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BARTÓK: *DUKE BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE*

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This article sets out to clarify the meaning of Balázs' text for *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and to illuminate some aspects of how Bartók has used his musical setting to give psychological depth to that meaning. *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* has been the subject, among others, of two large and very detailed studies, Leafstedt (1999) and Antokoletz (2004), and of two chapters in Frigyesi (1998)[1]. I seek to present a nuanced interpretation of some aspects of the opera which they have either not explored, or have, in my judgement, underexplored. Leafstedt's book is fundamental to any modern study of the opera, and I do not discuss several substantial topics which he has dealt with, but which are outside my concerns here. These are (i) the origins and development of the Bluebeard myth, (ii) the cultural context in which Balázs wrote his play and Bartók composed his opera and (iii) the significance of naming the last wife Judit[2].

Some features of Béla Balázs' libretto are not easy to elucidate. We can begin with the big question invited by the Prologue: are the play and the opera designed, as the Bard's enigmatic words seem to imply, to offer universal truths about all men and women? In which case, is *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* almost uniquely pessimistic in its portrayal of the relationship between the sexes? Kodály regarded the text as a treatment of 'the eternal insolubility of the man/woman problem', and it has often been read in this way[3]. Balázs' notes on the play, written around 1915, encourage this interpretation: he gives a close description of the action which hardly mentions the two characters, suggesting that it takes place between 'the man' and 'the woman'[4]. This universalising approach almost invites Kroó's (1994: 354) interpretation of the ending, which would probably be considered misogynist, or at least sexist, if put forward today:

> The wife-slaying duke of the saga disappears: the only moving force of the denouement will be the woman's blind passion. While woman's mediocrity is being exposed, man's idealism is increasingly glorified. Man's love and heroic character are sublime and pure, and therefore his realization that he can never gain fulfilment in love and is doomed to eternal misery is all the more tragic.

This reading would make the tragedy entirely the result of a basic flaw in women, which makes them inferior to men. However, Carl Leafstedt (1999: 182–3), when he

sums up the opera's meaning towards the end of his excellent book, argues that it is Bluebeard's and Judit's particular individual character traits that lead to the catastrophe:

> Human love cannot survive expectations of perfection, even when sustained by the ardent hopes of two lovers. Bluebeard's idealized vision of a love so warm and complete it will redeem him from his melancholic state is doomed from the start, for he places unrealistic expectations on the women he marries, hoping that they will love him unconditionally while he maintains his essential reserve — symbolized by the closed doors in his castle.
>
> Like Bluebeard, [Judit] is a lonely individual. She has turned her back on the sunny outside world to pursue a life at Bluebeard's side ... She recognizes that marrying Bluebeard is fraught with peril. Inside the castle, her decision to press forward, to overcome her fears, is motivated by the knowledge that her love for this mysterious man cannot flourish in an environment where secrets lurk around every corner. She wants to bring healing light to his castle.

This interpretation narrows the title character's breadth from Everyman to intensely private men like Bartók, who felt an immediate affinity with the text when Balázs presented it to him, and to Kodály (the latter composer, less introverted than his friend, felt no compulsion to set *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* to music, though he subsequently expressed warm admiration for both the text and Bartók's opera)[5]. And it redeems womankind in general from Kroó's sexist reading, since it gives a good reason that Judit should pursue her quest even when, as she realises after the fifth door, it may mean her death (86.1–7)[6].

This opera is not named after either Bluebeard or Judit. In *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, the castle itself is central: Balázs included it in the cast of characters for the mystery play on which the opera is based, alongside Bluebeard and Judit: 'My ballad is the "ballad of inner life". Bluebeard's castle is not a real castle of stone. The castle is his soul. It is lonely, dark and secretive: the castle of closed doors'[7]. We must always bear in mind this fundamental symbolism: the castle represents Bluebeard's psyche.

