PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

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

Viola Concerto

Bartók began this concerto in the summer of 1945, but it remained unfinished at his death. Tibor Serly prepared the work for publication. The first performance was given on December 2, 1949, in Minneapolis. The orchestra consists of three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, two trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Bartók’s Viola Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on March 26 and 27, 1959, with Milton Preves as soloist and Fritz Reiner conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on September 23, 24, and 25, 1999, with Pinchas Zukerman as soloist and William Eddins conducting. The Orchestra has performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival only once, in August 1983, with Thomas Riebl as soloist and Edo de Waart conducting.

American moviegoers know that Mozart died with pages of the requiem scattered across his bed. (The facts are somewhat less picturesque.) Beethoven had begun sketching a tenth symphony before he slipped into his fatal coma; Mahler had made good progress with his Tenth Symphony before his heart failed. When Béla Bartók died of leukemia in a New York hospital on September 26, 1945, he left two important works still in progress: the Third Piano Concerto was complete except for final touches on the last seventeen measures, but a viola concerto was left in a pile of manuscript pages on his bedside table.

The musical estates of important composers quickly attract friends, colleagues, and opportunists—all concerned, for differing reasons, with calculating the value of what music has been left behind and preparing unfinished works for performance. Bartók was lucky: both his Third Piano Concerto and Viola Concerto ended up in the hands of his friend Tibor Serly, as sympathetic an heir as the composer could have wished. Serly’s work on the piano concerto was minimal and straightforward, but the viola concerto required not only his substantial musical skills and his thorough knowledge of the viola (which he played professionally), but an intimate understanding of the way Bartók’s mind worked and of his personal style.

Tibor Serly first met Professor Bartók at the Budapest Academy of Music when he was a student of Zoltán Kodály in the early 1920s. In 1924 Serly moved to the United States to play viola with the Cincinnati Symphony, and, later, with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the NBC Symphony. When Bartók fled Hungary and landed—homesick and disoriented—at the New York harbor on October 30, 1940, Serly was there to meet him. In a country where Bartók made few friends and fewer champions, Serly was both.

Despite the relative unproductivity of Bartók’s final years in the States, there was a brief flurry of creativity near the end of his life, beginning with the commission for the Concerto for Orchestra in 1943. Later that year, Yehudi Menuhin met Bartók and asked for a violin sonata. In 1944 Ralph Hawkes (whose name is known to music students who carry Boosey & Hawkes scores to their practice rooms) commissioned a seventh string quartet. In February 1945 the distinguished Scottish violinist William Primrose asked for a concerto. Bartók was reluctant, claiming he didn’t know the technical capability of the solo viola. But that summer, when Bartók’s son Peter (who now lives in Florida) was discharged from the Navy and went to visit his parents at Saranac Lake, he found his father watching “chickmucks,” as he called them, calculating the speed of hummingbirds’ wings, and working simultaneously on the viola concerto and a new piano concerto.
On September 8 Bartók wrote to Primrose:

I am very glad to be able to tell you that your viola concerto is ready in draft, so that only the score has to be written, which means a purely mechanical work, so to speak. If nothing happens I can be through in 5 or 6 weeks, that is, I can send you a copy of the orchestral score in the second half of October, and a few weeks afterwards a copy (or if you wish more copies) of the piano score.

But Bartók and Primrose weren’t that lucky—the composer’s time simply ran out. The story of Bartók’s last days really belongs to Tibor Serly. Here’s his account of their final meeting, published in *The New York Times* on December 11, 1949:

On the evening of September 21, 1945, when I last talked with Béla Bartók, he was lying in bed, quite ill. Nevertheless, on and around his bed were sheets of score and sketch manuscript papers. He was working feverishly to complete the scoring of the last few bars of his third piano concerto.

While discussing the concerto with him, my attention was drawn to the night table beside his bed where I noticed, underneath several half-empty medicine bottles, some additional pages of sketches, seemingly not related to the piano concerto. There was a reason for my curiosity, for it was known to several of Bartók’s friends that earlier in the year he had accepted a commission to write a concerto for viola and orchestra for William Primrose.

Pointing to these manuscript sheets, I inquired about the viola concerto. Bartók nodded wearily toward the night table, saying: “Yes, that is the viola concerto.” To my question as to whether it was completed, his reply was, “Yes and no.” He explained that while in the sketches the work was by and large finished, the details and scoring had not yet been worked out.

The following day, he was taken to the hospital, where he died September 26. The question as to which of the two works was the “last” may never be determined. Madame Bartók, who spent the entire period at his side, corroborated the fact that while he never before had worked on two major compositions at one time, on this occasion he had worked some days on the piano concerto and other days on the viola concerto.

It wasn’t easy for Serly to pick up where Bartók left off and put the viola concerto in order. The pages were unnumbered and sometimes cluttered with irrelevant sketches. Bartók wrote in ink, scratching over mistakes and scribbling in new ideas. But the essential material was all there. Serly’s task was like a jigsaw puzzle with more than one solution. There were, for example, virtually no indications for the instrumentation, so Serly had to rely on his own instinct and training, and on his superior knowledge of Bartók’s style. Bartók left one important clue in his last letter to Primrose:

The orchestration will be rather transparent, more transparent than in the Violin Concerto. Also the somber, more masculine character of your instrument executed some influence on the general character of the work.

In the meantime, William Primrose had given up hope of ever playing his concerto. Only in 1949, when Ernest Ansermet passed along the rumor that the work was being rewritten for cello, did Primrose press the case, discover that the concerto was indeed playable, and finally secure a copy of the music that was rightfully his. He gave the first performance later that year in Minneapolis. The score was printed the following year with this modest comment on the title page: “Prepared for publication from the composer’s original manuscript by Tibor Serly.”

The three-movement concerto echoes the classical simplicity of the Third Piano Concerto. The opening movement, in the most classical of forms, sonata form, travels far and wide with its straightforward, yet
malleable, first theme. A slow, brief interlude, largely for the viola alone, leads to the second movement. This music, for which Serly borrows the adagio religioso marking Bartók used for the parallel movement of the Third Piano Concerto, is conceived in Bartók’s favorite arch form, with serene chorale passages framing a sudden outburst. Another interlude, marked allegretto, leads directly to the short finale, the last of Bartók’s folk dances, complete with the sound of droning bagpipes.

In 1970 Primrose recalled, with the generosity of hindsight, his wisdom in approaching Bartók:

> When I commissioned the concerto, most people thought I had made a big mistake, including people in my manager’s office. Who on earth was going to ask me to play a concerto by Béla Bartók? I paid him what he asked—$1,000—and I played the concerto well over a hundred times for fairly respectable fees. So it was almost like getting in on the ground floor in investing in Xerox or the Polaroid camera.

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