MEANING AND MOTIVE

An Analysis of Béla Bartók's Piano Sonata, Sz. 80,

II: *Sostenuto e pesante*

By Gretchen Hull

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The atonal second movement of Bartók's Piano Sonata presents a cold, clear, other-worldly aesthetic created in part by somber, tolling bell figures and slowly rising gestures that release into silence. The movement stands in stark contrast to the surrounding first and third movements, which in turn offer incisive rhythmic vigor or dance-like metrical patterns and near-pentatonisicm. Such a remote musical language poses several interpretive dilemmas. For example, aspects such as formal organization, phrase trajectory, timbral choices, and musical meaning are complicated by a tempo prone to lifelessness, notation beyond the range of most piano keyboards, and the inherent decay of a piano so noticeable at slow tempi and so rapid in the instrument's higher register.

To best understand the means by which Bartok has achieved such a musical language and to discover answers to the performer's inevitable questions, it is necessary to examine the form and pacing of the work as well as its melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic motives. Linear-motivic analysis, the most effective analytical tool for this music, will be utilized with special reference to Paul Wilson's analysis of the sonata.[1]

[1] Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).

Many findings with regard to large-scale growth and organization, motivic coherence, phrase structure, and motivic variance will carry strong implications for the performer.

The second element essential to uncovering the musical meaning of this movement is an inspiration potentially largely unknown: while studying the sonata with Rebecca Penneys, I was informed that in her study of the same under Bartók student György Sebők, she was instructed that the sonata's slow movement was in fact Bartók's depiction of the night sky. Such associations would immediately lend more meaning to its sparse texture and broad orchestration of time and might even allow, without venturing too far into the realm of unsubstantiated conjecture, programmatic hypotheses relating to certain musical events that enter and exit the musical atmosphere.

I. Analytical method

Linear-motivic analysis is described in Forte's "New Approaches to the Linear Analysis of Music" as a combination Schenkerian's structural hierarchical layers and the concept of the horizontal projection of harmonic motives, often employing Forte's self-developed version of pitch-class set theory in post-tonal or other contemporary (and harmonically non-functional) musical literature.[2] Paul Wilson's analysis of the sonata provides a helpful comparison and reference, although there are some significant differences between this analysis and Wilson's; this analysis aims to set significantly clearer criteria for identifying subsections and their subsequently varied restatements. Wilson occasionally designates a subsection in the recapitulation with a label (e.g. b2)

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[2] Allen Forte, "New Approaches to the Linear Analysis of Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 41.2 (1988), 315, 319

without any further explanation as to its relationship to "b" as opposed to "a" or regarding its relationship to *any* preceding material.[3] Furthermore, Wilson occasionally ignores clues given by rhythmic or melodic motives that clarify structure. Certain rhythmic and melodic motives prove essential for identifying the full spectrum of motivic relationships in the recapitulation, and even the exposition. Besides assisting in the identification of tonal hierarchy (as observed with by Forte regarding rhythm as a less significant determinant[4]), they can alter the very form attributed to the movement on both large and small scales.

An immensely valuable concept from Paul Wilson's analytical framework is his newly defined, flexible system of harmonic function. He lists seven categories: initiating tones, goal events, local dominants, interior tonal centers, local dominant preparation, tonic extensions, and tonic substitutions.[5] These highly contextual labels will prove very useful in analyzing this sonata, although he does not always name them as such in his analysis.

II. Analysis[6]

This movement is ternary; bars 1 through 29 constitute the "A" section, new motivic material is introduced in bar 30 ("B"), and the opening material returns altered in bar 43, constituting the "A' " section. Before proceeding to smaller subdivisions,

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[3] Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 71

[4] Forte writes, "This study assumes that rhythm plays a purely differential role in Western music. This is in contrast to the music of many exotic cultures, where rhythm is the underlying and frequently predominant phenomenon. But, for our purposes, rhythmic factors, both accentual and durational, only help to define the various tonal values within the hierarchy established by relations of various structural strengths, and may also be considered as secondary determinants of those relations." [Allen Forte, *Contemporary Tone-Structures* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1955), 9]

[5] For an elaboration of the terms used in this analysis, see Appendix B. [Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 34-39]

