Composer Bela Bartok's visit to Vermont

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What is now a small clearing with an old maple tree in a thicket of woods in Berlin was once-- more than half a century ago-- a grand summer retreat for artists and musicians.

Back in August of 1941, the Riverton Retreat on Erhardt Hill hosted its most famous guest. Hungarian-born composer Bela Bartok and his wife, recent arrivals in the U.S., traveled from New York City for a summer getaway.

"I just love Bartok because he's a great pianist, so everything fits and to me this piece is very appealing, I just like the tunes, I like the setting, I like the energy-- and it's just fun," said Sylvia Parker, a musicologist at the University of Vermont.

Parker has spent her career researching and performing Bartok's music. When she moved to Berlin 24 years ago, she knew nothing about the former occupants just next door.

"I started asking the neighbors and I went to the town office, found old deeds, found documents, found people who had worked there, people who had known the people that lived there, and it turned into a really fascinating story," Parker said.

While in Vermont, Bartok was in the process of compiling a catalog of traditional Romanian folk tunes, music that today is considered the hallmark of his unconventional style.

"He's an absolutely wonderful composer," Parker said. "I teach music theory, I'm just endlessly fascinated with the details of how he puts music together, and yet what I very often find appealing-- is just fun-- is the folksy, common natural of the material that he uses."

His month-long stay was not without its difficulties. He worked constantly, often staying up all night and keeping to himself.

"He was finicky. He criticized the cook. She brought him some homemade bread and he says, "How do you make homemade bread? You're supposed to make this is the middle of the night in a wooden trough and it should rise and you must do this before dawn. They did in the old country," Parker said. "He didn't like that."

He would take walks on trails in the woods and look at the creatures lying under logs, fascinated with the natural world. One story credits him with helping to find the cottage owner's lost cat.

"The first night Bartok was here, about midnight he woke everybody up and he said, 'I hear a cat, I hear a cat.' And he led them with a flashlight out into the woods somewhere, and this big old maple tree had the cat stuck way up in the top. So at midnight they went and got a ladder, climbed up and fetched down Lulu the cat," Parker said.

But the ongoing war in Europe and a yet undiagnosed case of leukemia unsettled Bartok. And his visit ended abruptly one day after a trip to the granite quarries in Barre.

"So this air raid practice happened and the sound of that air raid so shocked him, so upset him, that he came home and packed up his bags and left the next day and went back to New York City and he never went back to Vermont," Parker said.

By order of his doctor, Bartok went on to spend the four remaining summers of his life in Saranac Lake.

The Riverton Retreat had fallen into disrepair by the late 1950s. The once grand house was being used by a farmer to store hay. Fire departments set it ablaze in 1966 as a training exercise, and today the vacant clearing is part of the Boyer State Forest.

But Parker says she sometimes imagines hearing the melody of Bartok's music in the hills.

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