

An Interview with Saul Goodman about the Bartók Sonata

By Paul Jasionowski

Saul Goodman was the timpanist for the New York Philharmonic for 46 years. Within that time span, Mr. Goodman performed under some of the world's foremost composers. Among them were Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók. Today, many of Mr. Goodman's students hold positions with major symphony orchestras throughout the world. The interview with Mr. Goodman took place on July 13, 1991, at his Lake Placid home in upstate New York. Topics and materials discussed are relevant to the U.S. première of the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, performed at Town Hall in New York City in 1940 with Bartók and his wife, Ditta, as the pianists.

JASIONOWSKI: How did you get hired to perform the U.S. première of the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*?

GOODMAN: To begin with, several weeks before Béla Bartók came to the United States, the manager of the New York Philharmonic asked me if I would be interested in doing a performance with Béla Bartók of a new work which had never been performed in the United States before. I asked, "What sort of a piece is it? Do you have the music?" The answer was "No, I don't have the music. Béla Bartók has the music and he'll be coming over on the ship from Italy." When the Germans invaded Hungary, somehow Bartók was able to get out of Budapest, where he lived, and go to Italy. As a result of the efforts of the American League of Composers, they were able to get visas for Bartók and his wife to come to this country to participate in one of their performances at Town Hall.

The day of the rehearsal, Bartók still hadn't arrived in the United States. When I tried to find out what instruments were required, the manager of the orchestra simply stated, "Well, I think there's a couple of timpani required, and maybe a bass drum, maybe a xylophone." It was always "maybe," not knowing the true

facts. The rehearsal took place at Steinway Hall, 113 West 57th Street, in New York City. I sent up a set of—just think of it—hand-tuned timpani, a 25", a 28"; they were Leedy, hand-tuned timpani. The second percussion player sent up a bass drum, a tango bass drum, which is a small bass drum, very narrow. It's made specifically for people who want to transport their drums around. The xylophone was a two-and-a-half octave xylophone. The bars were all crooked, no resonators. It was a portable xylophone. We both had the usual triangle, tambourine, and other instruments which percussionists carry around. The rehearsal was scheduled for 4:00 in the afternoon. Finally, Bartók and his wife walked in to the rehearsal at 5:00, one hour late, and he had the music. He gave the music out; he had copied it. The music looked like little dots of nothing because I didn't know what instruments were required. We eventually worked it out so that we

were able to start the rehearsal. When we started to rehearse, Bartók came over and looked at the timpani and shook his head in disbelief. I looked at the part and I shook my head agreeing with him. I said, "What we need are pedal timpani. Nobody mentioned that to me." I told him that tomorrow I would have pedal timpani. The second percussion player, who was much older than I was at the time, was obviously not quick enough to absorb this new idiom which Bartók had written for percussion. He wasn't doing very well with it. As a result, the next day we had another percussion player, a fellow named Henry Denecke. He later became a conductor. He did very well with the part. We had 13 rehearsals for that performance. The parts presented quite a few problems. Playing something without a conductor, when a timpanist or a percussionist is used to performing with a conductor, made it difficult to coordinate our rhythmic conceptions with



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Bartók's, which, incidently, was very good. But, still it presented a problem. When we got to the performance site that afternoon in November, 1940, the performance started very nicely, the beginning of the piece, the introduction. When we got to the allegro, Bartók had turned two pages of his part and the thing started to go to pieces. So, they stopped the performance. Bartók looked over at both percussion players and called out the rehearsal number where we would begin, which was the allegro. From there on the piece went quite well. Obviously, the music critics—not being familiar with the piece since it was the first performance—didn't realize what actually happened. What I just described took place in a few seconds. One of the music critics, Samuel Chotzinoff, who was formerly an accompanist for Jascha Heifetz, (I'm glad he became a music critic), realized the outstanding conception of this type of piece written for percussion and used in this particular manner. The audience seemed to like it very much. Incidently, at this same performance I played the *L'Histoire du Soldat* under Fritz Reiner. We had the intermission, then we played the Bartók.

JASIONOWSKI: *What was Béla Bartók like as a person?*

GOODMAN: He seemed to be a very morose person. He seemed to be the type of person who continually had a worried look on his face. He had a difficult time making a living. I don't know if you know the story of the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Bartók was ill with tuberculosis and he was in the hospital at Saranac Lake. Serge Koussevitzky, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, came to visit Bartók to tell him that he had been elected (commissioned) to write a piece, the *Concerto for Orchestra*. That was the beginning of that piece.

