



BÉLA BARTÓK

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 2

Béla Viktor János Bartók was a Hungarian composer, pianist, and ethnomusicologist. He is considered one of the most important composers of the 20th century; he and Franz Liszt are regarded as Hungary's greatest composers. Through his collection and analytical study of folk music, he was one of the founders of comparative musicology, which later became known as ethnomusicology. Bartók's music reflects two trends that dramatically changed the sound of music in the 20th century: the breakdown of the diatonic system of harmony that had served composers for the previous two hundred years; and the revival of nationalism as a source for musical inspiration, a trend that began with Mikhail Glinka and Antonín Dvořák in the last half of the 19th century. In his search for new forms of tonality, Bartók turned to Hungarian folk music, as well as to other folk music of the Carpathian Basin and even of Algeria and Turkey; in so doing he became influential in that stream of modernism which used indigenous music and techniques. One characteristic style of music is his Night music, which he used mostly in slow movements of multi-movement ensemble or orchestral compositions in his mature period. It is characterised by "eerie dissonances providing a backdrop to sounds of nature and lonely melodies". An example is the third movement (Adagio) of his *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. His music can be grouped roughly in accordance with the different periods in his life. The works of Bartók's youth were written in a classical and early romantic style touched with influences of popular and romani music. Between 1890 and 1894 (9 to 13 years of age) he wrote 31 piano pieces with corresponding opus numbers. Although most of these were simple dance pieces, in these early works Bartók began to tackle some more advanced forms, as in his ten-part programmatic *A Duna folyása* ("The Course of the Danube", 1890–1894), which he played in his first public recital in 1892. In Catholic grammar school Bartók took to studying the scores of composers "from Bach to Wagner", his compositions then advancing in style and taking on similarities to Schumann and Brahms. Following his matriculation into the Budapest Academy in 1890 he composed very little, though he began to work on exercises in orchestration and familiarized himself thoroughly with the operas of Wagner. In 1902 his creative energies were revitalized by the discovery of the music of Richard Strauss, whose tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra*, according to Bartók, "stimulated the greatest enthusiasm in me; at last I saw the way that lay before me". Bartók also owned the score to *A Hero's Life*, which he transcribed for the piano and committed to memory. Under the influence of Strauss, Bartók composed in 1903 *Kossuth*, a symphonic poem in ten tableaux on the subject of the 1848 Hungarian war of independence, reflecting the composers growing interest in musical nationalism. A year later he renewed his opus numbers with the *Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra* serving as Opus 1. Driven by nationalistic fervor and a desire to transcend the influence of prior composers, Bartók began a lifelong devotion to folk music, which was sparked by his overhearing nanny Lidi Dósa's singing of Transylvanian folk songs at a Hungarian resort in 1904. Bartók began to collect Magyar peasant melodies, later extending to the folk music of other peoples of the Carpathian Basin, Slovaks, Romanians, Rusyns, Serbs and Croats. His compositional output would gradually prune away romantic elements in favour of an idiom that embodied folk music as intrinsic and essential to its style.

Béla Bartók's **Violin Concerto No. 2**, BB 117 was written in 1937–38. During the composer's life, it was known simply as his Violin Concerto. His other violin concerto, Violin Concerto No. 1, Sz. 36, BB 48a, was written in the years 1907–1908, but only published in 1956, after the composer's death, as "Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. posth."

Bartók composed the concerto in a difficult stage of his life, when he was filled with serious concerns about the growing strength of fascism. He was of firm anti-fascist opinions, and therefore became the target of various attacks in pre-war Hungary. Bartók initially planned to write a single-movement concerto set of variations, but Zoltán Székely wanted a standard three-movement concerto. In the end, Székely received his three movements, while Bartók received his variations: the second movement is a formal set of variations, and the third movement is a variation on material from the first. The work was premiered at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam on March 23, 1939 with Zoltán Székely on violin and Willem Mengelberg conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra. It had its United States premiere in Cleveland, Ohio in 1943, with Tossy Spivakovsky on the violin accompanied by The Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Artur Rodziński. Spivakovsky later gave the New York and San Francisco premieres of the work.