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Subject-Position and Béla Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (1936) in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980)

Sarah Lucas

Abstract: Twentieth-century art music composed by Bartók, Ligeti and Penderecki constitutes a large portion of the soundtrack for Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film adaptation of Stephen King's novel, *The Shining*. This music was not written for the film, and the use of these pieces might leave listeners doubtful as to the legitimacy of a connection between them and the scenes in the movie they were used to enhance. However, in the case of the Bartók work excerpted in the film – *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936) – an analysis of the subject-position of the music allows for another interpretation. Eric Clarke identifies subject-position in music as "the way in which characteristics of the musical material shape the general character of a listener's response or engagement," a definition based on earlier explorations of subject-position in film studies. My analysis of the subject-position of Bartók's piece and the scenes in which excerpts of the work appear in *The Shining* reveals similarities in their potential effect on an audience member.

Keywords*: Béla Bartók; Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta; The Shining; subject-position; film music*

Biography: Sarah M. Lucas is a Lecturer of Music History, Music Theory and Ear Training at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. She completed her doctoral studies in musicology at the University of Iowa. Her dissertation, *Fritz Reiner and the Legacy of Béla Bartók's Orchestral Music in the United States*, is based on archival research carried out in the U.S. and in Hungary, where she conducted research at the Budapest Bartók Archives with the support of a Fulbright Fellowship in affiliation with the Hungarian Institute for Musicology and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her master's work in music history at the University of Missouri culminated in her thesis, *Béla Bartók and the Pro-Musica Society: A Chronicle of Piano Recitals in Eleven American Cities During his 1927-1928 Tour*. Lucas is currently carrying out further research on Bartók and Reiner with the support of an American Philosophical Society Franklin Grant. She regularly presents her research at regional, national, and international conferences and has published articles in journals such as *Magyar Zene* ['*Hungarian Music*'] and *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. Most recently she has contributed to content guides for the Nineteenth-Century materials of the *A-R Music Anthology*. sarah.lucas@tamuk.edu

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Twentieth-century art music composed by Béla Bartók, György Ligeti and Krzysztof Penderecki constitutes a significant portion of the soundtrack for Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film adaptation of Stephen King's novel *The Shining*, while the remainder of the film score was written for the movie by Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind. The use of preexisting music in a film soundtrack is a topic already explored by numerous film and music scholars, but as a Bartók specialist I was particularly intrigued by the inclusion of Bartók's music in a horror film, as a connection between his music and the plot of *The Shining* was not clear to me. Written for his publisher, Universal Edition, Bartók's 1937 program notes for *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* indicate that the piece was not conceived as a programmatic work and did not contain intentional elements of horror (Suchoff, 2004: 32). However, unique elements of the work's third movement, such as its instrumentation, form, and "night music" texture, (used by Bartók as early as 1926 to depict natural sounds of the night, here, featuring glissandos, string tremolos, pentatonic scales, and featuring the celesta, piano and harp), likely led to Kubrick and music editor Gordon Stainforth's decision to include it to accompany three scenes in *The Shining*. The result is effective enhancement of the drama in the scenes, even though the music was not originally intended to accompany a film or otherwise tell a story. An ecological approach provides one method of exploring this issue, and so I determined a subject-position for each movement of Bartók's work in accordance with the definition of subject-position established by film scholar Sheila Johnston and elaborated upon by music scholar Eric F. Clarke. In this paper I attempt to show that the subject-position of the third movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings* as related to the work's other movements, is similar to the viewer's subject-position during the scenes in *The Shining* accompanied by excerpts from the movement.

An idea of what is meant by "subject-position" in the analysis of film and music was essential for undertaking this study. Clarke identifies subject-position in music as "the way in which characteristics of the musical material shape the general character of a listener's response or engagement (involved, repelled, indifferent)" (Clarke, 2005: 91-92). He relates subject-position to the ecological approach to analyzing music in that a listener's perception of a musical work is based on the relationship between "the capacities, sensitivities, and interests of a perceiver" and the information available to that perceiver in the environment (Clarke, 2005: 91). In his discussion of subject-position, Clarke focuses on the way aesthetic viewpoints are defined by this relationship. The idea of subject-position is not new but is based on a type of film study. Clarke bases his definition on film writer Sheila Johnston's explanation of subject-position (Johnston, 1985: 245). Johnston problematizes the idea of a single possible subject-position, admitting that there may be as many possible subject-positions as there are viewers.

