

# Analysis of Bartók String Quartet #5

Jeffrey C. Smith

Music 301C with Eric Ulman

What does it mean to be modern? The twentieth century saw several different musical idioms emerge, some revolutionary, others more evolutionary. Does the measure of modern reflect the extent to which an idiom breaks with tradition, a transgressive measure? Or, should the question instead reflect evidence of a genuine movement, wherein a given idiom evolves into a school and even style, later adopted and developed by succeeding artists? Perhaps both? Perhaps the question itself is not worth asking.

Given this is an academic paper on 20<sup>th</sup> century music, form dictates the obligatory Schönberg discussion, here one paragraph late. We then continue on with discussion of Webern, followed perhaps by a Boulez reference. Of course Cage. Then, we spend time on the pilgrimage to Darmstadt. And I suppose, Q.E.D., Schönberg is the quintessential modern composer.

Certainly the branches emanating from this Schönbergian tree are broad and numerous (and have produced an exceedingly large number of dissertations). Yet such a focus on the question of 'modern', wherein we adopt the standard proposed above suggesting an idiom identified first by the magnitude of its departure from tradition and then the extent to which such an idiom becomes a style, such a focus leaves unresolved more fundamental questions. Unfortunately, given the fractured nature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the several idioms and styles, the recursively transgressive strikes against tradition in the name of the new and unique, it's not obvious that all or even most branches can be traced to Schönberg. Darmstadt disciples aside, what do we do with Bartók, Barber, Shostakovich, and even Ligeti?

Adding to this complexity on what we now come to recognize as a completely frivolous question of ‘modern’, we could amend the criteria to include relevance. But at what cost? Mass adoption means George Bush Jr. as President of the United States, ergo the masses lack any significance as we consider a definition of artistic relevance. Elvis Presley, Duke Ellington, the Beatles, and, God-willing, Alan Menken therefore must be excluded from any question of relevance given what we now know of the impact of mass media and the recording industry on the huddled masses, the indoctrination of the masses with the sentimental and the sexual, and the mass-worship of idols (and prisons) over art. If Stockhausen’s vision of the Eagle-Man bearing TierKreis-laden objects only had the support of the Disney marketing machine, then we might have normative data to analyze the hypothesis. But alas, Disney did not back this artwork.

But what about the work of 2Pac? With an incarceration rate exceeding 1% of the adult population in America, shouldn’t we push Stockhausen’s Eagle-man aside and instead consider the relevance of 2Pac (e.g. Tupac Amaru Shakur)? Even in the absence of Disney marketing machine support of Stockhausen, any definition of art that pertains to relevance in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century would need to at least reference 2Pac, and perhaps his 1994 LP “Thug Life” LP (aka *The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody*). The fact is, with a standard of relevance applied to the masses, aside from a few barbarous jabs that alienated his pianist daughter, Stockhausen is irrelevant. 2Pac, by contrast, sold several gold albums.

Ah, but what of history you ask? Beyond the fact that the masses elected Bush Jr., a second argument against relevance manifests, namely who are we to judge today what will survive time? Few statements provide more solace to the completely irrelevant artists than this, the ‘who am I to judge now’ postulate. One performance, twenty attendees, perhaps a paper, a few vibrant debates (which last substantially longer than the performance itself or even the truncated play-back of the recording of the performance as a precursor to the lively debate on the work), these plus the solace of potential history?

Ironically, academia is one of the few modern institutions supporting many modern movements in art, and as we know, academia itself provides a shelter from the cruelty of the masses, a self-sustaining artificial world, removed from the standards of commerce and acceptance. In contrast to the whims of the masses, academia promotes the unique-standard above all (otherwise known as the dissertation). And so the increasingly unique becomes noteworthy, yet (unfortunately) increasingly irrelevant.

