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# Casting Beams of Darkness into Bartók's *Cantata Profana*

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**Abstract**

Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana* (1930) retains ambiguities inherent in the Romanian myth on which it is based – a story of nine hunting-lads magically transformed into stags. This article explores the mysterious elements through psychoanalysis, positing links between darkness, Bartókian 'night music', and the Unconscious. Other aspects of the musical language suggest representations of Lacanian processes, specifically a regressive fantasy to the mental order of the 'Real'. This is linked to Bartók's experience of childhood illness, a time of perfect maternal love but profound bodily betrayal, suggesting that the stag-body represents a strong, proud transformation, 'replacing' the debilitated body of childhood memory. Musically, the 'mirror-image' scales of the opening and ending of the work are re-examined. It is proposed that they represent Bartók acknowledging loss, most importantly the loss of the myth of 'pure sources', which had sustained him, both musically and psychologically, up until then. This loss inevitably sought expression after a disastrous polemical debate forced him to abandon the idea of musical purity in folksong.

In April 1914 Bartók went on a folk song collecting trip to Transylvania, one of the last he was able to make before war severely curtailed such activities. The expedition was to provide him with important compositional material, but, unusually, texts rather than music would be his inspiration. Through two related *colinde* (winter solstice songs) he discovered the Romanian myth of nine lads who are transformed into stags while hunting in the forest, and whose altered condition renders them forever unable to return to the comforts of home. Instead, they must reject their parents, remain in the forest, and find their sustenance at the pure well-springs. The *colinde* haunted Bartók through a sixteen-year period of dormancy, eventually finding form in the *Cantata Profana* in 1930. He is reputed to have called the work his 'most personal confession'.[1]

The *Cantata* has proved perennially fascinating; it is mysterious and ambiguous, leaving key questions unanswered. Because there are gaps in the narrative, we see only Bartók's response rather than its preceding stimulus. Many critics have focused on identifying the underlying message of the boys who turn into stags and break away from the comforts of home, never to return, suggesting that the work is about generational conflict, a rejection of

I owe a large debt of gratitude to Rachel Beckles Willson for invaluable guidance on the Hungarian musicological work on the *Cantata Profana* and for pointing out inconsistencies and repetitions in an early draft of this article. I should also like to thank Mickey Yudkin for advice on the psychoanalytic theory, and Julie Brown for providing material from her forthcoming book, *Bartók and the Grotesque*. My friend and colleague Jenny Doctor edited the article and made many helpful suggestions.

1 The origins of the work are documented in detail by László Vikárius in 'Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana* (1930)'. Bence Szabolcsi recalled this comment of Bartók's in 'Cantata Profana', 186; quoted in Vikárius, 'Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana*', 250.

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conciliation, or the transition to a more perfect but terrifyingly uncompromising state.[2] The musical language has been seen as directly expressive of transformation, even of Nature itself. However, there are other possibilities. The transformation of the boys has been understood as being symbolized by transformations of the musical material,[3] but these are far from straightforward. The serene ending has been heard as mitigating the opening's atmosphere of tragic foreboding, but one of the pillars of received interpretation that is supposed to express this most directly – that the closing 'acoustic' scale is a mirror image of the opening scale[4] – does not bear close scrutiny. Furthermore, an important aspect of the confrontational scene at the pure spring – that it takes place in dark shadow – has been overlooked.

The text for Bartók's *Cantata Profana* is based on a myth. Because that myth speaks of a phenomenon that is cloaked in mystery – it would usually be considered impossible for lads to turn into stags – one senses the presence of a parable, of themes that invite interpretation through intellectual mechanisms other than those of reason. Tibor Tallián aptly characterizes Bartók's work as 'painfully ungraspable';[5] yet the text is so saturated with strangeness that the music seems comparatively straightforward. Many aspects of the musical language draw on familiar signifiers from the common-practice era (and I am primarily reading the *Cantata* as a discourse of topics here):[6] the opening key of D minor is associated with tragedy, and the device of fugue and the pitches of E♭ and B♭ are associated with the Hunt; within Bartók's œuvre, the chain of descending thirds outlining a major ninth – the 'Stefi Geyer theme' – almost always represents loss, as Kroó noted,[7] and the shimmering, unearthly textures of 'night music' cloak in mystery that which we cannot 'see'. The music confirms the themes of tragedy, hunting, loss, mystery, but we never really come close to identifying what is tragic, whose loss we are witnessing, or what significance the theme of hunter-turned-hunted holds.

2 Major writings on the *Cantata Profana* include, in addition to the above, Lendvai, *Bartók dramaturgiája*; Tallián, *Cantata Profana*, the main chapters of which were published later as 'Die Cantata profana – ein "Mythos des Überganges"', and the key points summarized in *Béla Bartók*, 161–7. See also Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, 281–8; Kroó, '*Cantata Profana*'; Antokoletz, 'Modal Transformation and Musical Symbolism', an expansion of *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 241–9; and Rachel Beckles Willson, 'Vocal Music: Inspiration and Ideology'. Significant points are raised by Szabolcsi in 'Bartók's Miraculous Mandarin', 36–8, and in 'Two Bartók Obituaries', 292; and also by Peter Laki in 'The Gallows and the Altar', 88–90. Szabolcsi and Laki are important as they summarize earlier material previously available only in older Hungarian sources. The writers who focus particularly on the conflict/transition model are Tallián, Kroó, and Szabolcsi.

3 See Antokoletz, 'Modal Transformation and Musical Symbolism'.

4 See Lendvai, *Bartók dramaturgiája*, 262–6; see also Lendvai, *Béla Bartók*, 72.

5 'Doch davon, daß wir die sekundäre mythische Hülle zersprechen, zieht die Auslegung des Werkes direckt noch keinen Nutzen' (Tallián, 'Die Cantata profana', 136; German trans. by Beatrice Szczepek).

6 The theory of 'topics' – subjects of musical discourse – as an exploration of musical meaning that addresses the issue of musical expression seems first to have been proposed by Leonard G. Ratner with regard to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music; see *Classic Music*, 3–30. Kofi Agawu expands Ratner's theories in *Playing with Signs*. I take my cue partially from Agawu, in that he explores how and why topics surface and how they convey musical expression. Understanding Bartók's works as a series of topics (topoi) has not been consistently adopted as an approach in Bartók studies to date, although it can offer valuable information, especially to the performer, about characterization and poetic content. However, the methodology intersects fruitfully with other, more formalistic analytic approaches, such as those that consider pitch material, since it focuses on elements such as timbre, musical style, musical language, and texture, thus making use of previous analytical insights without necessarily challenging their conclusions.

7 '*Cantata Profana*', 435.

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So many mysteries demand either symbolic representations – transformations into what can be known – or else the ability to be comfortable with the unknown. We should not presuppose, after all, that a work must answer all the questions it raises, or that the composer would know if it had. As a series of ambiguous and punctured events, the *Cantata Profana* lends itself to interpretation through psychoanalysis, a discipline that, since Freud, has offered structures and a theoretical language by which to focus on the unknown. It has done so through representations that may 'bring to light' unconscious[8] processes through that which *can* be known, that which *is* done and said. Bartók would have been well aware of the role of the Unconscious through his association with Sándor Ferenczi, one of Freud's 'disciples', who brought his master's new and evolving ideas to the attention of the Hungarian public.[9] I purposefully use the expression 'bring to light' because one of the major topoi in Bartók's musical world is, of course, that of 'night music'. Features of this topos appear at the point of transformation in the *Cantata Profana* (I, bb. 164–98), and, significantly, the lads change to stags in the darkness of the forest thicket.

Transformation is undoubtedly a major issue in the *Cantata Profana*, but the transformation of the body has been somewhat overlooked in comparison with the more conceptual themes explored in the literature on this work. To this end I shall explore the relevance of bodily change in Bartók's life, linking in with his childhood experience of illness, its effect on his social isolation and on his relationship with his mother – an attachment which he clearly idealized and which had a significant bearing on relationships with men and women throughout his life. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan contrasts the earliest period of mental development (what he terms the 'Real') with that attained after entry into language and thus into the world of intersubjectivity (the so-called 'Symbolic' order). I shall suggest that in the *Cantata Profana* these different orders of mental life are represented by different types of musical language, which range from the Bachian counterpoint of the fugue to the eldest stag's vocalized screeching wail at the end (III, bb. 72–9).[10] Interpretations of this cry have depended to a great extent on the distinctiveness of the scale on which it is built. Here, I offer another suggestion about the identity of this scale, based on its harmonic underpinning. Finally, I examine Bartók's relationship with the idea of the 'pure source', an idea he had once held dear, but which by 1930 was so at odds with itself in the composer's mind as to have produced in him a condition close to aporia. This condition was, I shall argue, one of the motivating factors behind the composition of the *Cantata Profana*, although other psychological aspects also played their part in the shaping of the work.

8 The noun 'Unconscious', with an upper-case initial, denotes one of the psychical systems of Freud's 'topographical' model of mental structure. The adjective 'unconscious', with a lower-case initial, refers to mental processes of which the subject is unaware at the time.

9 Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*, 81. Important arguments for and against the use of Freud during the Freudian era are advanced by Robert Fink in 'Desire, Repression and Brahms's First Symphony', 249–63. Fink persuasively argues that using a 'historicized' Freud can be appropriate in reading musical works that were written during the time when Freud's theories were current.

10 The question of how types of musical language can 'represent' stages of mental development is explored in 'When the Music of Psychoanalysis Becomes the Psychoanalysis of Music', Martin Scherzinger's review-essay of David Schwarz's *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*. Scherzinger, in effect, reviews the current status of psychoanalytic theory in its dynamic relationships with musicology.

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## Darkness, 'Night Music', the Unconscious, and Traumatic Rupture

The traditional story of the 'Nine Enchanted Stags'[11] contains typical elements of the mythic; it involves a supernatural event and, setting up its narrative for tragedy from the start, is thus characterized by an atmosphere of foreboding.[12] However, the facets of the 'Nine Enchanted Stags' that behave as markers of the 'mythic' are problematic. The mystical transformation/separation elements, for instance, have connections to the Christian notion of transubstantiation and to the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex; but in the Christian sense this type of transformation is from a human to a divine condition, whereas in the Freudian it represents a necessary stage in the entirely human journey towards individuated selfhood. We can perhaps do no better than echo the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen, who suggests that myths 'function as markers for the unknown';[13] in those spaces of unknowing marked by mythic elements, anything is possible. In psychoanalysis it is these very *terrae incognitae* that contain the possibility of psychic change. Eigen's more famous colleague Wilfred Bion called such spaces 'O' (standing for 'Origin', in the sense of psychic 'truth'), saying that only when patient and therapist are at one with 'O' can transformation occur. Bion contrasted 'O' – ultimate reality, the thing-in-itself, darkness and formlessness, that which can never be known – with what we can know, which he formulated 'K' ('Knowledge').[14] I shall return to the relationship between 'O' and 'K' below.

Bartók conflated two folk texts of the 'Nine Enchanted Stags', from the nearby Transylvanian villages of Urisiu de Sus and Idicel. The texts are broadly similar but not identical,[15] and Bartók's version throws up some interesting points. The Urisiu text is longer and more complete. Here, however, the boys do not go into a forest; rather, they hunt in the hills, where the father later goes looking for them.[16] We know in the Urisiu text that the transformation has taken place at twilight, since the mother is waiting for them with candles burning. The Idicel text contains the idea of hunting through the woods (*pin codrii vânară*), although the crucial moment of transformation is, unfortunately, missing (indicated by a dashed line in the edition of the texts); however, there is no mention of lighted candles, and the father's pleading centres on the sons' return to a weeping mother waiting with a glass of wine. Bartók's emphasis on the dark surroundings of the transformation is his own. Both Bartók's earlier, Romanian version of the libretto and the later, Hungarian version see the boys not only roaming through the forests; they are also twice 'lost in the forest thicket' (*erdő sűrűjében*).

A preoccupation with darkness is, of course, an ever-present theme in Bartók's music. The idea of the dark could translate literally into night itself, and his continual experimentations

11 I refer to the tale of the 'Nine Enchanted Stags' thus, and to the musical work as the *Cantata Profana*.

12 Tallián, 'Die Cantata profana'.

13 Eigen, 'The Area of Faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion', 427.

14 Bion first proposed the concept of 'O' in *Transformations*; he returns to and clarifies the idea in *Attention and Interpretation*, see esp. pp. 26–30.

15 The texts are edited in Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music*, vol. 4, pp. 229–31.

16 The openness of the landscape around this village (at least at the time of my visit in 2004) distinguishes it from other Romanian villages nearby, which are set among or near to woods, and this aspect of the topography has found its way into the poem.

