

**Las Vegas Philharmonic
2009-2010 Season
Program Notes**

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Bela Bartok (1881-1945), *Concerto for Orchestra*

Bartok is celebrated as one of the greatest of all Hungarian composers, and as a visionary. He methodically collected and transcribed literally thousands of Hungarian folk songs, and through his scientific study of the genre, became one of the founders of the academic discipline we now know as ethnomusicology. Perhaps the most famous of all twentieth century Hungarian composers, Bartok's reputation was only firmly established after the completion of his greatest symphonic masterpiece, the epic *Concerto for Orchestra*. The commission for this work, in 1943, could not have come at a better time for Bartok. He was despondent over the plight of his beloved homeland, occupied by the Nazis during the height of World War II, and Bartok himself had been forced to flee the country to find a safe haven in America. He was composing very little, and was in a precarious financial position. The great conductor Fritz Reiner helped to arrange for a commission for Bartok from Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony. This bit of good news boosted Bartok's spirits and his compositional output, as well as his pocketbook. He finished the score in less than two months, and the premiere by Boston on December 1st, 1944, was met with great critical and popular acclaim. Unfortunately, Bartok did not live to see the full impact of this great work, dying of leukemia in 1945.

The title *Concerto for Orchestra* seems incongruous, since this is not a concerto but rather something closer to a symphony. However, Bartok commented that he chose the name concerto, because the instrumental sections of the orchestra are treated soloistically. This trait is noticeable in several places within the work, but particularly in the second of its five movements. The first movement starts with a whisper, eventually launching into a frenzied *allegro*. The trombone announces the main thematic idea for the movement, an angular motive that relies on intervals of the perfect fourth. This "quartal" organization gives the music a modern, though not necessarily atonal, quality. Indeed, Bartok uses altered scales and modal scales liberally throughout the work. It is interesting to note that, while melodies and thematic lines tend to use modal or exotic scales, the accompaniment by the remainder of the orchestra is mainly triadic. The juxtaposition of competing modes and harmonic structures becomes a hallmark of the work. The second movement is notable for the soloistic treatment of pairs of wind and brass instruments. Two trumpets are in major seconds, oboes in thirds, flutes in fifths, bassoons in minor sixths, and clarinets in minor sevenths. The effect is stunning; the similar sounds of like instruments, moving in a fixed intervallic relationship, transform the timbre to make it seem as though one is hearing a single instrument with unique overtones.

The third movement is a reflective, almost eerie, mix of chromatic, diminished, whole tone, and altered exotic scales. Note that, although the melodic lines are "exotic", the orchestral harmonies are fairly conventional. Whereas the melodies in the second

movement were constructed mostly from chromatic and diatonic “stepwise” relationships, the themes in this movement expand the palette somewhat to include thirds and some larger intervals.

The fourth movement adds a new color, that of the dominant seventh. The oboe solo introduces the concept, a motive of a step and a third, which outlines an inverted dominant chord. It is as though Bartok, after the initial, anguished first movement, is gradually adding other sounds to the mixture, gradually embracing all conventional melodic intervals. In this movement, a new conflict arises between styles. The primary theme is a folk like melody of great charm and grace. Then one hears the beginnings of a comical march, which repeatedly disintegrates, only to be replaced by the same serenely charming, folk like melody. The story goes that Bartok, during the composition of this movement, was aggravated by news of the commercial success of Shostakovich’s *Symphony #7*, a work that Bartok apparently regarded as noisy and bombastic. So, the march in Bartok’s movement was supposedly a caricature of the Shostakovich symphony, which generates no momentum and collapses, only to be replaced by the “real” music of Bartok and his native Hungary.

The final movement begins with a fanfare in the lower brass, which announces among other things, that some exploration of both major and minor sevenths will be taking place. We hear a playful exchange of modes between major and mixolydian. This movement is pure energy, with all of the orchestra’s instrumental and harmonic resources in full swing. There are two fugues in the movement, which contribute to complete the study of intervals that seemed to consume Bartok throughout the composition. At one point of repose, the earlier flirtations with diminished and exotic scales reappear, only to be replaced with a renewed frenzy in the strings. Announcements from the brass in perfect fourths and fifths seem to indicate that the mission to explore intervals is complete, and in a dynamic flourish, the *Concerto for Orchestra* is finished. Fittingly, this monumental work has taken its rightful place as one of the most masterfully conceived showpieces for orchestra of all time.

George Gershwin (1898-1937), *Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra*

Like so many composers, such as Mozart and Mendelssohn, Gershwin died in his 30s, at the peak of his creative powers. He was world-famous; having composed more than 200 hit tunes and several musicals, but was hungry for recognition as a serious composer. His *Rhapsody in Blue* was spurned by symphony orchestras, but he eventually had the work premiered in 1924 by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, a popular dance band. Its huge success, however, led to the commission in 1925 by the New York Symphony Society for a piano concerto. The *Concert in F* was the result, and it was premiered at Carnegie Hall in December 1925, with Walter Damrosch conducting and Gershwin himself at the piano. Gershwin was on his way, finally garnering praise from the symphonic community. He maintained an incredibly busy schedule over his remaining years, writing more musicals and Hollywood film scores, and pausing to compose serious works when he could. By the end of Gershwin’s life, however, his serious works numbered fewer than 10, including the *Concerto*, the *Rhapsody*, the tone poem *An American in Paris*, the groundbreaking opera *Porgy and Bess*, and his beautiful piano preludes.

The *Concerto in F* was Gershwin's first attempt at a large orchestral form. Though it is set in the customary three movements, the music is "different" in several respects. First, and most obvious, is the American "blues," "jazz" and "Charleston" influence in the themes. All of the phrases within the first movement have some thematic language imbedded within them; therefore, transitions between themes seem to occur abruptly. The haunting, probing second theme reappears in the final movement and serves to bind the work together. The syncopations are clearly and uniquely American, and the scoring is the most adroit of any of Gershwin's orchestral works. The second movement features a trumpet solo, which leads to the main theme. This theme, though plaintive, is filled with syncopations and blues influence. Still, it is not nostalgic or heavy; the music is pastoral and serene. After a flourish and a somewhat frenzied accelerando, the second movement closes in a wonderfully intimate manner, with some of Gershwin's most lovely scoring. The third movement hits the listener like a hammer. Though technically a modified rondo, the appearance of various themes seems almost cyclic. Alternately, the introductory theme, the haunting adagio theme from the first movement, and another blues melody build the movement relentlessly toward a powerful coda. The solo sections are uniquely Gershwin and are impressively virtuosic. Exotic scalar passages, combined with complicated syncopations, make the piano part a challenge for any soloist.

Gershwin succeeded in making his *Concerto in F* one of the most recognizable, imaginative and attractive solo works in all of American musical literature. As with all great geniuses whose lives are cut short, one wonders what other masterpieces Gershwin could have produced, given a little more time.