

PROGRAM NOTES

Béla Bartók – Divertimento for String Orchestra

Béla Bartók

Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Transylvania (now part of Romania).

Died September 26, 1945, New York City.

Composition History

Bartók composed this work in Saanen, Switzerland, between August 2 and 17, 1939; the first performance was given on June 11, 1940, by the Basle Chamber Orchestra (for which it was written) under the direction of Paul Sacher. The score calls for a minimum of six first and six second violins, four violas, four cellos, and two basses. Performance time is approximately twenty-seven minutes.

Performance History

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Bartók's Divertimento for String Orchestra were given at Orchestra Hall on February 21 and 22, 1957, with Fritz Reiner conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on December 4, 5, and 7, 2003, with Pierre Boulez conducting.

Divertimento for String Orchestra

After Bartók's death in 1945, Paul Sacher wrote: "Whoever met Bartók, thinking of the rhythmic strength of his work, was surprised by his slight, delicate figure." Bartók was sickly from early childhood. By the time he began writing music at the age of nine, he had already suffered a number of ailments, including eczema, pneumonia, and curvature of the spine. When Paul Sacher met him in 1929, the power of Bartók's music was widely recognized. Sacher would soon add to the composer's catalog by commissioning two major works for his own Basle Chamber Orchestra. The young Swiss conductor and this delicate giant of twentieth-century music remained close friends till Bartók's death.

The first of the works Sacher commissioned from Bartók is the landmark Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, written to celebrate the Basle orchestra's tenth anniversary in 1936. The second is this divertimento for strings, composed during the summer of 1939, when Bartók, at fifty-eight, was at the height of his powers and reputation, and Europe was at

a terrible crossroads. For perhaps the last time in his life, Bartók was able to write music that didn't reflect the world around him. Or perhaps this divertimento was literally meant as a diversion—an intentional escape from a political situation that would only get worse.

In November 1938, Sacher asked Bartók to write something for string orchestra, and the following summer he offered the composer his chalet at Saanen in the Swiss Alps, so that he could work in peace, now more precious than ever. Sacher even had a piano transported from Berne. "Somehow I feel like a musician of olden times—the invited guest of a patron of the arts," Bartók wrote to his twenty-eight-year-old son, Béla, Jr., back home in Hungary.

Alone in this rustic cottage, with not so much as a cloud or a newspaper to darken his days, Bartók worked at unusual speed: he began the divertimento on August 2 and finished it on August 17. The very next day, after taking time only to write his son a letter, he began his sixth string quartet; the piece was well under way when he left Saanen a week and a half later. In the meantime, world events continued at a frightening speed. Sacher went to Saanen to check up on the composer: "I found him completely without misgivings for the future, absorbed in his work. The news of the political events which were so cruelly to interfere in his life had not yet penetrated to him." The day he finished the divertimento, Bartók saw a newspaper for the first time in two weeks. And with his return to Hungary, he found his life controlled by the events that made daily headlines and his work pushed aside by the pressing need for self-preservation.

Just before Christmas, his mother died. He later wrote to a friend, "Last summer ... I went to Saanen to be totally undisturbed, so that I could write two works as quickly as possible; I spent three and one-half weeks there, the works got done, wholly or in part, and those three and one-half weeks I took away from my mother. I can never make amends for this. I should not have done it." So in the end, even this divertimento, as untroubled as any work Bartók wrote, was clouded by regrets, guilt, and sadness.

The divertimento is one of Bartók's lightest and most accessible scores. It picks up the tradition of the eighteenth-century concerto grosso—with its alternating passages for a small group of solo instruments and full ensemble—and turns it into a series of games for soloists and orchestra. The two fast outer movements are dancelike, their easygoing manner disguising a wealth of ingenious motivic development. In between comes a powerful slow movement with dark harmonies and a tragic tone—an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the terrible events unfolding outside the cottage. At the end there is calm, but not peace.

Both outer movements toy with conventional forms. The first takes on sonata form, though the recapitulation is more development than restatement. The finale is a complex rondo, with a folk-tune theme that is convincingly transformed at each appearance; a thorny fugato section; a gypsy fiddler's cadenza; and, near the end, a mock Viennese polka. This movement is joyful in a way we don't expect from Bartók, though Paul Sacher remembered a man that photographs don't capture: when things were going well, Bartók "laughed in boyish glee," and "when he was pleased with the successful solution of a problem, he actually beamed."

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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