[6] For full analysis, see Appendix A.

however, it is essential to recognize that against this more conservative, traditional large-scale form, Bartók has created an innovative organization that does not always coincide with motivic divisions as one might expect. This new large-scale organization includes three pairs of ascents and descents, each ascent and descent exceeding the previous in terms of duration, volume, and often range.[7] After the "J" motive (bars 1 through 6), there is the first brief ascent and descent in bars 7 through 9 (bar 7 and 8 containing the new recurring motive "K"). A type of ripple or reflective ascent in bars 10 through 12 is less assertive and more patient; a responding bass descent against a transposed inversion of the opening chord in bars 13 through 14 follows. Also within the A section is the second major pair—a longer ascent overlapping with the opening J motive in bars 17 through 24, and a likewise longer descent extending to bar 30. The climax of the second ascent is rounded; the highest pitch does not occur on a down beat, and is succeeded by the dynamic climax. However, there is no doubt as to its heightened range and intensity.

The entire B section constitutes the broadest, most slowly paced upward climb, interrupted in bar 43 by a return to the J motive. However, this return does not preserve the restrained, tense calm of the opening; rather, its unstable and agitated affect indicates that something is incomplete. It is in fact after the close of this subsection (bar 46) that the climax arrives, resuming in bar 47 with a restatement of material K found in bars 7 and 24. This is followed by the longest descent yet, which descends to the lowest possible pitches attainable on the piano until the final return of J. The movement then concludes with an abrupt, motivically alien ending.

[7] Despite the fact that octave equivalence is an essential assumption in pitch-class set theory, range is a key element of this movement's identity, informing large and small structural divisions and hierarchical levels.

All three major climaxes are united by a common factor: the arrival of the K material. Each of the two recurrences of K extends the motive by sequence; the first recurrence contains two descending repetitions sequenced by the interval of a whole step, and the second rhythmically augments the initial motive before sequencing a fragment of the motive downward by a minor third. Furthermore, as previously noted, each arrival of K increases in dynamic; the first begins at ***mf*** before growing to ***f***. The second begins at ***piú f***, and the third arrival opens with a crescendo to ***ff*** before its descent. Thus, the K motive identifies the top of an arch; it is bound up with the release of tension that signals the commencement of a slow descent.

A pressing question then begs to be asked: what is the reason for this innovative form? The answer may lie in the extra-musical inspiration. One imagines Bartók stepping onto his front porch, gazing at the nighttime sky. As his eyes adjust to the darkness, his deepening vision perceives continually growing complexity; the vast, unreachable, imponderable heavens, endlessly replete with eon-old constellations, meteors, planets, and stars captivate his mind by their very inaccessibility and incomprehensibility. Perhaps the movement's increasingly grand and elaborate musical arches are representations of this unfolding sight of the massive, intricate dome the heavens seem to create above the earth. K functions somewhat like the North Star; it is a constant reference point, be it ever-more adorned as its innumerous unearthly comrades are revealed.

1. A section

The A section is divided into 5 subsections made distinct by harmonic and rhythmic motives, contour, and dynamics. The first subsection is comprised of the initial J theme. Opening with four solemn soundings of 3-7 in the bass and a responding melancholy toll in the treble, the resultant harmony, and initiating tone, is pc set 4-4. This set returns repeatedly throughout the movement, as does its subset 3-7. A final D in the right hand signals the close of the melody. All of these rhythmic and harmonic motives are essential attributes of J.[8]

The next subsection—bars 7 through 9—introduce a subsequently common pc set on the downbeat of bar 7: 4-16. Simultaneously, 3-7 maintains a strong presence. As Wilson points out, the bass line C-B♭-E♭ is a horizontal projection of 3-7.[9] Furthermore, if the notes C and D are considered auxiliary to the final E due to their arrival on weak beats and the subsequent dynamic supercedence, the melodic line D-G-E is found to be another linear projection of 3-7. This combination K of 3-7 and 4-16 provides the first contrast of character: while J is rather static, and has certain qualities of a first theme (i.e. its importance attested by its development in bars 15-22 and its return at the end of the B section), K is energetic; with loud, jarring chords, a degree of force is sustained in its melody until the gesture releases with a "snap" into silence. In short, J is familiar and atmospheric; K is expeditious. Following K, an antecedent phrase in bar 9 begins with an inversion of 4-4—the second use of the harmony as an initiating tone. This phrase then closes on a 4-2, which subsequently becomes an important goal event.