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with 'night music' have their roots in a fascination for the time of day when that which has been obscured in brightness and noise is exposed, sonically, in darkness – the period when phenomena derive their identity through sound rather than vision. Representations of night soundscapes have been listed and typologized by several scholars, and 'night music' is an accepted topos in Bartók's output. Some hear the night music pieces as representational, listing frogs and insect noises.[17] Psychological interpretations of the night pieces have less commonly been explored. However, Wilfrid Mellers reports that in the 1930s Bartók remarked to him that the night music 'was his most important work, as it dealt with the things that really mattered'; at the time, Mellers says, he inferred that shrouded, psychological issues were of most significance, not those that 'glared, obviously, in the light of day'.[18] This interpretation now seems absolutely in keeping with the ferment of Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic ideas that were still appearing at that time – fresh, new, and exciting.[19] Indeed, it is hard to believe that Bartók had not read Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*, the classic meditation on individual and institutional conflict, and another major product of the horrifying growth of Nazism.[20] One could go so far as to suggest that journeys into dark areas represent crossings into the Unconscious, and that 'night music' is Bartók's signal of a departure into this state. If Mellers remembers his conversation with the composer accurately, then Bartók appears to have held an active desire for us to 'know' that which was shrouded by the dark, since he kept creating musical manifestations of the night. Bion made a free translation of Freud that resonates powerfully with this idea of 'night music'; he saw 'O' as 'a dark spot that must be illuminated by blindness':[21] 'The analyst must cast a beam of intense darkness into the interior of the patient's associations so that some object that has hitherto been obscured in the light can now glow in that darkness.'[22]

17 See Szabolcsi, 'Man and Nature in Bartók's World'; Harley, '*Natura naturans*, *natura naturata*'; Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, 233–6; Danchenka, 'Diatonic Pitch-Class Sets in Bartók's Night Music'; Somfai, 'The "Piano Year" of 1926', 180–1. Curiously, 'night music' is not listed as a subject in Antokoletz, *Béla Bartók: a Guide to Research*.

18 Conversation with the present author, 16 March 2004. During our conversation Mellers mentioned in passing that he had met Bartók and had told the composer that he liked the 'night music' pieces best. Bartók was apparently pleased, and then made the stated comment. Even if, at some seventy years' distance, Mellers has misremembered Bartók's exact words, my conversation with him left me in little doubt about the substance of Bartók's remarks. The psychological 'take' was Mellers', and I thank Wilfrid for this insight.

19 Although Freud's 'The Unconscious' had been published as early as 1915, the decade preceding the composition of the *Cantata* saw, for instance, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929–30), as well as Carl Gustav Jung's *Psychological Types* (1921) and Alfred Adler, *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology* (1923); see 'Sigmund Freud: a Chronology', in S. Freud, *The Freud Reader*, xlii–xlv.

20 The early parts were published in 1929 and the complete work as a short book in 1930; English trans. in S. Freud, *SE* 21, pp. 64–145.

21 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 88.

22 This was Bion's 'liberal' translation of Freud's letter of 16 May 1916 to Lou Andreas-Salomé, as quoted by James Grotstein in 'Bion's "Transformation in 'O'"', <http://www.sicap.it/~merciai/bion/papers/grots.htm> (accessed 10 June 2004). The key issue, as Bion seems to see it here, is having to be 'artificially blind'. Freud's letter has been translated more literally as: 'I know that in writing I have to blind myself artificially in order to focus all the light on one dark spot, renouncing cohesion, harmony, rhetoric and everything which you call symbolic, frightened as I am by the experience that any such claim or expectation involves the danger of distorting the matter under investigation, even thought it may embellish it' (repr. in S. Freud, *Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé: Letters*, 45; originally pubd in Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*).

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Like 'night music', however, the Unconscious does not give up meanings easily, if indeed it can be said to give them up at all. John Searle, neatly conflating different psychoanalytic models, points out that we can 'understand the notion of an unconscious mental state only as [. . .] the *sort of thing* that [. . .] could be [. . .] conscious'.[23] Freud used the term 'the Unconscious' in his early, tripartite 'topographical' model of the mind – Conscious, Pre-Conscious, and Unconscious.[24] Later, while not retaining precisely the same meanings (since Ego and Superego could both contain unconscious aspects), Freud posited a new model of Id, Ego, and Superego. Here, the Id designates a developmentally undifferentiated mental order, containing 'everything that is present at birth, this is fixed in the constitution – above all, therefore, the instincts, which originate from the somatic organization and which find a first psychical expression here in forms unknown to us':[25]

> It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality. [. . .] We approach the Id with analogies; we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations [. . .] it is filled with energy reading it from the instincts, but since it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure-principle.[26]

The Unconscious lies outside that which can be brought to consciousness, in two senses: of matter of which the mind may be *unaware* at any given time, and also of matter that the mind has repressed and is unable to access. This latter material is radically separated from consciousness; it will only enter consciousness in a distorted form.[27]

Those repressed or hidden phenomena that emerge from darkness, 'night music', and the Unconscious do so in a veiled manner. In the dark, things are known primarily by their sounds; from the Unconscious, things emerge transformed into the everyday in only a partial, distorted way. Encounters with the Unconscious contain an element of risk, as the Jungian psychoanalyst Aniela Jaffé has suggested; behind the façade of the phenomenal world the Unconscious lies in a relationship with the realities of human existence that is unclear and fraught with dangers of misunderstanding.[28] This is probably one reason why, for Bartók, explorations into the psyche could probably only happen in texted music through mythic formulations, such as perilous magic journeys through forests, or through non-texted music, whose meanings remain obscure fantasy-objects for their listeners.

The feature of the 'Nine Enchanted Stags' myth that seems to have been of particular importance to Bartók is the transformation of the boys into creatures with new bodies, a

23 Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, 155–6. Searle even goes so far as to deny the possibility of unconscious mental phenomena.

24 So called because Freud believed at this time that the different psychological functions of the Unconscious, Preconscious, and Conscious were located in different places; see Bateman and Holmes, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, 29–32.

25 S. Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938), in *SE* 23, p. 145.

26 S. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1964), 73.

27 These definitions are from Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 217. I reproduce Evans's definition since it most consciously explicates the links between Freud's uses of the word and Lacan's, despite the radical departures made by the latter in his later theory.

28 Jaffé, *The Myth of Meaning*, 62.

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transformation that allows them no means of sustenance except from the pure spring. But the situation is a fantasy. In the part of the myth that takes place on the other side of the bridge of transformation there has been a departure from reality, and only through symbol can we 'know' what is taking place. However, although the stags may be embodying an ideal, it is entirely through a quirk of fate; happiness or sadness is incidental to their new lives in the dark of the forest. Their survival at the pure spring embodies both the serenity of destiny and the chaos of savage existence. Because music is a fabric of semantic multiplicity that can express both organization and turmoil at the same time, Bartók's representations of dark, formless, Id-ness can seem both primordially chaotic and fundamentally serene. József Ujfalussy noted a similarity between the slow introduction to the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* and the *Cantata* melody through which the chorus murmurs 'In the thick of the forest they were changed into stags'. Both employ what he calls 'one of Bartók's familiar centrally-pivoted whirling melodies',[29] and both make use of similar textures (shuddering timpani rolls, glissandi, soft strokes on the tam-tam, suspended cymbal) to communicate that we are located in a world of magic and 'original formlessness'. In the *Sonata*, dating from nine years after the composition of the *Cantata*, Bartók will create order from this 'primordial soup'; but in the *Cantata*, the stags, once part of the world of human reason, are 'regressed' to this place in which they can act out Bartók's fantasy of a pure existence but where nothing is certain. The contrast between the *Cantata* and the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* is noteworthy, highlighting the significance of the regressive nature of the musical topoi in the former. This was not the first time Bartók had played out a regressive fantasy: Julie Brown has observed other ways in which his obsession with sliding under the veneer of respectability, and allowing the almost scatological violence of the underneath world to emerge, found expression through types of musical language.[30]

The characteristics of this primordial world of ultimate transformation are forever in shadow; Bion's 'beams of darkness' can illuminate nothing but paradoxes and crevices in the narrative. Bion himself might have felt entirely comfortable with this, since 'O' (see above), the place of psychological truth he had posited, was ultimately transformative but unknowable.[31] Bion contrasted 'O' with 'K', saying that

> O does not fall in the domain of knowledge save incidentally; it can 'become' but it cannot be 'known'. It is darkness and formlessness but it enters the domain K when it has evolved to a point where it can be known, through knowledge gained by experience, and formulated in terms derived from sensuous experience; its existence is conjectured phenomenologically.[32]

Thus, living with the unknowable might be dreadful or serene. 'O', in the sense that it represents a type of darkness and formlessness, is similar in some ways to Freud's Id;[33] but,

29 Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, 286.

30 I thank Julie Brown for discussing and supplying me with an extract from her forthcoming book *Bartók and the Grotesque* (RMA Monograph Series).

31 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 30.

32 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 26.

33 See especially *The Ego and the Id*, in *SE* 19, pp. 12–66, esp. 12–18.

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unlike Freud, Bion was comfortable with mysticism and believed in the ineffable as a place where psychic transformation could occur. One of the key issues is that faith can plug the gap between elemental being and reality, but faith is to be distinguished from 'knowledge'. To repeat what Bion said: 'O' could only 'enter the domain of K when it has evolved to a point where it can be known, through knowledge gained by experience, and formulated in terms derived from sensuous experience'.

So far, 'O' and 'K' seem familiar enough, rooted in classic concepts of unconsciousness ('O') and consciousness ('K'). However, the 'O' implies a psychic condition of orphandom, a premature awakening before the psyche is ready. In this condition one is impelled to look to 'K' as the 'saviour' from a loss that would otherwise be too hard to bear.[34] Although 'O' can never be known, transformations of 'O' can be knowable in the form of thoughts or statements – 'K' – but these are not 'the truth' because they are not 'O' itself. Absence of truth, or loss of truth, or the impossibility of truth, characterize 'K'. Borrowing from Freud's depiction of psychoanalysis as a process of 'artificial blinding' in order to see that which was unable to 'glow' in the light, Bion's 'O' was the ultimate dark spot which could only be illuminated by blindness[35] and the means by which true psychical transformation could take place – *if* patient and analyst could be perfectly at one with 'O'. To this end it was the job of the analyst to 'cast beams of darkness' into the patient's interior in order to see what was obscured by light.[36]

I dwell at length on 'O' and 'K' because Bion's theory seems so apposite in this case. The absences and losses in the *Cantata Profana* can be interpreted as gaps in 'K', and through these lacunae 'O' can be intuited. For this reason the places where gaps in narratives occur and where traumatic rupture is experienced are vital in identifying what it is we should be intuiting – what 'O' is. For Freud, of course, the Unconscious or Id represents in part that which is repressed; for Bion the 'unknowable' 'O' can be *identified* by symbolic emergences, but only *understood* in blindness and therefore in faith. This is why it can be experienced as horror or serenity, two conditions directly relevant to the *Cantata Profana*.[37] Lacanian psychoanalysis parallels this, in some ways; but for Lacan the mental order that exists 'before knowledge' was identified not with the 'truth' of a psychoanalytic session, but with the earliest period of human development. This order of mental life, the 'Real', is what humans surrender in order to enter the world of intersubjectivity; completely losing the possibility of further contact with this 'Real' state, we nevertheless gain the benefit of communication with other humans through language – the register of the 'Symbolic'. In Lacanian terms, then, the stags' abandonment of human life would be an impossible regression into an unrecoverable mental stage that existed before communication and community had been achieved. This time the orphandom is of the human world, surrendered in order to regain the 'lost' condition of pre-human existence.

34 Grotstein, 'Bion's "Transformations in 'O'"'. Beatriz Priel's 'Negative Capability and Truth in Borges's "Emma Kunz"', though not directly relevant to this study, was useful in understanding how Bion's concept of 'O' can be helpful in understanding lacunae and loss in works of culture.

35 Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 88.

36 See Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 26.

37 And different, then, from the Id, which could be 'known' through dreams and parapraxes.

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Bion intuited the presence of 'O' through silence or a rupture in the emerging narrative of a psychoanalytic session. On the one hand, the gaps in the *narrative* invite conjecture; but, on the other hand, there are no actual musical 'gaps' in this work: it is through-composed, and there are no significant internal silences. Perhaps the most significant fissure in the 'Nine Enchanted Stags' myth is the space in which the boys' transformation occurs – in Bartók's music, where the 'night music' comes in (see Example 1). This, I suggest, is the significance of the 'night music' section: it stands in place of a gap, because it makes known that we are dealing with the unknown. Put simply, the 'night music' topos of Unconsciousness equates in this instance with traumatic rupture and accompanies, musically, the bodily transformation from boys to stags: it can be heard as a corporeal, musical 'representation' of a Bionian 'transformation in O'. It is to this bodily transformation, and its psychological implications, that I now turn.

## Bodily Transformation as Fantasy-Regression

At this crucial point of transformation Bartók's text for the *Cantata Profana* expands the Urisiu redaction. The Romanian folk text sees the boys turning into stags after 'losing their way', whereas in Bartók's libretto the change occurs as they follow magic deer tracks over a beautiful bridge.[38] The issue of change from human to stag has been viewed by Tallián, Kroó, Szabolcsi, and Frygyesi as, respectively, a parable of transubstantiation, of Oedipal separation and initiation into manhood, of a return to Nature, and of a refusal to compromise by accepting anything other than the 'pure source'.

