

THE IMMEDIATE SUCCESS OF BARTÓK:
RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE OF THE *CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA* ON THE
REPERTOIRE

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Written in late 1943 and premiered the following winter in 1944, *Concerto for Orchestra*, Sz 116, BB 123, of Hungarian composer Béla Bartók was immediately regarded as a success by his critics and contemporaries alike. Presented as an entirely new compositional form, unheard before by audiences of the time, the *Concerto for Orchestra* brought strident fanfares coupled with delicate virtuosity, demanded of all performers of the orchestra. Though its reception was critically acclaimed, the troublesome events of World War II and rise of Socialism occurring alongside the conception and composition of the piece as well as its ground-breaking formal organization warrant closer analysis of the work as a possible anti-dogmatic composition.

Drawing influence from the early *concerto* form, Bartók sought to emulate composers of the past and their emphases of individual performers in virtuosic solo concertos. Many other composers have been allured to the genre and their respective works across musical periods have entered the standard repertoire. However, arguably none have been so dramatic and contrasting as Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, a five-movement quasi-symphonic work in which each movement features one instrumental section over another, complete with the virtuosic demands composers, performers, and critics have all come to know with the concerto genre.

This analyses serves to provide examples and reviews which support the view of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* as a sans-textbook composition which has since entered the standard orchestral repertoire as a representative of the new compositional attitudes of the 20th century. Additionally, this analyses strives to emphasize the impact of the work on Bartók's contemporaries, who continue to emulate his techniques in respective compositions. Argumentative support will be garnered by examining personal writings and correspondence of Bartók as well as those of his contemporaries. Additionally, by analyzing score and recording

notes as well as performance reviews from contrasting decades, an idea of how receptions and performances of the work have changed can be posited in support of the influence and preeminence of the *Concerto for Orchestra* as one of the most significant works in the orchestral body literature from the last 100 years.

Bartók himself was a well-known composer of the European music scene, most-notably as an ethnomusicologist and performer, and his influence upon both European and American music was known and widespread. Richard Taruskin, writer of the esteemed *Oxford History of Western Music*, identified Bartók as a composer who “loosened the restrictive bonds of tonality; [or] introduced eighteenth-century principles into their works in an innovative way.”¹ Aptly stated, Taruskin titled this particular essay “Why You Cannot Leave Bartók Out,” as if to further exemplify the composer as an essential mainstay, pertinent to any discussion of nineteenth century composers. Another of Bartók’s more famous compositions, *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (1936), was a relatively-new piece to the European concert halls, and earned the composer much positive critical fame due to its unique scoring and strong representation of 20th century composition stylistic trends.² Despite this acclaim and commercial success in his homeland, the troubled composer saw no furtherance of life in Eastern Europe, and made the trek westward, taking flight from the worsening political climate of the European continent.

¹ Richard Taruskin, “Why You Cannot Leave Bartók Out,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 47, no. 3/4 (2006): 265-77, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25598260>.

² David Cooper, *Béla Bartók* (New Have: Yale University Press, 2015), 382.

In 1940, a troubling time for much of the world, notably the Western Hemisphere in Europe, Bartók and his wife, Ditta, immigrated to the United States to escape the rising Nazism in their native country of Hungary. Bartók was growing increasingly nervous in response to the Hungarian patriotic turn towards the Nazi's socialist dogma, and even refused to program and perform concerts for known-German sympathizers in Hungary. Seeking refuge in America, Bartók and his wife hoped for a new life in the United States, remaining on the east coast in New York.³ Bartók was no stranger to America, having traveled on at least two tours previous to his immigration. Bartók saw America as a compositional solace, a freer place in which to clear one's mind from the distractions of a tumultuous outside world. However, Bartók did travel back to Europe when financially feasible, particularly to gather inspiration and materials for folksong transcriptions from his homeland.⁴ Bartók's closest colleagues encouraged the composer to stay in the States, and instead turn his focus towards the writing of symphonic works as well as a series of instrumental concertos, being told by one colleague, "I have in mind the Brandenburg Concertos by Bach, and I believe you are well fitted to do something on these lines."⁵ Bartók ignored these requests, and chose to stride forward in his compositions emulating the folk material of his homeland which seemed to bring him comfort while abroad.⁶

Under a commission by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and conductor Serge Koussevitzky, Bartók completed the *Concerto for Orchestra* in a matter of months, experiencing