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[8] These pcs are naturally part of Paul Wilson's analysis as well; their significance is self-evident. [Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 71]

[9] Ibid., 72-73

Bar 10 begins with the same material as bar 9, but in a newly extended ascending phrase. The initiating inverted 4-4 reaches a preliminary goal event at bar 12 on a second 4-2 before a final closure 4-2 closure on the last beat of 12 emphasized by a *sforzando* and *tenuto* marking. The structural pitches B♭, A, C, and E♭ in bars 10 through 12 form a projection of 4-13 which is later prominently featured beginning in bar 18. The next recession of intensity and range occurs in bar 13, continuing with the same 4-2 chord, but compressed into a smaller range. Paul Wilson draws special attention here to the whole tone descent in the bass.[10] This ascent and descent is not considered as an independent large-scale section because it lacks K's motivic signature.

A return to J follows, although it is altered first by a melodic line that breaks from the stationary E to swing up to an A, and second by bass chords which are struck this time at different octaves, eventually arriving with the melody at a new harmony (4-13) which becomes important in this second major ascent. Subsequent 4-13's include beat 1 of bar 19, beat 1 of bar 20, and beat 4 of bar 21. The next episode in this increase of intensity is a 4-8 and related 4-9 moving to two 4-Z15's before a second powerful assertion of goal event 4-16. Here at bar 24, K makes its first reappearance before descending in a privileged pattern at the interval of a major second. A second voice is this time added in the bass as it imitatively echoes the last three notes of the treble. In contrast to bars 7 through 8, this restatement soars for six bars, resounding in the heights and depths of the keyboard's range. At the very last moment, this pattern is altered by the occasion of pc 9 in bar 29 rather than the expected pc 11. What follows is a "tonal pun:" two overlapping A-B-C# lines conclude at the pedal point D of the B section in a

[10] Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 72

manner that reminds one of the common cadential bass line V-I or of the conclusive melodic line "sol la ti do." This confirms 4-16 as a goal event at bar 30.

2. B section

The contrasting middle section comprises the final ascent. Unified by a persistent D pedal point in the bass, the slowly rising tenor line provides a sense of tense, inexorable approach that underpins comparatively static treble chords. These chords, by use of upper and lower neighbors, revolve around three central harmonies (3-9 [a subset of 4-16], 3-9, and 3-2, respectively). Again, a 4-16 in bar 42 functions as a goal event, and its tolling rhythm harkens back to J. Furthermore, the highest voice of this chord, taken with the upper line formed by the three preceding chords, features a horizontal projection of 4-13—the prominent harmony of bars 15 through 22.[11]

3. A' section

How surprising that the suspenseful swell of the B section should be abruptly undermined by the return of J! However, all is not as it seems. In bar 44, the rhythmic stasis peculiar to J is cloaked with the harmony of K and softened with a *pianissimo*. The original J figure returns in bar 45, this time upside-down—a further sign of unrest. Lastly, in bar 46, the harmony of K is unleashed in a glorious clash, and in the subsequent bar, both the foreshadowing of the K harmony and the build of the B section are fulfilled in the splendor of the ultimate appearance of K. This time, the temporally augmented K is lengthened by a bass which rings out each pitch repeatedly in multiple octaves. The last three notes of K's melody are then sequenced three times downward by the interval

[11] Paul Wilson likewise made this finding. [Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 76]

of a minor third. Finally, a third layer widens the panorama as three dyads enter in the bass—pitches found only on the largest Bösendorfer pianos.

