

Bartók, Béla

Fassett, Agatha (l'òod 04)



Béla Bartók (right) and violinist Rudolf Kolisch, New York, December, 1940.

## Behind the Mask, a Deep Love of Nature

THE NAKED FACE OF GENIUS: Béla Bartók's American Years. By Agatha Fassett. Illustrated. 367 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, \$5.

By ARTHUR BERGER

BEFORE the development of the rigorous approach to musical history that is known as "musicology," the memoir was a major source of information about musicians and musical life. Disciplined treatment of facts is obviously progress, since memory easily deceives. At the same time, a good memoir of a creative personality yields a human warmth, of little use perhaps to the scholar, but fascinating to those who try to comprehend the eternally perplexing phenomenon of the artist.

In resorting to memoir as an approach to Béla Bartók, Agatha Fassett has succeeded in bringing us into the presence of one of the most retiring figures ever to appear on the American musical scene. Bartók (1881-1945) was a Hungarian composer of modern tonalities, contrapuntal and rather harsh sounding; but through his six string quartets and works for orchestra, he is becoming better known to the American music lover. During his tragic last years from 1940

to 1945, spent here in voluntary exile from his native Hungary, he presented an impenetrable façade to almost everyone but a few compatriots.

As Mrs. Fassett puts it, he had a "classical mask that was ready for any public occasion, and which was generally mistaken for the sign of an essentially cold personality." She herself admits, "I never had any illusion that I had been taken into his confidence." Yet he revealed some of his deepest concerns to her, because a passionate love of nature served as a meeting ground.

IN a memoir from the Romantic era, nature would have been a source of no end of extravagances. But any sign of them has been whittled away in what turns out to be a thoroughly ingenuous and remarkably well written account where nature figures not as a mystical value with a capital "N," but in specific terms that bespeak the most precise knowledge on Bartók's part. The author injects surprising suspense into the most innocent episodes, such as a quest in the forest for a lost cat or a walk outside her Vermont house during which Bartók finds traces of an old coach road.

Significantly, Bartók is mentioned only in the subtitle of "The Naked Face of Genius," for this keenly perceptive treat-

ment of him is like a composite portrait of any true creative individual. His pride, refractoriness and temper are typical products of the artist's integrity. Specific details of Bartók's music and career such as may be found in Halsey Stevens "Life and Music of Béla Bartók" are thus not to be sought here at all and are gratuitous when they appear.

The author's aim was not to document Bartók's life but rather to describe his behavior as she saw it and to record memories of conversations that bear little on music. When not directly in Bartók's company, she sees him through the eyes of his wife, Ditta, who became her close friend. Gradually we watch Ditta crack under the strain of her husband's suffering from his depatriation, the leukemia of which he died and the American public's appalling apathy to his music.

When Mrs. Fassett, toward the end, sees the Bartóks less and less, she quite properly resorts to sketching in pertinent details and reprints a description of the composer's death which she received in a long letter from his son, Peter. Arriving inexorably as the consequence of the recurrent theme of illness that pervades the book, this conclusion skillfully rounds out a highly moving exposition, molded with exceptional sympathy and care.

Mr. Berger, composer, critic and teacher, is the author of "Aaron Copland."

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

1958

Apr. 27.

N.Y. Times  
Book Review