

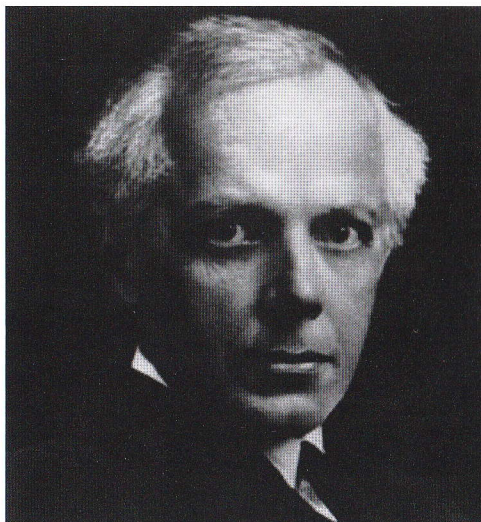
Concerto for Orchestra

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

- 1 *Introduzione. Andante non troppo – Allegro vivace*
- 2 *'Giuoco delle coppie'. Allegretto scherzando*
- 3 *'Elegia'. Andante non troppo*
- 4 *'Intermezzo interrotto'. Allegretto*
- 5 *Finale. Presto*

Béla Bartók was almost 60 when he fled his native – and at that time Nazi-sympathising – Hungary for the US in 1940. In his homeland, he had been a highly successful composer, pianist and teacher; in America, however, he had virtually nothing. Friends found him a job at Columbia University cataloguing the institution's collection of eastern European folk music, but the work soon dried up. He gained a small income from performing with his wife Ditta, but ill health soon curtailed that too. And in 1943, following a year of declining health, Bartók was finally diagnosed with leukaemia. It was against this bleak backdrop that Bartók, ironically, wrote one of his most enduringly popular and life-affirming works – the Concerto for Orchestra. The composer himself described the piece as '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'.

It was written to a commission from the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who visited Bartók in hospital and requested a large-scale orchestral work from him (funded, unbeknownst to Bartók, by fellow Hungarian émigrés, violinist Joseph Szigeti and conductor Fritz Reiner). Bartók initially refused, suspicious that the commission was merely an act of charity, but on Koussevitzky's insistence finally took it on. Its premiere – in December 1944, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky – was an enormous success,



and gave Bartók a renewed confidence that resulted in the remarkable Third Piano Concerto and Viola Concerto that he (almost) finished before his death in 1945.

A democratic Concerto

The title – Concerto for Orchestra – might sound like a contradiction in terms. After all, isn't a traditional concerto meant to have a soloist battling against the full might of the orchestra? Bartók's wasn't the first, but it's the best known, and the composer explained that he called the piece a concerto because of the way he treats the orchestral instruments in soloistic, virtuosic ways. Just about everyone in the orchestra gets a moment in the spotlight at one point or another, and the piece combines a democracy of spirit (maybe a comment on the totalitarian darkness Bartók left behind in Europe) with a requirement for its players to rise to the virtuosic challenges the composer sets them.

The music

The **first movement** begins with a slow,

ominous introduction kicked off by a sepulchral rising and falling theme on cellos and basses, before the movement's main, faster music plays around with three main melodies: an unpredictable, racing tune on violins; a distinctive, fanfare-like melody first heard on a solo trombone; and a gentler, folk-like theme introduced by a solo oboe.

After a solo side drum raps out a memorable rhythm, the **second movement** – whose Italian title translates as 'Game of Pairs' – features duos of bassoons, oboes, clarinet, flutes and trumpets playing the same, perky melody. A solemn chorale on trumpets, trombones, horns and tuba provides contrast, before the duos return and the side drum has the final word.

The tortured **third movement** contrasts mysterious, half-heard outer sections with a powerful inner core, complete with soaring violins and pounding timpani, and a birdsong-like tune on a solo piccolo providing a glimpse of light.

The **fourth movement** is an 'Interrupted Intermezzo' – the unmistakable interruption to Bartók's flowing viola tune coming courtesy of a parody of a melody from Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony*, which Bartók felt was getting far more attention than it deserved (and which ends up being mocked by raucous laughter from trombones, trumpets and woodwind).

A big horn fanfare announces the whirling, seemingly unstoppable dance of the **fifth movement**. In a later section, a striding theme is passed back and forth between different sections of the orchestra in complex counterpoint, before a final build-up and a race to the finish.

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The virtuosic viola

RSNO Violist Katherine Wren on how Bartók's showpiece feels from the inside



It feels different playing Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra to playing a symphony – it's far more virtuosic, and it feels more light-hearted as well. There's more of an emphasis on showing off the orchestra rather than developing the themes of the piece – if you analyse it, I'm sure that's not quite the case, but that's how it feels to play.

Our big passages in the viola section are tunes in the third and fourth movements. In the third movement, we've got a big, exposed melody that's marked to be played quite freely. For a viola player, a lot of the time you don't expect to be quite so much in the spotlight, but every instrument is featured in this piece. Bartók writes really well for the viola – he appreciates the colour of the instrument and the fact that it can also be virtuosic.

The movement that always sticks out for me is the second movement 'Game of Pairs'. One of the things that fascinates me is musical colour – in fact, I think people can sometimes focus too much on melody. Here, Bartók uses the different colours of the pairs of instruments – flutes, trumpets, bassoons and so on – in a really fascinating way. We don't have anything particularly difficult to play in that movement, so I can just sit back a bit and enjoy the colour around me.