

# BARTÓK

## Rhapsody • Variations For Children • Études

### Fülöp Ránki, Piano



## Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

### Piano Music • 8

<b>Études, Op. 18, BB 81, Sz. 72</b> (1918)	<b>7:26</b>	Volume 1 (version transcribed from Bartók's January 1945 New Jersey Kossuth Radio concert recording)	
1 No. 1. Allegro molto	2:12	10 No. 21. Allegro robusto	0:49
2 No. 2. Andante sostenuto	3:05	11 No. 26. Moderato	0:44
3 No. 3. Rubato – Tempo giusto	2:04	Based on Slovakian folk tunes:	
<b>4 Rhapsody, Op. 1, BB 36a, Sz. 26</b> (1904)	<b>18:10</b>	Volume 4	
from <b>For Children, BB 53, Sz. 42</b> (1908–10)	<b>13:31</b>	12 No. 23. Molto rubato, non troppo lento	1:57
(original versions except where indicated)		13 No. 27. Allegro	0:34
Based on Hungarian folk tunes:		Volume 3	
Volume 2		14 No. 5. Variations (Molto andante)	1:52
5 No. 25. Allegro	0:57	15 No. 11. Lento	1:16
6 No. 29. Allegro	0:36	Volume 4	
Volume 1		16 No. 36. Largo	0:53
7 No. 17. Adagio	1:11	17 No. 37. Molto tranquillo	0:44
Volume 2		<b>18 Variations, BB 22</b> (1900–01)	<b>21:18</b>
8 No. 26. Andante	0:42		
9 No. 34. Andante	1:08		

Were we to travel back in time and visit Budapest at the turn of the 20th century, we would arrive in a confident capital city that was proud of its place on the world stage. It was still enjoying the international esteem it had attracted a few years earlier in 1896, when Hungary's first one thousand glorious years as a Magyar nation were celebrated amid great pomp and ceremony. Every aspect of Budapest was rapidly changing as a rush of ambitious construction projects altered the face of the city. These included the first underground railway in continental Europe and the building of many grand avenues modelled on the fashionable boulevards of Paris. Alongside this conspicuous display of municipal swagger, a correspondingly buoyant artistic scene flourished in private salons, away from the public eye. Budapest's preeminent musical salon was hosted by Emma Gruber, the wife of a wealthy banker. She was a highly accomplished musician in her own right, who took lessons in piano and composition from her young protégés Ernő Dohnányi, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, who would go on to become the three principal standard bearers of Hungarian music in the first half of the 20th century.

Bartók, then still a student at the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music, was introduced to Gruber through his piano teacher, István Thomán, who was keen to promote his two most promising students. The other one was Felicie Fábíán, with whom Bartók was romantically involved. She too was a promising young composer. In his characteristically melancholic way, Bartók, who was barely out of adolescence, assumed the manner of a romantic hero, casting himself as Robert Schumann to Felicie's Clara Wieck through his use of Schumannesque musical cyphers such as F–F–B flat–B flat (standing for Felicie Fábíán and Béla Bartók). The theme that forms the basis of the *Variations, BB 22*, is actually by Fábíán, and Bartók subsequently elaborated it in much the same way that Schumann was pleased to pay homage to Clara, by using her themes as a starting point for his own work. Bartók composed the *Variations* in 1900–01, much of it in the Alpine resort of Merano, where he had been sent to recuperate from a serious chest infection. He travelled there

with his mother, who even managed to hire a piano for Béla to use as he convalesced. Within a couple of years, Fábíán had left Budapest to study in Vienna with Liszt's pupil, Emil von Sauer, and before long Bartók transferred his romantic attentions to the violinist Stefi Geyer.

The high esteem in which Bartók held Emma Gruber can be deduced from the fact that his official Opus 1, the *Rhapsody, BB 36a* (1904), is dedicated to her. As the Hungarian musicologist György Kroó observed, an Opus 1 is a significant landmark in any composer's development: 'the first work which a young composer considers to be worthy of preservation, one that he would like to have performed in years to come...'. Completed in Pozsony (now Bratislava) towards the end of 1904, this original version for solo piano predates the version for piano and orchestra, which was premiered in Paris in 1905 with Bartók himself as the soloist. He also gave the belated first performance of the piano-only version in Pozsony the following year. It was around this time that Bartók first encountered the genuine peasant music of Hungary while he toured the mountains of Transylvania with his friend Kodály. The authentic music that they heard in this isolated district came as a revelation to them both and they recorded much of it on wax cylinders. After fully acquainting himself with the utterly unique folk songs of this region, Bartók reassessed his approach to composing. He subsequently described the style of his *Rhapsody* as 'pseudo-folk music' because it is permeated by urban characteristics that he, like most other middle-class Hungarians of the time, had erroneously considered to be the quintessential musical voice of Hungary. Despite the lasting impact of his musical travels in Transylvania, Bartók continued to perform the *Rhapsody* in both the solo and orchestral versions. In 1911, the composer Arthur Honegger heard Bartók play the work in Zurich and was captivated. More than 40 years later, he recalled 'how fresh the colour and rhythmic the life of this work, so unlike the many similarly entitled pieces which then encumbered the repertoires.'

