NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2026

Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Béla Bartók: *Romanian Folk Dances*

Beginning in 1904, Bartók undertook multiple research projects in Eastern Europe's remote mountain villages. Listening to folk songs and peasant dance tunes, he notated them on music paper, discovering an unimagined wealth of material preserved by meticulous oral tradition. Romanian peasant music exerted a particular fascination for him. In 1909, he began to learn Romanian and collected some 3,500 examples of Romanian folk music. Inevitably this rich assemblage of material worked its way into his own compositions.

Bartók transcribed these dances for orchestra in 1917. They are an exuberant collection of miniatures, celebrating the vigorous rhythms and haunting modal harmonies of eastern Europe. Augmented seconds and violin harmonics in the "Sash Dance" lend it a dreamy quality. Minuet rhythm provides unexpected Western grace to the "Hornpipe Dance" and metric shifts between triple and duple time hold our attention in the fifth dance, "Romanian Polka." The set concludes with an energetic, dizzying "Quick Dance."

Frédéric Chopin: Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

Chopin's apprenticeship period took place in his late teens and early 20s, before he left Poland permanently. The F-minor concerto was actually his first concerto, but it was published after the E-minor concerto, Op.11, hence the higher opus number.

Conversational and adversarial balance between orchestra and piano does not exist in the Chopin concerti. Taking Hummel rather than Mozart as his model, Chopin wrote an accompanied solo rather than concerted discussion. Everything is geared to highlight the pianist's technical virtuosity, beautiful tone, and expressive capability. The mood of the music changes rapidly, showing every face that the composer has, from warrior to poet. But these transformations are never at the expense of continuity, and Chopin sustains a convincing forward drive in spite of his unconventional approach to sonata form.

His youthful love for a Polish singer, Konstancja Gładkowska, affects his sense of melodic line and ornamentation in the lyrical Andante. Polish nationalism finds its way into the finale as a mazurka. This colorful movement incorporates a number of unexpectedly deft orchestral touches, such as col legno strings and a horn signal, that contribute to its energy. A virtuoso coda reminds us that the concerto, ultimately, belongs to the soloist.

Béla Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra

Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra is both the symphony that he never composed, and the ultimate *concerto grosso* for our time. Like many of Bartók's late works, it is written in a more diatonic, accessible language than his earlier music. Its roots lie in the peasant folk music of Hungary.

Serge Koussevitzky commissioned the Concerto for Orchestra for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Bartók capitalized on that orchestra's excellent players by giving virtually every instrument a brief turn as soloist. He uses a five movement "arch" form, a favorite structural device of his. Bartók's Concerto is filled with wondrous musical moments. In "Game of the Pairs" ("Giuoco delle coppie"), he introduces the winds two by two, as if they were marching onto Noah's Ark. Emphasizing differences in their timbres, he writes for the bassoons in parallel sixths, the oboes in thirds, the clarinets in sevenths, flutes in fifths, and muted trumpets in major seconds; after an intervening brass chorale, the restatement expands to triple woodwind. The movement is like a microcosmic guide to the orchestra. The side drum opens and concludes this remarkable "game," ushering the parade of duets.

Bartók's musical material in "Elegia" grows out of the slow introduction to the first movement. In "Intermezzo interrotto," the interruption is a vulgar quotation from Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony. Bartók's distortion and ridicule are raucous snipes at another composer. He closes his Concerto with an energetic opening fanfare, including an elaborate fugue as the centerpiece of the brilliant finale.

Béla Bartók: *Romanian Folk Dances*

Béla Bartók
Born: March 25, 1881 in Nagy Szent Miklós, Transylvania
Died: September 26, 1945 in New York City
Composed: 1915 for piano; orchestrated in 1917
World Premiere: February 11, 1918 in Budapest; Emil Lichtenberg conducted
Duration: 6 minutes
Instrumentation: two flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, and strings

While we revere Béla Bartók as one of the great compositional titans of the 20th century, his contribution as an ethnomusicologist was nearly as great. Beginning in 1904, he embarked upon a series of in-depth research projects in the remote mountain villages of Eastern Europe. He listened to folk songs and peasant dance tunes, notating them on music paper. In Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia he found an unimagined wealth of material preserved by meticulous oral tradition.

Romanian peasant music exerted a particular fascination for him after 1909. Collaborating with János Busitia, headmaster of the old Catholic Grammar School in Belényes, Bartók learned to speak and write Romanian, and collected some 3,500 examples of Romanian folk music. Inevitably this rich assemblage of material worked its way into his own compositions. He poured forth a series of important piano and vocal works in

1915, including the Sonatina on *Romanian Folk Melodies*, the Suite, Op.14, (for piano), *Romanian Christmas Carols*, and the *Romanian Folk Dances* we hear on this program.

