CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA
COMPOSED FROM 1943-44

BÉLA BARTÓK
BORN IN NAGYSZENTMIKLÓS, HUNGARY (NOW ROMANIA), MARCH 25, 1881
DIED IN NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 26, 1945

The Concerto for Orchestra of Béla Bartók came in the twilight of a career, as the composer struggled with the upheaval of exile, and with life-threatening illness. He was perhaps the least successful of the major emigré composers in making a life in the United States: When he arrived here in 1940, hardly anyone seemed to know about his rich career in Europe as pianist and composer. To wartime America, Bartók was just another great artist driven from Europe by the fascists, and partly as a result of this insouciance, his last years were marked by sorrow and chronic monetary worries. Nonetheless, the Concerto for Orchestra brought a flurry of attention that would help secure a place for his works in American concert halls; its warm reception was the closest thing to a “happy ending” that one could have hoped for.

A DECADE OF SPEAKING OUT
From the early 1930s Bartók had been outspoken in his criticism of fascism; he defended Toscanini against censure, and after 1933 he refused to perform in Germany. As a result he began to be the object of attacks in the Hungarian press. At first he considered moving to England, but during concerts in America in the late 1930s he entertained the notion of settling in the United States, an idea that was solidified in 1940 through the offer of a temporary appointment as research associate at Columbia University, a position he assumed in 1941—settling into New York with his wife, Ditta.

After a year he was told that this position would not be renewed; the Bartóks fell into financial straits. Meanwhile Bartók was growing gravely ill. In 1943, after becoming so sick he could no longer concertize, he was diagnosed with leukemia (though doctors told him that it was polycythemia, a less serious illness of the red blood cells).

Friends of ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) stepped in and offered to pay for his treatment, and he was sent to a sanatorium at Lake Saranac, where he showed marked improvement. It was there, in the summer of 1943, that he began working on the commission he had received from Serge Koussevitzky for an orchestra piece.

WORK AS MEDICINE
Later, he wrote to his dearest friend, the violinist Joseph Szigeti, of how the commission had proceeded: “At the end of August I experienced an improvement in the state of my health. Presently I feel quite healthy: I have no fever, my strength has returned, and I am able to take long walks in the wooded hills around here. In March I weighed 87 pounds, now 105. I’m gaining weight. I’m getting fat. I’m getting limber. You won’t recognize me any more. Perhaps the fact that I was able to complete the work that Koussevitzky commissioned is attributable to this improvement (or vice versa). I worked on it for the whole of September, more or less night and day. It is supposed to be performed around March 17 or 18 [1944], on the same concert in which you are to be soloist.” The work’s
first performance took place in Boston on December 1, 1944, with the Boston Symphony conducted by Koussevitzky. The Concerto was such a triumph that almost overnight it became standard orchestral fare.

If Bartók did not invent the idea of the concerto for orchestra, he created what is clearly the 20th century’s most brilliant example of it. The roots of this concept lay in the Baroque concerto grosso, a favorite form of Vivaldi and Handel that featured numerous soloists contrasted with full whole orchestra. Although the exaggerated Romantic manner of pitting heroic soloist against orchestral horde formed a sort of momentary diversion from this earlier concept, the neoclassicists of the 1920s and ’30s tried to revive the collaborative Baroque model. Hindemith and Kodály both composed works they called “concertos for orchestra” as early as 1925, and others followed suit—including Stravinsky, whose “Dumbarton Oaks” Concerto of 1938 openly emulated the Baroque.

A CLOSER LOOK
But none of these achieved the central place in the repertoire that Bartók’s has. This five-movement piece is constructed in the composer’s familiar “arch,” with a central slow movement flanked by two scherzos, each surrounded in turn by elaborate outer movements. The direction of this arch reflects Bartók’s outlook in 1943: “The general mood of the work,” he wrote in a program note, “represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death-song of the third to the life-assertion of the last one.”

At the same time the piece pays apt tribute to the orchestral virtuosity of the American orchestras such as the Boston Symphony. “The title of this symphony-like orchestral work is explained by its tendency to treat the single orchestral instruments in a concertante or soloistic manner,” the composer writes. The initial Introduzione: Andante non troppo—Allegro vivace is a sort of modified sonata-form, beginning with a slow introduction and concluding with a highly imitative coda. The second movement (Giuoco delle coppie: Allegretto scherzando) is a brilliant and witty scherzo, consisting of a chain of sections played by pairs of bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes, and trumpets.

The mournful third movement (Elegia: Andante non troppo) gives way to the second scherzo (Intermezzo interrotto: Allegretto), in which Bartók openly parodies the march movement from Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, which he happened to hear on the radio while composing the passage. “Most of the thematic material of this movement derives from the ‘Introduction’ to the first movement.” Bartók’s Concerto concludes as it began: with a sonata-form movement. “The exposition in the finale (Pesante—Presto) is somewhat extended,” he writes, “and its development consists of a fugue built on the last theme of the exposition.”

—Paul J. Horsley

Program note © 2005. All rights reserved. Program note may not be reprinted without written permission from The Philadelphia Orchestra Association.