Let us examine closely some aspects of the text, before considering Bartók's setting. One of Judit's first observations, as she begins to explore the castle, is that its walls are weeping (11.1–8). The clear implication is that Bluebeard is internally consumed with grief. (Leslie Megahey, in his fascinating and powerful 1988 video production[8] cut across at this moment to a shot of Bluebeard's face with tears falling from his eyes to reinforce this point). Judit pities him for the darkness of his castle ('Poor, poor Bluebeard!' (14)), and she immediately undertakes to cure these tears with the warmth of her sexual love:

> I shall dry its damp wall,
> With my lips I'll dry it off!
> I shall warm its cold stone,
> With my body I shall warm it.
>
> (15.1–16.4)[9]

This raises the question: who has wept the lake of tears behind the sixth door? When Judit demands that the seventh door be opened, she implies that the tears are those of the murdered former wives (115.1–2). But she must be wrong, and not just because the wives will turn out to be living (Leafstedt 1999: 36, cf. 78). Tears have already been associated with the castle by the wet walls in the Introduction, so the tears of the lake must be Bluebeard's too (cf. Rhodes 1974: 13). This clarifies our reading of the play and the opera: Bluebeard suffers from a severely depressive personality. Further evidence for this view is provided by Bluebeard's greeting to the former wives when they appear from the seventh door: he credits them with his achievements, explicitly referencing doors three, four and five (his wealth, his garden and his domain), the doors the contents of which he was most proud to exhibit to Judit (125.1–126.3). Bluebeard does not mention doors one, two and six because they exhibit features which are not in any way related to his wives but are entirely parts of his own personality: his cruelty, aggression, and boundless grief. He shows Judit the torture chamber and the armoury first because he wants to test her loyalty to him by exhibiting the worst sides of his personality (he is happy to give her the first key: 'Your hands are blessed, Judit', 29.2–4). He gives her the keys to all three of the middle doors at once, not entirely unwillingly, because he is proud of his achievements, but he fights tenaciously to conceal the misery of the sixth door, because it is a personal grief which he does not want

to share. He only releases the key to the seventh door after a fearsome verbal and musical onslaught by Judit, which culminates in the second of the opera's three great musical climaxes.

Duke Bluebeard's Castle thus becomes a compressed symbolic vision of how love can progress in the real world, from the willing acceptance of any aspect of the beloved during the infatuation of first love (Judit's reaction to doors one and two) through a sharing of the beloved's proud achievements (doors three to five) and then sometimes to a desperate need to know everything, even the darkest truths (doors six and seven). It is important, incidentally, to assert against gender-biased readings of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* that this holds true as much for a man's quest to know his new female partner intimately as it is for the quest by a woman, which is dramatised in the opera. Though doubtless unthinkable in the patriarchal Europe where the opera was written, a gender-reversed scenario, in which a man seeks to know all of a woman's secrets and she resists, is easily imaginable today.

Bluebeard anticipates the sequence of events: after all, he has been through this ordeal three times before, with an outcome of failure each time! When Judit has opened the first door, hailed the blood flowing from it as a stream of light, and demanded to be allowed to open more doors, he sings that his castle is trembling, warns her to beware of it and, surprisingly, tells her that she can open every door (41). After she has opened the second door and once again has sung that the blood is a stream of light illuminating the castle, Bluebeard repeats that his castle is trembling, and this time adds that:

> From within the gloomy rocks, pleasure shivers;
> Judit, Judit! Cool and sweet is
> Blood that flows from open wounds
>
> (50.1–51.5).

These are psychologically complex sequences. Bluebeard's psyche is threatened at its core by Judit's actions ('the castle's dark foundations tremble' (41.1–2)), and he fears that her passion will destroy it. But he seems already to accept that she will open all the doors, and this causes him both pleasure and pain: pleasure presumably because she will love him more all the more she knows of him and pain because the cumulative revelation of each of his bloodstained inner secrets hurts this suffering and deeply introverted man. And, when he gives her the keys to the next three doors, he sings, 'Judit, don't be afraid: it doesn't matter any more' (53.7–8). He is perhaps already resigned even though he will resist her demands for the last two keys.

