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# THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF BARTÓK'S 14 BAGATELLES FOR PIANO

*Elliott Antokoletz*

BARTÓK's musical language may be approached from two points of view—one, in which the concepts and terminology are derived from folk-music sources, and the other, in which the concepts and analytical tools are derived from certain currents in contemporary music. The present essay is intended to demonstrate, through a study of selected pieces from the 14 *Bagatelles* for piano, opus 6 (1908), that the assumptions underlying both approaches are essential in understanding the evolution of Bartók's musical language, and that fundamental relationships exist between the diatonic folk modes and various abstract pitch formations commonly found in contemporary compositions.

The *Bagatelles*, written shortly after Bartók's and Kodály's first investigations of Hungarian folk music in 1905-6, bear the first important evidence of his ability to synthesize his dual experience of folk and art music. The essence of this synthesis lies in the growth toward a new kind of tonal system and a new means of progression. Bartók's own comments regarding his early harmonic derivations from modal folk melodies suggest a link between folk sources and certain procedures associated with serial composition.<sup>1</sup> The transformation of folk elements into abstract pitch formations in Bartók's music is described by the composer:

Through inversion, and by placing these [modal] chords in juxtaposition one above the other, many different chords are obtained and with them the freest melodic as well as harmonic treatment of the twelve tones of our present day harmonic system . . . Of course, many other (foreign) composers, who do not lean upon folk music, have met with similar results at about the same time—only in an intuitive or speculative way, which, evidently, is a procedure equally justifiable. The difference is that we created through Nature . . .<sup>2</sup>

1 The term 'series' usually denotes an ordered succession of elements, such as the Schoenbergian twelve-tone set. Although Bartók's music is based on unordered non-twelve-tone sets, i.e. which have fixed intervallic content but not ordering, the means by which he establishes connections between the melodic and harmonic levels are closely related to those found in serial compositions. This definition is given by George Perle, in *Serial Composition and Atonality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p.40.

2 *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. Benjamin Suchoff (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p.338.

The *Bagatelles* had already at their early date juxtaposed, transformed, and to an extent synthesized most of those elements that were to be basic to Bartók's musical language throughout the various stages of his compositional evolution. Since we are primarily concerned with the evolutionary process, we shall explore representative *Bagatelles* in an order moving from the more traditional (folk) characteristics through increasingly abstract pitch formations. The general correspondence of Bartók's life-long compositional development with this trend justifies the effort to classify this early set of pieces that contains, in microcosm, a mixture of those seeds that will manifest themselves in the successive stages of that development.

\*            \*            \*

#### *Harmonization of Authentic Folk Tunes*

A study of Bartók's harmonic evolution may begin with those early works based on his harmonic settings of authentic Eastern-European folk melodies. In December 1906, Bartók and Kodály jointly arranged and published *Twenty Hungarian Folksongs* for voice and piano, the first results of their early expedition. Modal considerations of the tunes already show evidence of a weakening of traditional dominant-tonic relations. In his desire to move away from traditional western influences, Bartók had to find the means of deriving new pitch structures for harmonizing authentic folk melodies of eastern origin or his own imitations of such melodies.

The tunes themselves showed Bartók new ways of harmonization. Of the diverse folk melodies he collected, we may observe two basic categories<sup>3</sup>—one, an 'old' Hungarian peasant style, and the other, a 'new' Hungarian peasant style, which probably began to develop in the second half of the 19th century. From the pentatonic scale, which is the basis of the oldest tunes, Bartók derived special limited possibilities for harmonization: these included two triads (one major, the other minor), the minor-seventh chord, and the inversions of these chordal structures. The consonant use of the minor-seventh chord was traced back by Bartók to the 'old' pentatonic melodies, where the seventh appears as an interval of equal importance with the third and fifth. Since these intervals were frequently heard as of equal value in the linear succession, it seemed natural to make them sound of equal importance when used simultaneously. Also, the frequent use of fourth intervals in the pentatonic melodies suggested the use of fourth chords.<sup>4</sup> In the 'new' modal folk tunes (including Dorian, Phrygian, some Mixolydian, and even major sometimes strongly felt in the melodies,) the underlying linear structure is often pentatonic, so that pentatonically derived harmonies were given priority by Bartók here also, though such modal melodies expanded the number of harmonic possibilities.