These six Dances draw more on instrumental than vocal models, particularly rural fiddle tunes. Consequently, they have lent themselves readily to instrumental transcription. Recognizing this, Bartók transcribed the six pieces (originally for piano) for orchestra in 1917. They have since been arranged for many other instrumental combinations and are thus among the most familiar of Bartók's folk-derived music.

Bartók's music is an exuberant collection of miniatures, celebrating the vigorous rhythms and haunting modal harmonies of eastern Europe. Augmented seconds and violin harmonics in the “Sash Dance” lend it a dreamy quality. Minuet rhythm provides unexpected western grace to the “Pipehorn Dance” and metric shifts between triple and duple time hold our attention in the fifth dance, a “Romanian Polka.” The set concludes with an energetic, dizzying “Quick Dance.”

Frédéric Chopin: Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

Frédéric Chopin
Born: March 1, 1810 in Żelazowa Wola, near Warsaw, Poland
Died: October 17, 1849 in Paris, France
Composed: 1829–30
World Premiere: March 17, 1830 in Warsaw; the composer was the soloist
Duration: 32 minutes
Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, bass trombone, timpani, solo piano, and strings

Some composers undergo marked changes in their style and approach to their art in the course of a long career: Beethoven and Stravinsky are obvious examples. Others, like Brahms, seem to have burst forth fully formed, with a unique and personal musical language that is instantly identifiable as their own and remains consistent in early, middle, and late works.

Frédéric Chopin falls into the latter category. Hallmarks of his style appear in all his compositions. We are exceedingly unlikely to mistake Chopin's music for that of any of his contemporaries. His two piano concertos are the finest of his so-called "apprentice" works—both demonstrate his incomparable flair for solo display.

Chopin began work on the F minor concerto in autumn 1829. It was actually his first concerto, but was not published until 1836, three years after the publication of his Piano Concerto in E minor, Op.11. Consequently the F minor concerto bears a later opus number.

The relationship between orchestra and piano is different in Chopin from, for example, the conversational balance in a Mozart concerto. Chopin took Johann Nepomuk Hummel as his model, rather than Mozart. The F minor Concerto is more an accompanied solo than a concerted discussion. Everything is geared to highlight technical virtuosity, beautiful tone, and the expressive capability of the pianist. The mood of the music

changes rapidly, showing every face that the composer has, from warrior to poet. But these transformations are never at the expense of continuity, and Chopin sustains a convincing forward drive in spite of his unconventional approach to sonata form. As Peter Gould observed:

> "The development section of the F minor concerto is not a true development as understood by Beethoven. Chopin seldom argued. He was not naturally an intellectual, his greatest attribute being that of sensitivity, and in his development, he wrote what could be better described as a commentary on what had gone before."

Chopin had a lifelong love of opera that exercised a powerful influence on his sense of melodic line and inimitable ornamentation. That influence is most readily perceived in his lyrical slow movements. The F minor concerto's central Andante (originally *Adagio*) was an expression of Chopin's love for a singer, Konstancja Gładkowska, during the last year he spent in Warsaw. He wrote to his friend Titus Woyciechowski in October 1829:

> "To my misfortune, perhaps, I have found my ideal. I venerate her with all my soul. For six months now I have been dreaming of her every night and still I have not addressed a single word to her. It is thinking of her that I have composed the *Adagio* of my Concerto."

Chopin remained very fond of performing this slow movement long after other women (notably Countess Delphine Potocka of Paris, the eventual dedicatee of the concerto) had replaced Konstancja in his affections. It is easy to understand why. With its lavish ornamentation and delicate embroidery, this movement blurs the distinction between melody and decoration, weaving a magical seductive spell.

Polish nationalism finds its way into the finale as a mazurka. This colorful movement incorporates a number of unexpectedly deft orchestral touches, such as col legno strings (striking the strings with the wood of the bow, rather than the horsehair) and a horn signal, that contribute to its energy. A virtuoso coda reminds us that the concerto, ultimately, belongs to the soloist.