Robert Schumann was a modern composer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His *Fantasia* in C Op. 17 for the piano pushed tonality into a new realm: the opening movement<sup>1</sup> avoids a 'tonic' cadence until the 297<sup>th</sup> bar in a piece of some 308 bars. The piece was seldom if ever performed during his lifetime. Even his wife Clara removed it from her concert repertoire given the reaction from the audience (e.g. the educated and privileged). It was Franz Liszt who recognized the stature of the work and eventually succeeded in promoting the Fantasy, thereby achieving a broader level of acceptance. And we note that Robert's *Album für die Jugend* was his top-seller. Yet he capitulated, here, perhaps to feed his children<sup>2</sup>?

Skipping past Wagner and his Tristan chord<sup>3</sup>, few of Charles Ives's pieces were performed in his lifetime, and those that were performed met a frosty reception. Arguably, Ives was not accepted beyond a few elite academics and musicians (e.g. pianists like John Kirkpatrick and composers like Henry Cowell) until Bernstein<sup>4</sup> began performing Ives' works in the sixties. Unlike Schumann, Ives didn't need to capitulate to feed his only adopted daughter given the fortune he generated through the insurance business he co-founded. We modern, post-modern, transgressive, anti-Disney composers find profound solace in the story of Charles Ives – the elusive triumph after death!

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<sup>1</sup> Which at one point bore the title "ruins" and in his final manuscript had no title but instead an illustration of three stars which the publisher declined. I include as much to support the notion of 'modern' in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other examples of Schumann abound.

<sup>2</sup> Or his Album did more than pay the bills – it helped engage his children (and many more generations of children) in the study of piano performance.

<sup>3</sup> You are welcome.

<sup>4</sup> The composer of West Side Story.

Yet, as we ponder the absurd derivative of the initial preposterous question on what is modern, namely the standard of relevance, we did find solace, but only by trading our contemporaneous irrelevance for the potential for posthumous ascendance. And so capitulation (or conformance if you prefer) is not required. I once asked Christian Wolfe why it was so important to be unique and break with tradition, and his response was “I don’t know, it just seemed like the thing to do at the time”. What beauty! And courage!

They insist on returning to the question: what does it mean to be modern? Relevance has nothing to do with the topic. Marketing and modern are oxymoronic terms (yet we might suggest, but only with some trepidation, that few were more skilled in the art of marketing than John Cage). And so, having perturbed you the reader for an excess, I summarily dismiss the question. The question itself is irrelevant. And the standard proposed by the question, that unique + following = modern is also summarily dismissed. Dismissed with prejudice.

Bartók, however, was a modern composer. (Such confrontation, and for what purpose? Essays in seminars are not meant to be stream-of-conscious ramblings, as if I write notes from underground.) Essays should be extremely coherent, matter-of-fact and devoid of prejudice. They (unless meant to offend) should certainly not include any references to ‘fuck’ and ‘prison music’. Yet, if I question the very institutions that sanction these absurd definitions and genealogical approaches to the twentieth century and its father, Papa Schönberg, shouldn’t I make it easier for that institution (and its purveyors) to dismiss my arguments as nothing but the ramblings of a mad man? But what of the entertainment value – no, I really belittle my work – the artistic merits of such a paper? I contradict myself so freely again, and here once more in an overly complex sentence.

Let us not dismiss an artist of the stature of Schönberg. But, too, let us not dismiss Bartók by applying some Darmstadtian standard that, relative to Schönberg, he was not unique. Or rather he was not

unique enough: he did not assault history<sup>5</sup>. Oh, but Schönberg first mastered tonality before disemboweling it (I am reminded over and over again). And this movement away from Germany, this nationalistic movement in music: certainly it was significant, but it was an expansion of Romanticism and chromaticism, no? Nothing new.