In *Bagatelle No. IV*, based on an old Hungarian folksong collected by Bartók in 1907 in Felsőiregh, Tolna—a district west of the Danube—the harmonized folk tune is in the D-Aeolian mode. Since there is no major-seventh degree, or leading tone (C#) in this mode, the triad built on the fifth degree (A-C-E) does not play the same tonality-defining role here as it did in traditional tonal music. Instead, the function of the modal minor-seventh degree (C) appears to be static since, without an adjacent semitone, it does not have a strong tendency toward

3 *ibid.*, p. 84.

4 *ibid.*, pp. 334-6.

another tone. In the first two phrases of the melody (Ex. 1), the minor-seventh degree occurs as one of four principal tones, D-F-A-C, the sixth (B $\flat$ ) and fourth (G) degrees of the mode having passing functions and the second degree (E) being omitted altogether. While the first phrase is simply harmonized by triads, the second phrase adds a seventh degree to each of the original triads, so that in all but two of the chords (ninth chords on F and C) the minor-seventh-chord outline of the melody is vertically projected.



A special property of the minor-seventh chord is its symmetrical construction—one half intervallically mirrors the other half—a property which tends to weaken traditional tonal functions by giving a static quality to such chords.<sup>5</sup> The parallel motion of these root-position chords contributes to the equalization of the chordal tones by eliminating the necessity for any logical preparation or resolution of any of the tones in terms of traditional voice leading. The bass line, or root progression, supporting these parallel chords is also a manifestation of the minor-seventh-chord outline, the bass-note G functioning as a passing tone. This note (G), together with the minor-seventh-chord outline (D-F-A-C), symmetrically expands the four notes to a pentatonic substructure (D-F-G-A-C) of the D-Aeolian melody. This exclusively pentatonic bass line, which contains no semitone adjacencies, contributes to a weakening of the tonal motion. The harmonic fabric seems, therefore, to simply 'exist' within the D-Aeolian framework, rather than functionally participating, in the traditional sense, in the establishment of D as a tonal priority.

In his harmonization, Bartók also projects the prominent melodic perfect fourth (or its harmonic inversion, the perfect fifth) both vertically and into the bass line. While the vertical projection retains a fundamental association with traditional tonal music (i.e. as the boundary of the triad), this association is more apparent than real, since the perfect fifth of each triad in the first phrase is registrally isolated in the two lower lines and presented in parallel motion. Consecutive fifths (as one instance, in the eighth-note groups of the first phrase, F-C, G-D, and A-E, which outline a symmetrical six-note segment of the cycle of fifths), suggest a symmetrical, cyclic reordering of the intervals of the modal folk tune. The projection of this melodic interval, either singly or compounded to form a larger symmetry, occurs even more prominently and still more removed from functional roles in other bagatelles. Thus, Bartók's folk-tune harmonization establishes a new concept of sonic unification.

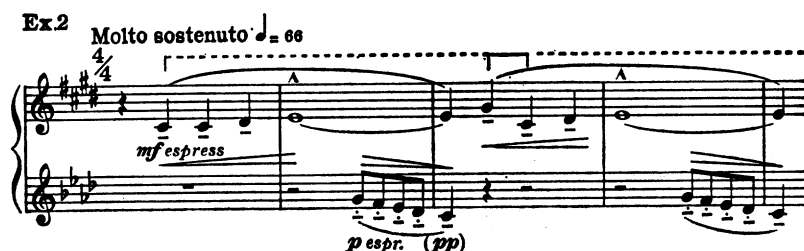
#### *Symmetrical Reordering of Modal Intervallic Properties*

Among the prominent characteristics of the old Hungarian folk melodies, frequent melodic skips of a perfect fourth were to be a significant source from

<sup>5</sup> See Perle, *op. cit.*, n. 1, above, p. 26.

which Bartók could draw material for his own melodic and harmonic inventions. As he states in one of his essays, 'The frequent repetition of this remarkable skip occasioned the construction of the simplest fourth-chord . . .'<sup>6</sup> The significance of this procedure lies in the transformation of the diatonic modes into symmetrical pitch constructions.