³ Benjamin Suchoff, *Bartók, Concerto for orchestra: understanding Bartók's world* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 123

⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 123

a resurgence in health and vigor despite becoming increasingly unwell due to undiagnosed ailments. Bartók himself wrote the programmatic note, published one year later with the initial premiere of the work by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, on December 1, 1944, in Symphony Hall. As mentioned earlier, the work takes on a symphonic-like persona, but is dubbed a concerto due to the virtuosic featuring of individual instrumental sections throughout each of the five movements. The first movement, “Introduzione. Andante non troppo - Allegro vivace” presents itself as a slow “night music type,” and fugue in a sonata-allegro form. The second and third movements present their respective material in a lesser-known form, with the second involving five unrelated themes and the third presenting three themes related to the introductory material heard from the first movement. The final two movements are structured as a “Intermezzo interrotto” for the fourth and another sonata-allegro form for the fifth.

First programmed to contrast works by Mozart and French composer César Franck, Bartók’s *Concerto for Orchestra* was met with a warm reception, and it was noted by one reviewer that “no composer could have hoped for a greater performance.”⁷ Among those in attendance, prominent music critic Rudolph Elie Jr. wrote an opinion in the *Boston Herald* just two days after the premiere entitled “The People vs. Bartók, is there really a case?”, presenting an argument representative of the accessibility of Bartók’s music compared to that of “Schoenberg and Krenek,” when Bartók himself “...still had something of a reputation as a dangerous modernist to American concertgoers.”⁸ The initial premiere of the *Concerto for Orchestra* dated December 1, 1944, was not recorded but subsequent recordings were made on

⁷ David Cooper, Bartók, *Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

following nights on which the work was programmed. Additional reviews rate as positive as well, with renowned critic of the *Christian Science Monitor* Winthrop Tryon calling attention to the overall success of the work while opining that the work should be listed as a symphony rather than a concerto.⁹

It is important to note as part of a reception analysis that the most commonly heard ending to the *Concerto for Orchestra* is not the originally-written ending by Bartók when first composed in 1943. Upon request by Koussevitzky in 1945 shortly after the premiere, Bartók revised the ending, adding nineteen bars to the final movement of the work. Koussevitzky was not alone in this request, as other critics and audiences claimed the piece seemed to end abruptly, having left listeners suspended and confused.¹⁰ Though there are some that remain faithful to the original ending as written in 1943, the vast majority of conductors (and audiences, for that matter) prefer the revised 1945 version, denoted by the title note “*Some additional improvements to ‘Concerto for Orchestra.’*”¹¹

Immediately after the premiere, confusion arose surrounding Bartók choice to compose a so-called symphonic work with five movements instead of the traditional four. Since the early years of Haydn and Mozart, true-to-form symphonies had been composed using a prescribed four-movement form. Beethoven’s interruption of this tradition with his sixth symphony (including a fifth movement) set in motion the idea of formal alteration, to be emulated by composers such as Sergei Rachmaninoff, Gustav Mahler, Hector Berlioz, and others of the 19th

⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹ Béla Bartók, *Concerto for Orchestra* (England: Boosey & Hawkes, 1997).

and 20th centuries.¹² One critic of a later performance of the work seemed to indicate the complexity brought on by this additional movement as well as the “clutter of ideas that do not seem significant,” though “the writing for the instruments is all clear.”¹³ Interestingly, the composer himself had nothing to say as to this adventurous deviation of form, as none of the discovered letters nor programmatic texts indicate his decision to include a fifth movement, or an explanation of desire to write five movements of contrasting forms at all.

One could argue that Bartók did not need any substantial reasoning to compose the *Concerto for Orchestra* in its intended formal structure. At the time of its composition, the trend in contemporary music was already pointed towards expanding the boundaries of previously-held compositional conventions, including formal organization. Bartók found himself writing amongst the serialist and neoclassical composers, and desired to fit somewhere in between.¹⁴ Thus, the *Concerto for Orchestra* took on the form of newer works with an added movement under the guise of the typical thematic sectional divisions seen in standard symphonic concerti.

Despite this peculiarity, receptions remained positive for the work well-past the programmed premiere in December of 1944. *Concerto for Orchestra* experienced widely-played success during the Boston Symphony Orchestra season of 1944-1945, and Bartók was even commissioned for a piano reduction for the work. The reduction was intended to be created for a ballet production by the American Ballet Theatre, and though Bartók agreed to the work, he

¹² K. M. Knittel, "Pilgrimages to Beethoven: Reminiscences by His Contemporaries," *Music & Letters* 84, no. 1 (2003): 19-54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3525878>.