Unfortunately, a wholesale identity crisis plagues the modern world. Responses vary to the crisis among six-and-one-half billion souls: the new voyeurism on Facebook, the continuing transgressive revolt (e.g. I want a new sound, ergo I hold uniqueness above all else), ironically the disintegration of the nation-state (e.g. I'm a Croatian, not a Yugoslavian), tattoos, etc. And so I recognize the haste by which I dismissed the term modern, and regret such a reactionary approach. For, it seems clear, the era we describe as 'modern' values the unique, the individual. And so accepting this standard and simplified definition, I can say with all sobriety that Bartók was a modern composer. Unique, we shall find, does not depend exclusively on iconoclasm<sup>6</sup>. In fact, in Bartók's case, his unique standard derived primarily from his reverence for the past, including the musical tradition of the preceding centuries, but also the language, customs, and folk-traditions of his homeland. Let me quote excerpts from his own brief autobiographical essay:

*[While studying in the music academy in Budapest early in my life], I got rid of the Brahmsian style, but did not succeed via Wagner and Liszt, in finding the new way so ardently desired...*

*From this stagnation I was roused as by a lightning stroke by the first performance in Budapest of Thus Spake Zarathustra, in 1902. The work was received by real abhorrence in musical circles here, but it filled me with the greatest enthusiasm. At last there was a way of composing which seemed to hold the seeds of a new life...*

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<sup>5</sup> You say Schönberg did not eschew history? Yes, I have his book on tonality. It's excellent. But that's beside the point. I don't criticize him. I enjoy (much) of his music.

<sup>6</sup> If we all insist on breaking with tradition as the definition of modern, then we're all conformists, no?

*Meanwhile the magic of Richard Strauss had evaporated. A really thorough study of Liszt's oeuvre ... revealed to me the true essence of composing...*

*In my studies of folk music I discovered that what we had known as Hungarian folk songs till then were more or less trivial songs by popular composers and did not contain much that was valuable. I felt an urge to go deeper into this question...*

*The outcome of these studies was of decisive influence upon my work, because it freed me from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys. The greater part of the collected treasure, and the more valuable part, was in old ecclesiastical or old Greek modes, or based on more primitive (pentatonic) scales, and the melodies were full of the most free and varied rhythmic phrases and changes of tempi, played both rubato and giusto. It became clear to me that the old modes, which had been forgotten in our music, had lost nothing of their vigour. Their new employment made new rhythmic combinations possible. This new way of using the diatonic scale brought freedom from the rigid use of major and minor keys, and eventually led to a new conception of the chromatic scale, every tone of which came to be considered of equal value and could be used freely and independently<sup>7</sup>.*

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Bartók sought 'the new way', perhaps reflective of his desire to be unique, or more precisely, his desire to discover his own voice. According to Bartók, he discovered this voice, not through Brahms, Wagner, Strauss or even Liszt, but by looking back further into the traditions of the folk music from the region of his birth.

Bartók's six string quartets, composed during the most adventurous period of his creative life, represent some of the more interesting contributions Bartók offered to the 20<sup>th</sup> century canon. A detailed examination of his fifth quartet (composed in 1934) will perhaps satisfy the academic requirements for this essay, but more importantly offer some evidence to support the dual thesis that Bartók was a modern composer in that he was unique, but in contrast to some peers, Bartók's uniqueness was steeped in tradition. He was a traditional modernist.

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<sup>7</sup> Béla Bartók Essays, Selected and Edited by Benjamin Suchoff, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1976.

As represented in the fifth quartet, there can be no doubt that we have encountered a new and exciting musical language. It is first a rhythmic language with lyrically connected lines, an extremely chromatic language devoid of tonal centers and cadences, and indeed a natural language full of balance and symmetry. The language is marked by its extreme contrasting topics: 'night music', or moments of stasis and explorations of ambient sounds vs. explosive rhetorical statements such as the opening and closing of the first movement, contrasted again by the sweeping folk-dances. We encounter unique timbres, articulations, and textures throughout the work. The form itself is novel, a mirror-like reflexive structure, projecting perhaps both times past and present. Ultimately, we discover the central structure unifying the form, textures, and technique: a unique plan of symmetry which permeates every aspect of the work.

