

Bartók: *Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta* (1936)

Background:

- Béla Bartók (1881 – 1945) was one of the twentieth century's leading composers writing works in all forms and genres, including operas, concertos, choral works and six string quartets. Alongside his work as a composer, he is well known for his collection and analytical survey of folk music from his native Hungary and further a field.



- *Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta* was commissioned by the conductor Paul Sacher to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Basle Chamber Orchestra. It was written in 1936, and the first performance was given by the Basle Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Sacher on 21 January 1937.
- The title of the work is slightly misleading, since the celesta is not specially used more important than the other tuned percussion in the work: piano, harp, xylophone and timpani. The string orchestra is divided into two groups of equal size that are placed on opposite sides of the platform.

Some different forms of analysis:

- The *Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta* is one of Bartók's most chillingly atmospheric scores. The extraordinary first movement reaches a central mirror point and then begins to unwind in the opposite direction – both backwards and upside down! – while the third typifies Bartók's 'things-that-go-bump-in-the-night' style of writing. **(David Ashman, Sleeve notes to EMI Classics 575620)**
- The first movement is a slow fugue. Its time signature changes constantly and it is written without key signature. It is based around the note A, on which the movement begins and ends. It begins on muted strings, and as the voices enter the texture thickens and the music becomes louder until the climax. Mutes are then removed, and the music becomes gradually quieter over gentle celesta arpeggios. The movement ends with the fugue subject played softly over its inversion. **(Wikipedia)**

Analysis:

- A is the tonal centre of the movement (in fact the tonal centre of the work as a whole), and it begins and ends on A. The movement is a fugue based on a chromatic, irregular four-phrased theme, with no interval larger than a third, and contained within the range of a fifth. The first phrase of the theme begins in the violas:

(♩=116-112)
con sord.
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- Successive canonic entries take the theme both ways around a circle of fifths: up to E, down to D, up again to B, down again to G etc until both circles reach the tritone opposite of A - E \flat (bar 44).
- In pursuing both of these cycles, Bartók includes entries based on all twelve possible chromatic pitches
- A scheme showing how the different entries work together:

	<u>Stage 1</u>				<u>Stage 2</u>		<u>Stage 3</u>		<u>Stage 4</u>		
Bar:	1	4	8	12	16	26	27	33	34	35	44
	A	E		B		F \sharp			C \sharp	G \sharp	(D \sharp)
	A		D		G		C	F		B \flat	E \flat

- Bartók varies his material in four stages:

Stage 1: This is a formal five-part exposition in which the full subject is played with minimal variation.

Stage 2: Here the full subject is played in a close stretto of entries (at the tritone C-F \sharp).

Stage 3: Here only phrases from the subject are presented in their individual parts, sometimes with accompanying echo effects.

Stage 4: Here subject fragments are developed before the final statement on E \flat is reached.

- At bar 56 we reach the climax, accentuated by the loudest dynamic level and the most open harmony, with E \flat played in repeated octaves by all the violins and violas. A loud bass drum strike emphasises this climax.
- How does Bartók return to the home tonality of A from this most distant point? He retraces his steps with his subject now in inversion (mirror image) using the same technique of circles of fifths to return to A:

	Stage 4				Stage 3				Stage 2			Stage 1
Bar:	56	58	61	62	64	65	68	69	72	73	77	
	E \flat	A \flat		D \flat		F \sharp		B		E	A	
		B \flat	F		C		G		D			

- The return is abbreviated with such a perfect sense of timing that without any audible hurrying, home base is achieved within barely twenty bars.
- Some of the entries within Stage 3 are nominal with B \flat and F being represented in their turn by the strongly pulsating rhythm just heard at the climax and the D \flat entry only playing part of the subject's fourth phrase.
- At bar 77, accompanied by glistening celesta arpeggios, Bartók has both the theme and its inversion played simultaneously three octaves apart:

(♩=c. 108)
con sord.

pp

- The movement ends with a microcosm of itself, as violins play scales in contrary motion from A out to E \flat and back to A again:

- The pitch content of the work derives from a simple asymmetrical scale which alternates between minor thirds and minor seconds:



- Is there a higher principle governing this movement's construction? In the 1940s it was suggested that a number of Bartók's works were governed by the Golden Section or Fibonacci series; a simple additive series associated with this principle:

1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89...

- The numbers of crucial bars in the first movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion & Celesta* look very similar to the Fibonacci series which brings up the important question: Is such an observation valid or helpful in our understanding of this music? Was Bartók aware of the Golden Section whilst composing this work, or is it purely an example of natural growth principles in action?