¹³ Benjamin Suchoff, *Bartók, Concerto for orchestra: understanding Bartók's world* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 202.

¹⁴ David Cooper, *Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

remarked “nobody will ever see this, nobody will ever take the trouble to look at it. I don’t think anybody will ever try to play it.”¹⁵ The warm reception of the *Concerto for Orchestra* was plain to see, but Bartók shied away from the spotlight and supposed his latest work would fade into the dusty annals and anthologies of orchestral libraries.

Not all reviews resounded positively with regard to Bartók’s new work, however. Some opinions noted Bartók’s absence from the list of newly-composed works since arriving in America in 1940, with others accusing Bartók of breaking from his personal established compositional techniques in favor of catering towards unreceptive American audiences scorned by the works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Olin Downes responded to a performance of the *Concerto for Orchestra* in New York in January of 1945, writing “[the work] is a wide departure from its author’s harsher and more cerebral style.”¹⁶ Conversely, Elie, who previously praised the work, noted that after additional performances following the premiere, “even two hearings were not enough to convince yesterday’s audience that Bartók has the slightest interest in diverting or reaching [his intended style].”¹⁷ Other reviews have surfaced from subsequent premieres in Europe, claiming Bartók’s new sound as “extraterrestrial,” or “adopt[ing] a simpler and more melodic manner with the intention of an appeal to a wider public.”¹⁸ To substantiate these claims for oneself, a deeper look should be taken into compositional rationale of Bartók’s post-European years.

¹⁵ David Cooper, *Béla Bartók* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 357.

¹⁶ David Cooper, *Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

One issue to confront when analyzing Bartók's music in America is the accessibility of the themes and harmonies to Western audiences. Given the rampant serialism in the early-to-mid twentieth century, American concert halls were quickly being emptied due to the pervasively-abrasive music of composers like Schoenberg, Ives, and Stravinsky. Bartók was not far-removed from these composers, but remained still somewhat pleasurable in the ears of the common listener. Elie further comments in his initial review of the *Concerto for Orchestra*, "the combination of a dissonant idiom an unfamiliar (if often piquant) melody; a savage, primitive and irregular rhythm, and the composer's own austerity," would seem to alienate listeners at the outset.¹⁹ Rather, the opposite effect is achieved, in the opinion of Elie; listeners of Bartók's music appreciate the "irregular rhythms," both savage and primitive, due simply to their memorability. While the atonal music of serialism gives the audience nothing to which to cling their ears after performance, Bartók's nativist-inspired melodies and rhythms often accompany the listener long after he or she has left the concert hall, thus adding respectability and influence to other works of the composer.

However, while plainly contrasted with other atonal and even serialist works of a similar period as the *Concerto for Orchestra*, deeper analysis of the work reveals greater relationships between Bartók's composition and those notably of the Second Viennese School than might otherwise be obvious. One such analysis appeared by musicology professor Elliott Antokoletz which stated Bartók's music utilizes "diatonic as well as octatonic collections, whether employed as the basis of traditional folk-like themes or abstract scale patterns, primarily function as pitch

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

sets...independent of traditional major-minor harmonic roles.”²⁰ Thus, Antokoletz’s postulations pose the idea that Bartók’s harmonies, rhythms, and melodies may not have been as pleasing to the audience if the listeners were aware of the indirect connection of the compositional techniques to composers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. Bartók seemingly wrote sets which were “‘unordered’, containing the pitches of...a C major scale, but without the organizing of a tonic or ‘goal.’”²¹ While listeners may have been aloof to the novelty of Bartók’s writing, critics and analysts were not so withdrawn.

As seen in the original score, specifically from the developmental section of the first movement, diatonic pitches (more friendly to the ear) originally presented move towards octatonicism, leading analysts to describe Bartók’s ideas as “essentially tonal,...although its surface is often densely chromatic.”²² Returning to Elie’s chief criticism of Bartók’s tonality, one can conceptualize the strident harmonies by which early listeners and critics were confused. The “dissonant idiom” described by Elie can be viewed in the rampant chromaticism throughout developmental sections of Bartók’s work, proving itself far less accessible to audiences of the time.

