sufficiently long or recognizable enough to be granted the status of a proper theme group yet important in its function of linking the first theme group with the next, hence the compromise term “bridge theme.” It mainly consists of triplet, quintuplet, and sixteenth note chromatic figures that culminate in a G# in m. 72, preparing the A of the tone row in the following bar.

The second theme begins on m. 73 with the violin playing straight through the twelve-tone row [9-e-5-t-6-1-7-3-0-4-8-2]. The row, which contains a G b major triad, a C minor triad, and a C augmented triad, is very similar to the theme of the Hungarian folk song “Cserebogár, sárga cserebogár,” roughly translated as “May bug, yellow May bug.” For reference, the matrix of this row is below.

	I ₉	I _e	I ₅	I _t	I ₆	I ₁	I ₇	I ₃	I ₀	I ₄	I ₈	I ₂	
P ₉	9	e	5	t	6	1	7	3	0	4	8	2	R ₉
P ₇	7	9	3	8	4	e	5	1	t	2	6	0	R ₇
P ₁	1	3	9	2	t	5	e	7	4	8	0	6	R ₁
P ₈	8	t	4	9	5	0	6	2	e	3	7	1	R ₈
P ₀	0	2	8	1	9	4	t	6	3	7	e	5	R ₀

P ₅	5	7	1	6	2	9	3	e	8	0	4	t	R ₅
P _e	e	1	7	0	8	3	9	5	2	6	t	4	R _e
P ₃	3	5	e	4	0	7	1	9	6	t	2	8	R ₃
P ₆	6	8	2	7	3	t	4	0	9	1	5	e	R ₆
P ₂	2	4	t	3	e	6	0	8	5	9	1	7	R ₂
P _t	t	0	6	e	7	2	8	4	1	5	9	3	R _t
P ₄	4	6	0	5	1	8	2	t	7	e	3	9	R ₄
	RI ₉	RI _e	RI ₅	RI _t	RI ₆	RI ₁	RI ₇	RI ₃	RI ₀	RI ₄	RI ₈	RI ₂	

Bartók's commitment to this row is more figurative than literal. Just after the solo violin finishes playing the row, the violins and violas in the orchestra play another twelve notes, [9-e-5-6-t-1-7-3-0-4-8-2]. The change is very subtle: only the fourth and fifth pitch classes are switched. The solo violin responds with [2-4-t-3-6-e-0-5-8-9-7-1], which at first appears to be P₂, but the "apparent P₂" is actually rife with errors: the fifth and sixth pitch classes are switched, as are the eighth and ninth, and finally the eleventh and twelfth. These errors, while noticeable, are not quite enough to make the row unrecognizable. Just after this statement, the ripieno violins joined by the flutes and clarinets respond with [2-t-3-4-6-e-8-0-5-1-9-7], ending with a first inversion B minor seventh chord in m. 85. This last row again appears to resemble P₂ but is riddled with even more errors than previously. Virtually the only remaining resemblance with what at first appears to be P₂ is the same hexachordal content of the first and second hexachords respectively, creating a sort of faux combinatoriality. The solo violin plays [9-t-1-6-7-3-4-0-8-2-9-8] over the next few bars. Note that A and A^b are repeated: not only has the row been distorted beyond recognition, it is no longer a twelve-tone row. This gradual but consistent deformation of the serial technique is perhaps Bartók's way of acknowledging

Schoenberg's contributions to musical thought but showing that dodecaphony is merely one way of composition. The section is fairly short, fading out in m. 91 with a *pp* harmonic in the violin.

M. 92 begins with a *f* statement in the full orchestra of the most shocking chord yet: a quadruple-inflected D major-minor-diminished-secundal chord, the cluster D-F-F \sharp -A-A \flat . The solo violin responds with an equally urgent *ff* statement of four chromatically descending quintuplets spanning G \sharp to A. The orchestra replies with another chord, only marginally less shocking than the first: a double-inflected F major-minor triad with an added tritone B. After another quintuplet figure, the orchestra plays a B \flat double-inflected triad with an added tritone E, mirroring the F chord two bars prior. As seen in the first theme group, relationships of fifths and fourths remain salient despite chordal construction that frequently strays from tertian harmony. This dialogue continues with frantic diminution and increasingly intense cascading figures until a *ff* explosion of a D major/D \sharp diminished chord in m. 111. It is built in the same manner as the preceding double inflection chords, but in actuality, it is a polychord with a common third and fifth. A stepwise harmonic progression of C $^{\circ}$ -D $^{\circ}$ -E $^{\circ}$ triads tonicizes F major at the beginning of the development.

M. 115 marks the start of the development with the solo violin playing a rhythmically augmented version of the verbunkos theme in a soothing F major tonality with the expected variant subtonic E \flat and minor mediant A \flat . Just as the violin comes to settle on F in m. 125, the orchestra plays a D minor chord instead of the expected F major tonic chord, moving to D \flat minor in the next bar and settling on C minor in m. 127 as the cor anglais takes up the augmented verbunkos theme in C minor. In m. 131, the cellos repeat the downward chromatic movement, playing C-B-B \flat -A-A \flat -G-G \flat in whole notes while the harp plays the harmonies a $\frac{6}{4}$