Drawing parallels between these phenomena and Bartók himself has proved irresistible. For Judit Frigyesi, for instance, the *Cantata* expresses a fusion between artistic truth and reality – an 'essence behind the incongruities of everyday existence' – which was one of the central concerns of artists between the wars: 'The old man's sons *are searching for* "the clear spring" – that is, existential essence, the deepest realms of the soul. *This search brings about their metamorphosis*: they become stags, they become nature.'[39] These views tie in with what we generally know about Bartók: his refusal to compromise,[40] his insistence on the pure source,[41] his idealization of Nature and of human existence lived close to nature,[42] and his desire to be free of society's political constraints. One of the most significant aspects of the transformation, however, is that it is not made out of choice. Independently of their volition, and out of their control, the boys' bodies turn into something strange, whose habits are unfamiliar and must be learned: no more drinking from glasses, wearing clothes, treading on ashes, passing through doorways.

The Oedipal aspects of the metamorphosis that Kroó has spotted are also not wholly transparent in relation to the composer, since the question of whether Bartók holds

38 As Vikárius notes ('Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana*', 264), the idea of the 'bridge' might have occurred to Bartók by the similarity of the Romanian *punte* ('bridge') and *p'unde* ('where' or 'wherever').

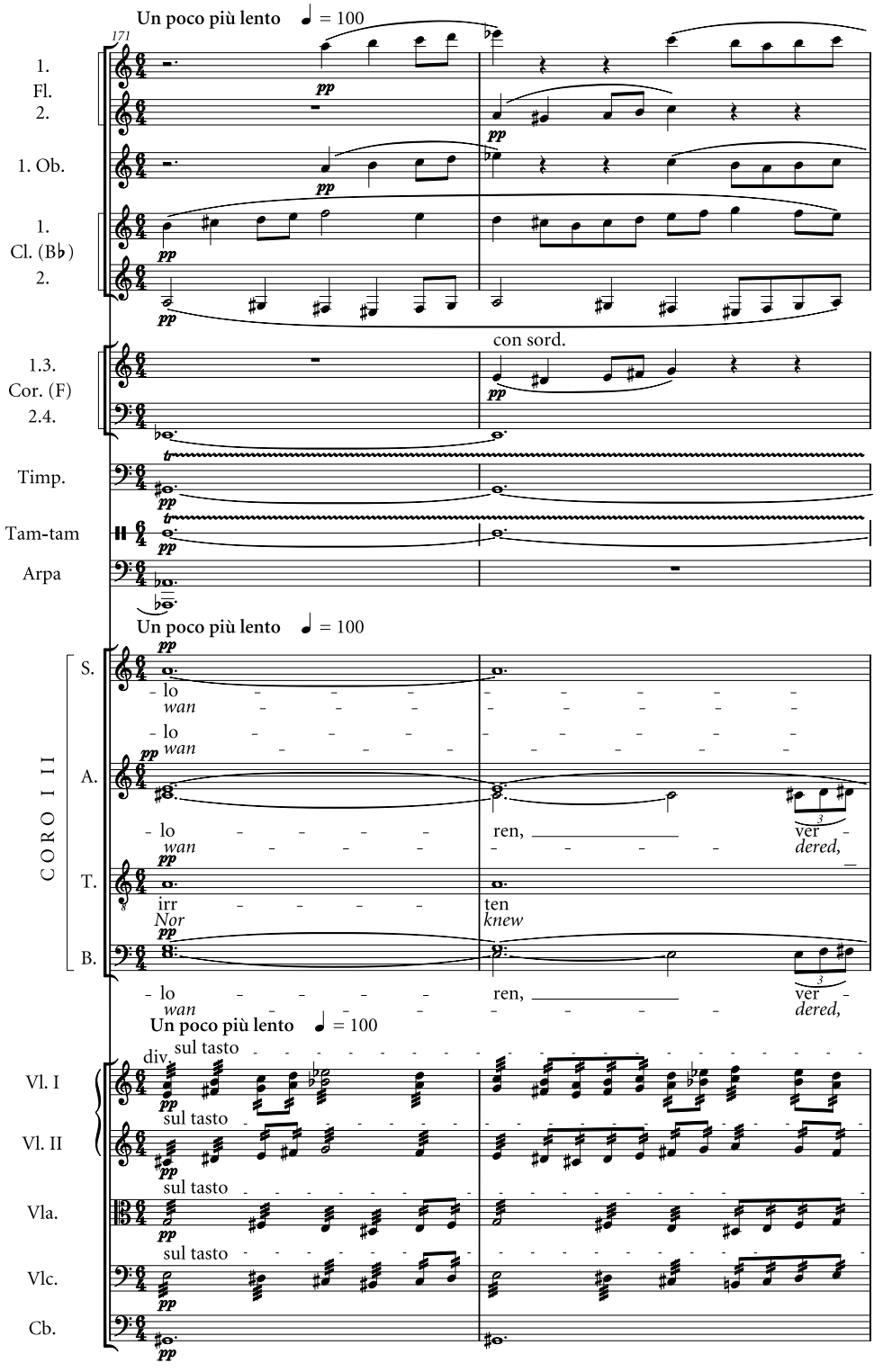
39 Frigyesi, *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest*, 115 (emphasis added).

40 Gillies, 'Bartók and his Music in the 1990s', 7–8.

41 Letter to Octavian Beu, trans. in Bartók, *Letters*, 201.
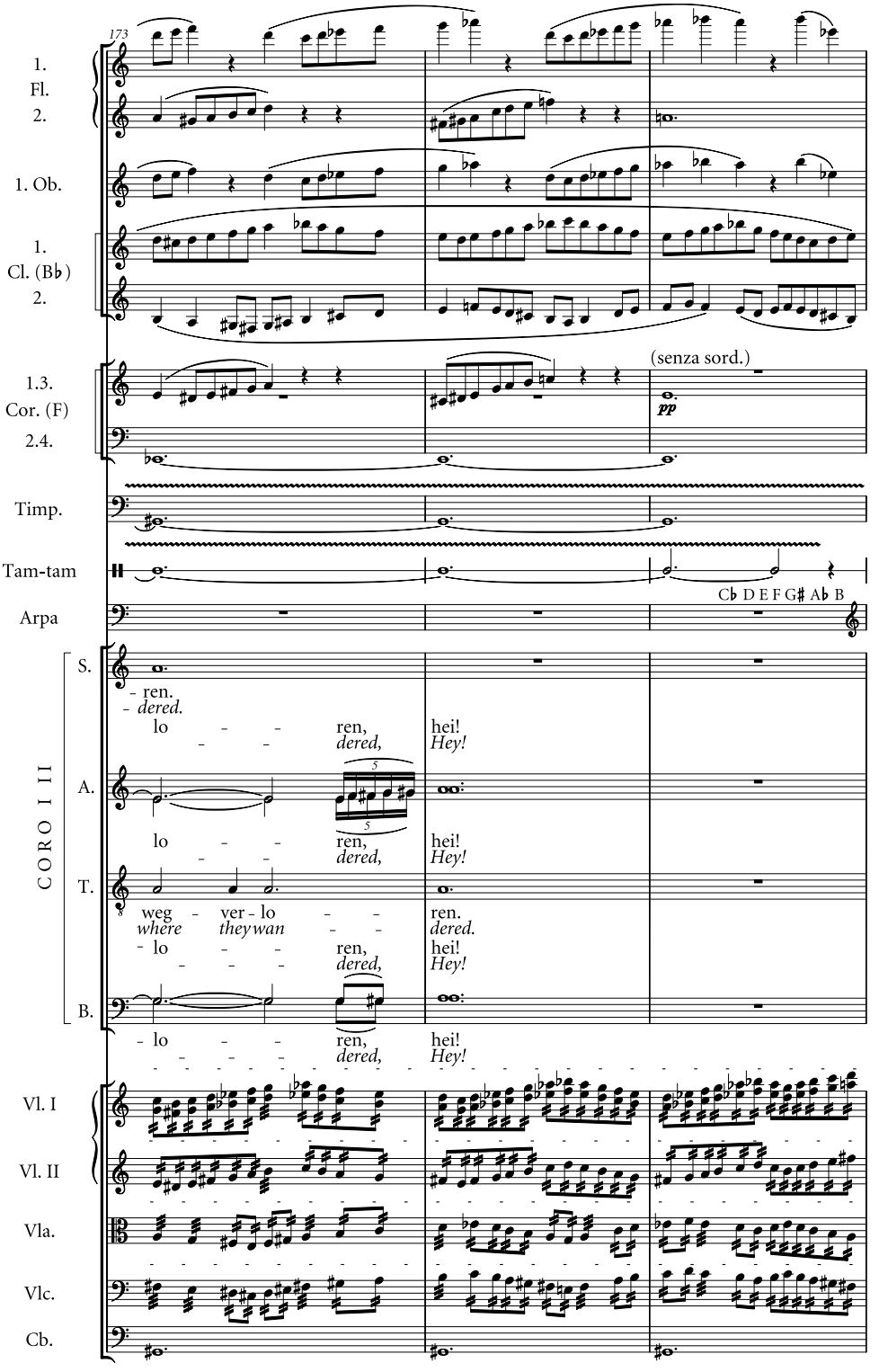
42 See Pethő, 'Béla Bartók's Personality'.

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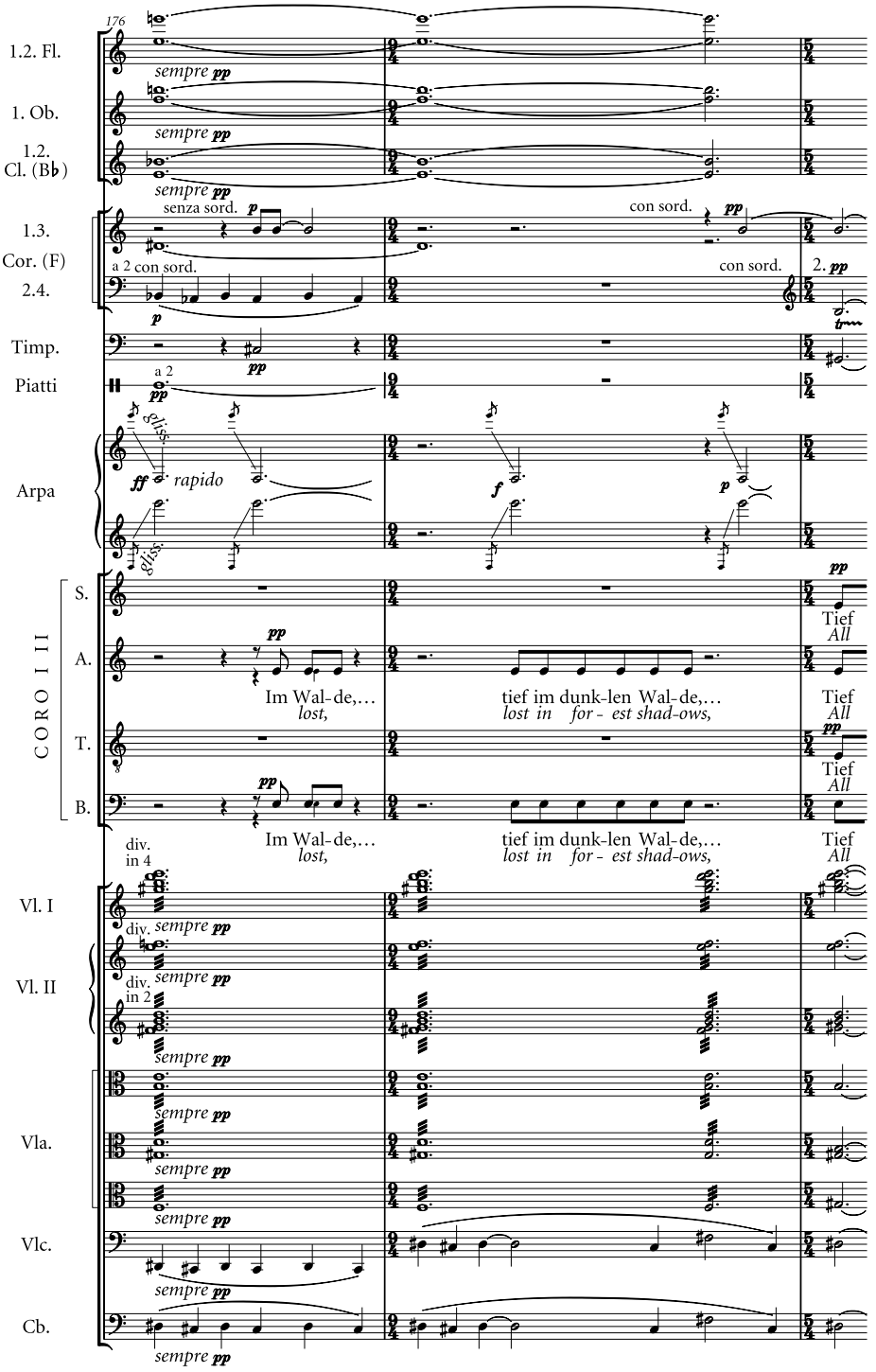



**Example 1** The beginning of the 'night music' section ('lost in forest shadows'); *Cantata Profana*, I, bb. 171–8. © 1934 by Universal Edition. Copyright assigned to Boosey & Hawkes Inc. Reproduced by permission. All rights Reserved.

