

BÉLA BARTÓK

Born March 25, 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary; died September 26, 1945 in New York City.

Concerto for Orchestra (1943)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Boston, December 1, 1944

Boston Symphony Orchestra
Symphony Hall
Sergei Koussevitzky, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 35 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings

Béla Bartók came to America in October 1940, sick of body and afflicted of spirit. He had been frail all his life, and the leukemia that was to cause his death five years later had already begun to erode his health. Adding to the trial of his medical condition was the war raging in Europe, a painful source of torment to Bartók's ardent Hungarian patriotism. Upon leaving his homeland, he not only relinquished the native country so dear to him, but also forfeited the secure financial and professional positions he had earned in Budapest. Compromise in the face of Hitler's brutal inhumanity, however, was never a possibility for a man of Bartók's adamant convictions. Filled with apprehension, he made the difficult overland trip to Lisbon, then sailed on to New York.

Sad to say, Bartók's misgivings were justified. His financial support from Hungary was cut off, and money worries aggravated his delicate physical condition. His health declined enough to make public appearances impossible after 1943. His chief disappointment, however, was the almost total neglect of his compositions by the musical community. It is to the credit of ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) that it provided money for the hospital care that enabled Bartók to continue composing to the very end of his life.

It was at this nadir in his fortunes that the commission for the Concerto for Orchestra was presented to Bartók. Phillip Ramey related the circumstances: "By early 1943, things had gotten so bad that two old friends of Bartók, [violinist] Joseph Szigeti and [conductor] Fritz Reiner, suggested to Sergei Koussevitzky [music director of the Boston Symphony] that he commission an orchestral work in memory of his wife, Natalie. Koussevitzky agreed and, one spring day, while Bartók was in a New York hospital undergoing tests, he appeared unexpectedly and startled the composer by offering him a commission for \$1,000 on behalf of the Koussevitzky Foundation. Bartók, as fastidious as ever, would initially only accept half of that amount because he feared that his precarious health might prevent him from fulfilling Koussevitzky's request." The commission and an ASCAP-sponsored stay at a sanatorium in Saranac Lake in upstate New York fortified Bartók's strength enough so that he could work on this new orchestral piece "practically night and day," as he wrote to Szigeti. Upon its premiere, the Concerto for Orchestra was an instant success. It was accepted immediately into the standard repertory and led to a surge of interest in Bartók's other compositions. He died less than a year after this work, the last he completed for orchestra, was first heard, not realizing that he would soon be acclaimed as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.

"The title of this symphony-like work is explained by its tendency to treat single instruments or instrument groups in a '*concertant*' or soloistic manner," wrote the composer to clarify the appellation of the score. Concerning the overall structure of the Concerto's five movements, he noted, "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 first and last movements, Bartók continued, "are in more or less regular sonata form," while "the second consists of a chain of independent short sections by wind instruments introduced in five pairs (bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes and muted trumpets). A kind of 'trio' — a short chorale for brass instruments and snare drum — follows, after which the five sections are recapitulated in a more elaborate instrumentation.... The form of the fourth movement — 'Interrupted Intermezzo' — could be rendered by the symbols 'A B A — interruption — B A.'" The interruption to which Bartók referred is a parody of the German march theme from the first movement of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, "Leningrad," which was in turn a mocking phrase based on a song from Lehár's *The Merry Widow*.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda