

BÉLA BARTÓK

Composer, Pianist, Ethnomusicologist
(Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary, 1881 — New York City, 1945)

DANCE SUITE

Composed: 1923

Premiered: November 19, 1923 in Budapest, conducted by Ernst von Dohnányi

Duration: ca. 17 minutes

Scoring: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, celesta, piano and strings

Overview

In an essay on *The Influence of Peasant Music on Modern Music* that appeared in the periodical *Melos* in 1920, Béla Bartók wrote of the issue central in his creative work. “At the beginning of the 20th century,” he began, “there was a turning point in the history of modern music. The excesses of the romanticists began to be unbearable for many.... Invaluable help was given in this change (or rather let us call it rejuvenation) by a kind of peasant music unknown until then. The right type of peasant music is most varied and perfect in its forms. Its expressive power is amazing, and at the same time it is devoid of all sentimentality and superfluous ornaments. It is simple, sometimes primitive, but never silly. It is the ideal starting point for a musical renaissance, and a composer in search of new ways cannot be led by a better master. What is the best way for a composer to reap the full benefits of his studies in peasant music? It is to assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his musical mother tongue....

“The question is, what are the ways in which peasant music is taken over and becomes transmuted into modern music? We may, for instance, take over a peasant melody unchanged or only slightly varied, write an accompaniment to it and possibly some opening and concluding phrases. This kind of work would show a certain analogy to Bach’s treatment of chorales.... Another method by which peasant music becomes transmuted into modern music is the following: The composer does not make use of a real peasant melody but invents his own imitation of such melodies.... There is yet a third way in which the influence of peasant music can be traced in a composer’s work. Neither peasant melodies nor imitations of peasant melodies can be found in his music, but it is pervaded by the atmosphere of peasant music.”

What To Listen For

The *Dance Suite*, an example of the second genre of Bartók’s folksong-inspired compositions, was written during the summer of 1923, just after he had returned from a tour of England and the Netherlands as a piano soloist. The work was commissioned by the Hungarian government for a concert on November 19th commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the merging of the cities of Buda and Pest into the unified capital of the country, an event that also symbolized the re-awakening of national intellectual life after the ravages of the First World War. For the same program, Zoltán Kodály wrote his *Psalmus Hungaricus* and Ernst von Dohnányi created a

Festival Overture; Dohnányi conducted. The *Dance Suite* was an immediate success at its premiere, and it enjoyed more than fifty performances in Germany alone during the following year. Bartók proudly noted that the *Suite*'s six continuous sections connected by a returning refrain represented the breadth of his extensive folk music researches: "No. 1 is partially and No. 4 entirely of an Oriental (Arabic) character; the ritornello and No. 2 are of Hungarian character; in No. 3, Hungarian, Rumanian and even Arabic influences alternate; and the theme of No. 5 is so primitive that one can only speak of a primitive peasant character here, and any classification according to nationality must be abandoned." The concluding No. 6 recalls themes from each of the preceding sections.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Composer, Pianist, Conductor

(Oneg [near Novgorod], Russia, 1873 — Beverly Hills, California, 1943)

CONCERTO NO. 4 FOR PIANO IN G MINOR, OP. 40

Composed: 1926

Premiered: March 18, 1927 in Philadelphia, conducted by Leopold Stokowski with the composer as soloist

Duration: ca. 31 minutes

Scoring: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

Overview

Rachmaninoff was living in Moscow when the Russian Revolution erupted in March 1917. Realizing that the days of his aristocratic world were numbered, he made the painful decision to leave his beloved homeland by accepting an offer that fortuitously arrived just at that time to give a recital tour of Scandinavia. He secured visas for himself and his family before departing in November, but left behind his home, his possessions and his money, taking with him only 2000 rubles — then practically worthless — and such personal belongings as fit into a small suitcase. He never saw Russia again.

During the next year, Rachmaninoff received repeated proposals to perform in America, and, on November 1, 1918, he sailed from Oslo to New York. His financial situation when he arrived in this country was difficult, since his family's wealth had been confiscated by the Bolsheviks and the income from the performance of his works was meager because Russia was not then a signatory of the international copyright laws which would have assured his royalties. To support his family and pick up the frayed threads of his career, he began the coast-to-coast performance tours that were to continue virtually uninterrupted for the next 25 years. So intense was his concertizing during his first American decade that he was unable to compose a single piece. He once told an interviewer that creative work was impossible for him while he was preoccupied with performing: "When I am concertizing, I cannot compose. When I feel like writing music, I have to concentrate on that — I cannot touch the piano. When I am conducting, I can neither compose nor play concerts. Other musicians may be more fortunate in this respect; but I have to concentrate on any one thing I am doing to such a degree that it does not seem to allow me to

take up anything else.” It was not until 1926, when he began the Piano Concerto No. 4, that he again found time to compose.

John Culshaw, in his admirable little volume on Rachmaninoff, suggested that the Fourth Concerto came about because the composer-pianist had grown tired of the constant demand for performances of the Second and Third Concertos, and wished to provide himself with an alternate concert vehicle. Rachmaninoff said nothing about the inspiration behind the work, though the bitter memories of 1917 may have been revived when he used some sketches from that year in the first movement. In style, the Concerto continued the conservative, Romantic musical idiom that marked Rachmaninoff’s earlier compositions, giving only scant regard to the swelling stream of modern music created by Stravinsky, Bartók, Schoenberg, Prokofiev and a host of other modern masters since his last composition, the *Études-Tableaux*, had appeared in 1916. Of his reactionary artistic stance, Rachmaninoff wrote in an article for the *Musical Courier*, “I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien. I cannot cast out the old way of writing, and I cannot acquire the new. I have made an intense effort to feel the musical manner of today, but it will not come to me. Unlike Madame Butterfly with her quick religious conversion, I cannot cast out my musical gods in a moment and bend the knee to new ones.”

Despite working in a comfortable, familiar style, Rachmaninoff enjoyed little success when he first presented the Fourth Concerto, on March 18, 1927 with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Pitts Sanborn of the New York *Telegram* said, “The Concerto in question is an interminable, loosely knit hodgepodge of this and that, all the way from Liszt to Puccini, from Chopin to Tchaikovsky.... This work could fittingly be described as super-salon music.” The more-sympathetic Samuel Chotzinoff noted that the piece got off to a fine start, “but as the movement progressed, the artistic tension began slowly to relax. Succeeding parts did not attain a natural fusion, new material appeared without the sanction of necessity, piano and orchestra went skirmishing afield. One’s attention began to wander.” Rachmaninoff played the work for only three years, dropping it from his repertory in 1930; it was not heard again until its extensive revision in 1941. Following the premiere of the new version, again given with the Philadelphia Orchestra, critical and audience reaction was more favorable. Edwin Schloss called the Concerto “nobly meant and darkly romantic music, somewhat fragmentary in shape and typically Rachmaninovian in spirit.” It is this last characteristic — Rachmaninoff’s brooding, poignant romanticism — that has kept the Fourth Concerto as an active part of the modern concert repertory while many works contemporary with it have long been forgotten.

What To Listen For

The Concerto opens with an energetic orchestral flourish as introduction to the main theme, which is presented by the piano. This sweeping melody, enriched by full piano chords and accompanied by swift triplet pulsations in the winds, spans a grand arch, climbing and descending through a wide-ranging scale pattern. The flourish and the sweeping main theme are repeated. A transition, filled with rippling figurations for the soloist, leads to the poetic second theme, given by the unaccompanied piano, and another lyrical strain initiated by the violins. The development section is rhapsodic in nature, with reminiscences of the main theme woven among new melodies and passages of an improvised character. The order of the themes is reversed in the recapitulation, with the poetic complementary subject recalled by the solo flute. In the

movement's final pages, the orchestral flourish that began the Concerto returns to herald the final traversal of the main theme, spun out by the violins above a piano accompaniment of broad arpeggios. A brief coda of only six measures brings the movement to an abrupt close.

Nikolai Medtner, the Russian composer and friend to whom Rachmaninoff dedicated the Fourth Concerto, thought that some extra-musical inspiration — perhaps the depiction of a solemn religious procession — lay behind the austere second movement. Rachmaninoff worried that the theme, played by the strings after a brief introduction for solo piano, too closely resembled that of Schumann's Piano Concerto. As several critics quickly pointed out, however, many English-speaking audiences might think it closer to the nursery tune *Three Blind Mice* than to Schumann's melody. The entire movement is built on the opening theme. The first section, unsettled in emotion, mixes major and minor tonalities to create the bittersweet melancholy that marks so much of Rachmaninoff's music. The middle portion is a stormy transformation of the theme led by the horns to which the piano provides stern commentary. The hushed solemnity of the opening returns to round out this deeply felt intermezzo.