This longest dénouement devolves into a sparse texture wherein this time the bass revolves around a D before isolating the last three notes of the figure, repeating the same rising trichord that completed the K melody. Paul Wilson draws attention in the A' section to the bass movement from A♭ to D and back to A♭, noting that it traverses the movement as a whole.[12] It is realistic to consider the D in bars 53 to 57 strong enough to be an interior tonal center, although the D pedal in the B section is surrounded by too much harmonic instability to be considered similar in function. Finally, in bar 59 J returns in an act of closure and is righted from its reversal in bar 45. The movement closes with an abrupt 3-3—a chord with surprisingly little precedent save a horizontal projection which is completed at the vertical chord's arrival.[13] The motivic oddity seems a bit brusque or out-of-place. On the other hand, however, it is easy to imagine that after a long gaze into the heavens, Bartók, or any other contemplative protagonist, has become resigned to the fact that the time has come to return to his work, his dishes, or his family, and the door clicks shut behind him.

III. Performance Implications

In light of analytical findings, it is now possible to propose answers to five remaining interpretive issues: range limitation, timbral choices, formal organization, phrase trajectory, and effective tempo execution. The question of range limitation in the bass of bars 49 through 51 is in fact the least of the pianist's concerns; upon a little further

[12] Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók*, 78
[13] There are instances of 4-17, of which 3-3 is a subset, in the goal events on beat 3 of bars 25 and 27.

deliberation, it is clear that Bartók's desire is to create an enormous and cavernous aural domain; the lowest bass notes should therefore be altered when necessary to utilize the lowest notes of the keyboard, creating a harmonically indistinct sound.

Choice of timbre is closely related to dynamic level, character and register. Bartók is clear about the dynamics of different voices when the choice may be less intuitively apparent (e.g. bars 47 through 52). Furthermore, motives are frequent indicators of possible tone choices; bars 43 through 46 should employ at least 3 different colors, if not 4. Register also plays a significant role in determining color, due to the inherent changes of sound from one end of the keyboard to the other.

Bar 43, a return of J, should be played in a manner that implies a "coming home to roost" for a final time. The startling harmony at 44, therefore, should have a different tone, as if it has traveled to the listener from a great distance—if orchestrated, it might have been an off-stage part. It exhibits not only J's familiar rhythm, but also K's unstable, nomadic harmony. Perhaps the return in bar 45 of J in reversed registers is insistent in comparison to bar 43. Or perhaps it is a reply sent up to the stars. In any case, the E in the left hand clearly ought to have a different sound; the register gives the note a different voice, so its distinctness from bar 43 should be highlighted, not hidden. The next chord, anticipating the breaking-out of K in bar 47, is the first to employ both the bass and higher treble range simultaneously. Both then ought to burst out without any restraint for the purpose of voicing the chord upwards or downwards.

