

Béla Bartók

– Musician, Musicologist, Composer . . . and Entomologist!

ARTICLE

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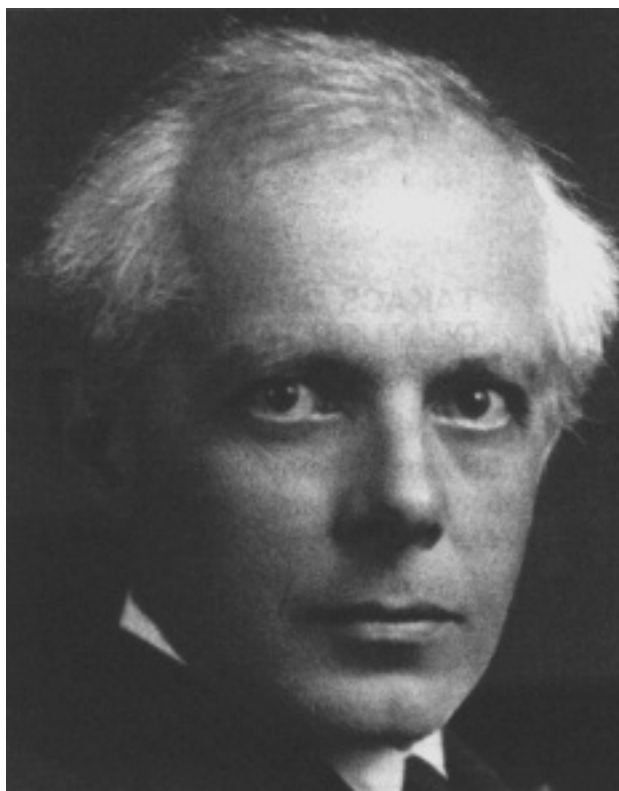


Fig. 1: Bartók in the early 1920s

'Animals would come to him with extraordinary confidence in his sympathy, and this sympathy was one and the same as his feeling for human beings who were rooted in their land. The longing he felt for such natural societies is demonstrated, I believe, in the greater simplicity of his last works, written in his race against death in the unfriendly urban environment of New York. Despite what must have struck him as the inhumanity of the streets, Bartók closed his ears to the roar of traffic, but opened them with interest to the rhythms and tunes of that American-African-European synthesis which is jazz; moreover, he incorporated some of what he heard into his *Concerto for Orchestra*.'

Yehudi Menuhin (1916-99), p. 186 in *Bartók Remembered* (Gillies, 1990)



Hugh Loxdale: I am a long-time Fellow of the RES, having served as Editor of the *Entomologist* and as President. My main entomological interests concern aphid molecular ecology, but I am also very interested in music and poetry. I presently hold a professorial position at the University of Jena, Germany.



Adalbert Balog: I am an entomologist and currently Associate Professor in the Department of Horticultural Sciences, Sapientia - Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania. I especially enjoy working on the taxonomy and ecology of rove beetles (Staphylinidae) and have recently begun to submerge myself in the fascinating world of aphid ecology and behaviour.

I (H.D.L.) remember years ago, back in the late 1970s, attending a social function at Court Place, Iffley, Oxfordshire (owned by Linacre College, Oxford), and an American postgraduate guest there saying that he would play some classical music written in the USA in the 1940s to liven things up a bit...and that it would "knock our socks off!". He did – the final movement of Bartók's famous *Concerto for Orchestra*, written in 1943 – and it did on both counts, the latter figuratively speaking at least! It was my first introduction to the famous Hungarian composer's works (I was then in my late twenties)...and I was hooked. True, on listening to other Bartók pieces soon afterwards, I was initially baffled and somewhat shocked by the strange sonorities and dissonances. However, I also realised that there was much beauty in the music too and that here was a kindred spirit who loved nature and the natural world. For example, it was clear that the slow movement (*Adagio religioso*) of the *Piano Concert No. 3*, written for his second wife, the concert pianist Ditta Pásztory (1903-82) in 1945 and left unfinished at his death of leukaemia in New York on September 25th, 1945 (the last 17 bars were finished by his student and friend, Tibor Serly, 1901-78), was full of the sounds of the living world – birds, frogs and crickets.