Bartók likened the arranging of a peasant melody to 'the mounting of a jewel'. It was a task he performed with great enjoyment. When transcribing the songs he had collected, his aim was always to keep the results simple. Between 1908 and 1910, his efforts bore fruit in 85 little pieces based on Hungarian and Slovak folk songs, which appeared under the title *Gyermekeknek* ('For Children'). A revised version appeared much later, in the last year of Bartók's life, but it is the original versions that are presented here. Rather like Schumann's *Album für die Jugend* ('Album for the Young'), the individual pieces are largely unadorned, and although they may at first sight seem free of ambition, they are extremely effective miniature masterpieces of graceful perfection, and Bartók conceived them as both a means of honing the dexterity of young fingers and of encouraging a rather loftier artistic discernment than is to be found in most teaching pieces. It comes as no surprise that this collection is among the few didactic works of the piano repertoire to be performed by skilled professionals as much as by eager youngsters. The selection of works from the Hungarian set each bear a title offering a clue as to their musical character. They reflect the simple existence of peasant life and tend to focus on such everyday pleasures as love (No. 17 'The young bride', No. 34 'Evening kiss'), dancing (No. 21 'Vigoro', No. 26 'Dance with me') and eating (No. 25 'Eve eats an apple', No. 29 'Dinner at my house'). No. 26 appears here twice: first as it is printed, and second as a transcription of a radio performance given by Bartók himself in early 1945. There are many significant rhythmic differences. No. 21 is also transcribed from the same radio performance.

Many of the songs that form the Slovak set were collected in the area around the present-day Hungarian-Slovak border, and Bartók makes use of rhythmic elements from both cultures. As with the Hungarian set, love is well represented in the Slovak songs (No. 11 'Sweetheart, wait for me', No. 36 'Roses for my sweetheart'). Nature and the outdoors come to the fore, too (No. 5 'Bird in flight', No. 23 'The old shepherd', No. 37 'On the banks of the Danube'). Childish high spirits also make a lively appearance (No. 27 'Mockery').

In the early 1920s, the Hungarian viola player Antal Molnár observed that the most recent piano music by his friend Bartók was seldom appreciated by the general public, who were apt to dismiss the composer as a 'rough, primitive man'.

Later in life, Molnár recalled that Bartók rarely performed Beethoven's late piano works because they 'are very difficult'. Molnár objected that Bartók's own *Études, Op. 18*, are among the most difficult works in the entire piano literature, but the composer simply replied, 'That is indeed true, but their preparation took me months, during which time I could not do anything else that was really worthwhile. It was wasted time!' The *Études* are devoted largely to the extension and contraction of the pianist's hand, and the resultant octave-displacements are not dissimilar to those in the twelve-tone technique pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg, who admired the way that Bartók was steering music away from the cloying chromatic excesses of late 19th-century Romanticism.

By the time that Bartók gave the first performance of his *Études*, in the spring of 1919, Budapest's citizens could only look back in wistful nostalgia to the lost glamour and glitz of their pre-war city. Following Hungary's crushing defeat in the Great War, lawlessness prevailed, and the country was facing imminent dismemberment. In 1919, any remaining traces of democracy were displaced, first by a brutal communist republic, and then, a few months later, by an insidious far-right irredentist regime that would eventually cause Bartók to emigrate to the United States, where he remained an exile until his death.

**Anthony Short**

### **Fülöp Ránki**

Fülöp Ránki was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1995. At age eight he was accepted into the Pál Járdányi Music School where he studied under Erika Becht. He was later tutored by Edit Hambalkó before entering the Franz Liszt Music Academy, where his teachers were Jenő Jandó, István Lantos and Rita Wagner. Since 2007 Ránki has performed works for three pianos with his mother, Edit Klukon, and father, Dezső Ránki, including concertos by Bach and Mozart and works by Barnabás Dukay. He has been a regular soloist with leading Hungarian orchestras including the Hungarian National Philharmonic, Concerto Budapest and Győr Philharmonic Orchestra, and has worked with conductors including Heinz Holliger, András Keller, Zoltán Kocsis and Gilbert Varga. He has also performed internationally in Europe and Asia at festivals including La Folle Journée in Nantes and Tokyo and the Festival de La Roque-d'Anthéron in France. Notable performances include the Hungarian premiere of Messiaen's *Des Canyons aux étoiles*.... He received a Junior Prima Award in 2016.



Photo: © Róza Radnóti

Béla Bartók's formative years as a composer in Budapest were stimulated by fashionable musical salons hosted by the wealthy Emma Gruber (later Zoltán Kodály's wife). His landmark *Rhapsody, Op. 1* is dedicated to Gruber, while the earlier *Variations* are a romantic homage to his talented colleague Felicie Fábrián, composer of the theme. The virtuoso *Études* focus on hand flexibility for pianists – the pieces *For Children* are based on Hungarian and Slovak peasant songs partly collected by Bartók. These revelatory sounds caused Bartók to change his approach to composing. He likened the arranging of a peasant melody to 'the mounting of a jewel', producing extremely effective miniature masterpieces of graceful perfection.

## Béla BARTÓK

(1881–1945)

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A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet

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