Yet there can be no doubt that the work follows tradition, perhaps not in a strict sense, but certainly in a referential sense. The voice-leading has been carefully considered in all parts. The piece frequently borrows from counter-point and fugue. The form of the first and last movements correlate highly to the expected sonata-like form of a first movement quartet and a rondo-like form of a last movement. While certainly not tonal, we see a clear tonal plan emerge in the piece. Add to this the folk melodies and dance-like meters and rhythms, and we recognize how pervasive the historical references and materials abound in the piece.

Yet this combination of experiment and tradition has created a sublime work of art. To support the above secondary thesis, namely that Bartók's 5<sup>th</sup> quartet was unique not by virtue of its rupture with the past but rather the composer's ability to experiment musically while embracing tradition, it will be necessary to elaborate on the above points in some detail.

We immediately detect an obvious reflexive symmetry across the entire work<sup>8</sup>. As the following table depicts, the fulcrum of the work is found in the central movement, the Scherzo, and specifically the trio of this minuet. The Scherzo, in turn, is flanked on either side by moments of stasis, or night music, namely the Adagio molto and the Andante. By extension, as we move from the center towards the perimeter, the outer movements of the piece, these highly diverse movements highlight rhetorical and declamatory qualities.

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>B'</b>	<b>A'</b>
<i>Mvmnt</i>	<i>Allegro</i>	<i>Adagio Molto</i>	<i>Scherzo</i>	<i>Andante</i>	<i>Allegro Vivace</i>
Style	Rhetorical	Ambient stasis	Dance	Ambient stasis	Rhetorical
Form	Sonata form	Arch	Minuet	Variation on B	Rondo
Pitch <sup>9</sup>	B-flat	D	C-sharp	G	B-flat

*Form of Bartók's Fifth String Quartet*

The symmetrical reflexive structure, represented at the highest level in the relationship of the movements themselves, permeates every aspect of the work. The central movement, the Scherzo, follows minuet form, or ABA'; its key structure maintains the reflexivity, rotating from C-sharp to E in the trio and back to C-sharp<sup>10</sup>. The Adagio strictly follows a scheme of three successive subjects, namely ABC, followed by the return of those subjects inverted, both in order of return but also the materials themselves, or C'B'A'<sup>11</sup>. And the outer movements, as we shall see, are themselves built on arch-like reflexive structures.

<sup>8</sup> The analysis of form contained in the next few pages borrows extensively from the analysis György Ligeti performed on the work, as published in the Boosey and Hawkes edition of the quartet, Hawkes Pocket Scores, London, 2.25, 1939 [Ligeti], as well as Bartók's own analysis published in the aforementioned Essays [Bartók]. While Ligeti's analysis sometimes departs from the notes of Bartók himself (for example Bartók claimed the first movement had only two subjects in the exposition vs. Ligeti's three), I find Ligeti's analysis insightful and compelling.

<sup>9</sup> The references to keys do not suggest tonalities but rather a seminal pitch.

<sup>10</sup> See Bartok, p. 414.

<sup>11</sup> See Ligeti, p. 3.



Our attention, therefore, is drawn to the nexus, the trio of the minuet in the scherzo. This trio, as referenced below, suggests a Bulgarian 9/8 dance (3:2:2:3). As the trio unfolds, an ostinati in the first violin opens the trio, seemingly suspending time. An obvious folk melody is then introduced, first in abeyance via a pizzicato texture in the second violin, and then fully *in rilievo* with the viola, eventually joined in imitation by the cello. The opening texture allows this section to float with the stasis-like quality of the night-music of the slower movements, yet with the arrival of the viola, we see a folk-dance unfold. We recognize we have arrived at a significant juncture in the piece. From here, the weight of the piece descends in a motion to the final “cadence” of B-flat for the final movement.



Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: Third Movement Scherzo: Trio

The symmetrical structure is recursive. As we delve into more detail of the first movement, we find the same reflexive qualities in this movement. Moreover, we identify a similar moment to the trio, this time the center of the first movement (as opposed to the center of the piece). It seems that we have

the first movement itself acting as an exposition of sorts for the entire work, pre-announcing the reflexive symmetry, where the arch crests in a dance-like folk melody.



Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: First Movement Allegro: m. 86

The ostinati offered in the lower strings creates an immediate contrast to the preceding declamatory section of the development. A bar into the ostinati we have the fortissimo, an equally declamatory entrance in both violins, but this time, in contrast to before, a folk-like statement. The following table allows us to place the setting of this moment in the context of the first movement.

<b>A-B-C-D-C'-B'-A'</b>									
<b>Exposition</b>				<b>Development</b>		<b>Recapitulation</b>			
<b>A</b> 1-14	<b>TR</b> 14-24	<b>B</b> 24-44	<b>C</b> 44-58	<b>D</b> 59-132	<b>C'</b> 132-146	<b>B'</b> 146-159	<b>A'</b> 159-176	<b>Coda</b> 177-218	
1st sub		2 <sup>nd</sup> sub	3 <sup>rd</sup> sub	<b>A &amp; B</b>	<b>C</b> inverted	<b>B</b> inverted	<b>A</b> inverted	<b>A</b> material	

B-flat?		C?	D?	E?		F#?	A-flat?	B-flat?	B-flat?
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### Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: First Movement Structure

We immediately notice that this transition to a folk-like dance topic with ostinati occurs precisely at the mid-point of the work (excluding the coda), embedded in a development section. And so we note the parallel between the first movement and the entire work: the heart of the work, and perhaps the heart of the composer: a simple folk melody.

The symmetrical observations apply to the form of the other movements. As referenced above, we find the Adagio Molto offers three subjects in succession, followed by their inversion in reverse order, or A-B-C'-B'-A'. The Andante, as we might expect, is more complicated. While not a strict inversion of the Adagio (if the arch-like form played out across this movement), we find the same materials of the Adagio Molto except varied, and so the Andante acts as a variation on the Adagio Molto. Yet, as we move away from our fulcrum, namely the trio of the Scherzo, the weight of the piece grows. The Andante begins with a variation of the first subject of the Adagio Molto, or A' (mm. 1-22), followed by a variation of the second subject, B' (mm. 23-42), and eventually the third subject, C' (mm. 42-54), a canonic variation<sup>12</sup>. Yet here we do not see the inversion of these same variations, as in the Adagio Molto, but instead encounter a transition (mm. 54-60), a development (mm. 60-81), and a recapitulation of sorts (mm. 81-101). And so the Andante seems integrated with the Adagio Molto, the combination suggesting the form of the opening Allegro.

Our final movement is the most complex in terms of form, and at 828 bars carries the most weight of the quartet. Following the analysis of Ligeti, a rondo-like form somewhat oscillates between an initial

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<sup>12</sup> See Ligeti, pp 4-5.

subject and episodes. Yet we see ‘grotesque transformations’<sup>13</sup>. The following table outlines the form of the final movement<sup>14 15</sup>.

Exposition?					Development?			Recapitulation?					Coda?
1-14	14-54	55-109	109-149	150-200	202-368	368 - 484	484-527	527-546	546-623	624-698	699-720	721-780	781-828
Intro	1 <sup>st</sup> sub	2 <sup>nd</sup> sub	1st sub inv	TR	Trio	Fugato (1 <sup>st</sup> sub)	Episode	Intro recap	1 <sup>st</sup> sub recap	2 <sup>nd</sup> sub recap	2 <sup>nd</sup> sub var	2 <sup>nd</sup> sub	Coda
<b>A</b>					<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>B'</b>	<b>A'</b>			<b>TR</b>	<b>Coda</b>	

#### Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: Final Movement Structure