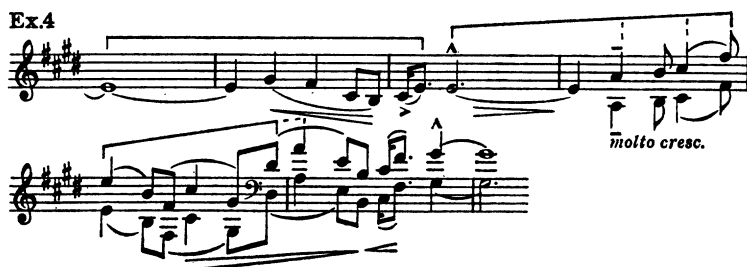
In *Bagatelle No. 1*, which joins two modal lines to produce a 'Phrygian-coloured C major',<sup>7</sup> symmetrical melodic formations emerge as primary foreground events through intervallic reordering of the opening modal material. In the upper melodic line (mm. 1-5), the perfect fifth C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$  appears as the boundary of the C sharp minor triadic outline (Ex. 2). In the consequent phrase of the same



line (mm. 5-8), the perfect fifth (or its complement in the same interval class, the perfect fourth) appears with increasing frequency as a melodic detail. The last two measures of the consequent phrase (Ex. 3) outline three intervallically equivalent segments. While the first and last only imply perfect fifths (E-B-F $\sharp$  and A-E-B), the middle one explicitly appears in its cyclic ordering, F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ .



The upper line in the opening of the second section (mm. 9-11) is exclusively pentatonic (Ex. 4). The consequent phrase is initiated (m. 12) by another pentatonic formation (E-A-B-C $\sharp$ -F $\sharp$ ), the latter now bounded by two perfect fourths and all five notes explicitly appearing in a symmetrical ordering. Then, the following measure unfolds a six-note segment of the cycle of fifths (E-B-F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ ), explicitly ordered in terms of both its symmetrical and cyclic properties. Thus, the exclusively C $\sharp$ -Aeolian or E-major pitch content of the entire upper melodic line is transformed in the second half of the piece into a segment of the cycle of fifths (( )-E-B-F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ -(A)).



6 Bartók, *op. cit.*, n. 2, above, p. 336.

7 *ibid.*, p. 433.

*Interactions of Diatonic, Whole-Tone, and Octatonic Pitch Sets*<sup>8</sup>

In *Bagatelle No. IX*, which is a set of variations in unison, ambiguous melodic segments serve as common links among whole-tone, diatonic, and octatonic formations. As shown in Ex. 5, the second (repeated) phrase cadences, at m. 4, with a gapped whole-tone segment, E $\flat$ -(-)-G-A. At the opening of m. 5, this cadential formation is extended by whole tones to A-(-)-C $\sharp$ -E $\flat$ -E $\sharp$ -G. At the end of this section (m. 11, beat 2, through m. 12, beats 1-2), the latter, in turn, appears as a complete whole-tone scale, A-B-C $\sharp$ -E $\flat$ -E $\sharp$ -G. At the main thematic cadence (m. 12), a segment (A-B-C $\sharp$ ) from this whole-tone scale is reinterpreted, with the addition of the note D, as diatonic, A-B-C $\sharp$ -D (Ex. 6).

In the first variation (*Tempo I*), the second phrase (mm. 17-18) cadences on a transposition (D-(-)-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ ) of the original gapped whole-tone segment, this time representing the other whole-tone scale. Whereas the first occurrence (m. 4) was expanded by whole tones in the next measure, the present occurrence is expanded

**Ex. 5**  
Allegretto grazioso ♩ = 50  
3/4

**Ex. 6**

by a complete octatonic scale, D-(-)-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -A-B-C-D-E $\flat$ -F (mm. 18-19), Ex. 7. Thus, the latter whole-tone segment (D-(-)-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ ) serves as an invariant segment between whole-tone and octatonic scales. Such common links appear to be a primary means of melodic progression throughout this as well as other bagatelles.