- f \sharp° $\frac{4}{2}$ - g $\frac{6}{4}$ sus6 - c $\frac{6}{5}$ - f 7 before devolving into less recognizable secundal harmonies. The tonal center is effectively shifted to B \flat in m. 139 by the solo violin in what seems like a deceptive cadence but isn't quite: the harp harmony directly preceding m. 139 is a D^{dom7} chord. The solo violin continues to slowly, almost hesitantly, develop the verbunkos theme until the ripieno strings begin holding a G \flat pedal point starting in m. 147. This continues, changing enharmonically to an F \sharp (albeit without any discernible modulation) in m. 152 while the solo violin ascends higher and higher with unhurried triplet figures, dying away in a leading-tone-sounding F \sharp at the end of m. 159. The tempo quickens in m. 160 and the unaccompanied solo violin begins eager sixteenth-note figures around an implied pitch center of G in a call and response with the orchestra. A four-bar harmonic sequence unfolds, outlining the pitches G-D-A and once again emphasizing the interval of a fifth. The sequence appears to end but continues in a broken fashion with interjections from the brass while the solo violin plays tremolo double stops *sul ponticello*. At m. 194, the verbunkos theme around B is played in inversion by the solo violin, although it would be nearly unrecognizable were it not for the familiar rhythmic gestures. After this brief statement, the full orchestra along with the solo violin begin a series of sporadic ascending sixteenth-sixteenth-eighth figures crescendoing to the recapitulation in m. 213.

The recapitulation begins with the solo violin playing *p* in m. 213 around the pitch center of B (as expected), an octave higher than the exposition. However, the two pickup notes this time are G \sharp -A \sharp , the correct submediant and leading tone of B major. After a truncated repetition of the verbunkos theme, the violin returns to the material of m. 22 in m. 220. Before the figurations can go on for long, the orchestra interrupts with bold ascending fifths outlining

A-C#-E-G#-B-D#, either an A/g# polychord or a A^{major} chord of sorts, crescendoing until m. 241, where the harmony changes to F-A-C-E-G-B, again a perfectly tertian structure that is either an F/e polychord or an F^{major} chord. The brief bridge theme is recapitulated in m. 248 across different sections of the orchestra before the solo violin appears to recapitulate the second theme, playing the tone row [6-e-5-1-0-9-4-3-t-7-8-2-9]. Consider the row [9-e-5-t-6-1-7-3-0-4-8-2], the row (albeit one that was deformed very quickly) of the second theme group of the exposition. The recapitulation's row looks tantalizingly similar and is *almost* combinatorial with the first, but the 0 and t pitch classes are in the wrong places. Again, the faux combinatoriality created here shows Bartók's liberal approach to serial technique. The solo violin immediately returns to the bridge theme, almost as if to say the recapitulation of the second theme group was premature. But then the solo violin plays the row [0-7-1-5-9-6-2-3-8-e-t-4]. This row looks very similar and is "faux combinatorial" with I₀ of the exposition's row, and it is in fact I₀ of the new tone row with the fourth and fifth pitch classes switched, an almost-exact replication of the unfolding of the second theme group of the exposition (the difference being the move to a variant of I₀ rather than P₂). The violin returns again to the bridge theme in m. 267. The back-and-forth dialogue continues while the tone row is gradually deformed into a ten-tone row similar to the the ten-tone row of the exposition. M. 280 marks the *ff* recapitulation of the closing theme, but the multiple-inflected "shocking" chords of the exposition's closing theme are replaced with a first-inversion G# dominant seventh chord followed by a second-inversion a# minor seventh chord. Despite the lack of explicit dissonance, the chords are orchestrated in a very low register and with inverted with tones close enough to convey nearly the same level of tension as the multiple-inflected chords of the exposition's closing theme. The recapitulation of the closing

theme continues without further significant deviation until m. 302, where the solo violin lands on a *ffff* D beneath a C#-D-E ♭ cluster in the harp. Atop D octaves in the double basses, the solo violin proceeds warily with triplets adumbrating D with the chromatic neighboring tones C# and E ♭. The harmony beneath the solo violin shifts to a B ♭^{dom7} chord in m. 308, at which point the solo violin begins a series of sixteenth-note arpeggiations launching into a very involved 33-bar cadenza starting in m. 313. An analysis of the cadenza's harmonic, melodic, and thematic material, while worthy, is beyond the scope of this paper, so suffice it to say that it showcases the virtuosic nature of the violin brilliantly and provides an effective transition to the coda, which comes at m. 364, eighteen bars after the end of the cadenza.

The coda employs typical devices of climax with crescendos, tempo changes, and rhythmic diminution. In m. 373, the ripieno strings pluck their instruments in the classic Bartók pizzicato (named as such because Bartók was one of the first composers to employ it widely), a technique wherein the musician plucks the strings of the instrument hard enough that they rebound off the fingerboard. The tension increases until m. 383, where the solo violin begins a long A#-B trill for three-and-a-half measures. The full orchestra concludes the first movement on octaves of B, ending the phrase with the only traditional cadential motion Bartók seems to employ, VII-I, and even then only with scale degrees rather than chords.

The first movement of the concerto shows virtuosic instrumental writing, wide-ranging compositional techniques, and a unique approach to formal structure that defines Bartók's idiosyncratic style. And indeed it is his expertise in utilizing and innovating musical structures that earned him his place in music history as a composer who could at once absorb and transcend tradition.

Works Cited

- 1) Nagy, Alexander. "Béla Bartók's Violin Concerto No. 2: An Analysis of the Creative and Compositional Process Through a Study of the Manuscripts." Ph.D. diss., New York: The City University of New York, 1992.
- 2) Schneider, David E. "A Context for Bela Bartok on the Eve of World War II: The Violin Concerto (1938)." *repercussions*, nos. 1-2 (1996): pp. 21-68.