BELA BARTOK ESSAYS

Selected and Edited by Benjamin Suchoff. Illustrated. 567 pp. New York: St. Martin's Press. $75.

By DONAL HENAHAN

WITHIN every failure, like dormant seeds, successes lie waiting to be watered and fertilized. For Béla Bartók it was a series of bitter failures as a young pianist and composer that turned him toward the study of Hungarian peasant music and set him on the road to international recognition as a folk-song scholar. In 1904, the 23-year-old musician entered his Opus 1, the Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra, in the Anton Rubinstein competition in Paris, and lost to a certain Brugnoli. He then entered the piano competition, and there at least he lost to a young man of some subsequent fame, Wilhelm Backhaus. A success or two at this time would have pushed Bartók onto the European concert whirligig; instead he began his pioneering song-collecting trips into the Hungarian back country. There he encountered another young composer with awakening curiosity about peasant music, Zoltán Kodály, and in 1906 the two published their first joint work, "Twenty Hungarian Folksongs." Before long they had embarrassed all previous writers on the subject, including Liszt, showing that what had been taken for Hungarian folk songs in the past were actually relatively sophisticated creations in a gypsy style by upper class amateurs.

Bartók's research did not stop at the borders of Hungary (if anyone during his lifetime could tell what those borders were) but carried him into the villages of other Central and Eastern European cultures. With him went a primitive cylinder recording machine, an exciting new tool for collecting the orally preserved music of Slovenian, Rumanian, Arabic and Turkish peasants. Bartók was part of what we now can see was an almost frantic rush by a few farsighted people to capture this simple but elusive music before onrushing technological development atomized it beyond recall. Anglo-American sources were mined by Francis James Child, Cecil J. Sharp, the Lomaxes and others, while in most other cultures similar prospectors were at work. But consider this cosmically arranged double bind: The very technology that put the portable recorder and phonograph into the hands of the folk researchers, making accurate and verifiable collecting possible for the first time, was also invading the previously isolated societies and eroding the material even as it came under study. The world, it would seem, is under the guid-

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N.Y. Times Book Review 1977 May 8.

ance of an ironic humorist.

Bartók the ethno-musicologist is heavily though not exclusively represented in Benjamin Suchoff's collection of essays, which cover more than 30 years and not only allow one to trace Bartók's career-long obsession with peasant music but also to see clearly how this concern shaped and strengthened his own compositions. Much of the material has been available in scattered specialized journals, but some has not been published previously, such as four Harvard lectures of 1943, half of a scheduled series that was cut short by Bartók's final illness (he died in New York in 1945).

Though Bartók was abused as a revolutionary during much of his composing life, he actually was not much in sympathy with extremism, not even of the scholastically attractive 12-tone variety in which he recognized a conservative 19th-century linkage. In fact, one may see in Bartók and Schoenberg artists straining in opposite directions in an effort to solve the problems of modern music. Throughout these essays Bartók preaches that art music's salvation must come through a renewal of the composer's connection with peasant society and its "inherent simplicity." He does not mean that folk music can be grafted onto composed music in any superficial fashion but that the artist, by going back and drinking at this pure spring, may absorb the terseness of expression, the turns of phrase and the deep flavor of his national culture's music. Schoenberg early on recognized this as a dead hope, a way possible in the past for composers in older, more hermetic societies—such as Bach or Beethoven or Schubert—but not for a cosmopolitan artist in the 20th century. Bartók described Schoenberg as "free from all peasant influence . . . his complete alienation to Nature, which of course I do not regard as a blemish, is no doubt the reason why many find his work so difficult to understand." Despite that disclaimer, which is a little unconvincing, Bartók shows no sympathy anywhere in these essays for atonality of the codified Schoenbergian sort.

Bartók's quixotic notion that a vital art music had to be grounded on the composer's national culture has been pretty well whipped off the stage in the past 50 years. The international stylists, following Schoenberg and especially his disciple Webern, have developed a kind of pan-cultural music that is purposely stateless, and, its opponents might say, rootless.

Bartók's vision of a modern music "rejuvenated under the influence of a kind of peasant music that has remained untouched by the musical creations of the last centuries" appears now as an idea whose time came and went while the recording machines were running. It gave us, however, much magnificent music, including all of Stravinsky's early ballet scores and Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov," to point out only a few peaks. And if his idea ever should return, it probably will be in a shape so strangely transformed that Bartók himself would not recognize it. In this country, at any rate, real folk music long ago went to Nashville to die and left no known survivors. ■