Béla Bartók: Concerto for Orchestra

Béla Bartók
Born: March 25, 1881 in Nagy Szent Miklós, Transylvania
Died: September 26, 1945 in New York City
Composed: in 1942 and 1943; revised in 1945
World Premiere: December 1, 1944 in Boston, Massachusetts; Serge Koussevitzky conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Bartók was present for the premiere; it was the last time he appeared in public.
Duration: 36 minutes
Instrumentation: three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), three oboes (3rd doubling English horn), three clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two harps, timpani, side drum, bass drum, tam-tam, cymbals, triangle, and strings

Bartók's 1943 Concerto for Orchestra is not a traditional concerto featuring one soloist. Rather, it celebrates the entire symphonic ensemble, allowing virtually every instrument its moment in the spotlight. This Concerto became the quintessential orchestral showpiece of the 20th century and remains a work with which symphony orchestras cut their teeth and prove their mettle. It is both the symphony that Bartók never composed and the ultimate *concerto grosso* for our time. In addition, the Concerto for Orchestra, like many of Bartók's late works, is written in a more diatonic, accessible language than his earlier music. Its roots lie in the peasant folk music of Hungary.

Foreign expatriate in a strange country

Early in 1940, unable to accept the political situation in his native Hungary and throughout war-torn Europe, Bartók emigrated to America. He found the strangeness of this foreign land daunting. His English was not strong. The noise of New York City, where he initially settled, proved irksome and disturbing. Plagued by exhaustion, overwork, and emotional stress, his health worsened. So did his financial situation. By spring 1942, he was quite ill with the leukemia that would claim his life three years later.

A welcome commission

Given such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Bartók expressed doubt to friends as to whether he would compose again. Even when his physical energy failed, he remained a vastly imaginative and energetic musician in spirit. The conductor Serge Koussevitzky visited him in May 1943 and requested a new piece for the Boston Symphony. Bartók threw himself into the new commission, which took shape rapidly that summer.

Perhaps because it was his first large composition in a while, ideas poured out of him. Knowing that Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony would play the first performance, he was inspired to write with superb orchestral players in mind, The Concerto's five movements distinguish it from a traditional four movement symphony, although there are some clear parallels in the overall structure. The five-movement organization is one that Bartók adopted frequently in his mature works. Generally, in such compositions, a weightier central (third) movement serves as a fulcrum to balancing outer movements, with the second and fourth somehow connected, and the first and last bearing some relationship to one another, as well as forming a frame for the whole. Music theorists call this method of formal organization an “arch form,” and the structure has become strongly associated with Bartók.

Noah’s Ark

Bartók's Concerto is filled with wondrous and exciting musical moments. A few warrant singling out, especially for live performance. The second movement, "Game of the Pairs” (“Giuoco delle coppie”), introduces the winds two by two, as if they were marching onto Noah's Ark. Emphasizing the difference in their respective timbres, he writes for the bassoons in parallel sixths, the oboes in thirds, the clarinets in sevenths, flutes in fifths, and muted trumpets in major seconds; after an intervening brass chorale, the restatement expands to triple woodwind. In each case, the melody is idiomatic to the character of the instrument, as if to express its personality. The movement is like a microcosmic guide to the orchestra. The side drum opens and concludes this remarkable “game,” ushering the parade of duets.

Sarcastic swipe at Shostakovich

Careful listeners may recognize that the musical material in the central “Elegia” grows out of the slow introduction to the first movement. In “Intermezzo interrotto,” the interruption consists of a vulgar quotation from Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony. Bartók found the Russian composer's theme absurd, and his ridicule of it in this movement is one of music's more raucous snipes at another composer. Bartók closes his Concerto with an energetic opening fanfare, including an elaborate fugue as the centerpiece of the brilliant finale.

CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA

The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music defines a concerto thus:

> “Since the late 18th century, a composition for orchestra and a solo instrument … an essential feature of such works is the contrast between passages dominated by the soloist (usually requiring some display of virtuosity) and passages (called tutti) for the orchestra alone.”

What then, is a concerto for orchestra, if not a contradiction in terms, since there is no soloist? Later in the same entry, the dictionary elaborates:

> “Some 20th-century composers (Hindemith, Piston, Bartók, Barber, and others) have written pieces under titles like concerto for orchestra. These often draw on elements of the baroque concerto, including the use of a group of soloists.”

In the case of Bartók's 1943 Concerto for Orchestra, the group of soloists amounts to the entire ensemble. The result is a celebration of that giant composite instrument, the orchestra.

Bartók was not the only important 20th-century composer to explore the capabilities of the large symphonic ensemble through this new genre. In addition to those listed in the dictionary article quoted above, other composers of significant Concertos for Orchestra included Witold Lutosławski, Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, and Rodion Shchedrin. More recently, many prominent Americans have turned their hands to it, including Richard Danielpour, Jennifer Higdon, Christopher Rouse, Steven Stucky (whose Second Concerto for Orchestra won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005), Joan Tower, and Jennifer Higdon. The genre has evolved into a significant alternative to the traditional multi-movement symphony as a vessel for musical ideas.