Béla Bartók (Fig. 1) was born in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now in western Romania), on 25th March, 1881. He is surely one of the greatest – if not *the* greatest – classical composer and musicologist of the 20th century. This is a view confirmed by no other than Jean Sibelius (1865-1957), no slouch himself in terms of the production of numerous classical musical masterpieces in the last century and like Bartók, a genius (Menuhin, 1977). Bartók's father, Béla Bartók senior (1855-88), a skilled cellist and director of the local orchestra as well as Principal of the Agricultural College in Nagyszentmiklós, died of liver disease at the age of thirty three, when Bartók was only seven. Prior to this family tragedy, his mother, Paula Bartók, née Voit (1857-1939), like her husband, "highly educated and a great music-lover", had started giving the young Béla piano lessons...on his insistence (Lesznai, 1973). At the age of nine he began to compose melodies on the

piano, and gave his first recital at age 11 in Pozsony (now Bratislava, Slovakia). He had his first orchestral work, the *Kossuth* symphony (named after the great Hungarian patriot Lajos Kossuth, 1802-94) performed in the great hall of the Budapest Redoute in January 1904, and was a Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, Budapest by 1907. Thereafter, his career, both as concert pianist and composer, proceeded in fits and starts. It was ultimately crowned with international success and recognition during the 1920s and 30s, and, after leaving his native homeland of Hungary in 1940 and sailing to the USA to escape Fascism, there also, although alas, to some large degree posthumously (Lesnai, 1973; Gillies, 1990; see also Péter Bartók's biography of his father's life, *My Father*, (2002), and the Wikipedia entry for the main events and achievements of Bartók's life).

In terms of compositional output, Bartók is best remembered for a plethora of masterworks, e.g., the stage works, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) and *The Wooden Prince* (1916), the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936), the three *Piano Concertos* (1926, 1930 and 1945), the choral work *Cantata profana* (1930), the *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra* (1937), the *Violin Concert No. 2* (1939), the *Viola Concerto* (1945) and the aforementioned *Concerto for Orchestra*...as well as six String Quartets (1908-39), with their profound and deeply personal message...perhaps the greatest of their genre since Beethoven (according to Schonberg (1998)... although doubtless, Shostakovich fans might dispute this last statement).

In the early 1900s, Bartók teamed up with his musical compatriot and fellow Academician, Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967), a great Hungarian composer in his own right, and toured the more remote regions of Hungary and Romania-Transylvania. There they gathered folksongs using an Edison cylindrical phonograph machine, which they published over many years. Later, Bartók went on other collecting trips, even up to the mid-1930s, and published scholarly ethnological works of great significance on the folk music of many other countries, including Serbo-Croatian and Turkish. Thus besides being a composer and performer of

huge mesmerising presence and skill (and despite his own small physical stature), he was also effectively a scientist, recording the rare and elusive folk melodies of many countries before these pieces were (probably) lost to posterity (Ujfalussy, 1971; Lesnai, 1973; Gillies, 1990; Schonberg, 1998). He was originally buried in New York, but his body was removed to Hungary in 1988. Several statues of him exist, including at the Bartók Memorial House, one of his former and indeed last residences in Budapest (Gillies, 1990), and strange to report, outside South Kensington tube station in London, on a narrow strip of land planted with colourful bedding plants, in effect, an island of colour and nature surrounded by busy traffic.

For sure Bartók loved nature and loved being in the countryside and absorbing the sounds, smells and resonances of nature, even during his five year sojourn in America, especially near Saranac Lake, New York, where he composed the *Concerto for Orchestra*. He was a man of exquisite refinement and sensitivity, and like so many brilliant people, was interested in a wide variety of things above and beyond his own speciality, in his case, a passion for music. He collected shells, plants, hand-made Hungarian furniture, amongst other pursuits (Péter Bartók, 2002). He also actively collected and studied insects, hence the topic of this article.