**Ex. 7**

*Construction, Development, and Interaction of Intervallic Cells*

With the weakening of the hierarchical pitch relations inherent in the traditional dominant-tonic progressions, greater emphasis had to be placed on the intervallic properties of both harmonic and melodic constructions as a means of establishing local and large-scale structural coherence. This new means in an idiom based on the equalization of the semitones is primarily found in the intervallic pitch-cell.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most radical early departures from the harmonic use of the triad occurs in *Bagatelle No. VIII*. The closing Ritenuto is melodically and harmonically

<sup>8</sup> 'Octatonic' refers to an eight-note scale based on regular alternations of whole-tones and semitones. There are altogether three different octatonic scales: C-D-E $\flat$ -F-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -A-B; C $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ -E-F $\sharp$ -G-A-B $\flat$ -C; and D-E-F-G-G $\sharp$ -A $\sharp$ -B-C $\sharp$ . Because of its cyclic intervallic properties, the starting point for each is arbitrary.

<sup>9</sup> According to Perle, *op. cit.*, n.1, above, p. 9, a 'cell' is a 'microcosmic set of fixed intervallic content, stable either as a chord or as a melodic figure or as a combination of both'. Its components, however, are not fixed with regard to order in Bartók's works.

permeated by all six possible transpositions of a symmetrical tetrachord known as cell Z<sup>10</sup> (this cell is based on two tritones separated either by a minor second or perfect fourth), as shown in Ex.8. This closing passage is the culmination of various cell transformations throughout the piece. A modified recapitulation (*Piu sostenuto*) brings back the opening harmonic statements of a nonsymmetrical three-note cell, the chromatic succession of which foreshadows that of the final Z-cell passage. The initial statement of the cell (G $\sharp$ -B $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ ) returns at its original pitch level (grace-note G $\sharp$  moving to the downbeat, C-D $\flat$ ) in enharmonic spelling. A significant transformation of the cell structure occurs in this section



(mm. 24-7). In the first two phrases, the original major third is dropped from each harmonic statement of the cell, leaving only the parallel semitones. At mm. 26-7, not only do each of the cell statements now appear complete, but a second major third is added. Each of the resulting four-note chords (Ex.9) joins the cell with its literal inversion. (As one instance, the first chord, B-G-C-A $\flat$ , m. 26, contains a prime form, G-B-C, and an inversion, G-A $\flat$ -C.) Each four-note symmetry, which can also be understood as two semitones separated by a minor third (G-A $\flat$ /B-C), anticipates cell Z, which will expand the minor third to a perfect fourth (e.g. F-F $\sharp$ /B-C, at m. 28).



Significant transformations of the basic three-note cell begin early in the exposition. The cadential major-seventh chords E-G $\sharp$ -B-D $\sharp$  (m. 6), a four-note symmetry, joins a prime form (B-D $\sharp$ -E) with an inversion (D $\sharp$ -E-G $\sharp$ ). At mm. 4-5 of the same phrase, a gapped whole-tone segment, A-B-( )-D $\sharp$ , retains the major third of the original cell and expands the semitone to A-B, producing a new boundary, A-D $\sharp$ . This represents the first tritone occurrence. A five-note diatonic segment (E-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -A $\sharp$ -B) follows in the bass line, the first four notes giving us a complete whole-tone tetrachord bounded by a second tritone, E-A $\sharp$ . Both tritone boundaries of these linearly unfolding whole-tone segments (A-B-( )-D $\sharp$  and E-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -A $\sharp$ ) together represent the first adumbration of the specific double-tritone combination of cell Z.

<sup>10</sup> This term was first used by Leo Treitler, 'Harmonic Procedure in the *Fourth Quartet* of Béla Bartók'. *Journal of Music Theory* 3 (November 1959), pp.292-7, and first explored in depth by Antokoletz, *Principles of Pitch Organization in Bartók's Fourth String Quartet*, Ph.D. dissertation (City University of New York, 1975). An extract of the latter is published in the *University of Michigan Journal, In Theory Only* 3/6 (September 1977), pp.3-22.