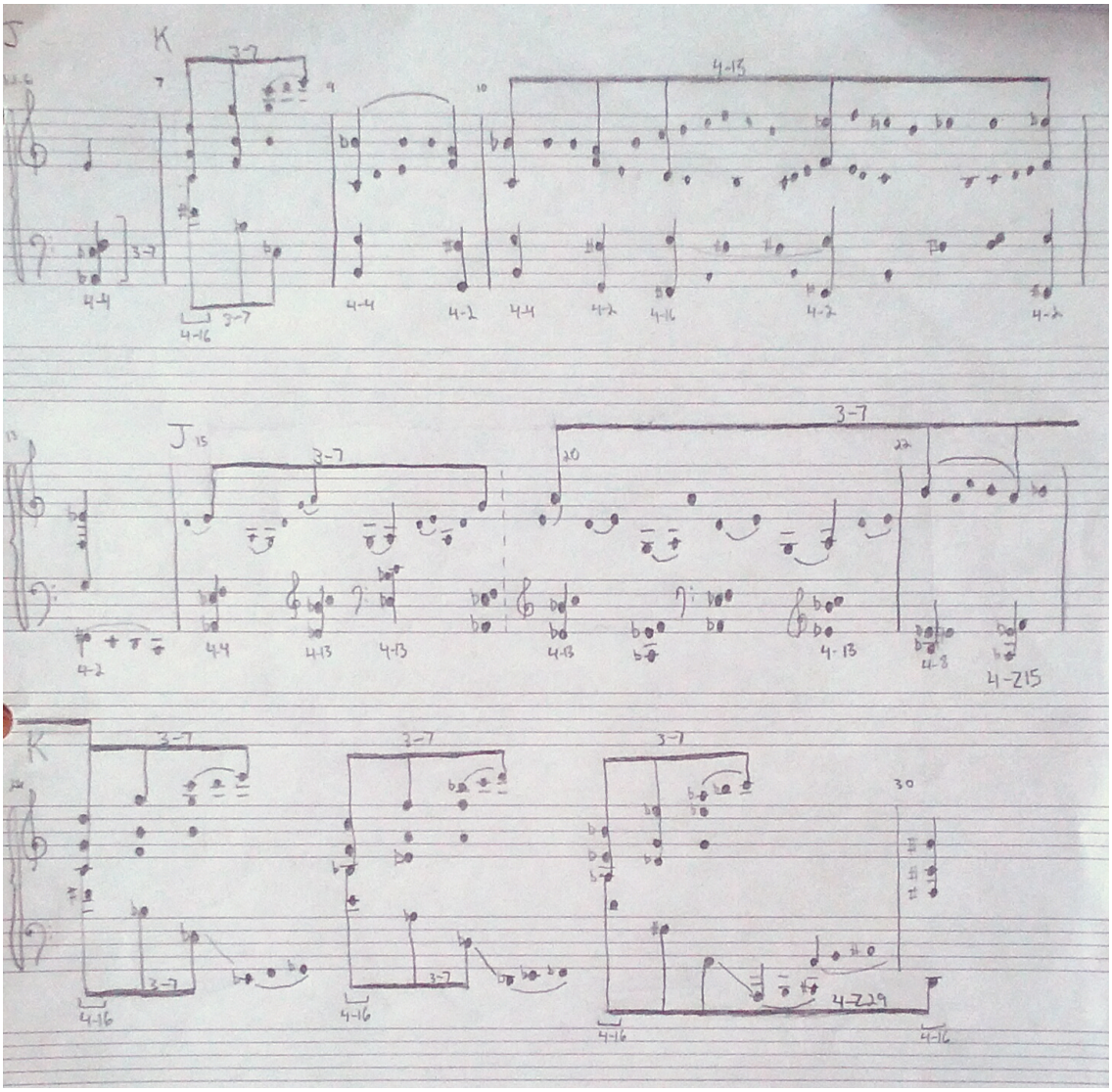
Large-scale structure takes on a new look in this work; so should it also have aural clarity. The four arcs within the movement are increasingly broad; their large, rounded climaxes ought to reflect the slower curvature of the sky rather than the more

impassioned climactic phrases of Western Romantic music. The direction of smaller scale phrases, such as those in bars 15 through 23, can be determined with musical intuition, a clear intentionality of the musical affect, and a sense of large scale ascent or descent.

