

**Five + Two = Six**  
**The Wartime Creation of Béla Bartók's *Six (Seven) Songs***  
**for Treble Voices and Orchestra (1941)**

by Carl Leafstedt

Outside of Hungary the market for Bartók's choral music has always been small and specialized. The dozen or so published works that comprise his choral legacy are infrequently encountered. As a group they are not numerous enough to have established a strong performance tradition, even when weighed together with the numerous Kodály works in the same genre. Their titles, it is fair to say, do little to help them stand out in a crowded landscape of repertory. The *Four Slovak Folk Songs*, *27 Two-part & Three-part Choruses for Women's and Children's Voices*, *Six Children's Choruses*, and *Four Old Hungarian Folk Songs* show too plainly the composer's lifelong preference for collections of shorter works identified by genre and quantity. Scientific accuracy is not always a virtue when selling sheet music. Even his most ambitious, large-scale choral work, *Cantata Profana* (1930), remains stuck at the periphery of the choral orchestral repertory despite the high esteem it has earned within the scholarly community. And perhaps no major composition of Bartók's later years is less known today than his three-movement *From Olden Times* (1935) for male choir, a formidably difficult work with no viable performance tradition outside Hungarian borders.

Choral directors, of course, routinely program works in a variety of languages. Some languages are harder than others for their singers to learn, or more remote from daily experience. Csilla Pintér, in a recent article about Bartók's *27 Choruses*, explains that the "internationally almost inaccessible language" in which those works are written presents "seemingly insurmountable handicaps for a work in which the connection between text and music is particularly strong."<sup>1</sup> Bartók knew this would be the case. As his international reputation grew, particularly in the years after he became connected with Universal Edition in 1918, he took steps to ensure his scholarly work and compositions were disseminated across a spectrum of

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1 Csilla Pintér, "The Music of Words in Béla Bartók's Twenty-Seven Choruses," *Studia Musicologica* 53, no. 1/3 (2012), pp. 141–52, esp. p. 142.

## CHORAL WORKS

FIVE SLOVAK FOLK SONGS, for Men's Voices, unaccompanied . . . . .	**
FOUR CHORUSES FOR FEMALE VOICES, a capella . . . . .	**
Spring—Enchanting Song—Mocking of Youth—The Wooing of a Girl.	
FOUR HUNGARIAN FOLK SONGS, for Mixed Voices, unaccompanied (English-German-Hungarian) . . . . .	**
FOUR OLD HUNGARIAN FOLK SONGS, for Men's Voices, unaccompanied	**
FOUR SLOVAK FOLK SONGS, for Mixed Voices and Piano (English- German-Hungarian-Slovak) . . . . .	**
SIX SONGS FOR WOMEN'S OR CHILDREN'S VOICES (chorus parts)	
each . . . . .	.15
Don't leave me—Breadbaking—Only tell me—Loafer—Teasing Song— Hussar.	

*To be performed with small orchestra or a capella—Score and orchestra parts for hire.*

Plate 1: An early postwar listing of Bartók's choral works, as listed in the eight-page pamphlet *Béla Bartók: A Complete Catalog of His Works* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, ca. 1947). The asterisks (\*\*) refer to works "available upon request."

languages. Translations, often commissioned on his behalf by publishers, or arranged informally through his network of acquaintances and family members, were a fact of his life.

When Boosey & Hawkes published their first promotional catalogue of Bartók's music in the United States, around 1947, almost all his choral works were listed as "price available upon request," meaning they were available, but not easily found (*Plate 1*). The one exception was the *Six Songs* (1941), which Bartók had newly prepared while in the US.

Also known as *Six Children's Choruses*, or *Six Choruses*, the *Six Songs* are English translations of selections from the *27 Choruses* Bartók had composed earlier, in 1935–36. They were his first efforts to produce new choral publications for the Boosey & Hawkes U.S. catalogue. They were published in two formats: 1) a cappella, for sale as a set or individually, or 2) with a chamber orchestra accompaniment (available by rental only).<sup>2</sup> In late 1940 Bartók had emigrated from Budapest with his wife Ditta; the subsequent months of adapting to life in the United States left him deeply discouraged and uncertain for the future. In a letter to his son Béla, Jr., written in the summer of 1941, he explains what prompted him to take up a choral project at this particular time:

<sup>2</sup> To the present day the chamber orchestra version is available by rental only from Boosey & Hawkes. Its distribution is managed through their London offices.