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**Example 1** *continued.*

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**Example 1** *continued.*

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the place of the 'father' or the 'son' is unclear. As Tallián pointed out, identifying fifty-year-old Bartók with the young lads is a 'basic psychological error': the goal of the young artist is unambiguous, but

> the 50-year-old feels increasingly unable to realize his ideals. This is precisely the reason why it is of great importance that the story of the *Cantata Profana* has two human poles who are both of the same gender and of the same hierarchical position – that is, they do not express the contrast between 'I' and 'the Other' but the conflict within one's own 'I'. The young deer disappearing into the forest and also the father who remains behind are both Bartók. In both of his heroes, he appears himself, and that is why the last solution is so dream-like.[43]

In any case, Jungians would question the notion of whether the division is entirely clear-cut: Jung himself suggested that

> up to a point we create the self by making ourselves conscious of our unconscious contents, and to that extent, it is our son. [. . .] But we are forced to make this effort by the unconscious presence of the self, which is all the time urging us to overcome our unconsciousness. From that point of view, the self is the father.[44]

Note that in the confrontational scene between father and eldest stag (II, bb. 43–215), the father functions as a means for the eldest stag to articulate that he *can only* drink from the pure spring; it is not uttered in a spirit of hatred or rivalry. The musical language – and the stag's wailing cry at the end of the work least of all – never clarifies whether the transformation is a happy one, as we shall see.

Like 'O' itself, then, the regressive experience of change might be either dreadful or beatific. But why idealize a regressive bodily transformation? Why should the stag icon have embodied, for Bartók, such a desirable symbol for slipping out of the 'human' world? In exploring this question, I turn now to Lacan's orders of mental life: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic.

Freud's model of Id, Ego, and Superego is essentially a biological one; Freud did not situate his ideas of human consciousness within a social network. Lacan, who claimed his ideas were rooted in Freud, nevertheless saw no possibility of consciousness or accessible unconsciousness that was not constructed within a social matrix. Knowledge, and consciousness (the self), can only come into being within the 'Symbolic' matrix of language. Language, then, plays the most important role in the emerging subject's formation of knowledge of the world.

In Lacan's three orders of mental life the infant is born into the Real, a primordial stage characterized by unconscious desire, inchoate self-experience, and perfect union with the Mother. At this point the child exists in its own world, but it emerges from this between the ages of six and eighteen months when it confronts its image in the mirror, incorrectly

43 See Tallián, 'Die Cantata profana', 170.
44 Jung, 'Transformation Symbolism in the Mass', 263.

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assuming the image to be its true self (the Imaginary order of mental life). The 'I' is henceforth a split subject, a reflection of others' desires, an 'Ideal-I' that can be observed in its specular wholeness; but this wholeness contrasts with the fragmented self the child knows itself to be. Thus the child's self-perception begins to alienate it from its original self. The 'I' sees the 'me'; the self becomes objectified. But this objectification depends on a 'third term', the Father, who exists outside the perfect mother–infant couple. A triangle is created. There are now possibilities of exclusion and envy. But there are gains: freedom to move outside the Mother's orbit and to think in more abstract terms. Thus, at the age of about two years, the child enters the Symbolic order, an entry marked by contact with language. With the advent of self-awareness, the primal, pre-Oedipal union between mother and child is broken by the prohibition of the jealous father, who wishes to break the unity of mother and child. Original pre-linguistic utterance is the 'mother tongue', but symbolic language is policed by patriarchy; the child must learn to force its initial, unconscious, inchoate experience of the world into expression through language. The pay-off from this coalescence of sensory experiences into objects that are classified by society is that the child is able to communicate with others in terms commonly understood. Entering the Symbolic order means separation from the Mother and the dissolution of the imaginary ego, and through this separation the Symbolizing subject can emerge. The Real – a state of nature, a time of fullness or completeness that is subsequently lost through the entrance into language – cannot be expressed in language because the very entrance into language marks our irrevocable separation from it. Although it cannot be expressed, however, it can be experienced, notably through traumatic confrontation.[45]

There can be little doubt that Bartók's experience of the Real was peculiarly predicated upon an extended engagement with the maternal bosom,[46] a literal and metaphorical maternal 'breast' that he did not have to give up in the usual way. From the memoirs of his mother, Paula Voit, we learn that after a vaccination at the age of three months Bartók developed a skin rash that lasted until he was five years old. As Voit reports: 'The poor child hid from people as it hurt him when they were always saying "poor little Béla!".' Voit goes on to say that she 'suffered seeing how innocently that good, gentle boy put up with such pain'.[47] His entire childhood was subsequently marked by an extraordinary number of illnesses,

45 Lacan never set down the concepts as such, and threads must be teased out from the not-unproblematic papers; see especially 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' and 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language', both reprinted in *Écrits: a Selection*, 1–8, 33–125. The concepts of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders of mental life can be found in a clearly explicated form in Bateman and Holmes, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, 14–15 and 65–6, from which the main paragraph is substantially taken; see also Sheridan, 'Translator's Note', in Lacan, *Écrits*, xi–xiii, and in Kearney and Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, 328–9. For a lucid review of Lacan see especially Bowie, *Lacan*. Dylan Evans's *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* is also an invaluable aid; and for a critique of ways in which Lacan has entered musicology (though long employed in literary-theoretical studies) see Scherzinger, 'When the Music of Psychoanalysis Becomes the Psychoanalysis of Music'.

46 Explored particularly by Melanie Klein; see Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, 16. Rycroft's précis of Kleinian theory is: 'splitting of the breast is a defence against recognizing that love and hate are directed against the same object'. Klein conceived of the breast as object representation: for the baby it was split into the 'good' – all-satisfying, perfect, lovable – and the 'bad' – hateful and rejecting. Klein considered that all psychopathology originates in relation to the mother.

47 Gillies, ed., *Bartók Remembered*, 6.

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'some so severe that fatal outcomes were predicted'.[48] Bartók's bond with his mother never broke. It could be said that he failed to oedipalize (or, individuate away from the mother to challenge the father),[49] in the classic psychological development pattern. 'All in all, he loved his mother very, very much – and still does even now, which is my joy. [. . .] He also greatly loved his father, but naturally spent less time with him.'[50] In Bartók's case, illness resulted directly in increased communion with his mother and an over-long period almost exclusively in her company. Given that he never showed any inclination to break this bond, one could posit an idealized memory of this early period.

Significantly, however, the idealization would have been coupled with an acute awareness of the body's betrayal and change. Bartók's loss of bodily control through illness brought continuous maternal love, but also isolation. Writing on the role of bodily illness in the mental life of children, Anna Freud noted that the child 'has to submit uncomprehendingly, helplessly, and passively' to the experience of suffering. However, she also noted that the ill child may find himself 'more loved and fondled than at any other time [. . .] and in sole possession of his mother's time and care'. The child may be 'unable to renounce the incidental, emotional gains after the recovery', but also cannot help feeling 'that he is exposed to a series of indignities. He has to renounce ownership of his body and permit it to be handled passively. [. . .] He is, as it were, under orders, subjected to a [. . .] routine which implies a major disregard for his personal attitudes and preferences'.[51] More recently, Jill M. Miller has written on the impact of illness on a child's inner world, noting that sick children can feel that their own bodies are 'attacking' them, that serious illness affects their integration, and that being ill 'almost always initiates developmental regressions [. . .] but [there are also] complex issues related to the child's own investment in his body, such as self-esteem, body image and identity formation'.[52]

This makes the element of fantasy in the sons' bodily transformations easier to understand. The mature Bartók, once weak, exercised in the open air and 'enthusiastically championed every new achievement in health matters'. There is some pathos in the knowledge that the man who had spent formative periods of his life suffering from illness should have been so excited when asked to assess musical works for the intellectual part of the Paris Olympic Games in 1924, delighting in the link between intellectual and physical prowess.[53] The body of the ill child becomes a site of treachery and betrayal; but for the enchanted stags, and thus in Bartók's fantasy, the body is transformed into something better – stronger, sleeker, and prouder. This, rather than oedipal fantasy, may lie behind the text's overt

48 Gillies, ed., *Bartók Remembered*, 3.

49 That is, he did not develop complex feelings around a need to compete or even eliminate the parent of the same sex; see S. Freud, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', in *SE* 19, pp. 173–9.
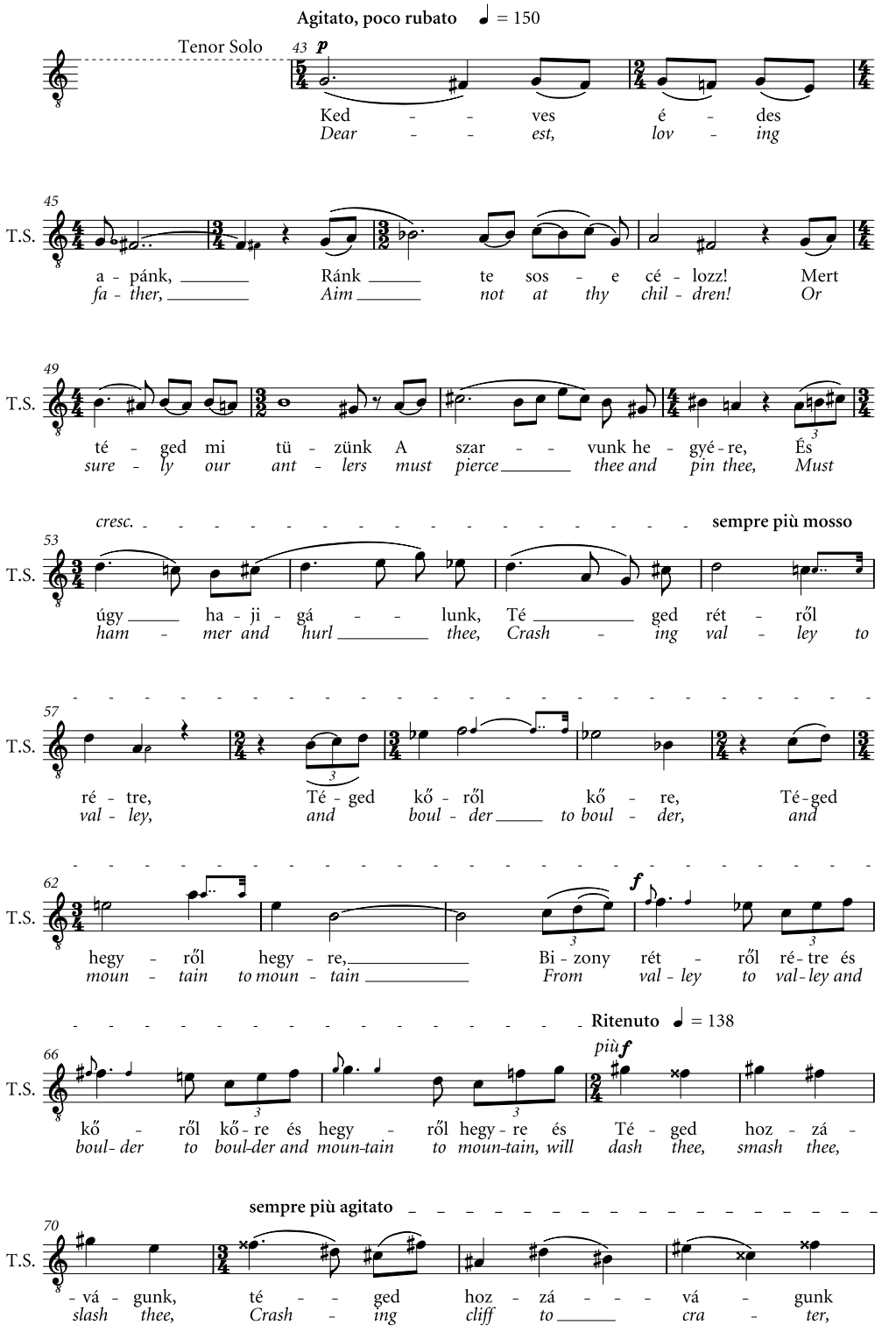
50 Gillies, ed., *Bartók Remembered*, 7.

51 A. Freud, 'The Role of Bodily Illness in the Mental Life of Children', 263–5. Her general observations of children also led her to note that 'so far as health, hygiene, and nursing care are concerned, the mother's ownership of the child's body extends from the earliest infancy. [. . .] Before independence is finally reached, recklessness in matters of health provides one of the bitter struggles between the adolescent and his mother' (277). Bartók went through no such stage, apparently, and allowed his mother to take care of his health until he was a grown man.

