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Béla Bartók's Letters to Klára Gombossy (1916) A Crucial Body of Sources to a Period in the Composer's Life¹

The war year 1916 was particularly important for Béla Bartók's compositional activity and for his whole later career. It was then that he resumed composition on the draft of his first ballet, *The Wooden Prince*, which he had put aside before the war; he furthermore largely completed the orchestration as well in the same year. The première of this ballet in the following year has long been considered a breakthrough in his Hungarian and international reception. Also in 1916, Bartók composed some very special works such as the Suite, op. 14, for piano and the two sets of five songs, op. 15 for poems by Klára Gombossy and Wanda Gleiman, and the op. 16 Ady Songs, all of which mark his renewing interest in composition. This is, however, one of the least well-documented periods in Bartók's life. Almost no letters from this period can be found in the two volumes of his collected correspondence. Only some of Denijs Dille's French articles contain a few dispersed quotations from Bartók's letters to Klára Gombossy, then 15, whom the composer met in late 1915 in connection with his Slovak folk song collecting, and who wrote some poetry at the time. All in all 16 letters, including series of picture postcards, written by Bartók to Gombossy survive in photocopies and can be studied at the Music Collection of the Royal Library in Brussels. These letters, in which "Professor" Bartók enthusiastically teaches and instructs his young disciple, are particularly revealing documents. They give rare access not only to data on this important period of stylistic evolution but also to Bartók's way of thinking.

Author of this article previously published data on the composition of the op. 15 Songs and the ballet based on these letters, see László Vikárius: „Intimations through Words and Music. Unique Sources to Béla Bartók's Life and Thought in the Fonds Denijs Dille (B-Br)”, *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* LXVII (2013), 179–217. The present article focuses on the letters as unique sources of Bartók's thoughts on, and approach to, literature, languages, the fine arts and folk song collecting.

¹ Abstract of the paper read at the conference entitled Music and the Great War organized by the Archives and Research Group for 20th-21st Century Music on 27 November 2014.