

Formal Problems in *Threnos in memoriam Béla Bartók* (1945) by Sándor Veress

by Friedemann Sallis

In early September 1945, the newly formed Hungarian Arts Council commissioned Zoltán Kodály, Pál Kadosa and Sándor Veress to compose orchestral works for a concert which was to signal the reawakening of cultural life in Budapest after the war. Veress began working on his composition towards the middle of the month. Initially it was intended to be a lament in memory of the suffering caused by the war. However once the news of Bartók's death broke on September 26, the work received its definitive title under which it was given its first performance in Budapest at the end of that month.¹

On at least three occasions, and notably in a letter written to Erich Doflein in 1952, Veress has spoken of this work as being composed in a sonata form.² From this point of view, *Threnos* is absolutely typical of Veress's production during the forties. In his letter to Doflein, the composer went out of his way to insist that almost all of the movements of all major works written between the Violin Concerto (1939) and the *Concerto for Piano, Strings and Percussion* (1952) are based on this form. While many aspects of *Threnos* do indeed correspond with the sonata form, others are problematic.³ The observations presented here concerning these problems may serve not only for a better understanding of Veress's style and technique at a critical point in his career, but may also allow one to situate his work in relation to Bartók's heritage.⁴

Carl Dahlhaus has defined the term "melodic tonality" as a "general congruence of structures and functions."⁵ He was referring to the music of the Middle Ages, however his definition is remarkably apt for dealing with the thematic aspect of *Threnos*. The two themes exposed at the beginning of the composition are each based on ecclesiastic modes. The first theme is in the dorian mode transposed to E. The second theme begins in the aeolian mode transposed to B. The pitch collection of this theme is then enlarged to encompass all twelve chromatic degrees and ends with a phrygian cadence on B. The metrico-rhythmic articulation of each theme produces a coherent and readily recognizable musical idea. Within these linear structures, certain functional devices such as pedal tones, repercussive tones, melodic summits and cadencial formulas combine to produce the impression that, notwithstanding their modal pitch collections, the two themes are not merely on E and B but in the respective melodic tonalities of these two pitches, which are held together not by chordal but rather by voice-leading structures. The entire work

can be reduced to no more and, generally speaking, no less than four voices. The recapitulation of the second theme (aeolian mode in E) presents a clear example of this sort of structure.

Sándor Veress, *Threnos*, bars 138–152 (reduction by Friedemann Sallis).

The following observations, made from the above example, are generally valid for the entire composition:

1. Stepwise motion dominates throughout. This implies that dissonance, consonance and their resultant harmonic tension and resolution are generated and controlled by such traditional contrapuntal devices as passing tones, neighbor tones, appoggiatura, etc.
2. Large leaps of a fifth or more are, in most cases, compensated by contrary motion.
3. Melodic ideas tend to have balanced, even symmetrical phrase structures. The second theme, for example, is divided into three five-bar phrases, each of which ends with a phrygian cadence in at least one voice: bar 141f., flute; bar 146f., violin; bar 151f., flute, violin and horn.
4. Themes and phrases are consistently conceived around carefully planned melodic summits.

On close scrutiny, the above excerpt reveals itself as a textbook example of three-voice species counterpoint over a tonic pedal. It is characteristic of the work as a whole that everything flows forward in an equilibrium reminding one of the vocal polyphony of the sixteenth century. In fact, the example could well represent yet another indication of the overwhelming impact Knud Jepsen's *Kontrapunkt: Lehrbuch der klassischen Vokalpolyphonie* had on the Hungarian music scene in the late thirties and forties.⁶

Coming back to sonata form in *Threnos*, we have noted that the exposition of the first and second themes are presented on pedal tones a fifth apart. Any suggestion of formal tension usually generated by the tonic/dominant relationship of traditional sonata form is completely lacking. In fact, it seems to have been specifically avoided. As the second theme begins on the aeolian mode transposed to B, it represents nothing more than a redeployment, up one fifth, of the pitch collection of the first theme, which is in the dorian mode transposed to E. Consequently Veress would appear to have deprived his sonata form of what is traditionally considered to be its most essential element: the functional contrast between the tonic and the dominant, a contrast which requires more than simply displacing the tonic within a given collection of pitches.

Of course one could argue that as of the mid 19th century functional harmony had ceased to be the driving force of evolving sonata form and was indeed gradually replaced by a network of thematic-motivic relations.⁷ This point would appear to be all the more pertinent in this particular context as thematic-motivic development is the very substance of sonata form in Bartók's work.⁸ Here again, however, *Threnos* comes up lacking. Veress's thematic material is often modeled on the baroque subject: that is to say, a melodic idea is spun out of intervals presented in an initial head motif.⁹ In *Threnos* both themes are clearly based on this technique which raises another difficulty concerning sonata form. The gradual spinning out of melodic material tends to mitigate clear thematic contrast. In *Threnos* forward motion has indeed little to do with thematic-motivic development. Within the first ten bars of what is supposed to be the development section, the initial differences between the two themes dissolve completely into what can readily be described as instrumental figuration. Thus, despite the rhythmic agitation, the linear aspect of this section is curiously static.

If we now step back and observe the diastematic organisation of the piece as a whole, we note that the work is dominated by the constant presence of the notes of the E triad. Except for an eleven-bar transition, the entire exposition is composed on the pedal tones of E and B. In the ensuing 'development' section this pedal function is transferred to the upper strings. The section uses the E major triad transposed enharmonically as a frame within which motifs of the first and second themes are combined in the instrumental figuration mentioned above. F flat dominates the upper voices from bars 57 to 65. Thereafter, A flat and C flat prevail up to the culmination of the *ffff* crescendo at

bar 88, which marks the high point of the work.¹⁰ Like the exposition, the recapitulation is entirely composed on the pedal tones E and B except for a fourteen-bar transition. The fact that the work is almost entirely written in and around the notes of the E triad is, once again, at odds with the sonata form's demand for dynamic tonal contrast. In a word, if the usual means for generating this contrast are inoperative, what is it that animates the form?