Two good things have happened in the meantime: (1) Columbia University has extended my contract until June 30, 1942 [...]. And secondly: At the Michigan University music festival next May (a big, annual affair) they intend to perform 5 or 6 of my choruses for children (those with orchestral accompaniment): they would be sung by 450 children, accompanied by the Philad. Orch. Their Director of Music heard a few of them in Budapest in 1937! Hence the idea.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for Bartók, the planned performances at the May Festival never materialized.<sup>4</sup> Somewhere between commission and execution the idea fell through. Spurred to action, however, Bartók and his publisher used this occasion to finally obtain the translations necessary to bring the music to wider audiences. For performances in Hungary in 1937 he had already orchestrated five of the choruses. While Ralph Hawkes worked out copyright permissions with Magyar Kórus, the Budapest publisher of the *27 Choruses*, Bartók set about creating an appealing selection that would work for the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Elizabeth Herzog, wife of Columbia University anthropologist George Herzog, was commissioned to prepare publication-ready English translations. By November 1941 the proofs of a new set of “six songs” were ready for Bartók’s review.<sup>5</sup> The set was published in early 1942 as *Six Songs*, for women’s or children’s voices, a title we can presume carried Bartók’s endorsement at the time. The work circulates today primarily in its a cappella version, retitled by Boosey & Hawkes in later prints as *Six Children’s Choruses*.

A small grouping of letters Elizabeth Herzog wrote to Bartók in the summer of 1941 survives.<sup>6</sup> For part of that summer he vacationed in Riverton, Vermont. The correspondence shows translator and composer in dialogue about specific points, including how to represent the vernacular folk expressions found in some of the texts. Separately, back in England, in 1939 Ralph Hawkes had also asked Nancy Bush, wife of Alan Bush, to prepare English translations of certain choruses on Bartók’s behalf. A single page showing Bartók’s autograph corrections to one of Nancy Bush’s earlier translations has survived (*Plate 2*). Annotations found on this page show the composer’s legendary attention to detail. Her suggested translation for the quatrain beginning “From your door I’ll never go / For I will have your blessing,” circled in the center of *Plate 2*, elicits his quick rebuttal (“This I can’t accept”), followed by a thoughtful reworking, several professorial

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3 Bartók, letter to Béla Bartók, Jr., June 20, 1941; in János Demény, *Béla Bartók Letters* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971), pp. 305–07, esp. p. 305.

4 The Ann Arbor Public Library has digitized its holdings of concert programs online for the University Musical Society, the sponsor of the annual event. No Bartók choruses appear on any of the wartime May Festivals (see [aadl.org/ums/programs](http://aadl.org/ums/programs), accessed on February 22, 2019).

5 Hans Heinsheimer, unpublished letter to Béla Bartók, November 12, 1941. Heinsheimer specifically refers to these as “six songs” (Béla Bartók Collection, PSS).

6 Correspondence with George and Elizabeth Herzog (Béla Bartók Collection, PSS).

In Hungarian (with very few exceptions) we never have upbeats, upbeat-structure!

BOOSEY & HAWKES, No. 3  
LIMITED.  
CONTINUATION SHEET No. 3

Therefore, (the periods of this music have all) downbeat-structures. We have

THE WOOING OF A GIRL

and not:

"Tell me why you come and go  
Daily near my dwelling?"  
"This is why I come and go  
Daily near your dwelling:  
You have a daughter,  
A marriageable daughter,  
You have a daughter, a daughter."  
"I have no daughter here, (lower parts: "She has no daughter")  
I have no daughter here,  
No, no, no."  
"No good lying now.  
At the fair I saw her.  
She was selling apples;  
Here are some she sold me,  
Still inside my pocket.  
See how I treasure them still.  
1. From your door I'll never go  
2. For I will have your blessing  
3. From your door I'll never go  
4. Until I win the maiden." X (altered line)

"Lying will never help.  
I will admit it then -  
Yes, I have a marriageable daughter ("Yes, she has a daughter  
Brighter than gold her hair,  
Golden brown her lashes,  
Scarlet her pretty cheeks,  
She is slim and slender,  
Hey! and her mouth is red.  
You shall have my daughter, then.  
Bright as gold her hair is,  
Golden brown her lashes,  
Cheeks as red as rowan,  
Yet her lips are redder.  
Fol-de-rol.  
You shall have my daughter,  
You shall have her, you shall have her,  
She is your betrothed."