52 Miller, 'The Impact of Illness and Medical Intervention on a Child's Inner World', 75–7.
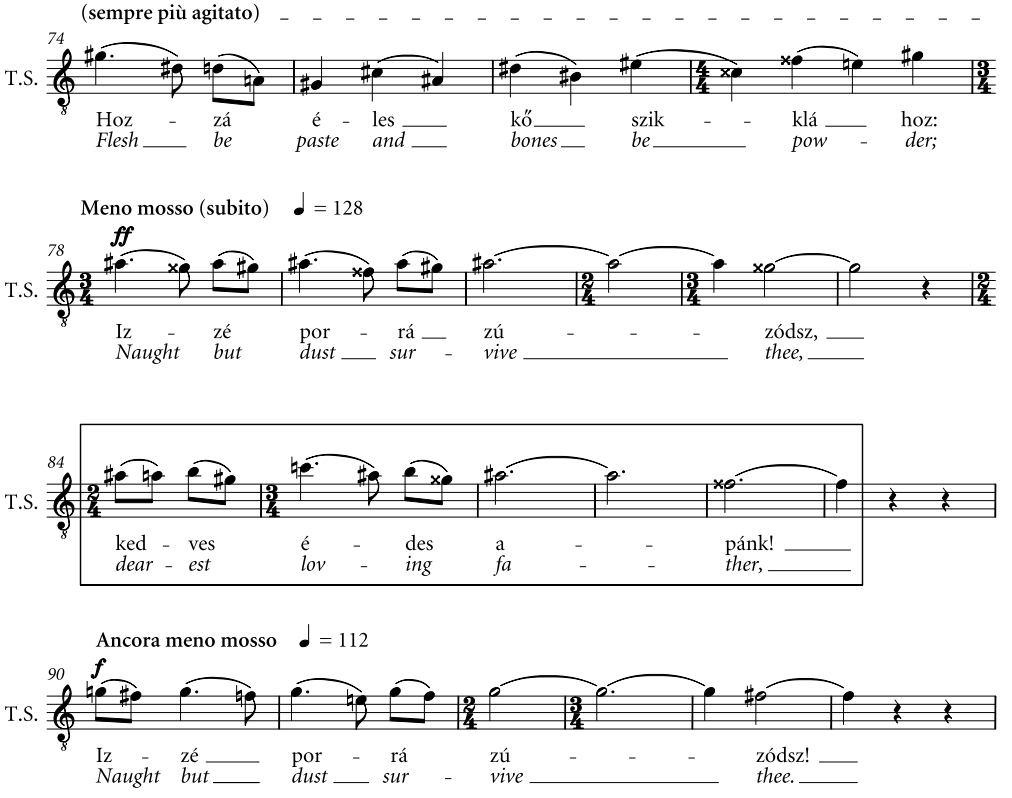
53 Béla Bartók, Jr., 'The Private Man', in Gillies, ed., *Bartók Companion*, 22–5.

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**Example 2** Tenor solo, *Cantata Profana*, II, bb. 43–95.

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**Example 2** *continued.*

meaning when the eldest stag points out to his father that he is able to overcome him physically. Here, physical strength, to say the least, is overstated – Bartók has the stag specifying that he can impale, toss, hurl, break, and smash – but it is to the reiterated words 'dearest loving father' (*kedves édes apánk*) that the tenor climaxes, fortissimo and almost desperately, on his high C (see Example 2).

## Musical Language and Orders of Mental Life

It is useful at this point to return to Bion's concept of 'O': it not only allows for the presence of the ineffable, but also proposes a different range of possibilities for accessing the unknown – which Bion unashamedly called 'the Truth', referring to the essential 'truth' of psychic experience – through gaps and losses. However, if we retain Bion's idea that transformation can happen by being 'at one' with 'O', even if 'O' itself can never be known, and allow 'O' to enhance the way in which Lacan's order of the Real has been conceived,[54] then this permits us to move into an interpretation of the musical language of the *Cantata*

54 Indeed, the connections between the two psychoanalysts deserves fuller exploration; Michael Eigen, in 'The Area of Faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion', makes many perspicacious links.

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*Profana* that takes advantage of the recognized vocabulary for the analysis of musical works that Lacanian theory allows.

In the *Cantata Profana* Bartók presents us with clear categories of musical language and musical texture. The character of the tragic-foreboding opening derives partly from the dark and ever-thickening texture, and partly from the haunting absence of the perfect fifth in its scale. The 'first theme' of the chorus (at I, b. 27), connected to the melody of *colindă* no. 12bb,[55] is homophonic and based around clear interval types. The hunt, a vigorous fugue, is on the time-honoured hunting pitches of E♭ and B♭ (see Example 3). The 'magic transformation' is in the mode of certain types of 'night music', with its shimmering strings and glittering percussion sounds (see Example 1 above). The 'clash' between father and son (see Example 2) is halting, melismatic, and, as Kroó says, 'outside human experience'.[56] Finally, the recapitulation (see Example 7 below) takes the eldest stag's music to its limit, becoming an agonized wail.

I suggest that there are links between these concrete types of musical language and Lacan's orders of mental life – that we are hearing certain aspects of the Lacanian process in musical action. The first of these aspects is the use of counterpoint and fugue in the hunt, the scene in which the lads pursue that which they will become.[57] For Bartók, as for his contemporaries, the idea of counterpoint was resonantly associated with Bach. Serge Moreux reported an interview with Bartók in which the composer declared counterpoint to be of 'transcendent' significance in the hands of Bach, the 'father of western music'.[58] By adopting the language of the Father – Bachian counterpoint – Bartók can communicate in a transcendent language, one that is universally understood: a 'Symbolic' order of musical language. (It is worth noting that counterpoint was in more senses than one the 'language of the Father': as László Vikárius has recently discovered, Bartók found contrapuntal writing difficult, and needed to consult Kodály – his longstanding father-figure – for advice.)[59] During this hunting fugue we do not hear the voices of the boys themselves but only society's comment (the chorus) on what they do. The stags confront the selves they have become at the point when they confront their father. Here, the musical language of the eldest lad, now stag, struggles to articulate into being the voice of his new self, beginning with the confinement of the minor second (II, b. 43 – g and f♯) and gradually increasing until it has found the full range of its voice (II, b. 85 – top $c^2$) (see Example 2). The stag's swansong communicates in a different type of musical language again: a wail, or 'screech' as Szabolcsi calls it.[60] This primordial utterance takes us back into the register of the Real, regressing from the language of the Father and rejecting the Symbolic order (see Example 5 below).

55 Bartók, *Rumanian Folk Music*, vol. 4, p. 63.

56 Kroó, '*Cantata Profana*', 434.

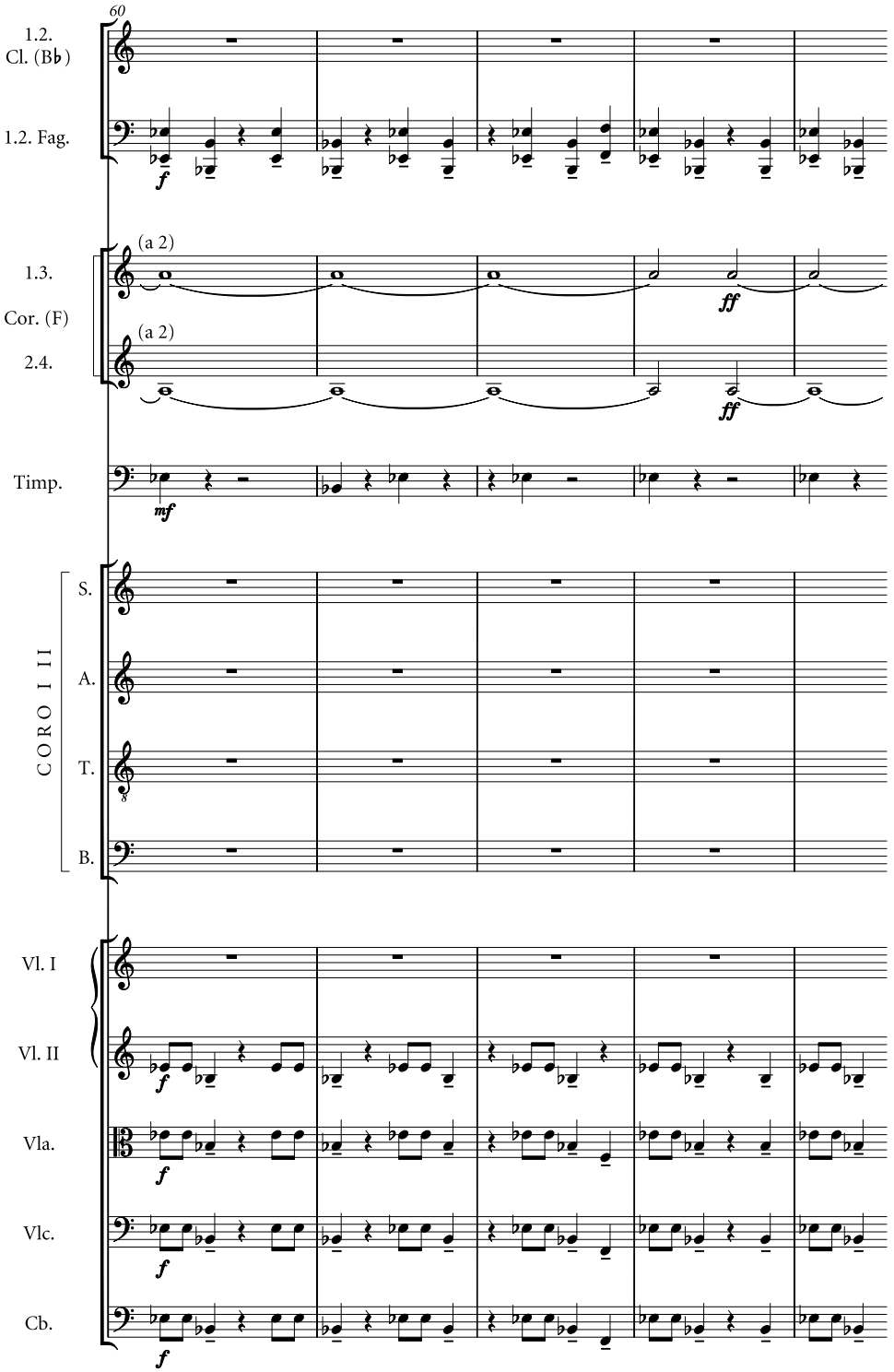
57 Interestingly, self-pursuit is often associated with meaning and purpose in life. But questions of meaning have usually been the province of organized religion, as Andrew Samuels notes in *Jung and the Post-Jungians*, 89. In yet another sense, then, mythical symbolism creeps into the *Cantata*.

58 'In [the matter of harmony, Debussy] was just as important as Beethoven, who revealed to us the meaning of progressive form, and as Bach, who showed us the transcendent significance of counterpoint' (Moreux, *Béla Bartók*, 92).

59 Vikárius, 'Bartók's Late Adventures with *Kontrapunkt*'.

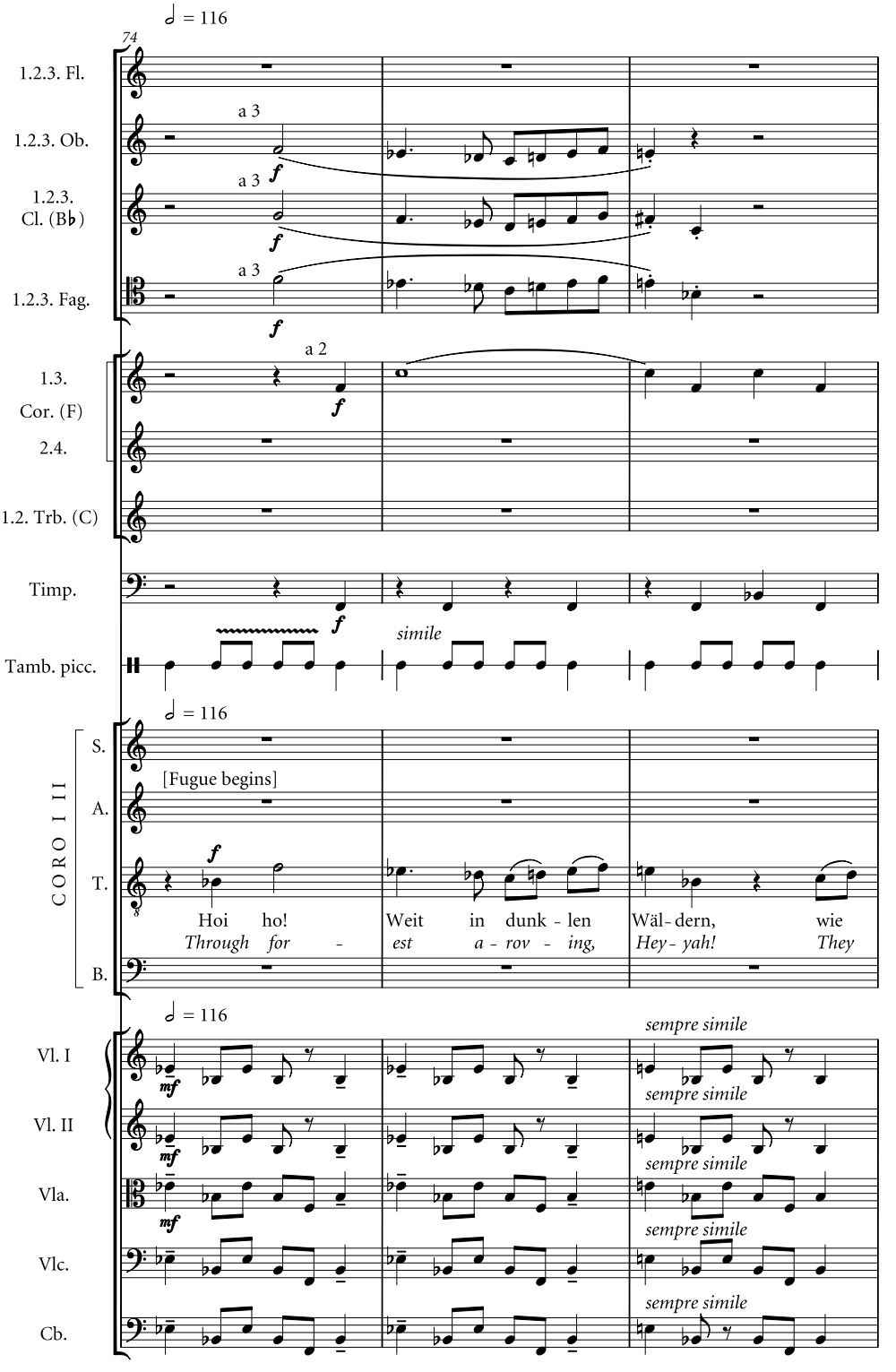
60 Szabolcsi, 'Two Bartók Obituaries', 292.

