

Concerto for Orchestra, BB 123, Sz 116

Béla Bartók

Béla Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra towers as one of the summits of 20th-century symphonic music, but it is something of a miracle that the piece was written at all. Bartók had been trained at the Budapest Academy of Music, had immersed himself in the traditional music of Hungary and the Balkans (and of regions as distant as North Africa), and had found liberation in the harmonies and orchestration of contemporary French composers. While his distinguished countryman Zoltán Kodály drew on folklore to develop a distinctly Hungarian "classical" style, Bartók used the same influences to transcend borders, to achieve a sort of idealized universality.

There was a price to pay for this, and Bartók often complained of being underappreciated by audiences and of experiencing financial trouble. He grew increasingly desperate as National Socialism overtook Central Europe in the 1930s, but he felt compelled to stay in Hungary to look after his adored mother. When she died, in 1939, Bartók wasted little time in preparing his exit, and in the fall of 1940 he and his family arrived in New York, where he spent the five years that remained to him.

The 59-year-old Bartók felt depressed and isolated in his new surroundings. He lacked energy and was plagued by ill health, the first symptoms of the leukemia that would kill him. He gave some concerts and received a grant from Columbia University to carry out research on Slavic folk music, but he became convinced that his career as a composer was over. Others gave in less easily. His English publisher, Ralph Hawkes, proposed that Bartók write a series of concertos for solo instruments and string orchestra along the lines of Bach's *Brandenburg* Concertos, but nothing came of that suggestion until the

summer of 1943. By then, Columbia's grant money had run out and Bartók was in precarious health, confined to a hospital.

At the instigation of two similarly displaced Hungarian friends, the conductor Fritz Reiner and the violinist Joseph Szigeti, Serge Koussevitzky (the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a champion of contemporary music) dropped by the hospital to offer the composer a \$1,000 commission for a new symphonic work. This was obviously an act of charity: Bartók's weight had fallen to 87 pounds, and he was all but bankrupt. Resistant to handouts, Bartók refused on the grounds that he doubted he could deliver the piece. But Koussevitzky, without missing a beat, improvised the white lie that his foundation required him to give Bartók a check for half the amount in order to secure the commission — a risk they wanted to assume — and that the remaining half would wait until the piece was completed. Bartók accepted the plan and the

IN SHORT

Born: March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sânnicolau Mare, Romania)

Died: September 26, 1945, in New York City

Work composed: August 15–October 8, 1943; dedicated to the memory of Natalie Koussevitzky

World premiere: December 1, 1944, in Boston, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 31, 1946, George Szell, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 9, 2013, Andris Nelsons, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 40 minutes

much-needed check, and during the summer and early fall of 1943 he rallied to write the entire Concerto for Orchestra at a rural mountain getaway at Saranac Lake, in upstate New York.

It is ironic that Koussevitzky should have been the instigator of this masterpiece, since he had not been a particular aficionado of Bartók's music previously. The new work converted him. What Koussevitzky got for his money was a splendid showpiece for his orchestra — for many of the solo wind-players and percussionists, as well as for the ensemble as a whole.

Bartók provided this comment:

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.

These three movements are the “big” sections

By the Numbers

The “BB” numbers attached to Bartók's compositions refer to entries in the chronological catalogue prepared by musicologist László Somfai and published in the volume *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (Berkeley, 1996). Somfai's catalogue supersedes the one produced in 1957 by András Szöllösy, *Bibliographie des oeuvres musicales et écrits musicologiques de Béla Bartók*, but one still finds frequent references to the “Sz” numbers of that earlier reference book, which lists the Concerto for Orchestra as Sz 116.

of the piece, with the second and fourth movements being more lightweight intermezzos.

Bartók attended the premiere in Boston against his doctors' advice, and the enthusiastic cheering would be a highlight of his career. “It was worth the while,” he reported succinctly. After the premiere he revised his Concerto for Orchestra, lengthening the *Finale* (which he considered too abrupt) and

Listen for ... the Musical Parody

The oboe takes pride of place in the *Interrupted Intermezzo*. It opens the movement, and after a section for lushly scored strings, restates its theme — here is when a clarinet “interruption” occurs, in the guise of a parody of a theme from Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony.



When Bartók wrote this piece, Shostakovich's music was enjoying great popularity in the United States, certainly buoyed by the wartime political alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Seventh Symphony became practically a “war anthem” on American shores (as in Russia), and Bartók, who disliked Shostakovich's music in general, grew increasingly annoyed by what he considered unfair adulation over the piece. Here, Bartók's parody of Shostakovich's tune comes across as rude and vulgar. Curiously, Bartók seems not to have been aware until the conductor Antal Doráti pointed it out to him that the tune was not original to Shostakovich, either — that the Russian had swiped it from Franz Lehár's operetta *The Merry Widow*.

bringing this masterpiece into the form in which it is nearly always presented today.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets,

three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, side drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, two harps, and strings.

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About the Genre

The word “concerto” generally signifies a work in which a soloist, or sometimes a group of soloists, is pitted against the full orchestra in a sort of dramatic back and forth. But in the 20th century, composers began devising the “concerto for orchestra,” in which individual players or sections of the symphony orchestra are given sequential moments in the spotlight. Hindemith wrote what seems to be the first of these pieces in 1925, and in ensuing years “concertos for orchestra” were written by such figures as Goffredo Petrassi, Walter Piston, Zoltán Kodály, Michael Tippett, Ulysses Kay, Witold Lutosławski, Roger Sessions, Roberto Gerhard, Karel Husa, Joan Tower, Richard Danielpour, and Robin Holloway. Of his Concerto for Orchestra, Béla Bartók commented:



The title of this symphony-like orchestral work is explained by its tendency to treat single orchestral instruments in a *concertante* or soloistic manner. The “virtuoso” treatment appears, for instance, in the *fugato* sections of the development of the first movement (brass instruments), or in the *perpetuum mobile*-like passage of the principal theme in the last movement (strings), and especially in the second movement, in which pairs of instruments consecutively appear with brilliant passages.

Plaque commemorating Bartók's last residence, at 309 West 57th Street, where he lived at the time the Concerto for Orchestra was composed