

Bartók Bolyongás

In the twilight years of interwar Hungary, Béla Bartók composed *Bolyongás*, a brief, haunting choral miniature whose modest dimensions belie its expressive depth. Written in 1935 as part of the *27 Two- and Three-Part Choruses for Children's and Women's Voices* (Sz. 103, BB 111), this work exemplifies Bartók's mature fusion of folk spirit and modernist sensibility.

Drawn from a traditional Hungarian folk ballad, the text of the piece, traces the lament of a solitary wanderer who has lost all: home, vineyard, horse and beloved. These stark images unfold in three stanzas, bound by the recurring refrain, "*Not even God shows me mercy.*" The poem is as much a spiritual cry as a folkloric narrative, its elliptical grief rendered universal through Bartók's setting. The composer, ever the ethnomusicologist, encountered the ballad in the *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény*, a trove of Hungarian oral poetry. Yet in this instance, he composed original music rather than transcribing a pre-existing folk tune, a gesture that renders the piece a kind of invented tradition, deeply rooted yet wholly his own.

In this work, Bartók offers more than lamentation; he gives us a distilled vision of music as witness. There is no pathos, no romantic indulgence—only a profound stillness where melody meets memory, and where the fragile harmonies of the human voice echo in a world indifferent to sorrow.

The opening lines, whispered in a modal melody of narrow range, return cyclically like footsteps retraced in the underbrush. The form is ternary, but the return is not a reprise so much as an echo -transfigured by the intervening sorrow of the central stanza-. Bartók weaves a delicate counterpoint between the voices, crafting imitative textures that hover on the edge of silence. Seconds and sevenths traverse between lines, dissonances neither harsh nor unresolved, but severely suspended. Harmony in *Bolyongás* does not progress. It endures, breathes and hesitates.

In *Bolyongás*, the setting honors the Hungarian tongue with extraordinary fidelity; the poem's natural accents -falling invariably on the first syllable of each word- are preserved in a *parlando-rubato* style that lends the music the intimacy of whispered speech. Yet within this freedom lies an undercurrent of order: a latent pulse, a quiet inevitability, as though grief itself moves with its own breathless meter. The voices, often entering in close imitation, lend a sense of echo, or of the self answering itself in the dark. The result is not theatrical despair, but something deeper: restrained, elemental, a grief beyond rhetoric.

It crystallizes the belief that folk culture could nourish a new, authentic art music; that even the sorrow of anonymous villagers, voiced by schoolchildren, could attain the dignity of the concert hall. The piece has since entered the choral canon of Hungary and, increasingly, of the wider world. It is sung in schools, at competitions, in commemorative concerts, not only as a technical study in interval and diction, but as a meditation on loss. Its refrain "*Rajtam az Isten sem könyörül*" rings out not as blasphemy but as testimony, a human cry in the wilderness. The forest of *Bolyongás* is both literal and symbolic, a place where the voice, stripped of ornament, becomes its truest self.