

Divertimento for Strings

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Written: 1939

Movements: Three

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 27 minutes

Béla Bartók wrote his *Divertimento* in the summer of 1939 when Europe was careening into World War II. He was in Switzerland on a “working vacation,” and was well aware of the situation. He wrote about it to his son: “The poor peace-loving loyal Swiss are forced to glow with war fever. Their daily papers are full of articles on protection of the country; in the more important passages are defense measures, military preparations.”

In spite of this, Bartók was happy. “Luckily, I can banish these anxiety-provoked thoughts,” he wrote. “While I am at work it doesn't disturb me.” He was in Switzerland courtesy of Paul Sacher, the conductor of the Basel Chamber Orchestra, who commissioned him to write the *Divertimento*. Sacher put Bartók up in his chalet in the Alps and he was well provided for:

Somehow I feel like a musician of olden times—the invited guest of a patron of the arts. . . . they see to everything—from a distance . . . The furnishings are not in character, but so much the better, because they are the last word in comfort. The janitor's wife cooks and cleans; she is a very nice and honest woman, and my wish is her command. Recently, even the weather has been favoring me . . .

He dashed off the *Divertimento* in fifteen days and then set to work on his *Quartet No. 6*. The *Divertimento* is some of Bartók's sunniest and most accessible music, the *Quartet* some of his gnarliest. Like the divertimentos of the eighteenth century, Bartók's *Divertimento* utilizes dance rhythms. He also hearkens back to the *concerto grosso* of Corelli, Handel, and Bach in which a large string orchestra contrasts with a smaller solo section.

The first movement starts in a jaunty tempo with an optimistic melody. The soloists introduce a gentler melody. The middle part of the movement introduces some tension as orchestra and soloists alternate and Bartók employs some grating dissonance. The recapitulation of the main themes seem a bit more subdued. The second movement is eerie and dark with some surprising and terrifying outbursts. All is well again in the robust final movement. The folk-like melody gets treated to some interesting transformations and a solo cadenza. At the end, the strings wind up into a frenzied tempo for a dramatic close.

Concerto No. 2 in E-flat Major for Clarinet and Orchestra, Op. 74

Carl Maria von Weber (1786—1726)

Written: 1811

Movements: Three

Style: Early romantic

Duration: 19 minutes

Carl Maria von Weber was one of the first German Romantic composers of the nineteenth century. Like many other Romantics, Weber was involved in a wide variety of musical pursuits and dabbled in literature as well. He was one of the greatest pianists—and guitarists!—of his generation. As a conductor, he was one of the first to conduct standing and with a baton. From contemporary accounts it seems that he was also the sort of conductor whose countenance on the podium transfixed players and audience alike. When Weber wrote about music, he campaigned for a distinctively “German” style of composition. Like other great composers of his day, Weber racked up huge debts and was always trying to evade the authorities. And like too many other great composers—Mozart, Chopin, and Schubert—he died while still in his thirties.

In 1811, Weber went on a concert tour that took him to Munich. There he met Heinrich Joseph Bärmann, a musician in the court orchestra there and one of the greatest clarinetists of the century. Felix Mendelssohn claimed that Bärmann was “one of the best musicians I know; one of those who carry everyone along with them, and who feel the true life and fire of music, and to whom music has become speech.” Weber was so taken with Bärmann that he whipped up a brilliant showpiece—the *Concertino for Clarinet*—for him in three days. The king was in the audience for its premiere and was so impressed that he commissioned two full-scale clarinet concertos for Bärmann from Weber.

Weber’s *Second Clarinet Concerto* takes advantage of the clarinet pyrotechnics that Bärmann loved. The first and third movements are full of jumps from the very lowest notes on the clarinet to its highest register. There are plenty of scales and chromatic runs to show off fast fingers and a quick tongue. However, there are lyrical moments too, because Bärmann “excelled in the soft velvety quality of his tone and in the refinement of his nuances.”

It’s been nearly two hundred years since Weber wrote his *Second Clarinet Concerto*. Nowadays, he is just a footnote in music history. Because this concerto is so fun to play and to listen to, it justifiably remains a mainstay of any great clarinetist’s repertoire.

Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Written: 1788

Movements: Four

Style: Classical

Duration: 35 minutes

Given all the financial turmoil that we've been through over the past seven years, Mozart's situation in 1788 has added poignancy. Emperor Joseph's court composer had just died, and Mozart was hoping to be the replacement. He did get a job, but it wasn't what he was expecting. He was to write little dance tunes for the court for disappointingly small pay: "Too much for what I do; too little for what I could do." In order to economize, Mozart moved his family to smaller accommodations further away from the center of activity.

Even with his economizing, Mozart was desperately in need of cash. In June 1788, he wrote to his fellow Mason Michael Puchberg, almost begging for a loan:

If you would be so kind, so friendly, as to lend me the sum of one or two thousand gulden for a period of one or two years, at suitable interest, you would be doing me a most radical service! You will no doubt yourself realize and acknowledge that it is inconvenient, nay, impossible, to live from one installment of income to another! Without a certain necessary capital sum it is impossible to keep one's affairs in order. Nothing can be done with nothing!

Despite his straightened circumstances, Mozart was churning out music at a furious pace. In the space of just over two months, he wrote the three symphonies—the last he would ever write—that are the crowning achievements of his entire symphonic output. It is not clear why or for whom he wrote these symphonies. In fact, there is no record of *any* performance of them during the remaining years of his life.

The *Symphony in G minor* is the middle work of Mozart's great symphonic trilogy. The first movement begins with quiet urgency and has a restless, dramatic quality throughout, in spite of some lighter, cheery secondary themes. The second movement is peaceful and lilting with only an occasional passionate outburst. The last two movements have a vigorous character that adds a sense of drama to finish the symphony.

Mozart ended up defaulting on his loan from Puchberg, and his money problems persisted until the end of his life. Fortunately for us, this didn't seem to hinder his genius.

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