

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Béla Bartók

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

Died September 26, 1945, New York City.

Hungarian Sketches

The Hungarian Sketches are orchestrations Bartók made in 1931 of five piano pieces he composed between 1908 and 1911. Four of the five sketches were first performed on January 24, 1932, in Budapest; the first complete performance was given there on November 26, 1934. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones and tuba, timpani, xylophone, triangle, side drum, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately eleven minutes.

The first Chicago Symphony Orchestra performances of the Hungarian Sketches were given on March 3 and 4, 1955, under Fritz Reiner.

Sometimes it is not inspiration, but the simple need to earn a living that sets a composer to work. Bartók frankly admitted that he made these Hungarian Sketches in 1931 "on account of the money," silently noting that these fresh and appealing pieces would be warmly received by the same orchestras and audiences that had so much trouble with his important and challenging new works. If these sketches were written for cash and popularity—familiar enough incentives, after all—it must be said that Bartók achieved little of either during his career. Money was never plentiful—near the end of his life he was paid a mere \$1,000 for the Concerto for Orchestra, a landmark score and still his most popular work—and fame came, as it has for so many composers, accompanied by that most unrewarding adjective, posthumous.

The Hungarian Sketches are orchestrations of earlier brief piano pieces. They are skillful and imaginatively done—here, as in all of Bartók's transcriptions, there is no sense that they were tossed off, that they did not benefit from the full powers of a great composer. In fact, Bartók believed in the importance of music of all kinds, including popular and educational works, and simple pieces that helped the public to understand what he had to say. The first two of these Hungarian Sketches, in fact, began life in 1908, as two of Ten Easy Pieces for piano, a title which some amateur pianists may still doubt, having tried them out, but which reflects Bartók's concern with writing not only some of the most demanding music of the century, but also some that is relatively manageable.

Evening in the Village, the fifth of the Ten Easy Pieces, alternates two folk tunes; Bear Dance, the last of the set, is a chordal rustic dance. The slow Melody at the heart of the Hungarian Sketches comes from Four Dirges written in 1909 and suggests the haunting world of Bluebeard's Castle. A Bit Drunk, with its bitter humor, is the second of the Three Burlesques of 1911. The Swineherd's Dance finale, with its bagpipe music, comes from For Children of 1908-09, among the earliest works in which Bartók applied the fruits of his folk song research to music that would bear his own name.

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

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