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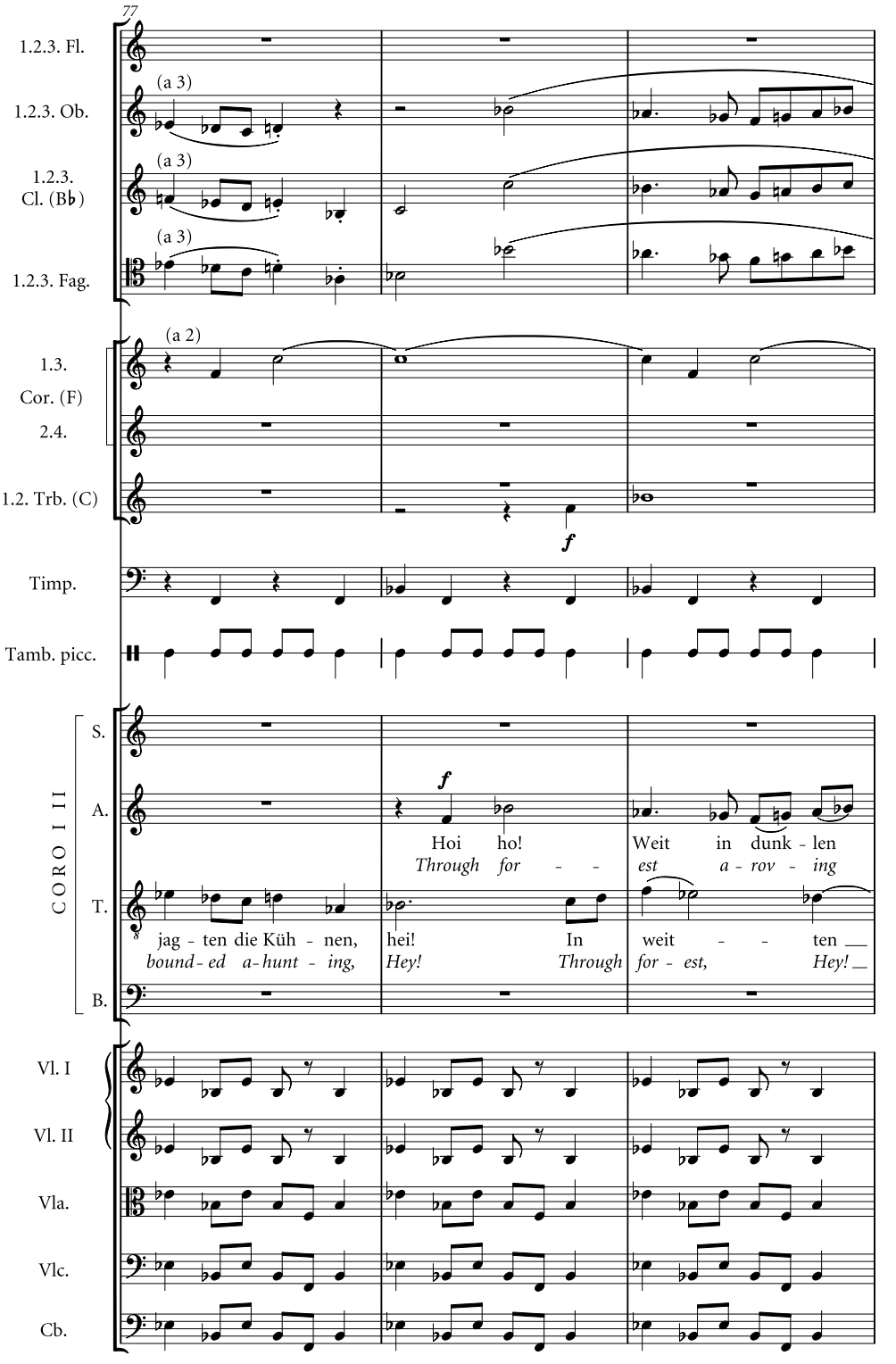

**Example 3** Beginning of the hunt scene; *Cantata Profana*, I, bb. 60–3, 74–83. © 1934 by Universal Edition. Copyright assigned to Boosey & Hawkes Inc. Reproduced by permission. All rights Reserved.

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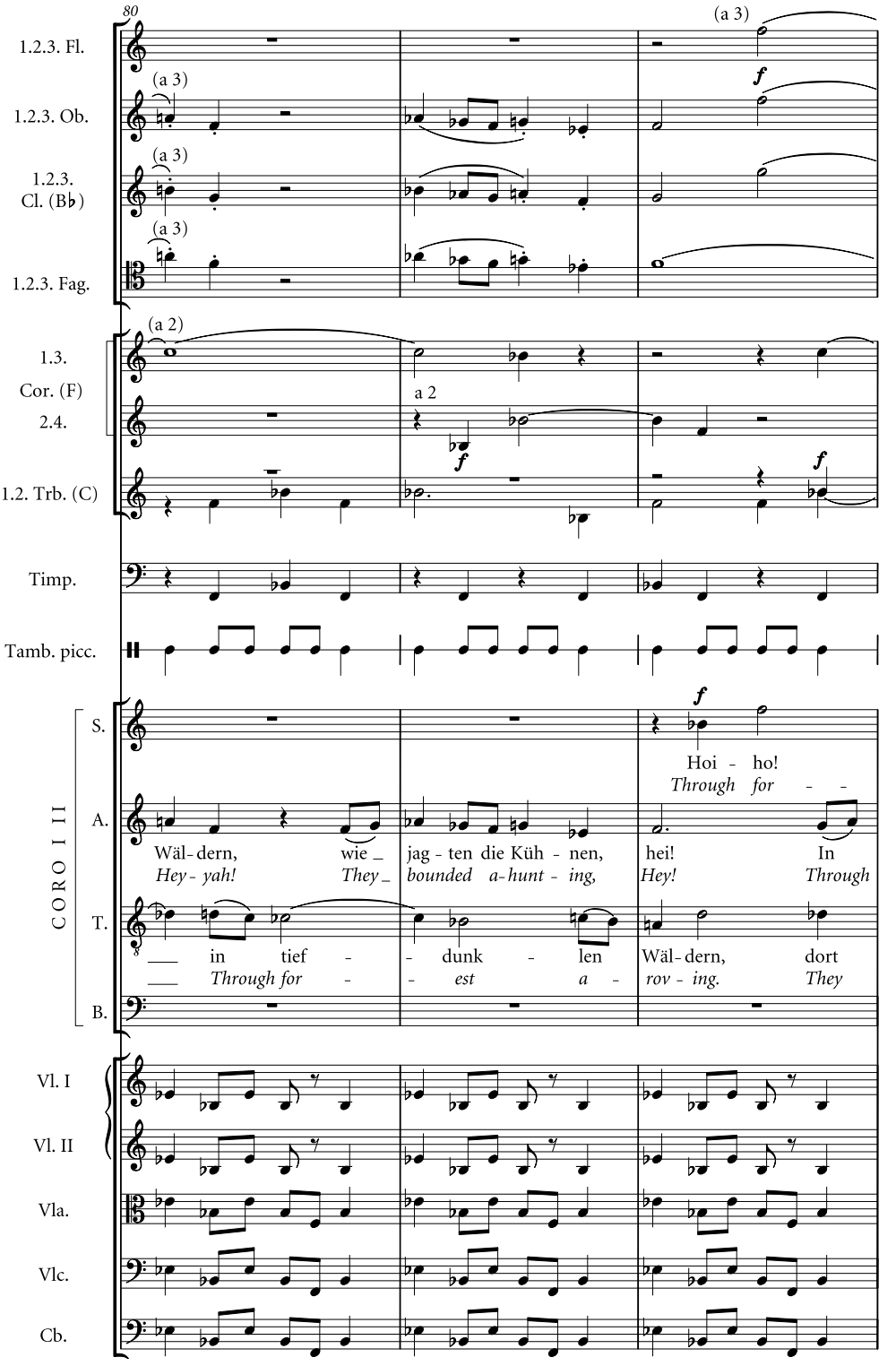

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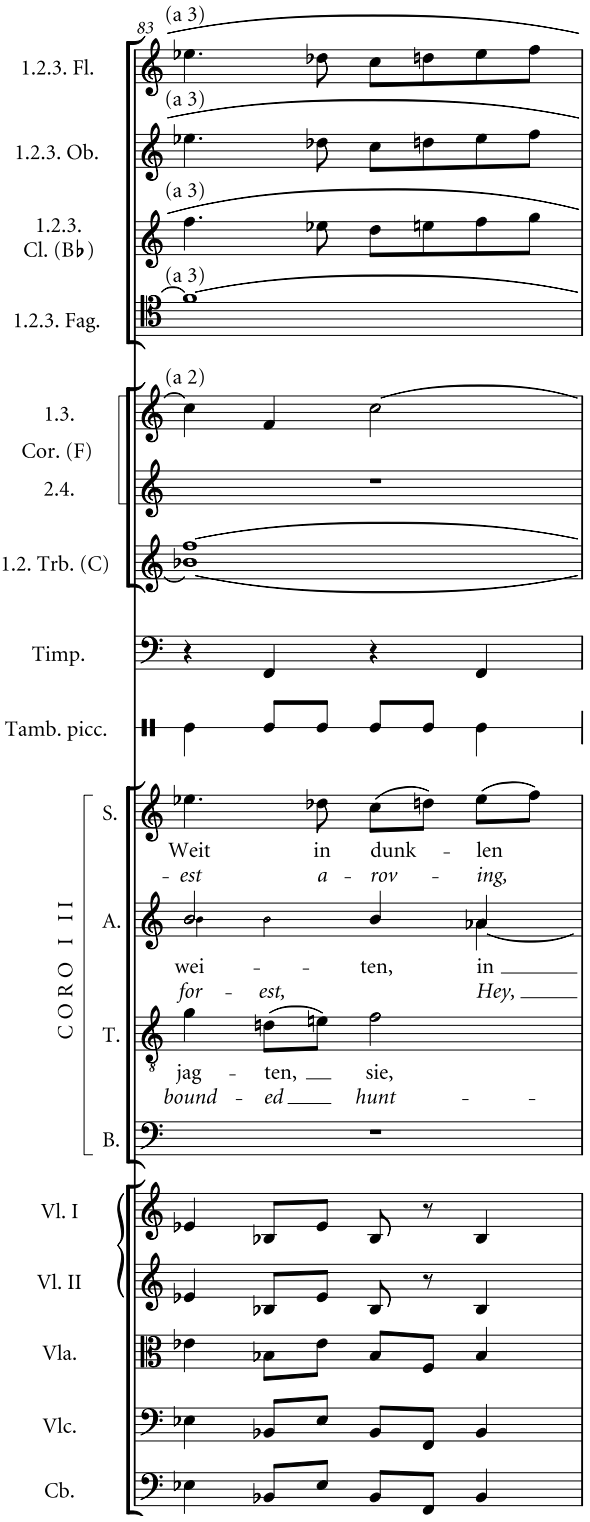

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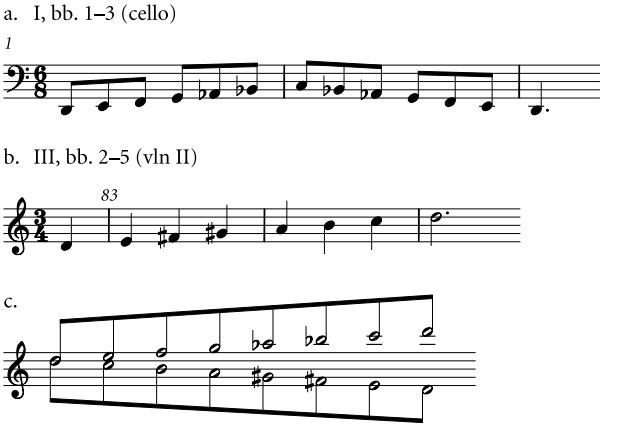

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**Example 3** *continued.*

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**Example 4** The (a) opening and (b) closing scales of *Cantata Profana*, and (c) the scales superimposed, showing their intervallic inversion.