A transitional passage (mm. 12-15) to the development section begins with the minor-third transposition (B-D $\sharp$ -E) of the basic cell. At mm. 13-15, statements of the cell melodically overlap in two-note segments: D $\sharp$ -D-B $\flat$  is interlocked with its inversion, D-B $\flat$ -A, which together produce a four-note symmetry, D $\sharp$ -D-B $\flat$ -A. (The latter is significant in the recapitulation, mm. 26-27, where it anticipates the expansion to cell Z: see Example 9.) This symmetry implies the presence of two partial Z cells, D $\sharp$ -D-A and D $\sharp$ -B $\flat$ -A, the former (A-E $\flat$ -D) explicitly appearing as a melodic adjacency (mm. 14-15).

The development section (mm. 16-23) begins now with the tritone transposition (D-F $\sharp$ -G) of the basic cell, which moves (second eighth note) to the gapped whole-tone cell (D $\flat$ -(-)-F-G). Then, the final chord, F-A-C $\sharp$ -G (m. 18), of the first half of this section contains two inversionally related gapped whole-tone cells, G-A-(-)-C $\sharp$  and C $\sharp$ -(-)-F-G. The analogously placed cadential chord, C-(-)-E-F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$  (m. 21), which is inversionally related to that at m. 18 (F-G-A-(-)-C $\sharp$ ), also contains two inversionally related gapped whole-tone cells, F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -(-)-C and C-(-)-E-F $\sharp$ . Each of these two cadential chords (mm. 18 and 21) contains one tritone, the first, G-C $\sharp$ , and the second, C-F $\sharp$ , together suggesting a relationship to cell Z. Subsequently, the two phrases at mm. 25 and 26 each end with an unresolved dominant-seventh chord (E $\flat$ -G-(-)-D $\flat$  and D-F $\sharp$ -A-C), the next two phrase segments (m. 27) similarly ending with dominant-sevenths, B-D $\sharp$ -F $\sharp$ -A and F $\sharp$ -A $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -E (Ex. 10). Each of these four chords contains a whole-tone cell with one tritone (G-D $\flat$ , F $\sharp$ -C, D $\sharp$ -A, A $\sharp$ -E), the successive pairs implying the presence of two Z cells. The *Bagatelle* ends, after the series of Z cells, with a return to the basic cell (D-F $\sharp$ -G) at the tritone transposition.

Ex.10



whole-tone cells within  
dominant-seventh chords  
(implied Z cell, D $\sharp$ -A/A $\sharp$ -E,  
in the two chordal tritones.)

### Generation of the Interval Cycles

In *Bagatelle No. X*, the intervallic properties of cell Z serve as the basis for cyclic interval expansion. This cell appears as a basic thematic construction at mm. 17-18 (Ex. 11), where it is partitioned into two perfect fourths or fifths, G-C and D $\flat$ -G $\flat$ , between the two hands. While G-C is sustained in the left hand, the right hand unfolds a complete melodic statement of the cell, ordered both as fourths (G $\flat$ -D $\flat$ /C-G) and tritones (D $\flat$ -G/C-F $\sharp$ ). At the return (mm. 54-55), the left hand now presents the complete cell as a pair of semitones (C-D $\flat$ /F $\sharp$ -G).

Ex.11





These interval couples of Z generate certain cycles as follows. Against G-C in the bass at m. 19, the right hand outlines F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -(-)-A $\sharp$ , a cyclic expansion of the other fifth (F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ ) of Z. This incomplete cyclic segment defines both whole-tone (F $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -A $\sharp$ ) and perfect-fifth (F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ ) properties. At m. 20, while the right hand has G-C, the left (A $\flat$ -E $\flat$ , or its enharmonic equivalent, G $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ ) completes the preceding perfect-fifth segment to give us the 'black key' pentatonic collection F $\sharp$ -C $\sharp$ -G $\sharp$ -D $\sharp$ -A $\sharp$ . At the same time, C-G of the right hand is cyclically expanded to C-G-D of the 'white keys'.

