

## Bartók and the Topic of Drunkenness

Over the centuries, the consumption of alcohol has been celebrated in music many times – one thinks of the brindisi from Verdi's *La Traviata* or 'In Taverna' from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. However, depictions of the effects of inebriation are rather more scarce and when they do occur they are usually humorous. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1963]) proposed the carnivalisation of the world, dividing this into four categories, the second of which was eccentric or inappropriate behaviour, where conventionally unacceptable behaviour is normalised in a carnival setting. Bakhtin believed that carnivalisation was preserved in literature, Rabelais and Dostoevsky in particular, so it is only a small step to apply the concept to music. For the purposes of this paper it is Bakhtin's emphasis on normally unacceptable behaviour that is important – in other words manifestations of intoxication as opposed to the celebration of drinking.

Burlesque may be regarded as a particular manifestation of the Bakhtinian carnival and the second of Bartók's Three Burlesques Op. 8/c deals with the topic of drunkenness. The carnivalisation of drunken behaviour is very much apparent here in that outside the context of the carnival, drunkenness is generally the object of official censure whereas within the carnival context, as processed through Bartók's music, it is rendered harmless, humorous and socially acceptable to the attentive listener.

The central question for the pianist is thus: what is the best way to portray this topic – how to project the carnival aspect but without so much musical distortion that the piece's coherence collapses? There are three principal sources for the performer to consult: the piano score (1911), the orchestral score of the composer's later transcription (1931) and Bartók's own recorded performance (1929). Of these, the piano score is the plainest, giving few clues as to how the topic might be realised. The orchestral score, in the wake of the composer's own recording, is rather more detailed in terms of tempo and articulation, and Bartók's recording contains significant tempo manipulation. In preparing my own interpretation, I negotiated between all three, the results of which may be heard in a complete performance of the piece at the end of the presentation.



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Julian is an ABRSM examiner, reviewer and public presenter, as well as a former mentor for the ABRSM's Certificate of Teaching course. He has taught academic music at Coventry University and London College of Music, and also has extensive experience of adjudicating and piano teaching. He has released several CDs for the ASC and MSV labels, and his book *Reading Musical Interpretation* was published by Ashgate in 2009. His second book, *The Mid-Twentieth-Century Concert Pianist: An English Experience*, was published by Routledge in 2018 and he is currently engaged in editing a multi-author compilation on the subject of topic theory and performance, also for Routledge.