Despite these criticisms of overused chromaticism, Hermann Hesse described Bartók’s music overall as bridging the fine line between “urban art music and rural popular music, tonality and atonality, chaos and order,” giving Bartók the ultimate complexity and fame as a twentieth

²⁰ Ibid., 67.

²¹ Ibid., 67.

²² Ibid., 68.

century composer in direct competition with composers of atonal and serialist genres.²³ Hesse further argues that Bartók's musical characteristics—which tempt the listener to the extremes with soft, quasi-minimalistic interludes countered with bombastic brass interjections—seem to provide an allegory for highs and lows of contemporary life, or at least the commonly-accepted life that had become the norm for the twentieth century in America.²⁴ Societal standards indicate that American life is more fast-paced and aggressive than many European societies.²⁵ Bartók's recognition and emulation of this fact took place through his compositions written while in the United States, utilizing compositional techniques which represented a time-restrictive, high-intensity aesthetic.

The rise and prominence of Nazism in the 1930s and '40s played a major role in Bartók's decision to emigrate, though this decision was met with much trepidation, as noted in one letter to a past professor remaining in Budapest. Bartók wrote, “owing to recent developments, I find it impossible to write more choruses or indeed anything at all—and this is probably how it will be for the rest of year,” seeming to foreshadow the planned voyage from Europe to the United States later that year.²⁶ Bartók continued to feel the pressures of the escalating political climate, and with the passing of his mother just prior to his departure, it was felt as though there was no remaining tie for Bartók to his homeland other than the music he preserved to influence his

²³ Ibid. 1.

²⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁵ Robert Levine, "The Pace of Life," *American Scientist* 78, no. 5 (1990): 450-59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29774181>.

²⁶ Béla Bartók to Gyula Kerész, July 14, 1940, in *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. Michael Tippett (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 283.

compositions.²⁷ The emigration of Bartók to America signified the end of his European career and the beginning of his mark upon the American classical music culture. Bringing his Hungarian roots in contrast with American aesthetics as discussed previously, Bartók faced new challenges in America, challenges which to some seemed to signify the end of the composer's career²⁸

Bartók felt artistically stunted, even after his emigration to a freer society, and was concerned that his compositional ideas had left him—though much of this uncertainty may have been due to the chronic illness he suffered since childhood. During the late spring into summer of 1943, Bartók was almost constantly running high fevers and had plummeted to an unhealthy weight for a man of his age. Doctors at the time were unable to ascertain the cause or give an accurate prognosis, and even though leukemia was eventually diagnosed, the doctors withheld this information from the composer to prevent a further descent into depression. Historians have agreed, however, that a single event which may have significantly prolonged Bartók's life was the Boston Symphony Orchestra's symphonic commission which produced the *Concerto for Orchestra*.²⁹ Elie commented further in his initial review of the premiere that there existed “the feeling of increased optimism, of increasing strength and vigor...strongly conveyed,” seeming to

²⁷ Malcolm Gillies, “Redrawing Bartók's Life,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 36, no. 3/4 (1995): 303-18, accessed January 26, 2017, doi:10.2307/902216.

²⁸ David Cooper, *Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

²⁹ David Cooper, *Béla Bartók* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 355.

capture the returned spirit of Bartók as he rose to the challenge of the commission with great strength and determination.³⁰

To regain some of his creative ability, Bartók returned to his ethnomusicologist passions and influences, specifically those of his motherland in Hungary. The folk songs and lyrics he transcribed for his own collections served as major influence for the melodies heard throughout the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Bartók notably combined both Transylvanian-Romanian materials as well as melodies of Hungary and Slovakia, “represent[ing] a compendium of unique musical dialects according to country or regional boundaries.”³¹ Noted by musicologist and prominent Bartók authority Benjamin Suchoff, Bartók “found [folk melodies] as gratifying and pleasurable as composing, and without the agonies that inhabit the world of artistic creation,” when speaking of Bartók’s desire to write influences from his home into many of his compositions.³²

Bartók’s humility with regard to the work only begins to touch on the inner turmoil felt before, during, and after the composition of the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Noted by Elie in his premiere review, “[the composer] was most cordially received when Dr. Koussevitzky escorted him to the platform, and he bowed with grave shyness.”³³ Also indicated by the lack of inclusion in correspondence, Bartók seemed without desire to talk about the *Concerto for Orchestra*, its only mention appearing briefly in a letter to close friend Wilhelmine Creed, noting that the piece

³⁰ Benjamin Suchoff, *Bartók, Concerto for orchestra: understanding Bartók's world* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 202.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ David Cooper, *Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

was to be performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra again later in December of 1944, with the performance subsequently aired over the radio in Seattle, Washington.³⁴ As mentioned before, Bartók did not see the future success of the *Concerto for Orchestra*. His humility towards the original premiere summarized his feelings overall; his great work was destined for minute fame and subsequent permanent shelving to be respected only by librarians and historians.

