

CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary

Died September 26, 1945, in New York, New York

On December 1, 1944, Béla Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra premiered in Boston under the baton of Serge Koussevitzky, who had commissioned the piece through the Koussevitzky Foundation under the most extraordinary circumstances. This commissioning took place on a hospital bed in New York City where the impoverished 87-pound composer was fighting leukemia. Life offered nothing. For two years, he had written nothing of consequence. His arrival in America in 1940, while fleeing the Nazis, marked years of great unhappiness and tragedy.

The request, delivered by his friends, violinist Joseph Szigeti and conductor Fritz Reiner, along with Koussevitzky, was life-giving. Upon this positive look into his future, Bartók rallied, and he began to compose a piece that would become one of his greatest and most popular orchestral works.

His score was completed in seven weeks during the summer and fall of 1943. Author Agatha Fassett recalled, "It seemed as if the obstructed forces with him were released at last and the entire center of his being had been restored and re-awakened." In the fall of 1944, shortly before his death, Bartók rewrote the original conclusion, and this is the version heard in this concert.

Rather than showing off the virtuosity of a single or singularly designated small group of instrumentalists, Bartók fashioned a concerto for the entire orchestral body, highlighting many "soloists." "The title of this symphony-like work is explained by its tendency to treat (many) instruments or instrumental groups in a *concertante* or soloistic manner. The general mood of the work represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death-song of the third, to the life assertion of the last one," the composer explained. There are five movements with its central *Elegy* (night music) lying in the emotional center, providing the keystone to an "arched" format.

The music contains elements of eastern European folk music, departures from traditional tonality, as well as holding true to the ideals of Western art music and form. The first movement, in *sonata-allegro* framework, begins with a mysterious introduction marked *dolce*, based in the low strings with high *tremolos* sounding from violins and winds. Solo oboe declaims a folk-like tune, turning in on itself in a small scope, and flexing rhythm overdone like accompaniment from the horns. Gradually, other instruments join the presentation before the orchestra breaks into a frisky *allegro* sporting two main themes. Violins have the honor of presenting the first idea; the second is sounded by trombone. With spectacular cleverness, Bartók flips the two ideas into different configurations, shapes reconnecting in sequential patterns, coiling into a *fugue*, dancing in canon and colored with brilliant instrumentation.

His second movement hosts the famous "game of the pairs" (originally titled Presentation of the Pairs) opening with a snappy side drum solo. The honored "soloists" are paired trumpets (in major seconds) and winds tossing a folk-like theme, based on a Yugoslavian folk tune, back and forth. Bassoons strut forward playing in intervals (distance) of a minor sixth; oboes follow in minor thirds; clarinets jump into the fray singing in minor sevenths; and flutes pop out in perfect fifths.

The third movement, titled *Elegy (Elegia)*, provides the emotional core of the work. Unquenchable sorrow and anguish reflect Bartók's personal anguish, homesickness and despair over the horrors of World War II that had been inflicted on Hungary. The composer explained, "The structure of the third movement is chain-like. The three themes appear successively. These constitute the core of the movement, which is framed by a misty texture of rudimentary motifs. Most of the thematic material of this movement derives from the introduction to the first movement."

Interrupted Intermezzo (Intermezzo interrotto) provides a flowing theme, destabilized by changing time signatures. As in the first movement, this voice is given to the oboe, which is interrupted by *glissandi* from trombones and winds. Timpani are given a show-off time with a spectacular interlude before the "swooningly romantic" second theme emerges from violas. A march parody from Shostakovich's seventh symphony provides more savage interruptions with the full orchestra offering biting commentary and "nasty" raspberries from the brass. Bartók hated the Nazi-style march, and herein, he had his revenge.

Bartók's finale is a brilliant *tour-de-force*, managing the musical thoughts similarly to the thematic manipulation of the first movement. Prefaced by a horn flourish, a wild *fugato* opens the scene with chattering bassoons before an enormous *fugue* arrives. Its subject is proclaimed by trumpets before undergoing ferocious, rapid, complicated development. Folk-dance melodies and rhythms constantly strain the boundaries of perpetual motion. The *coda* begins modestly, recalling the *fugue* subject in quiet murmurs before the former rhythmic momentum takes over, driving the music into a blazing conclusion: a veritable affirmation of life.

The Orchestra's last performances of Concerto for Orchestra were in November 2007 under the baton of Cornelius Meister.