I first became aware of this fact when, in 1981, I purchased the newly published book *Béla Bartók: His Life in Pictures and Documents* by Ferenc Bónis (1981), produced in celebration of the centenary of Bartók's birth. On page 93 it shows an early watercolour (reproduced in b/w) of Bartók as avid admirer and collector of insects (Fig. 2a) and on p. 259, a b/w photograph of Bartók crouching down (the original caption of the second picture reads 'Collecting Spanish flies on Mount Vermont [= Mt. Wilson, Addison County, Vermont, New England, USA], summer, 1941') (Fig. 2b). The plot thickened when I bought and read a copy of *My Father* (2002) by Péter Bartók (b. 1924), Bartók's son by Ditta Pásztory, which included many letters between Péter and his parents, especially Béla. Péter joined his parents in the States shortly after their arrival there and eventually signed up for the US Navy as an



Fig. 2a,b: Watercolour by Bartók's cousin Ervin Voit of the composer as passionate admirer and collector of insects, c. early 1900s; Bartók collecting beetles at Mt. Vermont, New Jersey, USA, early 1940s, from an original photograph by Dr. Alexander Honig (from Bónis, 1981; pages 93 and 259, respectively).

electrical engineer during WW2. On p. 215, referring to his recent posting to Panama, where he sent his father a large beetle that he found there (Fig. 3), he says:

'I had not chased after butterflies or other insects in Panama, but one morning into the electric shop where I worked in walked, majestically, a beetle the size of my fist. Here was my opportunity to send to my father not just the (beetle's) thigh he had asked for, but a full-fledged beetle, complete and assembled. My recall of his request resulted [in a] death sentence for the poor thing who, first executed in alcohol, and then dried out, made the journey to New York in a cardboard coffin lined with cotton wool. The package went by surface mail, and when I already gave it up for lost, perhaps censored into oblivion, came the acknowledgement.'

'The *Bogarone* [= bogár = Hungarian for beetle + Italian enlarging suffix] arrived completely intact. A magnificent specimen; did you catch it yourself? It was a surprise, because – I do not know why – I expected to find in the box some nautical contraption.'

Péter's mother added a postscript: '...I cannot find words to tell you what an effect your package evoked [in your father]....'

Péter continues by saying:

'My father probably believed the study of insect life to be universal and referred to it as an analogy in making a point about folk music collecting':

'...the collecting of songs as individual objects...is not enough. That would be like a collector of beetles and butterflies who was satisfied with just catching and preserving the various kinds of beetles and butterflies. But, if he is satisfied with doing only that

much, then his collection will be a dead thing, unrelated to life. For this reason, the true naturalist will not only collect and prepare animals, but will study and write down even the most hidden aspects of their life. True, even the most thorough description will be unable to bring the dead into life, but will salvage at least some little bit of life's smell and flavour into the dead collection. These same reasons dictate the folk music collector to also study thoroughly the real life of the melodies.'



Fig. 3: Large beetle sent by Péter Bartók from Panama to his father, photo early 1940s (from P. Bartók, 2002, p. 216, photograph entitled 'The Bogarone'). This appears to be a female of one of the subspecies of the Hercules beetle, *Dynastes hercules* L., native to the rainforests of Central and South America.

