

BÉLA BARTÓK 1881 - 1945

1. Andante tranquillo
2. Allegro
3. Adagio
4. Allegro molto

The Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta was commissioned in 1936 by Paul Sacher for the Basle Chamber Orchestra, and marked Bartók's return to full-scale abstract orchestral composition following a period of close involvement with folk music and the composition of the fifth string quartet. The title is slightly misleading, in that the celesta is not of significantly greater importance than the other tuned percussion instruments chosen by the composer; piano, harp, xylophone and timpani. These are placed between what effectively amounts to two quite separate string orchestras on opposite sides of the platform, thus emphasizing both the spatial and symmetrical potentialities of the music.

The first movement consists of the longest and most intense fugue of Bartók's career; an unbroken stream of notes of compelling and hypnotic power based on a theme which is to dominate the whole work. Starting on A in the violas of both orchestras, successive canonic entries then take the theme both ways round the circle of fifths, up to E, down to D, up again to B, down again to G, and so on until both upward and downward steps have arrived at the climax of E flat, played in repeated octaves by all the violins and violas. Thereafter, with the theme often only in inverted fragments, the steps reverse themselves back to A, which is reached with the theme played simultaneously both right way up and in inversion at a distance of two octaves under a shower of celesta arpeggios. The movement ends with a microcosm of itself as violins play scales in contrary motion from A out to E flat and back again.

The second movement exploits the hitherto untried possibilities of antiphonal exchange between the string orchestras in a brilliant and vitally rhythmic dance movement in expanded sonata form. This is followed by a profound and haunting adagio in which Bartók displays a growing ability to harness his innate technical resources to the expression of a new emotional force. Initially, only the anguished, uncertain, but highly emotive viola theme disturbs the remote iciness behind the music, and thereafter the mood of other-worldliness is accentuated by the chromaticisms and weird instrumental effects so characteristic of Bartók's so-called 'night music,' together with a stark, almost brutal passage at the height of the movement, marked by strident and percussive treatment of a five-note motif which gradually grows in both pace and dynamic.

The finale returns to A, but now unashamedly to A major, sounded in strummed chords at the start right across the first orchestra. In form it is a rondo-cum-dance medley of the sort to be found in the second parts of the earlier violin rhapsodies.

Perhaps the emotional climax of the whole piece, the point at which the doubts and conflicts of the adagio are finally resolved, is the moment near the end when the all-important motto theme returns in a more diatonic form, this time richly harmonized with triads, as if to assert the triumph of human nobility and warmth over adversity.