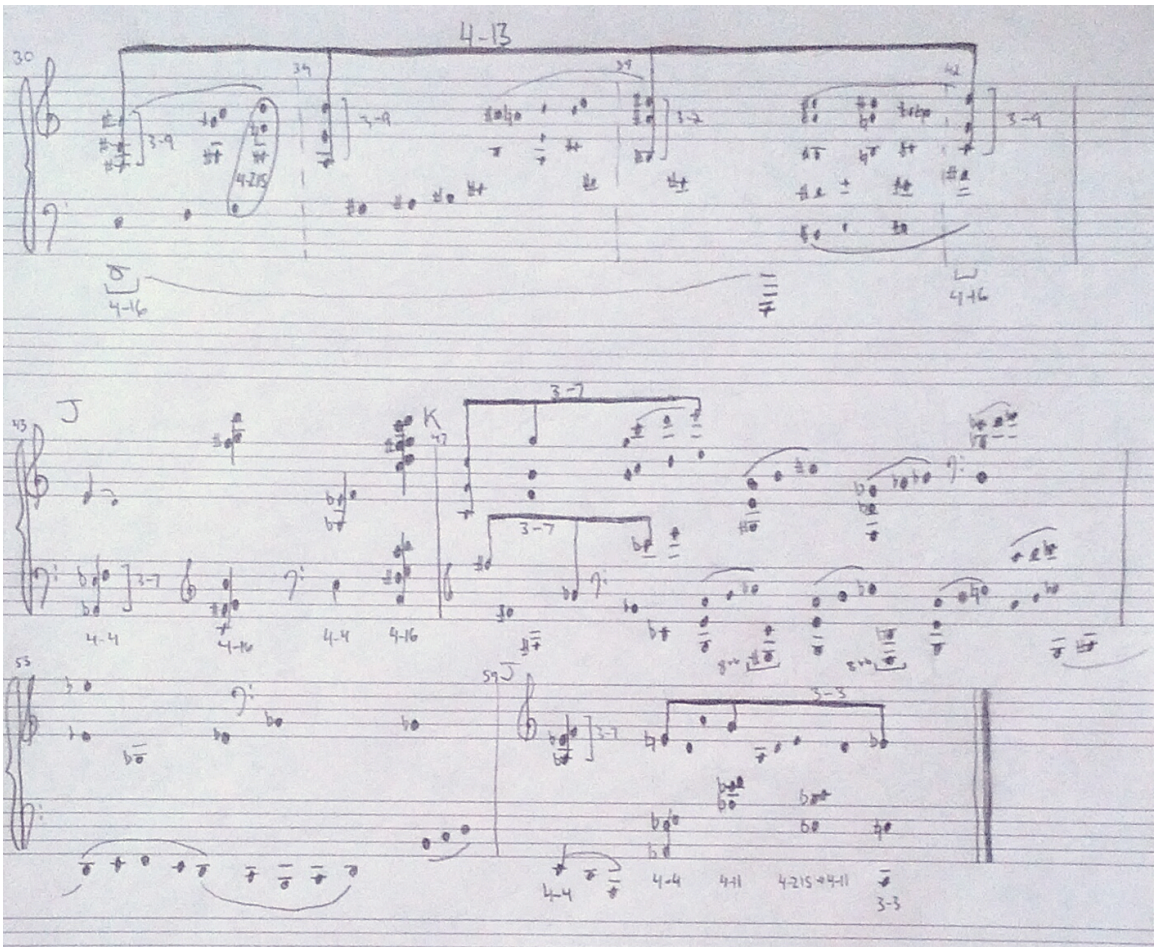
With regard to tempo execution, the performer may feel that the decay of the piano's sound inhibits phrase coherence if Bartók's tempo marking is heeded. However, this is not necessarily an obstacle to expression. If one considers the night sky, one remembers that there is a vast amount of empty space between one star and another. In a way, Bartók seems to use the instrument as a metaphor for this image. For example, in bar 7, the time between the first three chords *should* feel vacuous and spacious, as if reverberating into the heavens and back. The next gesture is different; the three notes united by a slur should have the effect of forward motion that is abruptly stilled by the absence of sound, or even the absence of air.

For the most part, the interpretive dilemmas that assail the performer need not be addressed in full, for the experienced artist is equipped to develop his or her musically intuitive and creative responses to interpretive issues, incorporating knowledge of phrase contour, motivic choice and variation, countless other clues found in the score and, most importantly, form and inspiration. Without applying dubious cosmic metaphors to every motive, the aesthetic may rather be better understood as an impressionistic depiction of the heavens (in this way, Bartók is perhaps a truer impressionist than Debussy). Here motive conveys in deliberate, measured motion the mystery of space, enormous and mesmerizing.

Appendix A: Analysis



"A" Section



B and A' Section

Appendix B: Paul Wilson's Functional Labels

1. Initiating tone: "In practice the initiating function is reserved for the even that begins a thematic line, a bass voice, or some vertical complex that sets off a complete texture."[14]
2. Goal event: "In Bartok's music, the concept of tonic as goal tone is crucial to any larger theory of function…As in tonal music, this concept is available at almost any level of form or process, from a two-measure phrase to an entire movement. In tonal music, however, the presence of a stable gamut allows other notes than the tonic to be separately identified as goals of process. In the absence of such a gamut, the term 'tonic' will refer only to a goal event (not necessarily a tone), and any goal event on any level will be referred to as the tonic at that level."[15]
3. Interior tonal center: "In addition, then, to the initiating tone and the goal tone, centers are established through extended duration and repetition through registral placement (primarily in one of the outer voices), and through symmetrical centricity."[16]

[14] Paul Wilson, *The Music of Béla Bartók* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), pg 36
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., pg 37

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