

Bohuslav Martinu

Violin Concerto No. 2

BOHUSLAV MARTINU was born in Policka, Bohemia, on December 8, 1890, and died in Liestal, Switzerland, on August 28, 1959. He composed his Second Violin Concerto in New York between February 23 and April 26, 1943. Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra gave the first performances of the concerto on December 31, 1943, and January 1, 1944, with soloist Mischa Elman, for whom Martinu wrote it. Koussevitzky, Elman, and the BSO repeated the concerto for its New York premiere on January 6 and 8, 1944, and then played it again at Tanglewood on August 10, 1946—the last time it was played by the BSO until this week. The first performance in Europe was given on October 6, 1948, by Alexander Plocek with the Prague Radio Orchestra conducted by Alois Klima.

IN ADDITION TO THE VIOLIN SOLOIST, the score of Martinu's Violin Concerto No. 2 calls for an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings.

Martinu resided in the United States from 1941 to 1952 and again for a year from 1955 to 1956. Although, like many other European musicians, he arrived as a fugitive from the Nazis with little money and no English, he quickly established himself here as a composer. Of inestimable value to him was the fact that he knew Serge Koussevitzky, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra since 1924. Having met Martinu in Paris in 1926, Koussevitzky programmed *La Bagarre*, subtitled "Allegro for Large Orchestra," with the BSO the following year. Its success prompted Martinu to compose another work for the same team, titled *La Symphonie* and performed in Boston in 1928.

In 1932 Martinu won the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Prize for his String Sextet, selected from 145 chamber works submitted from all over the world (Koussevitzky was on the jury panel). Also in 1932, Boston heard the Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra. Thus neither Martinu's name nor his music was unfamiliar to the audience when Koussevitzky gave the world premiere of his *Concerto Grosso* on November 14, 1941, in the composer's presence. This work had been bedeviled by political events, since Martinu, then living in Paris, originally planned it for a Vienna premiere. The *Anschluss* intervened, so the next city chosen was Prague. The Munich crisis caused that plan to be abandoned, so Charles Munch agreed to give it in Paris in 1940. That city in turn fell to Hitler, while George Szell took a copy of the score from Prague to Australia. Szell in turn passed it to Koussevitzky, so that the Boston premiere took place, launching a highly successful series of American premieres for the composer.

The Koussevitzky Foundation at once commissioned a new work, which Martinu composed in Jamaica, on Long Island, in the summer of 1942. He decided to write a symphony, the first of a series of six that all belong to his American years. The First Symphony was written expressly for the BSO, which gave its first performance in November 1942. When it was repeated in New York a week later, it was heard by the great violin virtuoso Mischa Elman, who was so impressed he asked Martinu to write him a concerto. Elman, almost exactly the same age as Martinu, had settled in the United States as early as 1911 and had sustained a brilliant career traveling widely and known for his richly romantic style of playing.

Elman invited Martinu to discuss the plan and was nonplussed when Martinu told him he was not familiar with the playing of Kreisler, Hubermann, Heifetz, and other great violinists of the day. "Have you ever heard *me* play?" he asked, to which the answer was "No." So Elman invited Martinu to his studio and played while Martinu allowed the idea of a concerto to form in his mind. "On laying down his violin," wrote Martinu's biographer Milo? ?afránek, "Elman naturally expected some comment. But the silence remained unbroken and, as Elman told me afterwards, Martinu looked as noncommittal as a sphinx. Thereupon Elman rose and the two artists took awkward leave of each other."

In fact the taciturn Martinu found Elman's playing to be marvelously expressive and that his tone had a special magic. The following February Martinu set to work and completed the concerto two months later. It received its first performance that December with Elman as soloist and Koussevitzky at the helm of the BSO. It was published simply as his "Violin Concerto" since it was not then known that Martinu had composed a violin concerto ten years before for Samuel Dushkin, a work that had been lost and did not surface until 1973. So the present work is now correctly labeled his Violin Concerto No. 2.

Martinu had also composed a *Suite Concertante* in 1938 and a *Concerto da camera* in 1941, both works featuring a solo violin. But these works belong to the neo-baroque style to which much of his music in the 1930s inclined. With the new concerto for Elman, Martinu went for the grander, lyrical manner of the traditional violin concerto, using a large orchestra, if only sparingly. Martinu played the violin himself, so the technical requirements of the instrument were second nature to him.

The concerto is cast in the traditional three movements, although the first movement is broader than usual. Even when the opening Andante turns to Poco Allegro it becomes restless rather than fast, and the slower music returns at the end. The thematic material is mostly based on a rocking, alternating figure, like a chant, the rhythms elusive, as always in Martinu. A brief cadenza introduces the soloist, whose presentation of the rocking figure becomes wonderfully lyrical. At the faster section the orchestra takes over, leading to more energetic work from the soloist. The orchestra's next intervention is cloudy and wistful, and a second short cadenza leads to a final statement of the chant-like figure.

The second movement is not unlike the first in mood, the themes lyrical, often moving in stepwise motion. These are simple familiar intervals but set apart in complex unpredictable rhythms. There are no forceful climaxes, simply an unfolding of melody over changing delicate textures. Having once entered, the soloist continues to the end with only a break for a ravishing section for muted strings and a restrained entry for the full orchestra.

The finale is the occasion for a display of energy which seems to blend a vigorous Czech folk idiom like that of Janáček's *Lachian Dances* with an open, airy style we often think of as American. Perhaps Martinu had already assimilated the atmosphere of his new home? He was always receptive to new cultures. But although he had lived in Paris for many years, married a French wife, and was later to show a deep affection for Italy, he never lost his attachment to his Czech homeland.

By 1946 Martinu had completed five symphonies, all of them successfully presented by American orchestras, as well as many chamber works. This was one of the most productive periods of his life. In that year, just as he was contemplating a return to Czechoslovakia, he suffered a fearful head injury after falling from a ten-foot-high balcony near Tanglewood. In any case he was soon prevented from returning by the Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1947, so he remained until 1953, the year of the Sixth Symphony (*Fantaisies symphoniques*), a BSO 75th-anniversary commission dedicated to Charles Munch and the orchestra. Martinu then returned to France and settled in Nice. In 1956 he took up a position as composer-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome. He kept composing ceaselessly, as he had done all his life, up until his death in a Swiss clinic three years later.

Martinu's manner of working was very unusual. He decried conventional teaching and the imposition of rules. He neither established nor taught any system of composition. He composed very quickly and fluently and amassed a huge body of work, much of it still unpublished and unknown. It is thus difficult to judge his work as a whole, and his faith in the natural flow of music, unhindered by architectural principles, compels the listener to follow the structural outlines of pieces on trust, since he preferred to let his ideas develop organically over the course of a movement or work, without clearly defined themes or sections. His aim as a composer, he once explained, was to discover the meaning of life, no less, that lofty quest on which composers have set out with many different degrees of success for many centuries. In the case of the Second Violin Concerto, he wrote a long program note for the first performance which actually tells us almost nothing about the work itself. Some composers are superbly articulate about their own music, but Martinu was not one of them. He doesn't have to worry: it is the music itself that speaks to us.

Hugh Macdonald