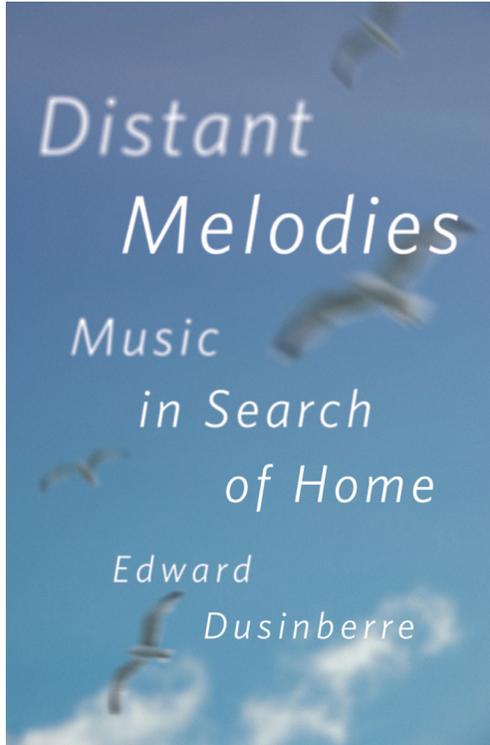


EDWARD DUSINBERRE

# Bartók's Retreat



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THROUGH THE GLEAM of brass the lettering was hard to read: “Bartók’s Retreat.” Out of habit I hung a “Do Not Disturb” cushion over the doorknob. I was staying in the same room at the Al-bemarle Inn located in Asheville, North Carolina, where Bartók lived between December 1943 and April 1944, sent there by his doctors to convalesce from a condition tentatively diagnosed as tuberculosis. The ailing composer recuperated at the salubrious inn, three miles away from a bustling downtown that during the Second World War accommodated a convalescent centre for Navy officers, a command

base for the US Air Force and a processing centre for refugees. Bartók regained enough strength to enjoy walking in the forests of the nearby Blue Ridge mountains. Grateful for the improvement to his health, he began collating the texts of some two thousand folk songs from the Romanian region of Wallachia. He was also busy composing the *Sonata for Solo Violin* for Yehudi Menuhin and making a piano reduction of his *Concerto for Orchestra*. Nonetheless, at times he struggled to maintain good spirits. Never far from his thoughts was his anguished decision to leave Hungary in October 1940.

In *You Can't Go Home Again* Thomas Wolfe, born in Asheville, explored the elusive nature of home. It is unlikely that Bartók read the novel, first published posthumously in 1940, but he would have understood protagonist George Webber's sense of loss and disillusionment when Webber makes a final visit to Germany in 1936. Webber, like Wolfe, has written a book that portrays unflatteringly the residents of his home town, but it is the emergence of Hitler that brings into focus the impossibility of recapturing childhood and his optimism as a young man.

In the quiet room under the eaves the conditions should have been ideal for sleeping, but as a traveling musician I was more accustomed to carving out quiet spaces against my immediate environment. The security-door lock of a larger hotel offered reassurance from bawdy corridor voices while earplugs muted the clatter of a room-service tray delivered nearby. The silence at the Albemarle Inn was overbearing. During an unsettled night I dreamed I was walking with a cello among jostling commuters but with no case to protect it. Even knowing that the larger instrument would be crushed, I tried to squeeze it into my violin case. In Bartók's haven my restlessness was jarring, symptomatic of a life spent bouncing between airports, hotels, and concert halls.

Despite the promising musical precedents established in my hotel room seventy-five years earlier, my violin practice after breakfast got off to an uninspired start. Two-thirds of the way through the second movement of the Sixth Quartet, I played a repeated pattern of two notes that began as a high shriek before plunging down through the different registers of the violin. Continuing the pattern, I leaped up the G string, an unsexy traversal of the violin's lowest string. Under my ear the violin sounded brittle and choked, a screeching squirrel in the claws of a raccoon. In Bartók's former room, the low ceiling and

heavy drapes contributed to the effect.

Twenty-six years ago, shortly before I moved to Boulder to become first violinist of the Takács Quartet, I first practised this passage in my attic bedroom in Cambridge. On a balmy June afternoon my efforts mingled with the chatter of goldfinches. My mother and my brother Martin offered their own vocal imitations of the violin part, laughing as they pulled out weeds in the garden below. When my parents moved to Cambridge from Leamington Spa in 1979, the presence of an attic conversion was still unusual on Pretoria Road, a street of semi-detached and terraced houses built between 1903 and 1910 following the end of the Boer War. The room would have made a perfect study for either of them to mark essays or prepare classes but instead they earmarked it as the ideal haven for a teenager. At weekends Martin and I spread out a vivid green cloth pitch on my bedroom floor to play miniature football tournaments. We listened to the football commentaries on the radio, enjoying game updates that whisked us from blustery wind at St James' Park, Newcastle, to dreary drizzle at the Baseball Ground, Derby; from elated cacophony following a goal at Old Trafford, Manchester, to a subdued Highbury where my team Arsenal frustrated fans with another attritional display. At five o'clock every Saturday afternoon, James Alexander Gordon read out the football results, the inflections so precise that from his first syllables the outcome of each game was clear; a subdued beginning indicated the loser, an enthusiastic emphasis the victor. A pianist who had performed on cruise ships, Gordon attributed his interest in phrasing only partially to his musical studies—the false expectations created by imprecise emphasis were irksome to his father, who bet on the results. I marvelled at Gordon's concentration, never giving a result a mistaken inflection. How tempted I would have been to dash the hopes of Manchester United supporters with a deceptive: Arsenal 1 Manchester United 0!

That a small section of a Bartók quartet could trigger a happy memory of my bedroom in Cambridge did not lessen the challenge of covering such distances across the fingerboard while simultaneously trying to observe Bartók's exacting phrasing instructions. Tiny hairpins — < and > — written under each group of two notes indicated the desired emphasis: brigh-TON or FUL-ham. Bartók had called this movement *Marcia*. Although the unyielding rhythm matched the title, there was something wrong with this march. The hairpins exaggerated

the effect of the rhythm—a soldier struggling to maintain balance as he lurched from one foot to the other.

Antagonism drove the music forward. At the beginning of the *Marcia* the instruments played in pairs, arguing back and forth, unwilling to march together. Individual melodies emerged to rail against the underlying rhythm. Bartók's metronome marking was a little too quick for a typical march, increasing the sense of relentless motion. Even so, I tended to choose a faster tempo than indicated. After many years of playing the piece with our cellist, founding member of the Takács, András Fejér, I knew how to read his concerned look in my direction at the beginning of the movement: I was tripping along, my rhythm too easy-going instead of inflexible.

In this *Marcia* Bartók seemed to evoke tyranny, even to foreshadow the horrors of concentration camps and forced marches. Growing up in Budapest under the communist system, András had experienced inflexibility and oppression in a different way. If my comfortable upbringing in Cambridge made it harder for me to inhabit the rigid character of the music, this relentless rhythm nonetheless generated its own sense of imprisonment, dictating the repetitive movements of my bow and fingers, self-expression no longer relevant. Twenty-six years after my first encounter with this music, I was holed up in an Asheville attic room still practising it. The music marched me along whether I liked it or not: no wonder I wanted to get through it as quickly as possible.

At first glance the movement was in a standard ABA form. The B section featured an anguished cello melody and an agitated rejoinder from the first violin. Where a less inventive composer would now have offered a predictable *da capo*—back to the beginning—merely repeating the *Marcia* in its previous state, Bartók transformed the opening music. The rhythm and melodic contours remained recognisable, but were now played in a soft dynamic. The second violin, viola and cello were all assigned double-stops that resulted in left hands jumping awkwardly up and down the fingerboard. Under these circumstances the quieter volume was difficult to maintain.

If I became too absorbed in the literal difficulties of managing squeaky high harmonies at the top of the group, András would urge me to sound more casual: a half-hearted soldier whistling as he continued his dreary task. Then came the passage that I practised most frequently, its crazy leaps a caricature of earlier music. In Asheville

the technical challenges of the music were only part of the reason for my continued attention. At the very moment when the music should rightfully have returned home to its opening material, I was also drawn to Bartók's distortion of the opening *Marcia*, the transformed music indifferent and nightmarish.

Bartók's childhood experience of home did not have much in common with a predictable *da capo*. The 1920 Treaty of Trianon that followed the First World War reduced Hungary's territories by around two-thirds. In 1881, the year of Bartók's birth, his home town of Nagyszentmiklós had belonged to Hungary; after the 1920 treaty it belonged to Romania. The following year Bartók wrote a short autobiographical sketch describing the many changes of home he had endured. His early years had been shaped by the loss of his father at the age of seven and his mother's struggles to support him and his younger sister Erzsébet. After his father died, "we first went to live in Nagyszöllös (at present Czechoslovak territory), then to Beszterce in Transylvania (at present Romanian territory), and in 1893 to Poszony (Bratislava, at present Czechoslovak territory)."<sup>1</sup> At least part of the reason for this last move to a town with a thriving musical life was Bartók's mother's awareness of her son's musical talent. But Bartók's insistent repetition of "at present" in his later essay illuminated how aware he was of impermanence, of shifting boundaries within the region.

Having experienced only one childhood move from Leamington Spa to Cambridge (at present Cambridgeshire territory), I could not blame any early trauma for causing my anathema towards the traditional ABA form that occurred in a typical minuet by Haydn or Mozart. After a contrasting trio section, the opening minuet material—already heard twice thanks to the repeat signs at the ends of its two halves—was presented for yet a third time. With some notable exceptions it seemed to me that composers hastily tossed off their minuets, conserving their creative energies for the grander challenges of a finale. Admittedly, my impatience with the minuet as a form betrayed a lack of appreciation for its original function as a dance. A clumsy dancer myself, the joyful return of a familiar step was lost on me—merely further confirmation of incompetence. I preferred those composers who used traditional musical forms to create the expectation of return, only for the off-balance soldier to take one in a different direction. No one did it better than Bartók.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Béla Bartók, *Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff, (London, 1976), 408.

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