Piano Concerto No. 2, BB 101

Béla Bartók

Since Béla Bartók was trained to be a pianist as well as a composer (not to mention an ethnomusicologist), one should not be surprised to find a sort of musical autobiography charted in his three piano concertos. As a young man he had been educated at the Budapest Academy of Music, had immersed himself in the folk music of the Balkans (and of regions as distant as North Africa), and had found liberation in the harmonies and orchestration of contemporary French composers. This is the Bartók we encounter in his Piano Concerto No. 1 of 1926, which reflects the composer's assimilation of folk traditions, the breakthrough innovations of Stravinsky, and the burgeoning neoclassicism of the French composers, all combined with the sort of rhythmic propulsion that was a Bartók hallmark.

In 1940 Bartók and his family had fled Hungary for New York, where he spent his remaining five years in perilously poor health and financial straits, feeling depressed and isolated in an unfamiliar country. Nonetheless, he managed to produce several summit works, culminating in his Piano Concerto No. 3 (1945). Conceived as a "concerto as insurance policy," that work was especially audience-friendly, and he hoped his pianist-wife, Ditta Pásztory-Bartók, could use it as a performing vehicle after he died.

Between these came his Piano Concerto No. 2, written in the space of a year: he worked on it in October 1930, then set it aside and returned to complete it in September and October of 1931. "I think [the First Piano Concerto] is a good work," wrote Bartók,

> in spite of the slight or even considerable difficulties it presents to both orchestra and audience. For this reason, I wanted my Second Concerto … to be a kind of antithesis to the First, easier in its orchestral part and more lucid in structure. This is the purpose and at the same time the reason for the more conventional and simpler treatment of most of the themes.

So far as structure is concerned, the Second Concerto could hardly be more lucid. By this phase of his career Bartók had become fascinated with symmetrical constructions, and quite a few of his pieces were cast in "arch forms" — essentially palindromes of overriding structural design, though not of the notes themselves. In this concerto we find a clear example: a fast opening movement; a middle movement that starts with a slow section, proceeds to a sparkling and vivacious

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In Short

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

Died: September 26, 1945, in New York City

Work composed: October 1930–October 9, 1931

World premiere: January 23, 1933, in Frankfurt, with Hans Rosbaud conducting the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra, the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 3, 1951, Franco Autori, conductor, Andor Foldes, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 8, 2005, Daniele Gatti, conductor, Yefim Bronfman, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 28 minutes

central section (the structural midpoint of the whole concerto), and then retraces its steps, so to speak, to close with a variation (again slow) on the slow section; and then a finale movement that mirrors the *Allegro* vigor of, and serves as a sort of variation upon, the opening movement, from which much of its thematic material is derived.

Bartók provides a brilliantly evolving orchestration as an overlay to this structural arch. In the first movement the piano is accompanied by winds and percussion, without strings. In contrast, the slow sections of the second movement feature strings and timpani (no winds), with the full orchestra reserved for the middle part of the second movement and for the finale. As always, Bartók is meticulous in finding "just the right sound" for every idea — to the extent of requiring English horn and bass clarinet only in the finale, the former for only eight notes, the latter for ten.

This work came at a moment that would prove decisive in Bartók's life — and in everyone else's. He played the premiere in Frankfurt on January 23, 1933. Precisely one week later, on January 30, Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany. Bartók chose to never perform in Germany again.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, and strings.

Listen for … the Hand-Spans

The Scottish pianist and composer Erik Chisholm, who had a close friendship with Bartók, did not press the composer about the hand-spans required in this concerto, though the issue was a real one. The first beat of measure 46 in the second movement, for example, is physically impossible — as written, it could be played only by a three-handed pianist:

Why would a composer write something that cannot be played? Because it makes sense musically: each of the lines is proceeding logically within its own octave, and it would do damage to the musical concept to leave out a note simply because a pianist can't actually play it. As a virtuoso pianist, Bartók knew that the pianist's art includes the art of illusion, and that pianists faced with this sort of thing would figure out how to negotiate the moment so that nothing would seem to be missing.