Beyond the reception of critics, a deeper and more thorough example of Bartók's impressive influence with the composition can be given by analyzing the effect had upon contemporaries of the composer. As noted by Suchoff, the contemporaries of Bartók hail from all over the world, from Argentina to Poland, and include major compositional names such as Olivier Messiaen, George Crumb, and Benjamin Britten. Given the diversity of Bartók's followers, what could possibly draw global composers to such high regard of this Hungarian-turned-American composer? In short, the answer is the same as the reason why Bartók left Hungary: nationalism. Bartók's desire to promote his homeland's themes and harmonies through emulation in America resounded within his contemporaries, particularly that of Alberto Ginastera of Argentina.³⁵ Additionally, the standard of twentieth century orchestral accessibility which was created through the *Concerto for Orchestra* led composers such as Benjamin Britten to compose *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, which he composed a tribute to Bartók himself. Additionally, Britten's *War Requiem* (also influenced by Bartók) serves as a nationalistic piece, although in a reversal of roles, as a pacifist against a war effort.³⁶

³⁴ Béla Bartók to Wilhelmine Creed, December 25, 1944, in *Béla Bartók Letters*, ed. Michael Tippett (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 344.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

Given the widespread positive reception of the work, standard performance practice of the piece has not varied greatly in the seventy years since its premiere. After Bartók released the revised ending as well as the notes for performance alteration, conductors across the globe have adhered to the original markings, save for one tempo alteration in the first movement (quarter note played closer to 94 beats-per-minute instead of the indicated range of 73-64)³⁷ On selected recordings, particularly that of the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Erich Leinsdorf, the performance interpretation varies almost undetectably from Bartók's original intention.³⁸ Additionally, European orchestras alike adhere to the same performance directives given by Bartók, only to reinforce the idea that the *Concerto for Orchestra*, since its original premiere, was highly-regarded as a masterpiece in its own right, deserving of editing and revision only by the composer himself.³⁹

David Cooper in his thorough analysis of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* plainly states that "several orchestral concertos were composed and performed almost concurrently with Bartók's," although the list of orchestral concertos later described in his writing contains works seemingly unheard of outside of the standard orchestral repertoire. Cooper further illustrates "whilst Bartók's concerto is clearly part of a tradition,...it has undoubtedly influenced a number

³⁷ David Cooper, *Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 33, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

³⁸ Béla Bartók, "Concerto for Orchestra," recorded October 2, 2000, conducted by Erich Leinsdorf and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Sony Classical 888880760265, CD.

³⁹ Béla Bartók, "Concerto for Orchestra," recorded November 6, 1990, by the Belgian Radio and Television Philharmonic Orchestra, Naxos 8.5500261, CD.

of other composers who were not particularly interested in the concerto.”⁴⁰ Cooper’s postulation seems to bring about an argument stating that since the dominance of the concerto in the mid-Baroque era, the form, style, and compositional techniques of the genre had maintained a relatively even status quo until Bartók’s *Concerto for Orchestra* in the mid-twentieth century. Arguably, Bartók’s virtuosic treatment and close attention to detail in composing a veritable concerto for multiple sections of an orchestra, not just for one soloist or one section, earns the work the rightful accolades of revolutionary and influential when discussing it in regard to the orchestral body of literature of the twentieth century.

Bartók would have readily shed the notion of being credited as a revolutionary, and even simply as an influential composer. Having died shortly after the initial premiere of the *Concerto for Orchestra*, Bartók only lived long enough to witness two seasons of performances of the work before it was shelved, not to be revisited until years later, again by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under new direction. But the widespread influences of arguably Bartók’s greatest work, the *Concerto for Orchestra*, speak for themselves, from nationalist composers spanning the globe, to unaltered performance practice spanning three-quarters of a century. Though some initial reviews were read with a negative bent due to the before-unheard compositional techniques, Bartók’s composition was quickly regarded for what it was—truly revolutionary for its time, and long-lasting through the many decades since.

⁴⁰ David Cooper, *Bartók, Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.07642.0001.001>.

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