Bluebeard only parts with the last key after an insistent passionate demand from Judit. Judit brings on her own downfall by the request (presumably also made by the three former wives, or they would not be imprisoned behind the seventh door) for details of his past relationships. That is the only secret that must at all costs be kept, or Bluebeard's new relationship will be destroyed. Balázs, here, taps into a fundamental truth: it is best for a new partner not to want to know too much about past relationships, as almost anyone who has experience of marriage will know. But Judit, tragically, is unable to accept this fact of life.

Antokoletz offers an interpretation which makes the libretto hold a particular personal meaning for the composer. In 1905 (four years before his marriage to Márta and six years before he composed the first version of the opera) Bartók expressed a desire for the self-isolation of the Nietzschean superman[10]. Antokoletz comments (2004: 261):

> Although Bluebeard exhibits what seems to be extraordinary power, he can never have the completeness for which he strives. That completeness requires reciprocation by revealing and sharing his entire self with his loved one. Yet, he asks Judith to love him but ask him nothing. For Bluebeard, as for Bartók himself, that self contains the weakness that he must deny to attain ultimate power. … true power lies not at the lonely peak that towers above the rest of humankind, hovering in a questionable autonomy, but, rather, in the completeness found in the human relationship that Bluebeard — or Bartók himself — feels he must resist to remain secure in his power. Thus the power for which the man strives is more apparent than real, a premise that we may assert is the ultimate meaning of the opera.

Bartók had moved forward, however, from the need for isolation from humankind which he expressed in his letter of 1905, by the time he composed *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in 1911, two years after becoming a married man[11]. The striving for such isolation is not the theme

of the opera, since Bluebeard exhibits throughout not what seems to be extraordinary power but rather a sometimes desperate need to be loved. I would propose that the ultimate meaning of the opera, if there is any one such meaning, is that Bluebeard's desire to be loved, without revealing any aspect of his self to any of his successive wives, makes an impossible demand on them, and one which leaves him doomed to failure. His four loving women reasonably desired to explore their new partner's character, but they each made an equally impossible demand: that Bluebeard should reveal his entire self, including his previous relationships. Therefore, he becomes forced to reveal the secret of the seventh and last door. In so doing, he has consigned each wife in turn to live on only in his memory and, with the imprisonment of Judit, the fourth and last wife, endless night descends on the castle (which represents Bluebeard's soul). Each relationship ends because the wives have been unable to give Bluebeard the blind trust that he requires from them, and he has been unwilling to satisfy their need for total knowledge. *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is, for Frigyesi (1998: 228), the drama 'of the eternal condition of love, the impossibility of fulfilling and resolving the infinite yearning for intimacy'. This reading does not, to my mind, sufficiently emphasise the centrality of knowing one's partner completely.

I cannot endorse Cooper's fascinating Freudian reading, in which Bluebeard is a father figure guiding an Oedipal daughter, Judit, through aspects of the adult world, leading to the end of childhood and perhaps her defloration: '[He] exposes her to the adult psyche, with its joy and pain, and beauty and horror, as she progresses through the first six chambers' (Cooper 2009: 63–7). Though it has a certain surface attraction, this interpretation disregards the clear presentation of the opera as an interaction between two unrelated adults. And how do the previous wives fit in?