## The Ambiguous Scale

What this swansong expresses has been the subject of much interpretation, which I shall now summarize. In 1953 Ernő Lendvai noticed one of the neatest phenomena of the work and one that other writers have often repeated. The dark scale at the opening, with its unsettling diminished fifth (see Example 4a), was, he saw, the mirror image of the sunnier, major-sounding 'open' scale at the work's close (see Example 4b). Lendvai characterized the closing scale as a typically Bartókian 'acoustic' scale, found in many of the composer's other works. He claimed that in many diverse ways the 'acoustic' scale stood in opposition to Bartók's 'chromatic'-type music, that which we associate with the closed, turning, brooding music of several opening movements, such as in the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* and the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*. 'Acoustic'-scale music, said Lendvai, was open, 'devoid of tension' because it is made from the overtone series (and also, therefore, 'natural') and often associated with closing movements.[61] Chromatic music – tense, expressive, and *emotionally* charged – is a '*closed* world and carries an inner tension, while the acoustic system is *open* and strives to release tension'.[62]

In Lendvai's terms, the appearance of the acoustic scale at the end of the *Cantata Profana* would be expected to resolve the tensions set up at the beginning of the work. This orchestral prologue creates a strong sense of foreboding, partly through the overt references to Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, partly through the dark tonal palette of the orchestration, and also through the deeply unsettled nature of the opening scale. Lacking a perfect fifth and thus a primary point of stability, there is instead the diminished fifth (D–A♭), one of the most unsettling devices the composer could have adopted in the context of a basically tonal piece.

61 Lendvai, *Béla Bartók*, 67–97, esp. 67–73.
62 Lendvai, *Béla Bartók*, 89.

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The idea that the opening and closing scales stand in opposition to each other has gone largely unchallenged in Hungarian writings on the *Cantata Profana*.[63]

Elliott Antokoletz's analysis of this pitch material is more radical. He notes that while the closing scale is an intervallic inversion of the opening scale (see Example 4c), 'the inversion can be understood as a systematic *rotation* of the original mode [. . .] if we begin the original scale on B♭, we get the rotation B♭–C–D–E–F–G–A♭–B♭'.[64] Thus, as Antokoletz discovered, the two scales are even more highly related than Lendvai had thought. Not only are they inversions of each other, but they can both be formed from each other by continuing up the scale and starting at different places (see Figure 1).

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B♭ | C | [D | E | F | G | A♭ | B♭ | C | D] |
| [B♭ | C | D | E | F | G | A♭ | B♭] | C | D |

**Figure 1** Opening scale and closing scale as rotations of each other (after Antokoletz).

Aspects of this characterization appear slightly disingenuous at first sight. After all, the church modes would all be the 'same' mode if looked at in that way, since they are all formed from the same 'scale' but begun in different places. There is, however, another important aspect to this discussion of pitch material: the harmonic underpinning. If a scale can turn into another scale depending on where it is begun, then harmonic underpinning becomes crucial, since it tells us where the tonic is. And although the piece is firmly on D at the beginning and the end, this is not the case during most of the crucial 'statement of the "acoustic" scale' (as it has been characterized) of the stag's 'screech' (III, bb. 72–9); the music only resolves on to a D pedal at b. 79. Furthermore, the strings' rising statements of the 'acoustic' scale between bb. 79–87 are tempered at every turn by a negation of that scale by the chorus (see Example 3).

Let us look more closely, therefore, at the harmonic underpinning of the eldest stag's wail and the passage beforehand that is so important in setting it up (III, bb. 65–79 overall). In some ways, Bartók's harmonies here are crystal clear; in other ways, they resist clear identity.[65] The harp plays a crucial role in defining the bare harmonic bones (see Figure 2),

| 65 | 66 | 67 | 68 | 69 | 70 | 71 | 72 | 73 | 74 | 75 | 76 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B♭ | C | B♭ | a | G | a | C | D | c♯ | [tacit] | | |

**Figure 2** Harp harmonies; *Cantata Profana*, III, bb. 65–73.

63 György Kroó allies the closing acoustic scale with 'purity, Nature, and the world drawn "only from a pure source" [. . .] which exists after the transformation'; see Kroó, '*Cantata Profana*', 428–9. János Kárpáti, following Lendvai, noted a dramaturgical function for the inverted scales; see liner notes to *Béla Bartók Complete Edition: Vocal Music, 3* (Hungaraton SLPX 11510), 10. Ujfalussy, also with reference to Lendvai, allies the use of the 'natural' scale with a journey from the darkness of sorrow to the light of hope; see *Béla Bartók*, 288. Tibor Tallián, also citing Lendvai as his source, considers everything to be 'reinterpreted' after the bridge – 'The themes heard at the beginning, even the scale system, are reversed'; see Tallián, *Béla Bartók*, 166.

64 Antokoletz, *Music of Béla Bartók*, 247; 'Modal Transformation and Musical Symbolism', 62–3 (emphasis added).

65 Tallián offers another interpretation of the harmonies; see *Cantata Profana*, 249–58.

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giving unequivocally major (shown in upper case) or minor chords (lower case) on each downbeat.

Against this, the picture is complicated by a D pedal note in the basses (III, bb. 65–72) moving down to a C♯ (bb. 73–6 downbeat) as well as added sixths and sevenths from the orchestra and chorus (see Example 5). Is D, then, the 'tonic' where the stag sings at b. 72? Yes, but only for that bar; at b. 73 the music moves to C♯ minor, reinterpreting the G♯ from its position as augmented fourth of the acoustic scale to the perfect fifth of the new harmony of C♯ minor. There are further changes in b. 74, because a crucial F♯ is then introduced by the first tenors, viola, and horn 2; this bar is supported by the pitches F♯–G♯–C♯. The stag's melodic line moves from G♯ (held over from b. 73) to A, and then to C♮; the all-important A is crucial, sounding like degree 3 to an ambiguous but 'new' supporting harmony of F♯ minor. The C♮ 'apotheosis' at b. 75 conflicts with the C♯ pedal in the bass, and then moves through a melismatic sequence of falling filled-in thirds to F♯ on the downbeat of b. 76. At this point all harmonic support drops out, before the lower strings re-enter at b. 77 with an A minor[7] to resolve to D on the downbeat of b. 79.

The closing passages' harmonic and scalic identities, cloaked through added sixths and sevenths, appear to have assumed this final shape after undergoing earlier changes – something that the earlier sketch material shows quite clearly. The draft in vocal-score form[66] indicates that at first Bartók had no F♯ in the equivalent of b. 74. Shown in the vocal parts only, the all-important tenor resolution from E to F♯ was added after the basic draft had been done; Bartók simply writes 'fis' beside the note E in the equivalent of b. 75. The considered nature of the decision increases its significance.

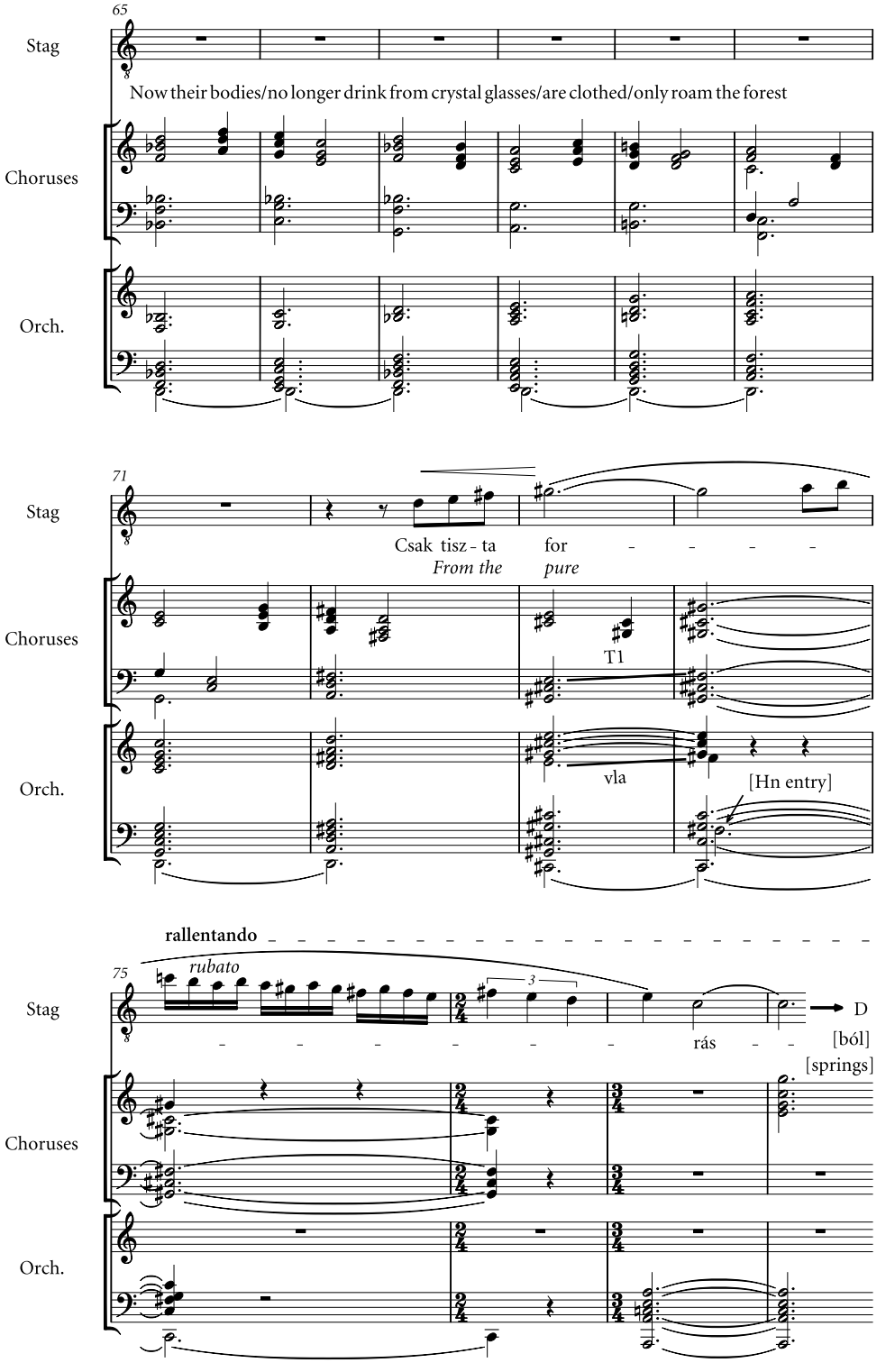
Do we 'hear' the stag's wail in D, C♯, or F♯, therefore? Almost certainly not the first of these options. If we look at the score only, the second is possible. In practice, however, F♯ emerges as the most powerful, because of three factors. First, the horn, viola, and first tenor's entry on the pitch F♯ at b. 74 points up the change of harmony strongly. Then, the stag's G♯, held over from b. 73, resolves on to A in b. 74, which can be heard to support F♯ as a temporary 'tonic'. Finally, the stag's downbeat F♯ at b. 76 acts as confirmation.

If F♯ is a strong contender as the underpinning harmony here, then the identity of the stag's scale changes at every turn. Although we initially hear the rising scale in b. 72 against the harmony of D, and therefore can justifiably characterize it as 'acoustic' at its beginning, it becomes retrospectively transformed to a Phrygian-coloured segment on C♯ at the beginning of b. 73. Between bb. 74 and 76 it becomes a transposition of the original 'dark' scale, complete with diminished fifth. Thus, far from offering a straightforward 'darkness to light trajectory', the stag's wail communicates something more ambiguous, painful, and complex.

Neither is this assuaged by the closing uncertainty that is generated by the 'cancelling-out' effect of the strings' rising scales (F♯–G♯) against those falling in the chorus (F♮–G♮). The F♯–G♯ tones give the 'acoustic' scale its most notable characteristic, in opposition to the

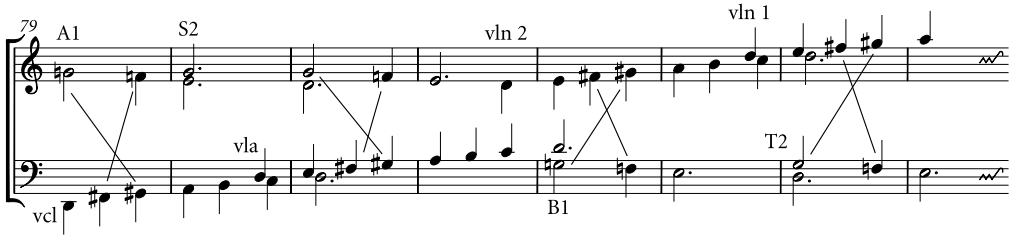
66 In the 'draft score' (as termed by László Somfai in *Béla Bartók*, 313), the changes have already been made. Somfai denotes the earlier sketch material 'draft in vocal score form' (this earlier draft is 67 VoSS 1 in Peter Bartók's 'Béla Bartók archive', held privately in America). This early vocal draft was called 'Konzept' by the composer and 'continuity draft' by Vikárius ('Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana*', 282).

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**Example 5** The eldest stag's 'wail' and the passage leading up to it; *Cantata Profana*, III, bb. 65–78.

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**Example 6** Rising and falling versions of modes as superimposed in the closing passage of *Cantata Profana*, III, bb. 79–86.

opening scale's F–G–A♭. During the closing passage of the *Cantata Profana* these F♯s and G♯s are met by G♮s and F♮s on the four occasions on which they occur: cellos against first altos in b. 79, violas against second sopranos in b. 81, second violins against first basses in b. 83, first violins against second tenors in b. 85 (see Example 6). The possibility of a new existence for the 'dark' scale turns out to be chimerical as its emerging mirror image is ruthlessly suppressed. There has been no triumph. We may never have known what was supposed to triumph over what, but we can be sure that it hasn't happened.

