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

Piano Concerto No. 1

Bartók composed this piano concerto in 1926 and gave the first performance on July 1, 1927, in Frankfurt, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, bass drum, cymbals, snare drums, tam-tam, triangle, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Bartók's First Piano Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on February 25 and 26, 1960, with Rudolf Serkin as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on November 8, 9, 10, and 13, 2001, with Krystian Zimerman as soloist and Pierre Boulez conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 10, 1966, with Peter Serkin as soloist and Seiji Ozawa conducting, and most recently on August 4, 1973, with Jean-Bernard Pommier as soloist and Lawrence Foster conducting.

Béla 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.

The First Piano Concerto was meant for Bartók's own hands—and though it has readily, if not conveniently, fit many other hands since, he wrote it because he needed a new piece to play in his concert appearances with orchestras. Bartók intended to perform this concerto on his first trip to the United States in 1927—he thought it an ideal vehicle for a New York debut—but insufficient rehearsal time prompted the substitution of the more conventional Rhapsody for piano and orchestra. He finally played it on a New York concert near the end of the tour, under the baton of the young Fritz Reiner, who later introduced the concerto to Chicago Symphony audiences. (Bartók passed through Chicago on his first American tour, giving a lecture-recital as well as a joint recital with the Chicago Symphony's concertmaster, John Weicher. In 1941 Bartók returned to play his Second Piano Concerto with the Chicago Symphony.)

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 Bistrița 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. But Bartók 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.

This piano concerto was the first music Bartók wrote for his appearances in orchestral concerts. (The much earlier rhapsody was originally for solo piano and was only rewritten for piano and orchestra because of the growing demand for Bartók as a soloist.) It was composed in 1926, when, after a dangerously long dry spell, Bartók suddenly wrote four new works for upcoming concert appearances: the Piano Sonata, Nine Little Pieces, Out of Doors, and this concerto. Although the concerto was an impressive showpiece for Bartók's
keyboard technique, it won him few friends at first. Bartók later admitted that it was “very difficult for the orchestra and the public”—though its greatest difficulties are for the pianist.

The solo piano part is formidable, with large, awkward leaps; dense clusters of notes scattered in wide stretches for the hand; and severe demands on the often weaker outer fingers, all at a relentless, brisk pace. From the very first measure, the piano insists that it’s a percussion instrument (as dictionaries often claim, because the sound is produced by striking keys). Throughout the piece, the soloist never introduces a lyrical theme, but searches for new sounds and familiar sonorities used in new ways instead.

Bartók once remarked that the First Piano Concerto is in E minor, but for him a key, like a piano keyboard, was merely a point of departure for rich adventure. Actually, Bartók uses key signatures here for the last time in a large work (Schoenberg had already given them up for good some twenty years before), but their presence is largely superfluous. The first movement’s careful sonata form, too, simply provides the framework from which Bartók can strike out on his own. The entire movement is breathlessly paced and, despite the appearance of frequent meter changes on the page, what one hears, rather than constantly shifting beats, is the larger overriding drive to the end.

The second movement is a conversation between piano and percussion in which the piano gradually asserts its rightful place as part of the percussion team. (This highly original music is a precursor of the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion.) At its center is a contrapuntal weaving of woodwind lines in four different keys at once over a stubborn piano ostinato. The finale, which begins without a break, is bold and aggressive. It's sometimes difficult to reconcile this tough and powerful music with the man who wrote and played it himself, for Bartók was a pale and sickly man all his life. But the music on the page clearly reflects the inner strength that shone from his piercing eyes.

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