This complex movement includes surprises. For example, the development section (if you will) packs together a Trio and Fugue. Yet the most bizarre moment of the piece occurs with the second recurrence of the second subject in the recapitulation (if you will) at mm. 699-720. The complete texture shift from the frenetic, lyrical lines to a mockingly simple texture of accompaniment plus melody. Perhaps we see a reference to the ostinati accompaniment of folk melody we encountered at the fulcrum of the Allegro and the fulcrum of the entire work, the Trio of the Scherzo. Yet here, we have nothing of the vitality and nostalgia of the previous folk-like dance sections. Instead, we have the first and only obvious tonic/dominant relationship providing a contorted reference to a folk melody with dance accompaniment. The section seems completely incongruous, and so we might ask what happened. Did the weight of the piece (or perhaps even the weight of history) reduce the nostalgic references of folk-melodies to aborted, grotesque images<sup>16</sup>? If we examine the final movement from a macro-perspective and follow Bartók’s own notes on the movement<sup>17</sup>, a clear symmetrical reflexive structure once again emerges. Bartók has modeled the final movement after the first movement.

<sup>13</sup> See Ligeti, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> See Ligeti, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> See Bartók, pp 414-415.

<sup>16</sup> Hence the proposed thesis.

<sup>17</sup> See Bartók p. 415.

The symmetrical nature defines the form, but permeates even the key structure and lines of the piece. Consider, again, the first movement. We notice a clear key structure that moves from B-flat in the opening, eventually to E natural (which acts as a dominant to B-flat<sup>18</sup>) for the development<sup>19</sup>, and then eventually up the whole-tone scale to B-flat. We see in the opening bars the relationship of B-flat to E defined as the accented arrival at m. 5. From the standpoint of symmetry, of course the tri-tone bi-sects the octave, with half of its weight on either side.

*Sinfonia* **ALLEGRO** Béla Bartók

Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: First Movement Allegro

For another example of this “axial symmetry”<sup>20</sup>, consider the final bars of the first movement.<sup>21</sup> After the arrival at the E-natural (dominant) at m. 215, we see the reflection play out in the inverted intervals, providing a cadence of sorts to our B-flat final. And again, we notice this same axial symmetry in the final bars of the final movement of the quartet, yet in contrast to the first movement, ascending voices rotate with descending voices.

<sup>18</sup> See Bartók p. 414.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Walsh, *Bartók Chamber Music*, BBC Music Guides, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1982, p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 4, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 400.

<sup>21</sup> See Walsh p. 61.



Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: First Movement Allegro: mm. 215-218



Bartók 5<sup>th</sup> Quartet: Final Movement Allegro vivace: mm. 825-828

We also notice symmetry of the entrance of ‘voices’ around common subjects, sometimes following the form we might expect in a four-voice counter-point. Examples of this technique abound, the most interesting being the opening of the piece. At m. 1 we have four voices as one. By m. 5, the unison voices have broken into two, the violins as one and the viola and cello as the other. By m. 15, the voices have broken into four. They enter as in a fugue; the viola first introduces the subject, followed by the first violin, then second violin, then cello. Eventually we see the return to the union of voices at m. 24.

Bartók’s experiment in symmetry permeated every aspect of the 5<sup>th</sup> quartet, from outer form, to inner form, to key structure, cadences, lines, and even entrance and groupings of voices. Yet the quartet is certainly not traditional. Tonality has been redefined with a new model of axial symmetry. Sonata form has been augmented to support an arch-like structure, where the return of material is opaque due to inversions of material and reversed ordering. New sounds and textures emanate from new techniques and articulations. And so the references to the tradition help us understand the piece, but act only as nostalgic guides.

Is it possible that a model for modernity exists within Bartók and in particular his string quartets? Is it possible that the transition from the Romantic Era to the Modern Era was not marked by revolution, but instead evolution? If we accept the absurd standard of modernity as a standard of unique, then can one argue that Bartók's quartet is any less unique than the works of his contemporaries? We now clearly recognize the question is absurd, nothing more than a prolonged distraction, and so, at last, we move on.