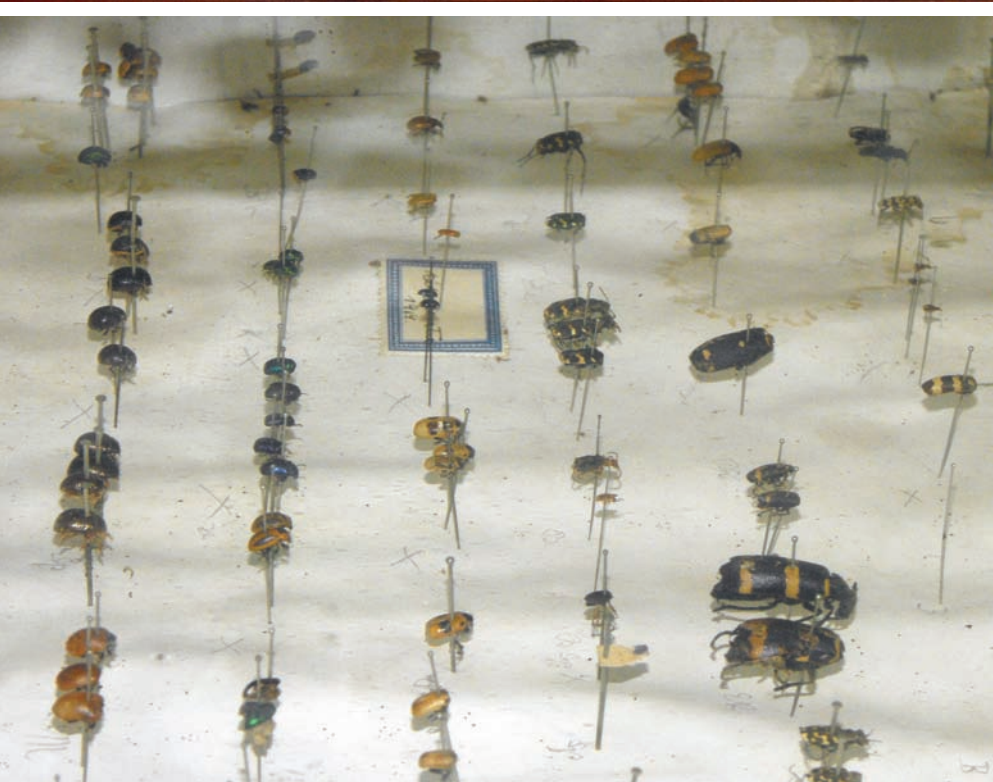


Fig. 4a,b: Photo of cases of insects (Coleoptera) collected by Bartók and now housed in the Bartók Memorial House, Budapest, and (below) close-up of same.

Péter concludes:

‘Any aspect of nature, be it the life of animals, the growth of trees, flowers, the formation of magnificent mountains, or the magic of the Universe, always interested my father and he never ceased wanting to learn more. It was so nice to be asked by my father: “What is it like in Panama? Tell me what stars you see; send me a beetle-thigh; then I will know.”’

But more was yet to be discovered about Bartók’s interest in insects. Following the arrival in March 2009

of Dr. Adalbert Balog from his university in Romania to continue his entomological researches in Jena, I asked him if he knew about the entomological endeavours of Bartók, more especially since a concert pianist friend of mine had recently been to the Béla Bartók Memorial House in Budapest and had seen collections of insects there purportedly made by Bartók. Adalbert said that he was going to Budapest in April and would check this out.

He duly went to the Memorial House as planned and indeed saw various artefacts belonging to the

composer, including two large, glazed cases of insects, mostly Coleoptera, neatly pinned and labelled in professional manner using entomological pins (Fig. 4). On discussing the matter with the museum archivist, it transpired that there had been around 30-40 such cases, but the remainder had – as far as was known – been lost during the turmoil at the end of the 2nd WW (including by attacking Soviet forces and Nazi and Hungarian defending troops, and Allied aerial bombing), and the terrible and bloody Hungarian uprising against Soviet occupation of 1956. It was not known where the material was collected, but probably in Hungary and possibly also Austria and Switzerland where he often went on holiday with his family and other countries in Europe and Africa (Egypt), rather than in the USA (see below).

Adalbert also visited the Bartók Archives at the Institute of Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, and brought back reference to a book that I had not seen before – *Bartók Remembered*, by Malcolm Gillies (1990), a collection of remembrances by various people who had personally met or known Bartók. In one remembrance dated 1966 and entitled *With Family* by Mrs Béla Bartók, née Márta Ziegler (1893-1967), Bartók’s first wife before his divorce from her in 1923, and also a musician in her own right, she says:

‘Bartók would exercise each morning according to Müller’s *Mein System*, and would take the sun as early as possible. He could stand the sun particularly well and while sunbathing he would go on working, studying languages, scoring his compositions, etc. Each day he took a walk, mostly with the family but sometimes alone. If alone, he always brought something home: a strange pebble, a small wildflower, etc. One of his hobbies was collecting beetles and butterflies. He always carried a small flask of alcohol with him for the beetles and one of chloroform for the butterflies. He never stuck pins into a living animal.’

Above the anecdote is a nice line drawing by the composer which he drew for his son Béla Bartók junior (1910-94) in 1915 (Fig. 5).

In the same book, Béla Balázs (1884-1949), who wrote the libretto



Fig. 5: Drawing made by Bartók for his son Béla in c. 1915 entitled 'A family excursion' (from Gillies, 1990).

for *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, writes about Bartók:

'He studies the stars, hunts insects, engages in ethnography, etc. This avidity is obviously to be explained by the fact that so far he has not studied much of anything outside music.'

