

## Divertimento for String Orchestra, BB 118

### Béla Bartók

**B**éla Bartók wrote his *Divertimento* in haste, in a span of only 15 days, from August 2 through August 17 in the summer of 1939. He and his wife were in Saanen, Switzerland, at the time, staying as guests in the chalet of Paul Sacher, a distinguished philanthropist and a conductor of insatiable musical curiosity. In 1926 Sacher (then aged 20) had founded the Basel Chamber Orchestra and set about commissioning works from leading composers. As a result, important scores by Richard Strauss, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Honegger, Tippett, and many others received their first performances in Basel. Sacher was a great friend of ancient music, too; in 1933 he founded the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, a bastion of Renaissance and Baroque performance practice that would prove influential in the historical performance movement.

Perhaps the holiday leisure Bartók was enjoying at the time, not to mention the escape from the pressing personal demands of his daily life in Hungary, accounts for the overall lightness of the *Divertimento*, which contrasts markedly with the dense, perplexing intricacy of many of the works that preceded it. In a letter, Bartók said of his vacation that

somehow I feel like an old-time musician summoned as the guest of a Maecenas; as you know, I am the guest of the Sachers here, who look after everything — from a distance.

The work's forthrightness may have resulted more specifically from Sacher's express request for a simple sort of piece for string orchestra. This request should be viewed in light of the complex work Bartók had provided Sacher in response to an earlier commission — the *Music for Strings, Percus-*

*sion and Celesta*, of 1936. (The *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, of 1937, also came about through Sacher's indirect involvement.) In any case, Bartók seemed to be undergoing a general stylistic adjustment at the moment, and the scores that followed the *Divertimento* continued to sport something of its clarity and immediate accessibility.

The composer conceived of a work in three movements that would involve an interplay between the string orchestra and several solo players within the orchestra: in short, a modern piece that recalled the structure, musical process, and spirit of the Baroque concerto grosso, much as Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* had a year earlier. The work displays the proportions of practically any Italian Baroque concerto grosso (by Vivaldi, Albinoni, Geminiani, or others) and has a lot in common with a Mozartian divertimento. Bartók weds the neo-Baroque alternation of solo and tutti to the sonata and rondo structures of the later 18th century, and to the vocabulary he had derived from his studies of

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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:** August 2–17, 1939, in Saanen, Switzerland

**World premiere:** June 11, 1940, by the Basel Chamber Orchestra, Paul Sacher, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 13, 1951, George Szell, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 1, 2002, in Seoul, South Korea, Kurt Masur, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 25 minutes

folk music of his native Hungary and of other Balkan nations.

Along with the Sixth String Quartet, also a product of the composer's visit to the realm of Sacher, the Divertimento would be the last music Bartók composed in Europe. With war blanketing the continent, even Sacher's Switzerland could provide no certain sanctuary, and in October 1940, four months following the Divertimento's premiere on June 11, Bartók left for what would be an unhappy life in the United States. Nonetheless, his first season in America was relatively auspicious, thanks in no small part to the Divertimento, which was introduced in this country on November 8, 1940, by the St. Louis Symphony;

two months later, it would be taken up by The Philadelphia Orchestra, where conductor Eugene Ormandy made it something of a signature piece. The day after it was presented in St. Louis, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* published a review by music critic Harry R. Burke, declaring that

Bartók's Divertimento might admirably serve as a commentary upon life in Europe in the last five years, but with a paean of faith in humanity as its coda.

**Instrumentation:** string orchestra comprising eight first violins, eight second violins, six violas, four cellos, and two basses.

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## Sources and Inspirations

Bartók's Divertimento is shot through with turns of melody and rhythm that derive from the folk music of which he was deeply enamored. Just after the turn of the century, he traveled extensively throughout the Balkans to collect folk music, often with his friend Zoltán Kodály, and in 1906 they published an anthology of their discoveries. His research trips brought him into direct contact with the folk musics of Ruthenia (an area south of the Carpathian Mountains in Hungary), Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Turkey, and also North Africa.

Curiosity about folk music was practically requisite for composers in the first half of the 20th century, making audible impact on composers as diverse as Stravinsky, Vaughan Williams, and Ives. Some composers might harmonize traditional pieces or arrange them in other ways while preserving their basic material. Others used them as inspiration for unquestionably new works. Bartók hoped to capture and preserve folk songs and dances in the pristine, "uninterpreted" form in which he found them. But when he switched to his composer mode, he viewed his mission differently, and tended strongly toward the latter approach. By analyzing the materials and processes of folk music he could extract creative principles to fuel his inquiring, modernist mind. His Divertimento is in no way a folk-song recital, yet folk-like sounds pervade it.



Bartók collecting research on Slovak folk songs in 1908