

## PROGRAM NOTES

### **Violin Concerto No. 2 BB 117 Sz.112**

**Béla Bartók**

**Born 25 March, 1881 in Nagy Szent Miklós, Transylvania**

**Died 26 September, 1945 in New York City**

*Approximate duration 36 minutes*

*This is the orchestra's first performance of Bartók's Second Violin Concerto.*

- Bartók wrote this concerto for the great Hungarian violinist Zoltán Szekely.
- Eastern European rhythmic patterns populate all three movements.
- The central theme and variations feature heart-wrenching lyricism side-by-side with dazzling pyrotechnics.
- Vigorous folk elements commingle with life's bitter reality in the outer movements.
- Two themes from the first movement re-surface in the finale.

If music lovers associate Bartók with a particular instrument, it is the piano. He was a virtuoso pianist who concertized extensively, often promoting his original keyboard works. He also composed three piano concerti that are staples of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century concert literature. Like most composers, however, he also had a thorough acquaintance with many orchestral instruments. The violin was special to him, not only because of its important place in Hungarian musical culture, but also because of his own felicitous associations with three brilliant Hungarian violinists: Jelly d'Arányi (who inspired him to write both of his Violin Sonatas), Joseph Szigeti (for whom he composed the First Violin Rhapsody and *Contrasts*) and Zoltán Székely (the dedicatee of the Second Violin Rhapsody and the Second Concerto).

Curiously, both Szigeti and Székely are closely connected to the history of the Second Violin Concerto, but Székely was the real impetus behind the piece. During the 1920s and 1930s, when he was first violinist of the renowned Hungarian String Quartet, he and Bartók concertized extensively together. Their friendship was founded on profound mutual artistic respect, and it was almost inevitable that Székely would ask the composer to write a violin concerto for him.

Bartók's custom was to study the music of others before embarking on a major new work of a specific genre. We know that he had been thinking about composing a violin concerto because he wrote to his publisher, Universal, in September 1936 requesting some violin concerto scores. Universal sent him those by Kurt Weill, Karol Szymanowski, and Alban Berg. Filled with musical ideas, Bartók was receptive to Székely's commission, which was offered to him in 1937.

Initially, he proposed variations for violin and orchestra to Székely because he was preoccupied with variation form at the time. The violinist was not enthused, preferring a more traditional three-movement concerto. On the surface, Bartók accommodated his friend; the first movement is indeed in sonata form. But he had the last word: the central slow movement is a set of variations, and the third movement is a free variation on the material presented in the first. These components add up to a giant arch form, another architectural device that fascinated Bartók during the 1930s.

The late 1930s were troubled times throughout Europe, and Bartók was particularly pained by the rise of Nazism and its long-range implications for his beloved Hungary. In 1937 the German Reichs-Musikkammer had sent him a questionnaire intended to verify his "Aryan

descent" in order that his music might continue to be performed in Germany. He reacted with disgust and responded with satire, one of several factors that contributed to his sensitive political situation and eventual emigration to the United States. Hitler's *Anschluss* (11-13 March, 1938) began the fulfillment of Bartók's worst fears.

Although this was the very time he was at work on the Violin Concerto -- he began sketching the concerto in mid-1936 and completed the score on the last day of 1938 -- the piece is no reflection of his dark presentiments. Indeed, its predominantly diatonic language bespeaks a less strident Bartók than the works of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Modal and folk influences, specifically the use of a *verbunkos* [traditional Hungarian military recruiting dance] rhythm in the first movement, add pungency to the more triadic harmonic vocabulary. Also noteworthy in this regard is Bartók's use of quarter-tones just before the cadenza.

The concerto opens tranquilly, with a distinctive Hungarian flavor, especially at the cadences. Bartók wastes little time establishing the spectacular, even flamboyant character of this concerto, whose moods shift dramatically. Very rapid, flashy sections alternate with unexpected slowdowns where the brakes get slammed on. Two themes are developed in alternation, in a sort of rondo technique; the first is re-used (with a meter change) in the finale. Pizzicato strings and harp brighten the vivid color palette.

