

Concerto for Orchestra
Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

Written: 1943

Movements: Five

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 36 minutes

Bela Bartók was safe in America after fleeing the horrors of World War II Europe, but he was not a happy or well man. He was poor, desperately homesick and, although he didn't know it yet, dying from a form of leukemia. And he wasn't writing any new music. Finally, two Hungarian compatriots, Joseph Szigeti and Fritz Reiner, approached Serge Koussevitsky—the conductor of the Boston Symphony—and asked him to commission a work from Bartok. Even though Koussevitsky wasn't particularly fond of Bartok's music, he agreed and personally delivered the first check to Bartok.

Bartok wrote the *Concerto for Orchestra* in less than two months. Bartok provided a short outline of it: “The general mood of the work represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death song of the third, to the life assertion of the last one.”

Bartok got virtually all of the important material for the various movements from his studies of folk music. But this is not obvious to the listener. Bartok's genius is the way he abstracts those elements and then uses them within “traditional” classical music.

The first and last movements of the *Concerto for Orchestra* are in a standard “sonata” form with an exposition area introducing the main themes, a development section, and then a restatement of those main themes. A chain of short sections, each played by a pair of wind instruments, makes up the second movement. The brass interrupt with a short chorale, and then the five pairs of winds return. The fourth movement features two folk-like melodies.

Bartok interrupts that movement with a quotation from Dmitri Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony* and then restores the peace with a return of the two themes. The central movement, what Bartok calls the "death song," is a nocturnal setting of one of the themes from the first movement.

Bartok's health was good enough for him to hear the premiere of his *Concerto for Orchestra* in December of 1944. However, he was still desperately homesick: ". . . I would like to go Home – forever." The war had ended but he didn't get his wish. In September of 1945, his health took a turn for the worse. He died in New York.

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