

Béla Bartók

Divertimento for String Orchestra

BÉLA BARTÓK was born in Nagyszentmiklós, Transylvania (then part of Hungary but now absorbed into Romania) on March 25, 1881, and died in New York on September 26, 1945. The Divertimento was commissioned by Paul Sacher for the Basel Chamber Orchestra, which he conducted, late in 1938. Bartók finally completed the score at Sacher's chalet in Saanen, Switzerland, between August 2 and 17, 1939. Sacher led the Basel Chamber Orchestra in the first performance on June 11, 1940, in Basel.

THE SCORE OF THE DIVERTIMENTO calls for the full complement of orchestral strings.

The success of Bartók's Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, composed in the summer of 1936 and premiered by Paul Sacher and the Basel Chamber Orchestra the following January, led to another commission from the Swiss ensemble. In November 1938, Sacher asked Bartók to write a new work for string orchestra, prescribing the size of his ensemble: six first and six second violins, four violas, four cellos, and two double basses. (In the published score, Bartók noted that the Divertimento should be performed by "not less than" these forces.) Sacher also apparently requested that the new work be somewhat easier to play than the earlier composition. This caused Bartók difficulty for a time, since he was not sure he could write such a piece and still remain true to himself. By June 1939 he still had no more precise notion of the work he was going to write than that it was "a string orchestral piece in the character of a suite." By July 1, though, he had clarified his ideas enough to ask Sacher a crucial question. He wanted to create a work that recalled the Baroque concerto grosso, with its dialogue between larger and smaller instrumental groups. Did Sacher's ensemble contain players who would be satisfactory soloists? "I would be greatly pleased if the ensemble and solo could alternate."

Despite his increasingly clear vision of the work to be written, Bartók found it difficult to begin. The preceding months had not been easy ones. Hitler's annexation of Austria on March 11, 1938, had cast a shadow over all of eastern Europe. His publishers, Universal-Edition in Vienna, had been "nazified," as he put it, and required all composers published by them to submit to the notorious questionnaire concerning their racial background; Bartók, along with his compatriot Kodály, refused to respond, with the result that he lost any further opportunity of publishing his works through that source. (Fortunately, both were soon offered contracts by the English publisher Ralph Hawkes.) Many of his friends began leaving for England or America. Bartók, though, was too strongly tied to his native land to consider leaving at once. He had already pondered the problem for a year and a half, describing his dilemma to fellow composer Sándor Veress in these terms:

If a person stays here when the possibility of leaving is open to him, it could be said that he is tacitly agreeing to everything that is happening here....On the other hand, it could also be said that no matter what quagmire the country sinks into, everybody should stay at home and help matters as much as possible.

Quite aside from the powerful cultural ties to his homeland, Bartók was hesitant to leave Hungary throughout 1938 and 1939 because his mother, to whom he was intensely devoted, was clearly failing. So for the moment he waited, caught up in the political maelstrom of central Europe, with little opportunity for peaceful composition.

Not until the middle of the summer, when Sacher invited him to be his guest at his Alpine chalet in Saanen, near Basel, did Bartók find the leisure to concentrate fully on his new work. Even there he was acutely aware of international tensions. He could see for himself that even the "poor, peaceful, honest Swiss" were preparing boulders above the mountain passes to use, if necessary, as a defense against German tanks.

Still, he at last was able to get to work seriously, and when he did, he composed with extraordinary speed, completing the entire score in just fifteen days of intense concentration. As soon as he had finished the work, he wrote to his son Béla to announce its completion, and added:

I hadn't read a newspaper for 2 weeks until I picked one up yesterday; the lapse of time was not perceptible, it was just as if I was reading one 2 weeks old. Nothing had happened in between (Thank God).

Soon after, of course, the world exploded, and when Bartók's mother died that December, the last remaining tie to Hungary had been cut. He moved to the United States, where he was to die in 1945, an exile from the land that had vibrated in the very core of his being.

Though the Divertimento was inspired in part by the Baroque concerto, Bartók makes no attempt to establish a formal, structural alternation between the full ensemble and the solo group. The soloists comment freely on the musical discourse, taking over at times, receding into the background at others, *primus inter pares*.

Despite the difficult time in which it was composed, Bartók's Divertimento is one of his liveliest and most accessible pieces, filled—especially in the outer movements—with rhythms and melodies that evoke Hungarian folk music and dance and fiddling. The slow movement belies the title of the work as a whole, with nothing there that could be described simply as “diverting.” This is one of those wonderful Bartókian “night music” pieces that form so characteristic and memorable a part of his musical personality. It is here, if anywhere, that the composer's suppressed concern for the political madness of the distant outside world might be sensed in the music.

The final rondo is as lively and unbuttoned a folk dance as Bartók ever composed, a vibrant, ringing contrast to the music of the Adagio. The third movement throughout reflects the good-humored character of folk dance, exploiting techniques of popular fiddle-playing in more refined form, even to the point of giving the principal violinist a kind of gypsy-violin solo and later on suggesting a slightly tipsy episode sandwiched between two wild-eyed *vivacissimo* passages, the second one bringing the Divertimento to its vigorous close.

Steven Ledbetter