The music confirms this reading of the text. The two themes introduced in the opening bars underlie much of the opera's thematic development and recur at the close: 'In a sense, the entire opera is built around these two themes' (Frigyesi 1988: 255). But there is only one unequivocal *leitmotif*: the minor second dissonance that comes to be associated with blood, by its sounding each time that Judit sees blood behind doors one to five and recoils from the sight. Minor seconds are present, though not foregrounded, as early as the woodwind motif in thirds, first heard at 0.16 (Cf. Rhodes 1974: 25–6). But the motif is first heard clearly when Judit feels dampness on the castle walls (11) and it sounds even in the sixth door, the lake of tears (where Judit discovers no blood), at the top of the arpeggios in clarinet and celesta (91 ff.). Although this motif is naturally very prominent in Judit's accusation that the seventh door conceals Bluebeard's murdered wives, it is almost unheard during the scene which takes place once that door is opened and the wives are found to be alive. (It does sound briefly at 131.5 ff. to add intensity to the chords while Bluebeard prepares to invest Judit with a cloak, crown and jewels, and similarly in the *tutti* climax as Judit, crushed, follows the previous wives through the seventh door (137.1).) The places where the motif is heard imply that the blood behind doors one to five is closely related to the tears: both are Bluebeard's own, symbolising his inner suffering. Rhodes (1974: 12) suggests that the blood behind the first two doors is the real blood of 'those whom Bluebeard has hurt or even destroyed to achieve his own ends', and that of the next three doors symbolises the suffering of those who worked to create his wealth, his garden and his kingdom (i.e. his former wives, as we learn in the final scene (124–6)). But I think that this reading ties Balázs' symbolism down too precisely. In its shifting associations, the motif is very similar to the *leitmotifs* of Wagner's *Ring:* powerfully indicative, yet gaining various other associations as the opera unfolds, and ambiguously situated between blood and tears. In *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, as in *The Nibelung's Ring*, it is dangerous to attach too precise a verbal equivalent to a musical *leitmotif*.

Duke Bluebeard's Castle is set as a series of episodes, linked to each other by the development of motifs, and by the tonal progression from the opening F# to C (at the fifth door) and back again. (For the key structure, see the table in Leafstedt (1999: 56) or Cooper (2015: 114); for the motivic development, see Frigyesi (1998: 250 ff.).) Each of the first six doors is conceived as an impressionist orchestral showpiece, much more tonally centred and self-contained than most of the rest of the opera. The opera is *durchkomponiert* on the model of the first three dramas of Wagner's *Ring*: there are no intrusive arias or ensembles, and the large orchestra plays continuously, without pause, throughout the opera as a flexible powerful expression of the intense drama between the two characters inside the castle.

The crucial actions of the opera occur when Judit sees the first door, and then between the doors, as she wears down Bluebeard's resistance. In Bartók's setting, Judit is momentarily cowed by the 'deep, heavy sigh', which the castle emits when she pounds on the first door. Her vocal line is nonetheless gentle and enthusiastic when she is handed the first key: 'Thank you. Thank you! I want to open it, I do!' (29.6–9). Her positive response to the stream of bloody light (37.4 ff.) leads her to a renewed declaration that every door must be opened and is set to joyful and optimistic music (39.3–40.4). After the second door, however, Bluebeard's attempts to prevaricate lead

to a different response: to go with the imperatives in the text of her last two lines, in the music Judit now presents a totally energised and almost furious determination:

> I came here because I love you.
> I am here and I am yours.
> Now then, lead me everywhere.
> Now then, open up every door!
>
> (48.3–49.9)

For Judit, total love demands total revelation. Bluebeard's response, set to gentle harp chords, does not soothe her: her music flares up again (51.8–12) and she gets not all five but three more keys as a result of this pressure.

Bluebeard gives Judit no time to respond after she has absorbed the contents behind the third and fourth doors: twice he hustles her along to the next door. But, after the fifth door, once again he prevaricates, celebrating the light and asking her for a kiss. Judit does not move (stage direction at 80.7): she simply sings, low in the voice, 'But two doors are still closed' (80.11–13). And then she repeats, very insistently, 'Open the last two doors!' (82.3–4; 83.5–8). His next attempt at stalling precipitates from Judit a sudden change of tempo and musical style. In *agitato molto* music, Judit declares that:

> I don't want you to have
> Any closed doors before me!
>
> (85)

And, despite Bluebeard calling on her by name to stop:

> Be it my life or my death,
> Open the last two doors, Bluebeard,
> Bluebeard!
>
> (86, *sempre agitato*)

Judit is now completely carried away, and the orchestral music reflects this in a very intense *presto* (88) which culminates in ferocious separated chords for four timpani, supported by clarinets, horns, harp and *pizzicato* strings (89–90)[12]. Bluebeard gives Judit one more key, and, as she approaches the sixth door, he begs her not to open it: to show his weakness, this plea is unaccompanied. She turns the key, and one final vicious chord is the contemptuous answer that he gets.