## The Loss of 'Pure Sources'

So, the 'final cry' of the transformed stag is musically ambiguous; it is formed of a series of pitches whose underlying tonal identity changes as it proceeds. Yet this musical expression of uncertainty accompanies that which has been seen as the fundamental message of the *Cantata Profana*. The boys, now stags, can no longer drink from glasses (read: can no longer partake of civilization's corrupt signs), but only from the clear spring/the pure source. The association of this clear spring with Bartók's most fundamental ideology was made starkly manifest a year after the composition of *Cantata Profana*, when, in a much-quoted letter to the Romanian folklorist Octavian Beu, the composer said:

> My own idea, however – of which I have been fully conscious since I found myself as a composer – is the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. I try – to the best of my ability – to serve this idea in my music; therefore I don't reject any influence, be it Slovakian, Romanian, Arabic or from any other source. The source must only be clean, fresh and healthy![67]

In one sense, then, Bartók sees his lifelong mission as a quest for pure sources, none of which he will reject. In the *Cantata Profana* the stags have found, and are drinking from, just such a source, and one of the last musical utterances is that of the eldest stag wailing 'from the pure source'. This idealistic image, coupled with the musical 'evidence' of the acoustic scale, has proved to be a potent symbol of the *Cantata* in interpretations of the work's underlying

67 Bartók, *Letters*, 201.

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message.[68] Kroó says it is 'part of Nature itself';[69] Szabolcsi understands the message to be that of one who has 'returned to nature', seeing the conflict of the work in terms of a rejection of old lies and compromises.[70] Tallián observes that the world was collapsing in front of Bartók's very eyes. Bartók's answer, he suggests, was to leave behind everything of the old home; following a mythic transformation, 'everything becomes reinterpreted [. . .] The scale at the beginning (d–e–f–g–a♭–b♭–c) passes into its mirror image at the conclusion, an acoustic scale'.[71]

If the idea that this 'cry' or 'screech' was uncomplicated, then many of these interpretations would be valid. However, as we have seen, the picture is more complex. The eldest stag is crying out about pure sources, but not in the 'natural', acoustic scale; in what way, then, *is* he crying?

To explore this issue let us look at Bartók's attitude to 'pure' musical sources between 1928 and 1931. Julie Brown has noted that during this period, in the midst of which the *Cantata Profana*, brewing since 1914, was finally composed, Bartók's writings contain complex and contradictory statements about purity in music.[72] His engagement in a polemical debate with Heinrich Möller on the subject of musical purity forced him to confront the issue of cultural hybridity. Brown notes that Bartók's comments on pure sources 'acknowledge Hungary's undeniable ethnic hybridity' and that 'Bartók himself embodied some of his country's hybridity, having a Southern Slav paternal grandmother and a German mother, and having been born in what is now part of Romania' (133). Bartók's negative attitudes towards musical hybridity had focused on the Gypsies, but his previously held views were 'floundering by this stage in the face of a mass of data about processes of folk music hybridisation' (136).[73] She notes that by 1933 Bartók's writings reflect that 'the very idea of peasant purity is itself questioned' (131), and that 'he became aware that searches for the origins of folk and peasant music are made in vain' (129). Whilst the statement is made in 1933, Brown pins down the period of this recognition to between 1928 and 1931 (137). Thus, as Brown says, Bartók's position on the subject of 'pure sources' was one of contradiction: he knew, in one part of himself, that the idea of purity could no longer feasibly be held, but still continued in some senses to do so. On the one hand, his writings on Gypsy music had undergone an almost total shift in position, while, on the other, he could still (somewhat astonishingly) misrepresent his own most recent thoughts in the debate with Möller (121). In one sense Bartók still clung to the myth of purity in musical sources, as he shows in the 1931 letter to Octavian Beu, while having also re-evaluated his essentially racialist position. The debate with Möller was nothing

68 This is made explicit by Szabolcsi, who writes: 'the true sense of the "Cantata Profana" with its stags that drank only spring water, is bound here as well to flash across the mind' ('Man and Nature in Bartók's World', 70).

69 Kroó, '*Cantata Profana*', 436.

70 Szabolcsi, 'Bartók's Miraculous Mandarin', 36.

71 Tallián, *Béla Bartók*, 166. Tallián also characterizes this scale as Lydian-Mixolydian and, interestingly, calls the opening dark scale the 'mother' scale; see *Cantata Profana*, 230–9. I thank Rachel Beckles Willson for pointing this out to me.

72 See Brown, 'Bartók, the Gypsies'. (Page references for the following quotations from this work will appear in the text.)

73 Brown notes that, as well as in scholarly writings, Bartók's changing views of Gypsy music were manifest in his readoption of *verbunkos* music in about 1928.

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less than a crisis point, beyond which his ideas about race and music could no longer go un-self-challenged.

Put differently, we might say that Bartók's formerly clear-cut ideas about drinking from the pure source were no longer really tenable. No wonder, then, that the stag's last cry is so agonized and belies simple alignment with the 'natural', acoustic scale. One might suggest that Bartók himself was crying for the loss of the pure sources, previously the centre of his ideals and ideology. Here, in the *Cantata Profana*, 'the source' has had to turn itself into a physical location, a site of pilgrimage almost.[74] As experienced with pilgrimages, faith fills the necessary gaps; but bad faith produces only overwrought exertion. And as Michael Eigen has observed, 'the vicissitudes of faith mark the central point around which psychic turmoil and conflict gather'.[75] Bartók has 'regressed' from the symbolic, but he has woken up, grasping at myth to cope with the loss of his ideals.

This interpretation also gives some focus to an aspect of the *Cantata Profana* which many have found troubling and which, at best, has given rise to readings that emphasize the haunting sense of tragedy beneath the apparently serene 'return to nature' signified by the stags' transformation. Ujfalussy emphasizes nostalgia for the world of Nature, characterizing the work in terms of an escape from the everyday world and suggesting that Bartók is 'struggling to express the journey from the darkness of sorrow to the light of hope'; but he admits that it 'leaves the end of the road in shadow', expressing 'only the moment when men tear themselves away from what is known and present'.[76] More recently, Kroó has spoken of 'fathers failing to recognise their sons' and 'living in freedom only if we abandon both home and family. [. . .] In return, we cannot hope for human happiness, but can discard this shocking veneer and drink from a pure source, thereby taking on the true garment of the soul'.[77] Even the interpretations of earlier writers, some of whom made more direct links with notions of personal freedom, noted the pitiless aspects implied by destinies of freedom; Aladár Tóth wrote of the 'agonized message, which stirs us to the depths of our souls, the heartrending cry, of a giant among men [. . .] who has torn himself away from our common lot to endure the solitude of personal freedom'.[78]

One of the mystifying aspects is the presentiment of tragedy at the beginning of the *Cantata*, expressed not only by references to Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, but also by its tragic key of D minor which resolves to a serene D major at the end. Like *Bluebeard's Castle*, in which the presentiments of death that are flagged up as early as the Introduction never really happen (the wives are all alive), we are not sure how we are to 'read' the tragedy of the *Cantata Profana*, except as some kind of loss. Yet the powerful sense of loss gives way to resignation in

74 Interestingly, well-springs are a feature of many pilgrimages, for instance for Buddhists to Jawalamukhi in India, for Christians to Lourdes in France, and for Sikhs at Bangla Sahib: see Martin Boord, 'Buddhism'; Douglas Davies, 'Christianity'; and Beryl Dhanjal, 'Sikhism', in *Sacred Place*, ed. Holm and Bowker, pp. 21, 27, 45, 160. Taking water from the Well of Zam-Zam is a feature of the Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah; see Robinson, *Islam: a Concise Introduction*, 133.

75 Eigen, 'The Area of Faith in Lacan, Bion and Winnnicott', 413.

76 Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, 284–8.

77 Kroó, '*Cantata Profana*', 436.

78 *Pesti Napló*, 10 November 1936; quoted in Ujfalussy, *Béla Bartók*, 288.

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the bittersweet, serene ending, raising the question of how the work can be said to 'resolve'. At the time of the *Cantata*'s composition Bartók was working through issues that challenged fundamental tenets of his artistic and personal existence. He had moved intellectually to a 'regressive' position away from the Symbolic by rejecting a certain type of civilized life (and given the desperate political position of Hungary during this period, how could he do otherwise?). He embraced what had always appeared ideal – the pure sources – only to find that they too could not exist: he found only an absence, experienced as a loss. Thus the 'wellsprings' described in the original peasant texts function in some senses as a site of pilgrimage, but only within myth. And perhaps it is only through the use of myth that both notions can be supported at once: as Michael Eigen has said, if a state of affairs cannot entirely be known, we can at least create myths 'that function as markers for the unknown'.

No wonder also, then, that in the work in which 'pure springs' occupy such a position of importance, there is no folk music.[79] Peasant material had acted as Bartók's most fundamental inspiration throughout his mature composing life. It formed a kind of disjunction with his own composed music. Jung noted that in psychological terms 'creative art is in most cases a collaboration between inspiration and the formative impulse'. Yet he noticed that 'one person will stress the *forms* into which he can work this material, and will therefore believe that he is the creator of what he finds in himself. Another will lay most weight on *what* is observed; he will therefore speak of it as a phenomenon, while remaining conscious of his own receptive attitude'.[80] Bartók stressed form in his own work but spoke of folk music as a 'phenomenon of nature' – 'the people' found it in themselves. But it is absent in the *Cantata Profana*, and there is no 'pure source'.[81]

Earlier Hungarian writers stressed the shocking political situation of Hungary in formulating interpretations of the *Cantata Profana*, and their testimony is not dismissed lightly. However, Aniela Jaffé has noted that there was a general tendency for artists to concentrate on the evils of the outer world prior to the war. Tellingly, she notes that 'the outer world is a locus of anxiety, but while art can become abstract as a refuge from evil and ugliness, the terrors of that outer world are revealed in art as agonies of the inner world'.[82] This formulation allows us to link Bartók's internal and external worlds. It gives some feasibility to the suggestion that the ending of the *Cantata Profana* can not only support at least two lacunae at once – the abandonment of the Symbolic for an embrace of the Real/'O', and the loss of the

79 I take on board here Vikárius's observations about the place of melody no. 12bb in the identity of the chorus's first theme (at I, b. 27); see Vikárius, 'Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana*', 253 n. 11, 268–72, 275–82. Vikárius rightly notes that this theme bears more than a passing resemblance to the jotted melody, and that Bartók's comments probably owe more to the fact that Hungary and Romania had been historical enemies and he was protecting himself against charges of treason. Rachel Beckles Willson offers the suggestion that 'while harnessing the "real" nature of rugged peasant song was acceptable in a transformed, abstract instrumental work, in a vocal work it would have seemed a mockery of the peasants whose trust Bartók personally had gained, and whose singing he himself had recorded' ('*Cantata Profana*', 91).

80 Jung, 'Freud and Jung: Contrasts', 334 (original emphasis).

81 Rachel Beckles Willson has pointed out to me (private communication) that Bartók does not generally use folk music in the larger works, and that it is not astonishing at all that there is no folk music in *Cantata Profana*. While I take this on board, it should be pointed out that there are no other larger works whose subject matter is so specifically concerned with pure sources.

82 Jaffé, *The Myth of Meaning*, 67.

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pure sources – but that it can also acknowledge Bartók's terror of the rise of fascism in Hungary, a dread that conditioned all his public articulations about folk musics other than those of Hungary. Neither loss can be fully engaged with, because they are merely gaps. And yet there is a strong sense of reconciliation at the end of the *Cantata Profana* – perhaps the same kind that Bion hoped for when voyaging into 'O'. This is achieved partly through the major tonality that assuages the darkness of the opening, and partly through the reinterpretation of the opening scale's diminished fifth (A♭) in a 'domesticated' form as augmented fourth (G♯) which can then resolve 'correctly' on to the proper, perfect fifth degree (A).

Freud considered creative work to fulfil wishes which are awoken in the present but which are embedded in memories of earlier experience, and noted that myths contain ready-made material that the creative personality can refashion.[83] We see this operating in the *Cantata Profana*: Bartók's fantasy removes him from the outside world, transforming the body into a more perfect state and re-embracing prelapsarian bliss through its evocation of a mythical world; but, at the same time, a void is acknowledged. The gap between what is painfully real and what trickles through from the Unconscious can be plugged by a tale that taps into psychological desire and by the creation of music that emphasizes obscure and surprising aspects of the narrative. The gaps are mourned as lacunae – deaths – but the acknowledgement of loss becomes in itself cause for quiet rejoicing. If there is a pitch that sums up this split between loss and acknowledgement, it is the A♭/G♯.[84] And if, finally, acknowledgement triumphs, then it is not only a sign of emerging psychological health, but one that confirms a purposeful role of Bartók's *musical* narrative, in which pitches can convey meaning.

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83 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1907), in S. Freud, *The Freud Reader*, 442.

84 The role of these pitches in the work as a whole does not seem to show any particular pattern. It is probably significant, however, that during the boys' transformation the timpani holds a pedal G♯ (I, bb. 165–78); but when the father goes searching for them, the timpani has the pitch spelled A♭ (II, bb. 17–37). It is as if the A♭ – as with the opening scale – signifies the presentiment of loss in these bars, whereas the G♯ at I, bb. 165–78 signifies a presentiment of transformation: where Becoming might turn itself into Being.

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