The finale pierces brusquely into this quiet reverie. This movement was the one most extensively revised in 1941, and shows Rachmaninoff's closest approach to modernity in its harmonic pungency and sardonic humor. It is a dazzling display of athletic virtuosity for the soloist. The finale's structure is complex, supporting not only its own thematic material, but also references to melodies from the first movement as a way of unifying the Concerto's overall form.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(Bonn, 1770 — Vienna, 1827)

SYMPHONY NO. 7 IN A MAJOR, OP. 92

Composed: 1811-1812

Premiered: December 8, 1813 in Vienna, under the composer's direction

Duration: ca. 36 minutes

Scoring: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings

Overview

In the autumn of 1813, Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, the inventor of the metronome, approached Beethoven with the proposal that the two organize a concert to benefit the soldiers wounded at the recent Battle of Hanau — with, perhaps, two or three repetitions of the concert to benefit themselves. Beethoven was eager to have his as-yet-unheard A major Symphony of the preceding year performed, and thought the financial reward worth the trouble, so he agreed. The concert consisted of this “Entirely New Symphony” by Beethoven, marches by Dussek and Pleyel performed on a “Mechanical Trumpeter” fabricated by Mälzel, and an orchestral arrangement of *Wellington's Victory*, a piece Beethoven had concocted the previous summer for yet another of Mälzel's musical machines, the clangorous “Panharmonicon.” The evening was such a success that Beethoven's first biographer, Anton Schindler, reported, “All persons, however they had previously dissented from his music, now agreed to award him his laurels.”

The orchestra for that important occasion included some of the most distinguished musicians and composers of the day: Spohr, Schuppanzigh, Dragonetti, Meyerbeer, Hummel and Salieri all lent their talents. Spohr, who played among the violins, left an account of Beethoven as conductor. “Beethoven had accustomed himself to indicate expression to the orchestra by all manner of singular bodily movements,” wrote Spohr. “So often as a *sforzando* [a sudden, strong attack] occurred, he thrust apart his arms, which he had previously crossed upon his breast. At *piano* [soft] he crouched down lower and lower as he desired the degree of softness. If a *crescendo* [gradually louder] then entered, he slowly rose again, and at the entrance of the *forte* [loud] jumped into the air. Sometimes, too, he unconsciously shouted to strengthen the *forte*.”

The Seventh Symphony is a magnificent creation in which Beethoven displayed several technical innovations that were to have a profound influence on the music of the 19th century: he expanded the scope of symphonic structure through the use of more distant tonal areas; he brought an unprecedented richness and range to the orchestral palette; and he gave a new awareness of rhythm as the vitalizing force in music. It is particularly the last of these characteristics that most immediately affects the listener, and to which commentators have consistently turned to explain the vibrant power of the work. Perhaps the most famous such observation about the Seventh Symphony is that of Richard Wagner, who called the work “the apotheosis of the Dance in its highest aspect ... the loftiest deed of bodily motion incorporated in an ideal world of tone.” Couching his observation in less highfalutin language, John N. Burk believed that its rhythm gave this work a feeling of immense grandeur incommensurate with its relatively short forty-minute length. “Beethoven,” Burk explained, “seems to have built up this impression by willfully driving a single rhythmic figure through each movement, until the music attains (particularly in the body of the first movement and in the Finale) a swift propulsion, an effect of cumulative growth which is akin to extraordinary size.”

What To Listen For

A slow introduction, almost a movement in itself, opens the Symphony. This initial section employs two themes: the first, majestic and unadorned, is passed down through the winds while being punctuated by long, rising scales in the strings; the second is a graceful melody for oboe. The transition to the main part of the first movement is accomplished by the superbly controlled reiteration of a single pitch. This device not only connects the introduction with the exposition but also establishes the dactylic rhythm that dominates the movement.

The *Allegretto* scored such a success at its premiere that it was immediately encored, a phenomenon virtually unprecedented for a slow movement. Indeed, this music was so popular that it was used to replace the brief slow movement of the Eighth Symphony at several performances during Beethoven’s lifetime. In form, the movement is a series of variations on the heartbeat rhythm of its opening measures. In spirit, however, it is more closely allied to the austere chaconne of the Baroque era than to the light, figural variations of Classicism.

The third movement, a study in contrasts of sonority and dynamics, is built on the formal model of the scherzo, but expanded to include a repetition of the horn-dominated Trio (Scherzo – Trio – Scherzo – Trio – Scherzo).

In the sonata-form finale, Beethoven not only produced music of virtually unmatched rhythmic

energy (“a triumph of Bacchic fury,” in the words of Sir Donald Tovey), but did it in such a manner as to exceed the climaxes of the earlier movements and make it the goal toward which they had all been aimed. So intoxicating is this music that some of Beethoven’s contemporaries were sure he had composed it in a drunken frenzy. An encounter with the Seventh Symphony is a heady experience. Klaus G. Roy, the distinguished musicologist and program annotator for The Cleveland Orchestra, wrote, “Many a listener has come away from a hearing of this Symphony in a state of being punch-drunk. Yet it is an intoxication without a hangover, a dope-like exhilaration without decadence.” To which the composer’s own words may be added. “I am Bacchus incarnate,” boasted Beethoven, “appointed to give humanity wine to drown its sorrow.... He who divines the secret of my music is delivered from the misery that haunts the world.”

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