Bluebeard asked Judit for a kiss after the fifth door. After the sixth, he asks again. This time she consents, perhaps shaken a little by the sight of the lake of tears. Their brief but tender love scene is depicted in lush romantic orchestration, led by upper strings and followed by horns (101.9 ff.). Cooper (2009: 58) suggests that we are to imagine Bluebeard and Judit as having sexual intercourse during this brief love interlude: 'a musical moment that suggests sexual union'. This could hardly be presented in a stage production in the short time allowed but it is certainly Megahey's reading. In his video production, after the sixth door, we cut to see Judit, clad only in a slip, in Bluebeard's bedroom. The scene in which Judit destroys their love by her questions about former wives is clearly to be regarded in this interpretation as post-coital.

The moment of closeness starts to disintegrate as Judit first asks, 'Do you truly love me, Bluebeard?' (103.5–7), then 'Whom did you love before me?' (105.3–5), and finally (108.1 ff.), 'How did you love her? Was she lovelier than I? Was she different than I?' Bluebeard responds to each of these questions, which Bartók sets as gradually more intense insinuations, with requests to 'Kiss me, never question', all of them set to outbursts of the romantic music of desire. This dies down slowly after his third and last such demand ('Judit, love me, never question', 110.1–6), as Bartók portrays in the orchestra with terrible clarity the gradual ebbing of Judit's feelings of affection, leading to her disentangling from Bluebeard's embrace (110.6–112.1).

Then comes the extremely powerful passage where Judit accuses Bluebeard of the murder of his former wives, and, as Leafstedt (1999: 77) puts it: '[the blood *leitmotif*] so pervades the music that the very air Judith and Bluebeard breathe seems clotted with semitones'. This music begins quietly at 112.1 ('Open the seventh door!') and reaches a very dissonant *tutti* climax at 117.6. The orchestra depicts Judit's

intense pressure on Bluebeard, to which he finally yields. He is heard, in Bartók's setting, as doing so without any further resistance. A highly emotional, extended orchestral melody then portrays the tragedy of what will now inevitably happen. For a long time Judit hesitates and, when she finally does take the key, it is 'with a faltering hand' (in Megahey's production Judit is so overwhelmed by the power of the moment that Bluebeard has to open the lock for her).

Bartók invests the final scene with the strong feeling of a ritual, which has indeed occurred three times before. Bluebeard praises the former wives collectively for what they have done for him, enlarging his riches, his garden and his kingdom: 'Everything is theirs, everything.' (126.4–7). When the latest wife, in this case Judit, has acknowledged her inferiority, Bluebeard proceeds to praise each of the previous wives individually, specifically referring to her place in his life, its morning, noon and evening respectively. Bartók sets these paeans in hushed but eloquent tones over minimal accompaniment with *tremolo* strings and hushed sustained chords in the clarinet and horn. This first part of the ritual ends with a brief moment of peace as the last previous wife returns behind the door (130.8–10), but then comes the beginning of the second part of the ritual, with the tension which is created by the investiture of Judit as she becomes the fourth and final wife to live only in memory, the woman of the night of Bluebeard's life. Bartók deploys a steady and sustained increase in intensity as Bluebeard clothes Judit successively with a cloak, a crown and jewels. Judit's vocal lines portray her resistance as muted (she now feels the inevitability of this fate as much as does Bluebeard himself) and the music swells towards the third and final climax of the opera as Bluebeard sings his paean of praise to her, the last and fairest wife: far more lyrical in the vocal line and the supporting orchestration than the earlier praise of the first three wives (135–6). This orchestral climax, which is a passionate portrayal of the tragic loss which both Bluebeard and Judit have suffered, is the result of a 1917 revision, before the first production. The penultimate section of the opera was much more low-key (and much less satisfactory) when Bartók first composed it in 1911 (see Leafstedt (1999: 125–58), for a full transcription of the original version).

