



Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta, BB 114

Béla Bartók

The Swiss conductor, collector, sometime composer, and billionaire philanthropist Paul Sacher (1906–99) contributed much to the shaping of 20th-century music. He married into a pharmaceutical fortune and used his newfound resources constructively. In 1926 the 20-year-old Sacher formed the Basel Chamber Orchestra and set about commissioning works from leading composers — such as Richard Strauss, Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Honegger — which he would often conduct at their premieres.

Sacher commissioned both Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (1936) and his *Divertimento for String Orchestra* (1939), and he also arranged for another party to commission his *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937). In a memorial tribute following the composer's death, in 1945, Sacher described him as he had been seven years before:

Whoever met Bartók, thinking of the rhythmic strength of his work, was surprised by his slight, delicate figure. He had the outward appearance of a fine-nerved scholar.

Possessed of fanatical will and pitiless severity, and propelled by an ardent spirit, he affected inaccessibility and was reservedly polite. ... His impassioned objectivity penetrated everything. He was himself clear to the smallest detail and demanded from everyone the utmost in differentiated precision.

This characteristic of exactitude is unmistakable in *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*. For example, the composer laid out a specific seating plan for the ensemble. The strings are divided into two equal groups, which mirror each other around the perimeter of the orchestra. The first violin section of each group sits nearest the lip of the stage, with violas behind them and cellos still farther back. The division of the strings into two orchestras is not at all arbitrary; the two groups tend to operate as separate ensembles, often playing antiphonally.

The other instruments fill up the middle of the stage, also positioned in a specific way. In

In Short

Born: March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Siniccolau Mare, Romania)

Died: September 26, 1945, in New York City

Work composed: during the summer of 1936, and completed that autumn in Budapest

World premiere: January 21, 1937, in Basel, Switzerland, Paul Sacher conducting the Basel Chamber Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: October 28, 1937, John Barbirolli, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 25, 2006, Robert Spano, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 30 minutes

front of the conductor but slightly to his left we find piano, then behind it the celesta, and then (proceeding deeper into the stage) snare drum, and finally the first double bass. Mirroring that group on the conductor's center-right are (from front to back) harp, xylophone, cymbals, bass drum, and second double bass.

Very specific guidance is also given about the work's duration, and the composer also offers instruction about how much time should elapse between certain landmark points.

Bartók's insistence on the proportional length of sections of the music was far from arbitrary. Much of the composer's music of this period exhibits characteristics that reflect

mathematical phenomena, including the golden section, the Fibonacci series, or the natural proportions found in spiraling structures such as pinecones and dandelion tufts.

Instrumentation: string orchestra divided into two groups (each comprising two violin sections plus violas, cellos, and basses), timpani, snare drum, cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, xylophone, harp, piano, and celesta (doubling piano in a four-hand passage in the last movement).

An earlier version of this note appeared in the program books of the San Francisco Symphony and is used with permission. © James M. Keller

Listen for ...

In a 1937 essay, Bartók offered commentary about the opening movement that reflects his interest in numeric-spatial relationships. The movement is a fugue that begins with strings alone and eventually includes light touches of percussion as well.

Andante tranquillo, ♩ ca. 116-112
con sord.

Violas 

Bartók wrote:

The second entry [of the fugue subject] appears a fifth higher; the 4th again a fifth higher than the 2nd; the 6th, 8th, and so on, again a fifth higher than the preceding one. The 3rd, 5th, 7th, and so on, on the other hand, each enter a fifth lower. After the remotest key – E-flat – has been reached (the climax of the movement) the following entries render the theme in contrary motion until the fundamental key – A – is again reached, after which a short coda follows.

The tight interweaving of the lines creates claustrophobic music that builds in volume and emotional pitch to a summit and then recedes, eventually arriving (for the coda) at a marvelous example of Bartók's famous "night music" style, in which the celesta quivers quietly above the sustained, high-pitched notes of the muted strings. One commentator compared the movement's overall effect to the opening and closing of a fan, another to a pit full of writhing snakes. Many listeners may recall the terrifying use of this score made by Stanley Kubrick in his 1980 film *The Shining*.