In my opinion the fundamental contrast around which the work is conceived has to do with pitch content: diatonic modes with strongly defined tonal profiles on the one hand and the complete chromatic scale with only weak tonal definition on the other. This diastematic contrast is articulated in a dynamic wave-like form. *Threnos* is marked by three important orchestral crescendos. The first two are abruptly cut off with a "*piano esp.*" (bar 33) and a "G. P." (bar 89), respectively. The last crescendo is followed by a decrescendo which goes to the end of the work.¹¹ Each crescendo has a clearly identifiable diatonic point of departure. As we progress towards the dynamic climax the pitch content increases (more or less rapidly) to the full chromatic scale. In each case the presence of all twelve scale degrees is constituted through the superposition of complementary orchestral voices, a technique clearly related to Bartók's idea of polymodality. This transition from a diatonic to a chromatic pitch collection is also present at the level of the phrase structure of the work. An example of this can be seen in the second theme. In the violin part (bars 145–146) the major and minor forms of the tetrachord F–B flat succeed one another so that all chromatic degrees occur within a relatively short period of time. In the second theme, the first phrase (bars 143–147) is diatonic, the second is partially chromatic and the third (which also contains the diastematic high point of the theme) is completely chromatic. The composer uses this gradual accumulation to build up tension to a climax which is then released in the descent towards the cadence. It is precisely this procedure, applied three times to the work as a whole, which is the main animating feature of the composition.

Threnos presents a ternary form based on a wave-like succession of three crescendos, each of which is an articulation of a transition from a diatonic to a chromatic pitch collection. The extraneous signs of sonata form are nothing but an empty shell. This is not to say that sonata form has nothing to do with the composition. Rather than a description of the form, it is the conceptual point of departure, the normative idea out of which Veress created his work.

- 1 Sándor Veress, "Threnos Béla Bartók zum Gedächtnis", in: *Mitteilungen des Basler Kammerorchesters*, No. 78, March 8, 1958, pp. 1–3. See also Sándor Veress, "Bartók Béla halálának negyvenedik évfordulójára" [On the Fortieth Anniversary of Béla Bartók's Death], unpublished document presented in a radio broadcast on the Deutschlandfunk in 1985, p. 5; Sándor Veress Collection.
- 2 Letter written to Erich Doflein on September 4, 1952, Sándor Veress Collection; Sándor Veress, "Threnos Béla Bartók zum Gedächtnis", op. cit., p. 3; Ferenc Bónis, "Three Days with Sándor Veress, the Composer", in: *New Hungarian Quarterly* 29 (1988), p. 219.

- 3 For a summary description of the sonata form in *Threnos*, see Andreas Traub, "Sándor Veress, Lebensweg – Schaffensweg", in: *Sándor Veress. Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag*, edited by A. Traub, Berlin 1986, p. 51.
- 4 As the sketches of this work do not appear to have survived Veress's emigration to the West in 1949, the basis for this study is the full score published by Suvini Zerboni, Milan in 1952.
- 5 "Tonality", in: *The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie, London [etc.] 1980, vol. 19, pp. 51–52. See also Rudolf Reti, *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality*, London 1958. Reti's discussion of melodic tonality seems remarkably close to the definition presented by Dahlhaus.
- 6 Kodály introduced the German translation of the book into Hungary in 1935 and has suggested that it had a decisive influence on the style of Bartók's last works. See Zoltán Kodály, "Der Mensch Bartók" (p. 229) and "Bartók als Volksmusikforscher" (p. 236), in: *Wege zur Musik*, edited by Ferenc Bónis, Budapest 1983.
- 7 Carl Dahlhaus, *Analyse und Werturteil*, Mainz [etc.] 1970, p. 94.
- 8 Cf. Hartmut Fladt, *Zur Problematik traditioneller Formentypen in der Musik des frühen zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Dargestellt an Sonatensätzen in den Streichquartetten Béla Bartóks*, Munich 1974.
- 9 At least two analysts of Veress's music have dwelt extensively on this sort of linear development; cf. Wolfgang Rathert, "Zum zweiten Streichquartett von Sándor Veress", in: *Sándor Veress. Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag*, op. cit. and Andreas Traub, "Sándor Veress", in: *Komponisten der Gegenwart*, edited by Hanns Werner Heister and Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer, Munich 1992.
- 10 In the seven bars preceding the climax the minor third (A flat – C flat) shines through the crescendo as the various orchestral voices converge on this interval. The procedure is strikingly reminiscent of the appearance of the Mandarin (marked by a sustained minor third in the brass) in Bartók's dramatic ballet. Veress must have been intimately familiar with this work because he sojourned in Italy and was collaborating closely with Aurel Miloss on a new ballet when the latter presented his landmark choreography of the *Miraculous Mandarin* in Milan on October 12, 1942.
- 11 This tendency to produce long periods based on an augmentation of intensity has long been recognized as a hallmark of Veress's style, particularly of the major works written during the forties. Colin Mason, who studied with Veress in Budapest and for a time during the fifties was one of his most unflagging supporters, saw this compositional gesture as being related to the first movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Celesta and Percussion*. Cf. Colin Mason, "Sándor Veress", in: *Ungarische Komponisten (= Musik der Zeit, Heft 9)*, Bonn 1954, p. 61.