He later reflected on a holiday the Balázs spent with the Bartóks and Kodálys at a mountain camp near Zürich, Switzerland in 1911, the time Bartók was completing the score of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*:

'Béla Bartók is a moving and most marvellous man. He, too, undressed to the skin. His frail, weak, delicate little body, even when he ran after the ball, seemed as if it moved in robes in front of an altar. It has unbelievable magical dignity and nobility. You could peel his skin off him, but not his unconscious dignity. The genius, in the most romantic schoolboy sense. He travels with a knapsack and ten cigar boxes, filled with insects and flies, which he gathers with scrupulous care and constant wonder. He will sit for hours on the edge of a dirty pond and fish for water insects with Edith

[Balázs's wife]. And the most awful thing is – he says in a plaintive childlike voice – that when a person thinks he has got one of every variety, he finds a new one. He gets up in the night and brings in a 'glow-worm insect' as he says with careful precision, because it is not yet an [adult] beetle. He studies it for an hour, then he carefully takes it back into the grass, because he doesn't collect worms. And it is 'awful' that it has wings, and one can't know whether it is a pupa, a worm, or what.'

Bartók's friend Zoltán Kodály wrote:

'Alongside such knowledge of languages and such musical ability, only the collector's passion was necessary to make a large-scale folklorist out of anyone. And that, too, was there: from early childhood Bartók loved to collect insects and butterflies (later bringing home such specimens from Africa). He often spent the summer in the Swiss Alps. On such occasions, he conscientiously collected and pressed the mountain flowers and read the various plant identifications. Besides this he collected folk

embroidery, carvings, jugs and plates, and studied their literature. Such widely diverging interests would have dissipated any other person's energy. It was Bartók's achievement that his various activities instead of obstructing each other, helped each other.'

I especially liked the anecdote by Ilona Rácz (1897-1985) who was a former piano student of the composer and worked with him during his final years at the Academy of Sciences in Budapest:

'... At 4 o'clock he took a break, got up from his place, [and] took out from his coat pocket a little bottle, in which was some white coffee, and a small slice of bread as well. This was his afternoon tea. He never ate anything else (For example, I can't think of him having ever eaten fruit). During this break he would lean against the window or the table facing the window – and this was his time of relaxation. On one such occasion, as he was standing there by the window and looking out on the stormy Danube, he suddenly began to speak in an unusually tender voice, saying "Look, it has fled here away from the storm!" A little butterfly had



Fig. 6: Entomological book (1901, in Hungarian) owned by Bartók.



Fig. 7a,b: Bartók's insects viewed by (l. to. r.) Zoltán Kodály and his wife Sarolta Péczeley and Bela Bartók jr., c. early 1960s; enlargement of insects in photo (Photos: Bartók Archives).



Fig. 7c,d: Further close up of Bartók's insects photographed in the early 1960s and Kodály and his wife Sarolta on another Museum visit around the same time (Photos: Bartók Archives).

fluttered between the two windows. Bartók loved animals such a lot, even the smallest insects...'

Back at the Bartók Archives, Adalbert also saw some of the entomological books used by Bartók, for example *Das Tierreich. V. Insecten* by Dr. J. Gross (1912) and *Rovargyűjtő* by Dr. Adolf Cserey (1901) (Fig. 6) and was shown photographs of Zoltán Kodály and his second wife Sarolta Péczeley (b. 1940), whom he married in 1959, and Béla Bartók Jnr., inspecting Bartók's remaining insect collections, presumably also in Budapest, probably sometime in the early 1960s (Fig 7a-d). There is also a previous article written about Bartók the entomologist, both in Hungarian and French, by Dr Barnabas Nagy (1962) of the Institute of Research for Plant Protection, Budapest, entitled '*De Béla Bartók Collectionneur des Insectes et ami de la nature*' and featuring close-up photographs of some of Bartók's beetle specimens and shells, the former again professionally pinned and with handwritten data labels (Fig. 8a,b). Clearly, at least one other scientist realised the importance of Bartók's fascination with insects long before our own independent discoveries. However, we have so far been unable to determine whether Bartók actually published anything about insects, other than of course, in the aforementioned *Piano Concerto No. 3* or *From the Diary of a Fly* (No.142... depicting the struggles of a fly to free itself from a spider's web) in the collection of 153 progressively technically and musically more difficult piano pieces – the *Mikrokosmos* (1926-39) – written for his young son Péter who was learning to play the piano under his parents' tuition. Also, in the evocative *Mosquito Dance*, No. 26 (Book 2) in the *44 Duos for Two Violins* (1931) and the so-called 'Night Music' in the *Second Piano Concerto* (1930) where, in the centrepiece of the entire concerto, the composer 'shifts our gaze from the large-scale evocation of nocturnal signalling to the small-scale scurrying of some insect hunt' (Bayley, 2001).

