

## Béla BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Concerto for Orchestra, BB.123 [1943]

- I Introduzione
- II Giuoco delle coppie
- III Elegia
- IV Intermezzo interrotto
- V Finale

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Upon immigrating to America in 1940 and until his death in 1945, Béla Bartók pined for Hungary. Burdened by repeated financial strains, he also suffered continual ill health, which proved to be the onset of leukemia; yet it was during this time that he wrote the Concerto for Orchestra, which is now widely regarded as his masterpiece. Unhappy in exile and having struggled to compose anything in the three years since arriving, it was a visit from his conductor friend Serge Koussevitzky in May 1943 that broke the spell of lethargy. Bartók agreed to a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation and in August that year began to draft the Concerto for Orchestra, his first serious composition since leaving Hungary.

Rather than being a concerto in the traditional sense for soloist and orchestra, this concerto features every section of the orchestra in a virtuosic manner. Another characteristic of the traditional concerto featured in Bartók's piece is the alternating sound textures between the full orchestra, single instruments and instrumental groups. Although not the first Concerto for Orchestra to be written, Bartók's piece is recognised as the first major example of its genre.

In Bartók's program notes, written at Koussevitzky's request, he explains that the 'general mood of the work, apart from the jesting second movement, represents a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement to the lugubrious death song of the third, to the life assertion of the last.'

The first movement begins slowly and ominously with elements of Bartók's 'night music' writing style, characterised by the evocation of 'nocturnal' sounds in the music rather than traditional melody and harmony. The movement then explodes into passages of violently impetuous fanfares juxtaposed with softer sections of folk-like melodies.

The second movement begins and ends with a snare-less side drum, which remains the underlying thread of the movement. Playful presentations of wind instrument pairs, each playing together at different intervals frame a brass chorale, arguably one of the most majestically striking moments in orchestral repertoire. Bartók originally envisaged the title *Presenting the Couples*, which is in fact a reflection of the folk tradition 'Sunday order of dances' found in parts of Hungary. However, the manuscript was sent to the publishers without a title, where they later labeled the movement *Game of Pairs*; most recent editions of this work have restored Bartók's intended title.

The third movement is the symmetrical centerpiece and the lowest emotional point of the work. Here Bartók combines elements of 'night music' with Hungarian folk motives in a transparent cry for his homeland. This sentiment is also reinforced in the following movement, where a transformed quotation of a Hungarian operetta melody, 'You are lovely, you are wonderful, Hungary' is rudely interrupted by a farcical parody of the invasion theme from Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony (believed by Bartók to be enjoying popularity beyond its merit at that time). Bartók's underlying program, as illustrated by the orchestra, is no secret as the composer explained: 'the artist declares his love for his native land in a serenade which is suddenly interrupted in a crude and violent manner; he is seized by rough bootmen who even break his instrument.' Bartók's passion for and studies of Eastern European folk music is apparent in the final movement where he assimilates folk characteristics, textures, rhythmic pulses and dance steps from his homeland as a powerful affirmation of life.

With the success of the Concerto for Orchestra and his creative drought broken, Bartók began composing once more. Despite suffering from the crippling later stages of leukemia, Bartók completed a piano concerto for his wife and accepted another two commissions. He was able to finish the first, a sonata for solo violin (for Yehudi Menuhin), but the viola concerto intended for William Primrose was incomplete at his death.

The premiere of the Concerto for Orchestra was given by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Koussevitzky on December 1, 1944, and was received with great acclaim. Koussevitzky later asked Bartók for a less abrupt ending, for which Bartók extended the work by 19 bars. Both are published and regularly performed. Tonight's performance will

present the second ending.

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