JASIONOWSKI: *Did Bartók speak English?*

GOODMAN: Yes, he spoke English fairly well. I speak pretty good German. I was able to talk with him in German when I didn't understand his English. His wife of course didn't speak English. She didn't say anything. She played the second piano part.

JASIONOWSKI: *What was Bartók like when all four players were rehearsing the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion?*

GOODMAN: He was nervous and edgy, but he was very pleased with what we did with our performance; he was extremely pleased. He had participated in a performance before this in Switzerland. That was the world première. I'm sure that the percussionists who did that performance didn't come anywhere near the way we did. (Editor's Note: The sonata was premièred on January 16, 1938, in Basel, Switzerland with the Bartóks playing pianos with percussionists Fritz Schiesser and Philipp Rühlig.)

JASIONOWSKI: *Why was that? Due to instrumentation?*

GOODMAN: The only reason I can give to that is that this particular conception of the use of percussion instruments, running from one instrument to another, and working the rhythmic conception, the phrasing and accents, might have interfered with the security and just where percussion playing was at during that period of time. I am only imagining this because, as I say, the performance of the Bartók *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* today is nothing. You get kids out of Juilliard, Curtis, or Indiana and they can knock this thing right off.

JASIONOWSKI: *What was Bartók's reason or inspiration for writing the work?*

GOODMAN: Well, it's a question which I truthfully couldn't answer. However, Bartók was a great experimenter; you know the trips that he made

throughout that part of Europe where he lived, to Hungary and Romania. He and Kodaly listened to folk music and folk tunes as they traveled throughout the countryside. The way he used those themes, for instance in *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, and the *Concerto for Orchestra*, and many of his solo pieces for violin, it's obvious that he was out to do something original. Incidently, with this same idea in mind when it came to percussion, I think he felt that he wanted to make some contribution to original use of percussion. Using it in this respect as a chamber music piece probably indicates that he had a very original idea. The composer who used percussion as a chamber music piece more or less was Igor Stravinsky in *L'Histoire du Soldat*.

JASIONOWSKI: *Was Bartók well known nationally and in New York City in 1940?*

GOODMAN: No he wasn't. The American League of Composers was very anxious that he come here because he had something very unusual to offer: *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, and later, the *Concerto for Orchestra*.

JASIONOWSKI: *Was Bartók precise as a director in regards to his instructions for the setup of the instruments and the instructions designated for the two percussionists?*

GOODMAN: He was precise. He wanted the percussion to be in between the two pianos. It was an unnatural situation for the percussion players because we were too close to the pianos. We weren't able to get a good feeling of the ensemble. It would have been better if the percussion was positioned back a little more. Besides, there was a lot more room for the instruments. I think it was an unimportant effect to the composer. You wouldn't expect the composer to realize all these technical details.

JASIONOWSKI: *It was pretty unnatural for the percussionists to be that close to the pianists?*

GOODMAN: Oh yes. It was better to be farther back so that we could get a good ensemble sound and hear what's happening.

JASIONOWSKI: *What were the original parts like? Handwritten?*

GOODMAN: They were very badly written. They were so badly written and I was so frustrated trying to figure the thing out, that I told the manager of the group that if they couldn't get some decent parts, then I didn't want to play it. They got a hold of a copyist. The copyist worked all night long copying out the parts. The next day during rehearsal the parts were beautiful. Bartók had taken the parts over to a print shop and had the parts printed. These are the parts that you get today—the parts that I insisted that they have the very next day.

JASIONOWSKI: *Do you own an original part?*

GOODMAN: Yes, I do, but the part is at my winter home in Florida.

JASIONOWSKI: *What types of heads were used during the première? Calf skin? Synthetic?*

GOODMAN: I used to use heads manufactured by American Rawhide Company. I don't think they're in existence anymore. They used to send me a bundle of heads. I used to pick out the ones that I wanted and send back the rest that I didn't think were good. That's a lot in itself to be able to choose a head, a calfskin head, that's close-knit. But that takes years and years of experience, believe me.

JASIONOWSKI: *You used calfskin heads on all your drums?*

GOODMAN: I always tucked my own heads. Never had anyone else do it but me.

JASIONOWSKI: *What was the audience reaction during the première concert?*

GOODMAN: There wasn't any specific audience reaction, except at the very end. There was sort of a lukewarm reaction. You must remember, since this program was given out of the auspices of the American League of Composers, they practically had a captive audience there. They were the people who collaborated to get a new voice in the composition of music. Naturally, they had a captive audience there. The applause, I would say, was very good. I wouldn't say it was great, but it was very good. Now, putting a question like that to me at this time, more than 50 years later, seems to be a little taxing on my memory. You can understand that.

JASIONOWSKI: *How did the critics receive the performance of the "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion?"*

GOODMAN: Not too well. The only critic who had a good word to say about the sonata was Samuel Chotzinoff, chief music critic of the *New York Post*. He was the only one who really had a good word to say about the use of percussion, the effectiveness of its use, and the attractiveness of its sound.

[*Editor's Note: Noel Straus, writing in the New York Times was another critic who was most favorable to this performance. In an article that appeared on November 4, 1940, the day after the performance Mr. Straus wrote:*

"...Superbly performed by both of the pianists with the expert assistance of Saul Goodman and Henry Deneke, Jr., percussionists, the novelty (sic!) completely dispelled any notion that Mr. Bartók's powers as musical creator had waned in the slightest during the years...Perhaps the most amazing thing about this extraordinary two-piano composition was its wealth of new and extremely effective sonorities. From the beginning to end, it teemed with novel and unsuspected possibilities of timbre and color. This was as true of the writing for the pianos as it was of the scoring for the keyboards in

combination with the pulsatile instruments.

Had the work possessed no other merit it would have been an outstanding achievement viewed simply from the standpoint of its discovery of so many hitherto unexploited tonal effects. As Mr. Bartók employed them, the percussion instruments and the pianos did not sound unrelated in character, but became highly unified in their ministrations.

But the composition was far more than a complex of fascinating sounds. It was unusually exciting in its dynamism, its enormous vitality, its unrelenting rhythmic urge and its perfection of form.

The brief introduction to the opening movement, from the pianissimo roll on the tympani and the brooding initial statement of the first piano to the more and more agitated crescendo leading to the barbaric outcries at the start of the allegro proper, formed a fitting beginning to a work that must have strengthened the conviction that Mr. Bartók, who was one of the first to resort to modernism in music with compelling success, still remains unsurpassed in individual and important contributions to contemporary music..." (Michael Rosen, editor)]

JASIONOWSKI: *How many people attended the première performance at Town Hall?*

GOODMAN: Full capacity of Town Hall. (Town Hall is now owned by New York University.)

JASIONOWSKI: *What was the percussion playing like at that time in New York in 1940?*

GOODMAN: Well, the good percussion players were either in dance bands or in some of the vaudeville theaters, and also some of the musical shows on Broadway.

JASIONOWSKI: *Was the Sonata considered extremely difficult at that time?*

GOODMAN: Tremendously difficult. The first performance took 13 rehearsals. Since then, I have performed it with Jonathan Haas. We only rehearsed it once before we performed it.

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JASIONOWSKI: *What was your approach to learning and performing the Sonata during its première?*

GOODMAN: You have to remember that I didn't get the part until the day of the first rehearsal, and the parts were badly written. It wasn't until the next day that we got decently written parts which I was really able to study. I didn't find it that difficult.

JASIONOWSKI: *Did you have any problems regarding tuning factors during the première?*

GOODMAN: No problem. No problem at all. The drums that I had, the chain drums and pedal timpani, were no problem at all. I used two chain drums on the ends, and two pedal timpani as the middle two drums. For the second rehearsal I brought my drums over from Carnegie Hall. The only reason I sent those two hand-tuned drums over to the first

rehearsal was because no one told me anything about the complexities of the music, since Bartók had the music with him on the boat.

JASIONOWSKI: *You didn't have too much time to prepare for the first rehearsal?*

GOODMAN: No, not at all, no time at all.

JASIONOWSKI: *Did that make you nervous?*

GOODMAN: Not really. I knew that we would have plenty of rehearsal time. Of course it took quite a few rehearsals to get it into shape.

JASIONOWSKI: *What was your approach to performing the Sonata later on?*

GOODMAN: Well, [regarding] the arrangement of the timpani, the type of timpani used: you're better off using two pedal timpani as the middle two drums. Although Bartók recom-

mends three timpani for the composition, I would suggest the fourth timpani as the high drum. The outside drums should be chain or cable drums, but not pedal drums because you can move your hands faster than your feet. Instead of having to shuffle your feet back and forth pedaling the two outside drums, you can use your hands and reach much easier.

JASIONOWSKI: *Have you always used four drums when performing the Sonata?*

GOODMAN: Absolutely, even at the first performance I used four drums. I never performed the piece with three drums. I always used four drums.

JASIONOWSKI: *What was your approach to teaching your students to learn and perform the Sonata?*

GOODMAN: I would teach the student to play it on four timpani instead of

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three. Player One should have his own two snare drums instead of trying to use the two snare drums of the second player.