> On the one hand, there is the empirical spectator whose interpretation of film will be determined by all manner of extraneous factors like personal biography, class origins, previous viewing experience, the variable of conditions of reception etc. On the other hand, the abstract notion of a 'subject-position,' which could be defined as the way in which a film solicits, demands even, a certain closely circumscribed reading from a viewer by mean of its own formal operations (Clarke, 2005: 245).

Johnston's definition not only allows for multiple interpretations of a scene based on individual viewers' personal experiences, but also insists that the filmmaker has narrowed the range of possible subject-positions for the viewer to adopt with his or her aesthetic decisions. A music scholar, Clarke uses these ideas to analyze both popular and classical music, calling special

attention to the texts of the popular songs and the texture, melody, and harmony in the classical instrumental pieces. He does not, however, address the formal characteristics of the music, which play a vital role in analyzing the subject-position of Bartók's *Music for Strings*.

Music for Strings was commissioned on June 23, 1936 by Paul Sacher, founder and director of the Basel Chamber Orchestra, to commemorate the ensemble's tenth anniversary. Bartók accepted the commission within four days and completed the composition in three months. The work's unique instrumentation was not entirely Bartók's decision, as Sacher requested that he write for "a piano or cembalo (as a continuo, so to speak) or some kind of percussion instrument" in place of winds (Suchoff, 2004: 31). The elimination of winds from the work was based on technical and monetary difficulties, not an aesthetic idea of Sacher's (Suchoff, 2004: 32). Bartók managed, however, to create a unique work within the terms of the commission, incorporating double string orchestra, celesta, harp, piano, xylophone, timpani, and one other percussion part covering a variety of instruments. The work is even described by Bartók's biographer Halsey Stevens as "three-dimensional" due to the stage organization dictated by the composer.

It is my analysis that formal elements of the music most effectively dictate a subject-position for each movement. The work is neotonal and highly organized, with a fugue theme uniting all four movements. The first movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* is a slow fugue in A. As counterpoint is meant to show off music as a material to be manipulated by a masterful composer, a fugue encourages the listener to adopt the subject-position of a connoisseur admiring a musical masterpiece. The second movement of the work is a fast sonata form in C. The classical and somewhat predictable nature of this form puts the listener at ease and again places him or her outside the music as a distant observer. In movement three, however, the listener is immediately pulled into the mysterious soundscape first created by the xylophone and timpani. No longer an observer, the audience member must devote more attention to the music in order to make sense of its unfamiliar elements. The separation of the tonal centers of movements two and three by a tritone further sets the third movement apart from the second. The movement, a slow arch form (ABCB'A'), is formally a palindrome containing nearly unrecognizable folk elements and Bartók's "night music," a style he first utilized in the fourth movement of his piano suite entitled *Out of Doors* (1926) to create a somewhat eerie nocturnal atmosphere through the use of cluster chords, repeated melodic fragments, and references folk music. The fugue theme from the first movement is presented transposed and backwards (retrograde), reminding the listener of the once-familiar texture and melody now fractured in this alien environment. The listener, however, soon emerges from the arch form of movement three and back into the subject-position of the observer in movement four, a fast rondo form in A (the same key as movement I) containing several stylized folk dances.

Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film *The Shining* is a somewhat loose interpretation of Stephen King's novel of the same name. A general understanding of the plot is helpful for understanding the argument presented in this paper. *The Shining* is the story of Jack Torrence, an out-of-work, recovering alcoholic and aspiring writer, who accepts a position as the winter caretaker at the Overlook Hotel in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado despite the fact that the isolation and cabin fever resulting from being snowed in without guests had driven a previous caretaker to murder his family and commit suicide. Jack, his wife Wendy and their young son Danny move to the hotel for the winter months. Before the guests and hotel staff vacate the premises, the family meets Dick Halloran, a cook who perceives that Danny has psychic powers. Halloran calls these visions "shining" and tells him that he may have visions of terrible things that have happened at

the hotel. He also warns Danny not to enter Room 237. After the hotel is empty, Jack quickly becomes irritable and suffers from writer's block and insomnia. He experiences hallucinations and murderous impulses toward Wendy and Danny. He eventually gives into these impulses, but Wendy and Danny manage to escape, leaving Jack to freeze to death in the hotel's hedge-maze.