It is ironic that the behatted bronze statue of Bartók by Imre Varga (Fig. 9a) should be erected in 2004 in South Kensington (certainly unbeknown to me until a few years

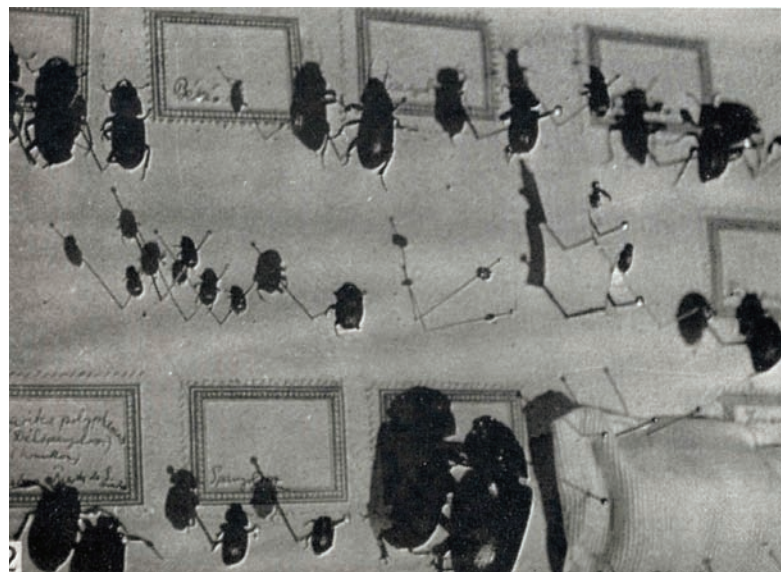


Fig. 8a,b: Close-up of Bartók's beetles showing entomological pins, handwritten labels and (lower photo) preservative (naphthalene?) in pinned cloth bag (from Nagy, 1962, his Plates 1 and 2).



Fig. 9a: A view of Bartók's former and last house in Budapest from 1932-40 (Csalán Road), now the Bartók Memorial House.



Fig. 9b-c: Statue of Bartók in the garden of the Memorial House; and a copy of the same statue in South Kensington (He visited London several times for performances beginning 1922). Photos 9a,b by Adalbert Balog.

ago when I visited it; Adalbert saw the original bronze during his visit to the Bartók Memorial House; Fig. 9b). South Kensington was of course the home, until recently, of both the Natural History Museum's huge collection of insects (now mostly in Wandsworth, although some collections are currently being transferred to the Darwin Centre), including Coleoptera – apparently Bartók's favourite insect Order if his relatively few extant specimens are anything to go by – and home too, until 2007, of the Royal Entomological Society's headquarters, now in St. Albans. Perhaps he would have been pleased to be surrounded by so many insect specimens, beautifully curated, and many

beautifully written and illustrated books about them too, with the Royal College of Music and Royal Albert Hall just up the road.

It remains of considerable interest to look at the insect specimens now in the possession of the Bartók Memorial House, Budapest, although according to Adalbert, the authorities there are reluctant for them to be disturbed lest they be damaged in any way. However, without proper preservation these specimens are likely to deteriorate further anyway, and without professional identification and curation, they have little scientific interest...other than the fact that they were collected by Bartók. We are sure that Bartók, being the meticulous worker he was, would wish his

specimens to be professionally identified and preserved for future generations, just as with the biological specimens of other great figures of the past, e.g. Carl Linnaeus (1707-78) (Fitton & Harman, 2007).

Acknowledgements

We thank the Bartók Memorial House for allowing us to use the pictures used in Figs. 4a,b, 8a,b, and Dr. László Vikárius, Head of the Budapest Bartók Archives, for kindly providing some of the biographical material and showing us Bartók's insect books, for allowing us to reproduce Figs. 6 and 7a-d, and for his helpful comments on the manuscript.

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