1. period  
From your door I'll never go for  
From your door I'll never go un-

2. period  
I will have your blessing,  
Til I win the maiden

188  
Would appear in print: 72 SAFC 2  
From your door I'll never go un-  
Til I win the maiden.  
Til I win the maiden.  
This I can't accept.

I have a suggestion for change of rhythm. In line 1. we may have (if this makes things easier) even, then change makes the rhythm better. But only in line 1. not in line 4.!

1. I will never leave your door!  
2. I must have your blessing  
3. I will never leave your threshold  
4. I must win the maiden.

or: 2. Having not your blessing  
4. Getting not the maiden  
Winning

I will never leave your threshold  
Till I have your blessing  
I will never leave your threshold  
Till I have your daughter -  
("I shall have your daughter,  
I shall have her, I shall have her,  
She is my betrothed.")

I believe it is impossible to print: un-til capital!

Estate  
Béla Bartók

Plate 2: Nancy Bush's translation of "Leánykérő" from 27 Choruses, ca. late 1939, showing Bartók's autograph annotations (Béla Bartók Collection, PSS).

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Sopr. 1.2. *f* *p*

Sopr. *pearls of wisdom; And that road will lead me to my dear ones. And that road will lead me to my dear ones.*

Mezzo. *pearls of wisdom; And that road will lead me to my dear ones. And that road will lead me to my dear ones.*

Alto. *road will lead me to my dear ones. And that road will lead me to my dear ones.*

Flut. 1.2. *f* *p*

Clar. *f* *p*

Viol. 1.2. *f* *p*

Viola *f* *p*

Violoncello *f* *p*

Double Bass *f* *p*

100

\* When performed a cappella without orchestra, bars 98-101 will read:

only for piano score!

Carl Fischer, Inc. New York.  
No. 7-16 lines.  
Estate  
Béla Bartók

Duration: 2'40"

\* (a cappella without orch.: 1'50")

723A-081

Plate 3: Béla Bartók, page 5 of the autograph draft for "Don't Leave Me Here," from Six Songs for treble voices and orchestra (ca. mid-1941) (Béla Bartók Collection, PSS).

explanations, and, for the publisher's benefit, a diagram at the bottom of the page showing clearly how his proposed correction should scan rhythmically under the existing notes of the voice part.

Musicians today will not find "The Wooing of a Girl" in the collection of *Six Songs*. As Bartók sifted and sorted through the *27 Choruses* with Philadelphia in mind, evidently he prepared more material than he needed. Translations were one element in the task. Deciding which choruses to include was the larger artistic question. Eventually two sets of a cappella choruses in English translation were created; the second, titled *Four Women's Choruses*, came out in London under the Winthrop Rogers choral octavo imprint in early 1942.<sup>7</sup> In England – not the US – "The Wooing of a Girl" found a home.

To the five existing orchestral arrangements from 1937 he added two more: "Ne hagyj itt" [Don't Leave Me Here] and "Legénycsufoló" [Boy's Teasing Song]. The closing measures of one of these new arrangements, the F# minor "Don't Leave Me Here," are shown in Bartók's autograph manuscript in *Plate 3*. Here Bartók, working in his typical manner, adds Herzog's translation directly into the compactly written score, and circles in red pencil his instructions to the publishing staff. Numerous scratch-outs at the end show him carefully gauging the voicing of the final chords.

For today's choral conductors, exactly how many choruses to include in the Hungarian language version (five or seven), or the English version (six), and in what order, remains a nested box of unsettled questions. As with the *27 Choruses*, more than one possible performing order exists. When he added two new arrangements to the orchestra set in 1941, Bartók eliminated one of the existing pieces, "Bolyongás" [Wandering], leaving him with a total of six songs ready to be played by the fabulous Philadelphians. Its absence forced a reordering of the other numbers, permanently uncoupling the Hungarian language and English language versions from each other. The currently available a cappella and orchestral scores no longer agree on the order, either. Even the title of the set – *Six Songs? Six Children's Choruses? Seven Pieces?* – openly avoids standardization, stretched as it is across two languages and multiple editions created in different countries. While perfectionists may rue the loose array of possible forms that has resulted, as musicians and scholars we remain grateful for the translating work that took place in 1941, and for Bartók's decision to arrange two more choruses for orchestra that year, actions that allowed these exquisite choral miniatures to find a broader international public.

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7 Originally envisioned (1940) by Bartók as "Four Part Songs for Mixed Chorus", these four arrangements had been planned for the English market already in 1939, but the publication process took several years, by which time he had settled on the all-female chorus format.