

***Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste***

**Bela Bartók (1881–1945)**

Written: 1936–37

Movements: Four

Style: Contemporary

Duration: 30 minutes

“Do you think my music is modern enough?” Béla Bartók asked the Danish composer Carl Nielsen. He was worried that his music, rooted in the folk melodies of his native Hungary but framed in the *avant-garde* techniques of the twentieth, was now sounding rather tame. Certainly many audience members and critics felt that his music was modern enough. “Béla Bartók has finally done it,” wrote one reviewer. “He has achieved one of the great desires of the modernists, in turning things upside down.”

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Basle Chamber Orchestra, Paul Sacher (its founder and conductor) asked Bartók to write a new work. To save expense, Sacher asked Bartók to use a reduced ensemble by omitting woodwinds and brass and replacing them with “a piano or cembalo . . . or some kind of percussion instrument.” What Sacher got was a work that many regard as Bartók’s greatest.

Bartók split the string section in two and placed them on either side of the percussion group. In the the first movement, he immediately presents a melodic theme that returns in altered forms in the succeeding movements. In the first movement, it is a fugue theme. All succeeding even-numbered entrances of the theme enter five steps higher than the preceding voice, and the odd-numbered entrances enter five steps lower. It sounds a bit like identical writhing snakes forming themselves into a ball. A bass drum crash signals the climax of the movement. By now, the theme has wandered as far away from the beginning note as possible. Slowly the ball of snakes unravels—with the theme played upside down—until the last voice

slithers away.

The vigorous angularity of the themes and rhythms in the second movement has a peasant-like quality. The two opposing string sections bounce off each other. The central section with its off-beat accents has a primal jazz-like quality.

A single xylophone note, like a lone cricket, begins and ends the third movement. Slipping and sliding string parts, shimmering accompaniments from the piano, harp and celesta, and sudden unexpected jabs suggest that if this movement hasn't been used for a horror film, it should be.

The final movement is a frantic kaleidoscope of folk dances in Bulgarian rhythms. Amidst the mayhem, the all-important beginning theme makes its appearance one more time before the final mad push to the end.

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***Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major for Piano and Orchestra***

**Franz Liszt (1811–1886)**

Written: 1832, revised 1849–56

Movements: Four (played without pause)

Style: Romantic

Duration: Eighteen minutes

Residing at the top of the piano world, Liszt had as many detractors as proponents. Beethoven called him a “Devil of a fellow – such a young rascal!” He was “an inspired charlatan,” and “Mephistopheles disguised as an Abbé.” Sometimes praise and condemnation came from the same source. Regarding his piano playing, Johannes Brahms claimed, “Whoever has not heard Liszt cannot even speak of piano playing.” However, about his compositions

Brahms wrote, “The disease spreads more and more, and in any event lengthens and ruins the ass’s ears of audience and young composers alike.”

Liszt began writing his *First Piano Concerto* when he was twenty-one. It took another seventeen years for him to orchestrate it (with the help of the composer Joachim Raff). He revised it again four years later and then performed it for the first time in 1855. In his *First Piano Concerto*, Liszt makes it clear: This is not your typical classical piano concerto. First of all, there are four movements instead of the standard three. There are no breaks between the movements—no opportunities for fidgeting! There is an underlying musical figure—heard in the first few seconds of the piece—that weaves its way through all four movements. Finally, gone are the long orchestral introductions: Let’s get to the focus of attention—the soloist—right away!

The orchestra begins the concerto with a powerful statement of a seven-note theme. The piano crashes in with a cadenza full of bravura. It eventually melts into a more serene section, trading a tender melody with the clarinet and solo violin. The orchestra intrudes and it’s off to the races—briefly—before the movement dissolves into the second movement. An extended and introspective melody is the focus of this movement. There is a brief tumultuous moment before calm returns and the orchestra presents the melody over a prolonged piano trill. This dissolves into the elf-like third movement that features, of all things, a triangle. Snippets of the first movement—including the roaring opening— return and propel the piece into the last movement. Liszt brings us full circle by recapping all of the important tunes in the guise of a jubilant march.

***Symphony No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 98***

**Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)**

Written: 1884–85

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 39 minutes

Johannes Brahms did most of his serious composing in the summer, away from his home in Vienna, at some sort of resort or spa. Back in the city, he spent the rest of the year revising the works of those creative months. He worked on his *Fourth Symphony* during the summers of 1884 and 1885 at Mürzzuschlag in Austria. It received almost instant public admiration at its premiere in October 1885 and has gained the same sort of stature in the symphonic repertoire as other composers' last symphonies: Mozart's *Jupiter*, Beethoven's *Ninth*, and Schubert's *Great*.

For his symphonies, Brahms always worked within already established formal plans. The first movement is in a standard *sonata-allegro* form. Here, the *exposition* presents two main themes at two different pitch levels: the tentative melody played by the violins right at the start and the heroic one played by the cellos soon after. The *development* works through those themes and then the *recapitulation* brings back the original material—ever so hesitatingly at first—but this time all in the same key. That is the dry academic plan of the first movement, but the thrill comes in listening to the dramatic tension between the themes and the composer's working out all their musical potential, and luxuriating in Brahms's sumptuous use of the orchestra.

The second movement has two main melodies as well: The first is the beautiful horn melody right at the beginning; The cellos get the second tune again. In this movement, Brahms varies the themes ever so slightly each time he repeats them.

Brahms breaks with tradition for the third movement. Normally this is a light-hearted dance-like movement—a *scherzo*—with a three-beat rhythm. Not here. It has a two-beat rhythm, more like a rollicking march.

For the final movement Brahms pays tribute to an old and revered form called the *passacaglia*, a type of theme and variations. Here the theme is a series of eight chords, and there are thirty variations. Brahms divided them into three parts. The first set constantly builds in intensity, while the second is gentle and peaceful. The third begins just like the first, except that this time it builds to a powerful conclusion.

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