JASIONOWSKI: *What is your advice to players learning the Sonata regarding performance problems that percussionists will encounter?*

GOODMAN: Well, when it comes to timpani, the tuning arrangements need to be worked out: which drums to tune, where, why, and when. Of course, any mallet part would have to be worked out and practiced. One of the most important things that has to be worked out is the arrangement of the percussion instruments, especially when more than one player is involved. Another is coordinating the parts so that each player knows which part to cover, and realizing the importance of making the percussion lines blend with the two pianos as well as project.

JASIONOWSKI: *Part One and Part Two are separate lines. Can Player Two cover some of Player One's parts?*

GOODMAN: Yes. A good example is in the introductory section in the first

movement just before the allegro. At bar 14, Player Two can pick up the tam-tam part. It's very important for Player One to be relieved of that responsibility.

JASIONOWSKI: *Was the New York premiere recorded?*

GOODMAN: No it wasn't. As far as I know it wasn't. If it was recorded, I wish that I could get a copy of that. There was a recording made about two weeks after our performance with Bartók and his wife. They wanted me and Denecke to play it for CBS radio, but we didn't do it. It was a program called *An Invitation to Music*. It was recorded from the air. My comment on that recording: probably stinks percussion wise, and inadequately played. The two guys who played it are dead. It doesn't make any difference. I'm not going to mention any names.

JASIONOWSKI: *What early recordings would you recommend?*

GOODMAN: To tell you the truth, I think the best recording was a recording that I made with Abe Marcus. Abe Marcus was the princi-

pal percussionist with the Metropolitan Opera, and later became personnel manager for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. He is a very close friend of mine. The recording that we did was recorded on a 78 record. You might be able to pick up an old one at a collectors record store.

JASIONOWSKI: *How long ago was that recording made?*

GOODMAN: Forty years ago.

JASIONOWSKI: *What current recordings would you recommend?*

GOODMAN: There's only one recording that I have any respect for, and that's a recording that was made in Budapest, a Hungarian recording. You see, it's very hard to record this piece. First of all, you have to have an engineer who can produce a quality sound. There are these different



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sounds that are very important that Bartók had in mind: for instance, the sound of a drum without snares, the sound of a smaller drum with snares, the sound of a high pitched cymbal, the sound of a large tam-tam.

All these things are important. As far as I can see no one has taken the trouble to try to make a good recording of this piece.

JASIONOWSKI: *Did you keep in contact with Bartók after 1940?*

GOODMAN: Oh no. I was never that close to him. I don't know anyone who was that close to Bartók. I don't know if he was that kind of a person. He seemed to be a very closed—in sort of a person. After all, who am I? Just a timpani player! PN

Paul Jasionowski received the bachelor of music degree from the University

of Lowell, Massachusetts, and the master of music degree from California State University at Long Beach. His principal teachers have been Everett Beale, Fred Buda, Dr. Michael Carney, Greg Goodall, and currently Ed Shaughnessy. He has also studied with Douglas Howard and Benjamin Herman at the Aspen Music School, and with Mitchell Peters at the Music Academy of the West.

Paul has served as timpanist/percussionist for the Bedford [MA] Symphony, Concord [MA] Orchestra, Longy Chamber Orchestra, and Inland Empire Symphony [San Bernardino, CA], and is currently the New York percussionist for English composer John Rutter.

Paul has taught percussion studies at CSU-Long Beach and CSU-San Bernardino. He maintains an active teaching studio at his Loma Linda, California, home.

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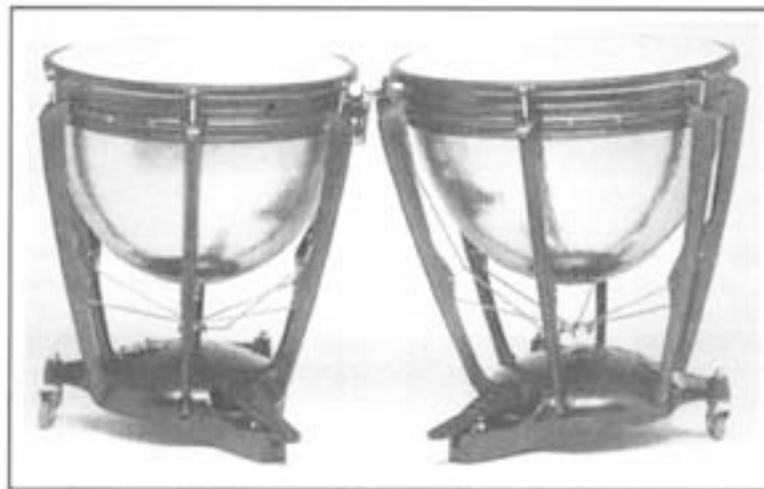
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