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. 2

Bartók began his second piano concerto in October 1930 and completed it on October 9, 1931. The composer was the soloist at the premiere on January 23, 1933, in Frankfurt am Main. The orchestra consists of three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, triangle, military drum, cymbals, tam-tam, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave the American premiere of Bartók's Second Piano Concerto at Orchestra Hall on March 2 and 3, 1939, with Storm Bull as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting. Bartók himself appeared as soloist in this concerto with the Orchestra on November 20 and 21, 1941, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on February 27, 28, and March 1, 1997, with Yefim Bronfman as soloist and Zubin Mehta conducting. The Orchestra has performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival only once, on August 4, 1970, with Stephen Bishop as soloist and Giuseppe Patanè conducting.

In 1939, when the Chicago Symphony gave the American premiere of Béla Bartók's new piano concerto, the composer was still living in his native Hungary. For several more months he would agonize over whether to leave his homeland and move to the United States to escape the threat of fascism. Although Bartók had played his Second Piano Concerto some twenty times following its Frankfurt premiere in 1933, he had refused to give the Budapest premiere as a political protest, and now he let the American premiere go to his student, Storm Bull. Americans weren't quick to recognize Bartók's importance. After he did move to this country in 1940, he wasn't considered a significant musical presence, his music wasn't widely played, and when he toured the country as a pianist, he was hardly treated like one of the indispensable giants of modern music.

Bartók began his career as a pianist, and he was an uncommonly gifted one, capable of playing not only his own brilliant and challenging scores, but—especially at first—the works of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms (the other Bs). Both his parents were pianists—his mother gave lessons to help feed her two children, and she was Béla's first teacher. He made his first public appearance as a pianist at the age of eleven, playing Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata. During his student days at the Budapest Academy (he graduated in June 1903), his friends and teachers predicted a bright future for him as a virtuoso pianist—his gifts as a composer didn't merit comment.

It was the Budapest premiere of Richard Strauss's Also sprach Zarathustra in 1902 that sparked Bartók's determination to become a composer as well. Eventually these two passions merged in a series of uncompromising keyboard works, particularly the two concertos he wrote to play himself. (A third concerto, composed in the last year of his life, was written with the full realization that he would never perform it; it was intended as a birthday present for his wife Ditta, who was a fine, though less athletic pianist.)

Both the First and Second piano concertos are virtuosic pieces of a kind Bartók's fellow students at the academy never envisioned—in the Second, the piano rests for a mere twenty-three measures in the first movement. This Allegro moves at such a rapid pace—this isn't just a question of tempo, but of density of
material as well—and the solo music is so compelling, demanding everything from racing octave scales to entire fistfuls of notes, that we scarcely notice that the strings have nothing at all to do. Bartók employs his own blend of sonata form, which involves a kind of mirror-recapitulation, with the opening material reprised in the correct sequence, but with each theme turned upside-down and backwards.

Like many of Bartók’s works composed around this time (it falls between the Fourth and Fifth string quartets), the concerto is designed as a grand arch form: here two fast, related outer movements frame a central adagio. This middle movement, too, is a mirror form, with broad, slow music interrupted midway by a furious, driven presto. (In the same paragraph, Bartók gives us both slow movement and scherzo.) In the slow sections, the strings and the piano engage in a dialogue, like Orpheus and the Furies that Liszt heard in the slow movement of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto (the solo timpani provides a high-profile running commentary). In the fast central section, the heart of the entire work, Bartók coaxes fantastic sounds from the piano, including tone clusters which can be played only by placing both hands flat over the keys to cover all the notes in the octave.

The last movement—inevitably, in any of the composer’s big symmetrical structures—retreads the same ground as the first, although Bartók continually finds new things to say. (Only the first, incisive pounding theme is, in fact, entirely new.) This is recapitulation in the deepest sense, but Bartók never evokes outright déjà vu, only the innate, satisfying feeling of familiarity and homecoming.

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

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.