Bluebeard is left alone in the main hall of the castle, which darkens rapidly as the last door closes behind Judit. The opening bars, which portrayed the darkness of the castle before a little door opened to admit Bluebeard and Judit, are echoed at the very end of the opera. The music is, however, varied to indicate, by the gradual but inexorable extinction of the two themes into nothingness, that the darkness will now never again be lightened. The opera's tragedy lies in the conflicting impossible demands on each other of Bluebeard and Judit. As with his previous wives, Bluebeard has no choice but to consign Judit to memory once she knows all his secrets. But she is the wife of the night-time of Bluebeard's life, and he will now be alone forever.

I argued, in the first part of this article, that the events in Bluebeard's castle do not symbolise the relationship between all men and all women: Bluebeard represents a profoundly depressive personality, while Judit exhibits a tragic insistence that she must know everything about him. I also examined the interactions between the two characters in the sequences between door scenes, in which Judit demands a key and Bluebeard prevaricates. In the second part, I have tried to demonstrate how Bartók's music illuminates each stage of the unfolding drama between them, discussing in particular the growth in tension in the sequences between door scenes, and then how Bartók invests the events at the seventh and final door with an almost ritual solemnity.

ENDNOTES

1. Antokoletz's exhaustive study of the harmonic structures is not very valuable for my purposes since the musical analysis is insufficiently related to the drama.
2. See Leafstedt (1999): 13–32 (cultural context), 161–84 (Bluebeard myth), and 185–200 (Judit). On the cultural context see Frigyesi (1998).
3. Kodály quoted in Leafstedt (1999: 6). Cf. e.g. Veress (1949: 33), Rhodes (1974: 10) and Antokoletz (2004: 253).
4. Balázs' notes are printed as an appendix in Leafstedt (1999: 201–3).
5. Kodály, quoted in Leafstedt (1999: 6).
6. All references to the opera are by rehearsal figure and by bar numbers within that figure.
7. Quoted in Leafstedt (1999: 202).
8. Adam Fischer, conductor; Robert Lloyd, Bluebeard; Elizabeth Laurence, Judit. DVD ℗ Kultur 2009.
9. Almost all quotations from the text of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* are cited with kind permission from an undated translation made by Carl Leafstedt for a concert performance of the opera.

10. Letter quoted in Antokoletz (2004: 234–5). Cf. Cooper (2015: 59–61).
11. Cf. Frigyesi (1998: 221). Bartók married first Márta Ziegler (1909–1923), to whom *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is dedicated, and then Ditta Pásztory (1923 to the end of his life in 1945).
12. For a detailed rhythmic and harmonic analysis of the intensifying pressure on Bluebeard from 85 to 88, see Rhodes (1974: 139–40).

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VIDEO RECORDING

Béla Bartók. *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. Kultur DVD (2009), produced under licence from BBC Enterprises Limited.

ABSTRACT

This article is in two parts. The first part elucidates the meaning of Béla Balázs's symbolist mystery play, which Bartók set to music in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. I consider first whether it is designed to illuminate universal truths about relationships between men and women, or just the relationships of intensely private men like Bartók himself. Then, the psychologically complex sequence of events at each door is analysed.

The second part is devoted to Bartók's music. The occurrences of the blood motif are evaluated, followed by a discussion of the music for each sequence in which Judit persuades Bluebeard to give her another key. The article concludes with an analysis of the almost ritualistic sequence in which Bluebeard invests Judit with a crown, jewels and a cloak, and sends her to take her place alongside his three former wives.

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Keywords. Balázs, Béla Bartók, Bluebeard, Judith, Carl Leafstedt

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