Zoltán Kodály
Born December 16, 1882, Kecskeméét, Hungary.
Died March 6, 1967, Budapest, Hungary.

Concerto for Orchestra

Kodály composed the Concerto for Orchestra in 1939 and 1940, on a commission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, to honor its fiftieth anniversary. The first performance was given by the Orchestra, under Frederick Stock, on February 6, 1941. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave the world premiere performances of Kodály's Concerto for Orchestra (commissioned for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's fiftieth season) on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on February 6 and 7, 1941, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on December 18, 19, and 20, 1986, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting.

The then-novel concept of a concerto for orchestra needed explanation, and the program notes reminded listeners that "the word 'concerto' is used here, not in the sense of a brilliant and showy composition for a solo instrument, or instruments, with symphonic accompaniment, but in the original employment of the word to denote a combination of instruments."

Kodály's score is an arresting combination of baroque architecture and Hungarian folk material. Stock told
The New York Times that he felt the entire work was imbued with Hungarian rhythm, "with all the elements of gypsy music developed to the last degree along the lines of symphony pattern." This concerto is a single span of music, divided into distinct sections. The way it alternates full orchestral paragraphs with passages for selected soloists is an obvious throwback to the concerto grosso of Bach's time. It begins, not unlike one of the Brandenburgs, with a unison statement of the main theme. In the opening Allegro risoluto section, the solo spotlight falls first on the individual winds, then the brass, later a single violin. The spacious, measured Largo that follows begins with solos for various string instruments, answered by the clarinet. As other instruments enter, this eventually grows from a rich and varied kind of chamber music into a dramatic symphonic slow movement. What happens next is partly recapitulation, with a return to the spirited opening material, this time highlighted by new solos and new adventures, followed by another Largo, more concentrated than the last. There is a short, full orchestral sprint to the final measure.

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