The three scenes examined in this study are not only connected by Bartók's music. While no violence occurs in the scenes featuring the Bartók excerpts, they may be considered foreshadowing for more disturbing events later in the film in the same locations. The scenes also impart a sense of association between the audience member and the characters Wendy and Danny. This is emphasized by the use of the Steadicam, a new technology at the time of the film's creation, in the scenes where the audience seems to float in front of or behind the characters (Code, 2010: 138). The audience is not placed in the subject-position of an evil presence following Wendy or Danny. The feeling, rather, is that whatever is threatening the characters in the movie is also threatening the viewer. Each excerpt is from the third movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* and ends with the cymbal crash at m. 45. This abrupt ending indicates a change of scene and subject-position within the movie. The first excerpt, which accompanies the maze scene, is the shortest (mm. 20-45), the second, in the scene in which Danny attempts to enter Room 237 and finds it locked, incorporates only three more measures (mm. 17-45), and the third, featuring Jack and Danny in the family apartment, utilizes the entire movement up to m. 45.

In the first scene accompanied by Bartók's music, Wendy and Danny are exploring the hotel's hedge maze. They race from the hotel to the maze, and the music begins when they reach it. Prior to this point the subject-position is that of a far-off observer. When the music starts and the characters enter the maze, the audience member is immediately pulled inward. Because of the changing camera position, the observer feels closer to Wendy and Danny, as if floating a few feet in front of or behind them. Jack, who stays inside the hotel, stares into the model of the maze while his wife and son are walking through the real version. The subject-position is different at this point, as the viewer is not invited to adopt a position that associates him or her with Jack in the way that the Steadicam technique invites the viewer to identify with his wife and son in the maze. This scene may foreshadow the end of the film, where Danny escapes Jack, who chases him with an axe in a murderous rage and later freezes to death.

In the second scene in which Bartók's music is utilized, Danny rides through the hotel hallways on his big wheel. He stops when he notices Room 237 – a place Halloran told him to avoid – and slowly approaches on foot. When he tries to open the door, he finds it is locked and "shines" for a moment. He has seen the girls who were killed by their father in the hotel. The audience is following closely behind Danny as he rides down the halls, yet sees the image of his shining as if they were inside his mind. The audience is pulled into Danny's mind just as he is pulled toward Room 237 by his curiosity. This subject-position is again similar to that of the third movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*. Significant events occur in Room 237 later in the film: Danny gains access to Room 237 and returns to his parents with a torn sweater and bruises on his neck. When Jack goes to see what or who may be in the room, he has a graphic hallucination.

The final scene featuring a Bartók excerpt incorporates the longest portion from *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* in the film, from the beginning of the third movement through measure 45. There is a great deal of coordination between the music and the acting at the beginning of the scene, which shows Danny attempting to avoid waking his father while entering the family apartment of the hotel to retrieve a toy. He finds his father awake, sitting on the bed,

staring into space. Jack asks Danny to come to him and assures the boy that he would never do anything to hurt him or his mother. The viewer feels associated with Danny in this scene. As the audience member watches the door open from inside the apartment, there is a distinct feeling of danger for both Danny and the viewer. It is (again) the feeling that whatever is threatening Danny may also be a threat to the observer. Like the others including a Bartók excerpt, this scene occurs in a location where violence takes place later in the movie. Near the end of the film, Jack breaks into the apartment and tries to kill his wife and son with an axe.

In conclusion, my analysis of the subject-position of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* and the scenes in which excerpts of the work appear in Kubrick's *The Shining* reveals similarities in their potential effect on an audience member. The first, second, and fourth movements of the piece place the listener outside the music as an observer, while the third movement – the only one used in *The Shining* – pulls the listener inward, due in part to its unique form and elements of "night music." This inward motion may also be felt by viewers in the scenes of the film accompanied by Bartók's piece as they are drawn into the hedge-maze with Wendy and Danny, pulled toward the door to Room 237 and into Danny's mind for his moment of "shining," and finally into the family apartment. These scenes are not only connected by the soundtrack, but also by the fact that violent events later occur in those locations. While the third movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* was not intended by the composer to accompany a horror film or otherwise tell a story, the similarity between the movement's subject-position within the context of the larger musical work and the subject-position of the scenes in *The Shining* which feature it help explain why the music enhances the storyline and aids in foreshadowing some of the most frightening events in the film.

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