PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Béla Bartók – Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion, and Orchestra

Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Transylvania (now part of Romania).  
Died September 26, 1945, New York City.

Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion, and Orchestra

Bartók composed his Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion in 1937 and gave the first performance with his pianist wife, Ditta Pásztory, on January 16, 1938, in Basel, Switzerland. He subsequently arranged the work as a concerto for two pianos, percussion, and orchestra, completing the score in December 1940. The first performance was given on November 14, 1942, in London; the composer and his wife were the soloists in the U.S. premiere of the piece, on January 21, 1943, with the New York Philharmonic conducted by Fritz Reiner. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, celesta, and strings. The percussion parts include three timpani, xylophone, two side drums (with and without snares), cymbals, suspended cymbal, bass drum, triangle, and tam-tam. Performance time is approximately twenty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performance of Bartók’s Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion, and Orchestra was given on a special preseason concert at Orchestra Hall with Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale as soloists, and Irwin Hoffman conducting. Our only previous subscription concert performances were given on January 9, 10, and 11, 1986, with Anthony and Joseph Paratore as soloists, and Raymond Leppard conducting.

This is the last music Béla Bartók played in public. He and his second wife, Ditta, gave the U.S. premiere of this singularly scored concerto in New York, their new hometown, in January 1943, with the New York Philharmonic conducted by Fritz Reiner (who would, in another ten years, as music director of the Chicago Symphony, continue his significant championship of Bartók’s music).
Bartók began his career as a pianist, and, by all accounts, he was a formidable talent—his name would still figure in the history of twentieth-century music even if he hadn’t gone on to a more brilliant career as a composer. Bartók’s mother gave him his first piano lesson on his fifth birthday. He made his public debut as a pianist at eleven, playing the opening movement of Beethoven’s *Waldstein* Sonata. A year later, when the family moved to the tiny town now known as Bistrita in Romania, Bartók’s mother sadly recognized that her gifted son “could not receive any musical training as he was the best pianist in town.”

After moving to Bratislava in 1894, Bartók’s career began to take off, and by the time he completed his studies at the Budapest Academy of Music in 1903, it seemed certain that he would enjoy great success as a piano virtuoso and that composition would be no more than a pleasant sideline. (He had already begun to include his own pieces on his recital programs.) Even a quarter of a century later, when he was preparing for his first tour of the United States, his renown as a performer was every bit as great (though not as controversial) as his reputation as a composer.

Bartók’s first and second piano concertos, composed in 1926 and 1930, were both written for his appearances in orchestral concerts, and both were impressive showpieces for his keyboard technique. (Bartók played the Second Concerto in his only appearance with the Chicago Symphony in November 1941.) When he was commissioned to compose a new work following the successful premiere of his Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, in Basel, Switzerland, in 1937, Bartók decided to write a new work to play, this time in tandem with his wife. Their concert debut as a piano team took place on January 16, 1938, with the premiere of the new piece for Basel—a sonata for the unprecedented combination of two pianos and two percussion players.

From his piano concertos, Bartók had realized that although the piano is, technically, a percussion instrument—a member of the extended family of instruments that make sounds when struck—it had seldom been showcased in that context. “For some time now,” he wrote in the *Basler National Zeitung*, “I have been planning to compose a work for piano and percussion. Slowly, however, I have become convinced that one piano does not sufficiently balance the frequently very sharp sounds of the percussion.” The two-piano sonata was his response—a way to properly balance the piano with other percussion instruments, to revitalize his own performing career, and, in the process, to cement marital, if not musical, harmony.
The sonata is a quartet for four virtuoso musicians (the demands are so great that six percussionists were used in one early performance), focusing exclusively on the piano-percussion interaction that had been one of the salient features of both piano concertos. (The slow movement of the First Piano Concerto, scored only for piano, percussion, and winds, begins to suggest the riches Bartók would eventually mine from this little-explored relationship.) The sonata explores the world of percussion—from the pitched xylophone and tuned timpani to the unpitched rhythmic patterns of the cymbals and drums—with a curiosity, subtlety, and vision new to music at the time.

Sometime after the Basel premiere, Bartók said that “the whole thing sounds quite unusual—but the Basel people like it anyway [and] it had a tremendous success.” That was not the case at the second performance, in Budapest, where Bartók’s page turner was twenty-six-year-old Georg Solti, who had gone to the concert eager to hear this provocative new score—Solti was a répétiteur at the Budapest Opera at the time—and ended up being recruited spur of the moment to turn pages for the composer. As Solti later recalled, speaking to the Women’s Association of the Chicago Symphony in 1988,

> It was a printed score but very difficult to follow even at that point, so if you ask me what my first impression was—I don’t know. . . . I was too busy reading so I could turn the pages! But what I know—and that is an eternal shame for the very conservative Hungarian public who were at the Philharmonic concert—the success was really minimal.

Late in 1940, the Bartóks left Hungary to escape the Nazi invasion. They settled in New York City, after a tortuous journey through Europe and a rough crossing on an American cargo ship, with all their luggage left behind. In New York, with a spartan hotel room serving as their temporary home, Bartók realized that the only way for him to make a living was to continue his concert career. At the same time, Bartók’s new publisher, Ralph Hawkes, the enterprising head of Boosey and Hawkes, suggested that the sonata would reach a wider audience if it were turned into a concerto. Bartók set to work at once, making remarkably few changes to the musical content itself, yet so ingeniously translating the piece into a work for piano, percussion, and orchestra that one would never suspect its origins as chamber music.
Like the landmark Music for String, Percussion, and Celesta that precedes it, the concerto is one of Bartók’s greatest achievements. The work has three movements—the first nearly as long as the remaining two combined—that move from complexity and harmonic daring to pure, radiant exuberance. The opening movement is a grand architectural achievement, unfolding mysteriously at first over the stirrings of a single timpani—Bartók’s students said he described the opening as the creation of a cosmos evolving out of formlessness and timelessness—and eventually settling into music of combustive energy and powerful rhythmic drive. The middle movement is pure night music, both edgy and dreamy, filled with the suggestive sounds of nature as well as sonorities Bartók alone knew existed. In light of all that has gone before, the robust finale has the lilt of simple folk music.

The “new” concerto was premiered in London in November 1942, without the Bartóks at the keyboard. The composer and his wife were the soloists for the U.S. premiere the following year, reuniting them with music intended for their hands from the start, and, at the same time, bringing an end to Bartók’s public career as a pianist. When Bartók composed one last concerto for piano in 1945, his third—it was the last score he completed before he died—he wrote it not for his own hands, but as a birthday gift for Ditta.

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