

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Béla Bartók

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

Piano Concerto No. 3

Bartók composed the Third Piano Concerto in 1945; the first performance was given on February 8, 1946, in Philadelphia, with György Sándor, pianist, and Eugene Ormandy, conductor. 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 and tuba, timpani, side drum, xylophone, triangle, tam-tam, bass drum, cymbals, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed Bartók's Third Piano Concerto at Orchestra Hall at a Popular Concert on December 8, 1951, with Béla Boszormenyi-Nagy as soloist and Rafael Kubelík conducting. Our first subscription concert performances were given on March 20 and 21, 1958, with Geza Anda as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given January 27, 28, and 29, 2005, with Mitsuko Uchida as soloist and Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 14, 1960, with Leonard Pennario as soloist and Constantin Silvestri conducting, and most recently on July 5, 1986, with Stephen Hough as soloist and James Levine conducting.

After the last measure of this concerto, Béla Bartók wrote the Hungarian word *vége* (the end). This was the last score Bartók completed before he was moved from his 57th Street Manhattan apartment to the West Side hospital where he died four days later.

His friend Tibor Serly visited him on his last night at home, and he found Bartók propped up in bed, surrounded by manuscript pages and medicine bottles, trying to finish the orchestral score of his third piano concerto. The great composer, weak and near death, was quite literally fighting the clock, filled with ideas he wouldn't get time to tell us. Bartók's son Peter had already drawn the bar lines on the paper, so it was simply a matter of Bartók writing in the parts. He got within seventeen measures; Serly assumed the relatively straightforward task of deciphering the composer's shorthand and filling in the blanks.

Bartók's last five years, spent entirely in the United States, were neither productive nor happy. For two years after his arrival in October 1940, he wrote nothing new. In April 1942, his health took a sudden turn for the worse and he never regained his full strength. But Koussevitzky's commission for the Concerto for Orchestra in May 1943 rekindled much of Bartók's old spirit. The music began to flow. His last year, 1945, marked a new high point, except that time ran out.

For the first time in years, Bartók worked on two major pieces at once—the Third Piano Concerto and the Viola Concerto that he left in sketches on odd scraps of paper. This almost desperate surge of activity may well have come from a realization of the severity of his illness. When he left his Manhattan apartment for the last time, he was sketching a seventh string quartet and considering a commission for a double concerto from a two-piano team. Bartók turned to a hospital doctor and said, "I am only sorry that I have to leave with my baggage full."

Bartók knew he would never play his third concerto; its solo part is written not in the explosive and incisive style that suited his own hands—the style of his first two concertos, which he often did play—but in a serene and more lyrical vein meant for his wife Ditta (it was intended as a birthday gift).

At the opening of the Allegretto (the marking is one of the few tempo indications Bartók actually wrote in), the piano etches a strong, simple melody—one note in each hand, two octaves apart, against a murmur in the strings. Although the music rises to moments of enormous energy and bristling excitement, the texture remains remarkably uncomplicated and transparent. It's as if Bartók meant for us to hear every note. The left hand of the piano solo often mirrors the right hand or plays the same music in contrary motion. The scoring is light—the trombones play in only two measures—and there's much doubling of instrumental lines; rarely does Bartók weave a dense fabric of many individual voices. To those who had never understood Bartók's music, this new simplicity was dismissed as the sad product of his weakened condition (just as in the previous century, Beethoven's visionary harmonies were blamed on his deafness).

The second movement is based on Beethoven's "Heiliger Dankgesang" (Holy song of thanksgiving), the sublime third movement of the String Quartet, op. 132, written after Beethoven recovered from a serious illness. (Bartók uses the marking *Adagio religioso* for the only time in his music; Serly later adopted it for the unfinished Viola Concerto.) Like the corresponding movement from Beethoven's quartet, it has an uncommon serenity and a complete command of a few perfectly suited materials. The strings begin like Beethoven's, slowly unfolding and refolding a tiny idea. The piano pronounces a benediction of eloquent chords.

The fragile middle section is Bartók's last evocation of night music. Over string tremolos, the piano, oboe, clarinet, and flute trade bird calls—some drawn from Bartók's own notations made while he recuperated the previous year in Asheville, North Carolina. The orchestra is used sparingly, to wondrous effect. The piano awakens to the full power of the night, in ripples of sound and cascading chords, but the winds restore calm and quiet. The piano plays a lovely two-part invention, rises to a great climax, and then yields to the infectious pulse of the final *Allegro vivace*.

The finale's main theme, with its identifying rhythm (short-long, long-short), recurs again and again, separated by aggressively fugal passages. The movement is lucid and relaxed, even in the most complex counterpoint. Bartók is in complete command throughout. There's no mystery surrounding the last seventeen bars; the composer's shorthand instructions were all Serly needed to complete, without any doubt, what is Bartók's last fully envisioned work.

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

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