

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### **Béla Bartók**

Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Transylvania (now part of Romania).

Died September 26, 1945, New York City.

### Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta

Bartók composed this work in 1936. Paul Sacher led the first performance in Basel on January 21, 1937. The score calls for small drums (with and without snares), cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, timpani, xylophone, celesta, piano, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

In 1945, after Bartók's death, Paul Sacher wrote: "Whoever met Bartók, thinking of the rhythmic strength of his work, was surprised by his slight, delicate figure." Bartók was sickly from early childhood. By the time he began writing music at the age of nine, he had already survived more illnesses than most adults, and throughout his life he was troubled by a skin rash caused by a smallpox vaccination. When Sacher met Bartók in 1929, he knew only the vigor and power of Bartók's music, and he soon added to this important catalog by commissioning one of Bartók's finest works, the Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, for the tenth anniversary of his Basel Chamber Orchestra in 1936. The young Swiss conductor and this slight, delicate giant of twentieth-century music remained close for many years, their friendship sealed by the creation of a landmark score.

Bartók accepted Sacher's commission on June 27, 1936, and said that he was thinking of writing a work for strings and percussion. He completed the score in ten weeks. Even more unusual than the instrumentation, which Bartók essentially lists as the title of his work, is the distribution of those instruments on the stage, specified by the composer in a seating plan that accompanies the score. Before the invention of stereophonic sound, only live performances could do justice to Bartók's layout: two string orchestras, one on either side of the stage, separated by the percussion. The string orchestras play together and antiphonally, echoing and answering each other like the choruses that Gabrieli placed in opposite balconies at Saint Mark's in Venice more than three hundred years earlier. Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta is one of the scores that reignited a fascination with spatially separated musicians.

The Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta is a neat and meticulously calculated work—a rare synthesis of cool precision and expressive richness. For once we can say, without danger of overstatement, that the music grows organically from the opening material. The entire first movement is a pure, lean, monothematic fugue: every note in its eighty-eight measures can be traced back to the initial subject—a sinuous idea introduced by the violas that climbs by half steps from A up to E and back down. The shape of the fugue amplifies that basic arch form, rising in one vast crescendo to a climax and then slowly falling off. So does the texture of the music, fanning out from a unison A to a dense interweaving of many lines at the peak—economically signaled by a stroke of the bass drum—and then reverting to the single A with which it began. Precisely at the climax, Bartók inverts the fugue subject and all its successive echoes, as if he had stepped through the looking glass at that moment. (This happens when the fugue reaches a high E-flat, the pitch farthest from A.)

Bartók's first movement avoids a regular pulse—the meter changes in virtually every measure, and the slow, seamless nature of the material works against detecting a beat. The Allegro, on the other hand, is the kind of brisk, rhythmically incisive music regularly identified with Bartók's name. (Bartók punishes foot-tappers, however: he throws a number of surprises against a standard 2/4 meter.) Although both movements are based on the same thematic material, the Allegro is as boldly aggressive as the first is dark and mysterious. Bartók gives some of the most important music to the piano, harp (both making their first appearance), drums, and timpani.

The Adagio is classic “night music” as Bartók defined it—an atmospheric mist of magical, nocturnal sounds. The movement’s shape is a palindrome—the symmetrical arrangement of six sections, the second half a mirror of the first. Bartók begins and ends with the morse-code tappings of the xylophone. The music is filled throughout with mysterious and delicate effects—the sound of the wind rustling through the harp, celesta, and piano is particularly haunting. It’s capped at the center by an eruption of fiery and percussive octaves.

The finale is dance music—undanceable, but informed by the spirit and gestures of dance. It opens with the strumming of violins and a peasant tune, which is eventually treated to a number of frenzied variations. We finally come full circle, arriving at a new, streamlined version of the work’s opening melody that’s both unexpected and entirely fitting.

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

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