At m. 56, following the thematic return, the left hand expands tritone F $\sharp$ -C of Z by whole tones (E-F $\sharp$ -(-)-B $\flat$ -C), by joining it with a new tritone, E-B $\flat$ . At the end of m. 56, the latter is immediately filled in by whole tones to form E-G $\flat$ -A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ . Therefore, the entire bass line of m. 56 cyclically expands tritone F $\sharp$ -C to a five-note whole-tone segment, E-G $\flat$ -A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ -C. At m. 61, the right hand expands D $\flat$  of Z by whole tones to D $\flat$ -E $\flat$ -F-G, which represents the other whole-tone cycle. Thus, the tritones of cell Z are also the basis for cyclic expansion to larger whole-tone segments.

#### *Tonal Centricity Based on Axes of Symmetry*

While local occurrences of symmetrical formations are prominent in most of the *Bagatelles*, the large-scale structure of *Bagatelle No. II* is primarily organized around a single axis. The opening eighth-note pattern establishes the priority of the major second, A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ , which is symmetrical around an implied axis, A-A. At mm. 3-4, this serves as a centre for symmetrical expansion in the left hand (Ex. 12). The melodically unfolding pairs of tones, together with A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ , form a series of symmetrically related intervals, which are generated by aligning two inversionally complementary semitonal cycles specifically intersecting at A-A and its tritone, E $\flat$ -E $\flat$  (Ex. 13).

Ex.12



Ex.13

Axis of symmetry—A-A or E $\flat$ -E $\flat$ 

At m. 17, the opening major second (A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ ) is recapitulated at the tritone transposition (D-E). The implied axis is E $\flat$ -E $\flat$ , the other intersection of the original axis (see Ex. 13). The original symmetrical expansion (see Ex. 12) is now switched to the right hand, expressly around the same axis (E $\flat$ -E $\flat$ ). A significant change occurs in the last two measures (22-3) of this recapitulated phrase. Whereas the analogous point (mm. 5-6) of the exposition departed from the axis (A-A) in the left hand, mm. 22-3 now maintain the axis in the right-hand chromatic figure, B $\flat$ -B $\flat$  $\sharp$ -A $\flat$ . The original pitch level of the opening returns at mm. 23 ff. Thus, in the outer sections of this *Bagatelle*, a new concept of

tonal centricity is established by means of a single axis of symmetry (A-A or E $\flat$ -E $\flat$ ).

### *Conclusion*

The evolution of Bartók's musical language from the folk modes to abstract melodic and harmonic formations is thus foreshadowed in his early set of *Bagatelles*. The two extremes of this evolution are represented by *Bagatelles No.IV* and *No.II*, the former of which is an arrangement of an authentic folk tune and the latter of which is chromatically organized around an axis of symmetry. The development of Bartók's musical language according to these principles is suggested in the composer's own words:

... the early researches ... into the youngest of the sciences, namely musical folklore, drew the attention of certain musicians to the genuine peasant music, and with astonishment they found that they had come upon a natural treasure-store of surpassing abundance.

This exploration ... seems to have been the inevitable result of a reaction against the ultra-chromaticism of the Wagner-Strauss period. The genuine folk music of Eastern Europe is almost completely diatonic and in some parts, such as Hungary, even pentatonic. Curiously enough, at the same time an apparently opposite tendency became apparent, a tendency towards the emancipation of the twelve sounds comprised within our octave from any system of tonality. (This has nothing to do with the ultra-chromaticism referred to, for there chromatic notes are only chromatic in so far as they are based upon the underlying diatonic scale.) The diatonic element in Eastern European folk music does not in any way conflict with the tendency to equalize the value of semitones. This tendency can be realized in melody as well as harmony; whether the foundation of the folk melodies is diatonic or even pentatonic, there is still plenty of room in the harmonization for equalizing the value of the semitones.<sup>11</sup>

11 Bartók, *op. cit.*, n. 2, above, pp.323-4.

## BÉLA BARTÓK 1881-1945

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