A pastoral *Andante tranquillo*, one of Bartók's loveliest movements, follows. This time the celesta is the featured member of the colorful orchestra. A darker middle section is but one of the variation techniques the composer employs to retain our interest in his development of the lovely song theme. He uses the percussion section with great ingenuity.

The finale makes for fascinating listening because of the masterful way in which Bartók re-introduces the two themes of the first movement. His orchestra is heavier, particularly in the brass section. Rhythmic vitality drives this movement; that is the most distinct difference from the opening movement, which it otherwise resembles in almost every structural aspect.

In a curious anomaly, the published score includes two endings Bartók composed for the finale. One is a brilliant solo vehicle; the other concludes without the soloist. Szekely requested the virtuoso version to permit the work to end "like a concerto, not a symphony." Not surprisingly, most violinists opt for the more demanding route.

Bartók's score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, side drums, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, celesta, harp, solo violin and strings.

## **Symphony No. 4 in A, Op.90 ("Italian")**

**Felix Mendelssohn**

**Born 3 February, 1809 in Hamburg, Germany**

**Died 4 November, 1847 in Leipzig, Germany**

*Approximate duration 27 minutes*

*The orchestra has performed Mendelssohn's 4<sup>th</sup> Symphony three times before: in March 1986, January 1995 and September 2009.*

- Infectious gaiety and irresistible themes overflow in this symphony.
- Listen for distinct changes of mood and atmosphere in each movement.
- The *Andante con moto* has been likened to a pilgrims' procession.

- Mendelssohn captures Italy's physical beauty, spirituality, sunny climate, and folk heritage.

Writing to his sisters from Italy in 1831, 22-year-old Felix Mendelssohn described his new symphony as "the liveliest thing I have yet done, especially the last movement." Ironically, the last movement that so pleased him in the "Italian" symphony's early stages proved to be a stumbling block. Mendelssohn was never entirely satisfied with the finale, and withheld the A major symphony from publication during his lifetime. How difficult for 21<sup>st</sup>-century listeners to understand, as perfect a jewel as this beloved symphony seems! From its first measures, the "Italian" symphony sweeps us willingly along in its joyous burble, a mountain brook with gleaming sunlight dappling in endless variety upon its surface.

### **Italian culture delivered with German technique**

Brilliantly orchestrated, the "Italian" symphony is the work of a master. It hardly seems possible that a young man in his early twenties could have composed it. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century composer and conductor Julius Benedict described the entire symphony as "warmed with the balmy air of a southern clime." So closely knit are its four movements that it almost seems unjust to single any of them out. But Mendelssohn, the classicist who also successfully embraced the romantic concept of program music, captured several aspects of Italian culture with consummate skill.

In the *Allegro vivace*, he plunges us into the Italian landscape with brisk woodwind chirping. The winds provide a steady, upbeat pulse beneath the lilting string theme, in a delicious example of Mendelssohn's gift for orchestral color. His second theme echoes the dotted rhythm

of the violin melody while altering its character: now more relaxed and graceful. This first movement honors Germanic tradition with its disciplined sonata form. Mendelssohn also salutes Germany's reverence for counterpoint by interpolating a *fugato* in the development section, introducing a new theme as its subject.

### **A procession of priests, a gorgeous melody, and a brisk Italian dance**

The remaining three movements reflect Mendelssohn's impressions of his Italian sojourn more overtly. Because of its walking bass, the *Andante con moto* has been variously likened to a procession of pilgrims such as young Felix might have seen on the roads around Naples, or perhaps a group of monks methodically going about their tasks on foot. If less explicitly pictorial, the third movement is surely one of the most melodious creations in all the romantic repertoire. Here again, it is scored with exquisite delicacy. The trio section, with its hunting motif for horns and bassoons, recalls the magical world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The finale that so frustrated Mendelssohn is a *saltarello*. This energetic and lively Italian dance originated in medieval times, but remained popular well into the nineteenth century. Mendelssohn vividly captures the dance's energy; his genius lies in setting it in minor mode. That imaginative stroke is one of the traits that sets this beloved symphony among the masterworks.

The "Italian" Symphony is scored for woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.