

## Bartok Violin Concerto

The relationship of a composition to its' historical context or even to the contemporary life stresses of the composer can seemingly be quite removed. We wonder how it is possible for Beethoven to pour out his personal angst in the heart-rending Heiligenstadt Testament of 1802, and yet write the amiable Second Symphony, which contains not a moment of despondency, in the same year. Similar questions can be asked of Bela Bartók's final European works as war clouds gathered throughout the continent and heightened tensions in his native Hungary consumed so much of the thoughts expressed in his personal correspondence. Along with the cantabile *Divertimento for Strings* and the jazz inspired *Contrasts*, the *Violin Concerto* seems remarkably free of any hint of the pervasive political tensions during its' conception and completion, indicated by Bartok as the last day of 1938.

Yet this seemingly contradiction may have been quite compatible with the convictions of Béla Bartók, who steadfastly and consistently decried the intrusion of politics on art. From his letters and principled stances against the flood of Nazism, we associate the composer with the conscience and integrity we would hope to see in all artists, as he vehemently rejected the advancing evil in his personal correspondence. But in actuality his professional objections sometimes were more pragmatic than philosophical. The famous "radio affair" of 1937 in which the composer refused to allow his performances to be broadcast on German or Italian radio stations is illustrative of this point. When his request was made public, he was furious. Eschewing the genuine opportunity (as Hungary's leading composer) to become the face of principled opposition, Bartok responded with a carefully worded statement that firmly avoided the obvious political ramifications:

"I see with sorrow that this matter has become public, because I consider this matter to be a private one concerning only me and the Radio company. But if it has already become public then I am forced to explain why I asked the Hungarian Radio not to offer my performances to the German and Italian Radios. The reason for this is simply that I never appeared as a performer on either the Italian Radio or that of the Third Reich, indeed these two radio companies never asked me to perform. I do not consider it to be fair that these two radio companies would simply receive my performances from the Hungarian Radio for free. I must emphasize specifically that I am talking only about giving my performances; this does not apply to my works, because I naturally cannot get involved in that, as it is an entirely different matter."

It is interesting that his public objections were a matter of fairness in receiving compensation for his work as a performer, but he pointedly did not object to the airing of his works when performed by others. After this initial public statement (published in the *Pesti Napló* [Pest Journal]) did not quell the public debate, Bartók again felt compelled to publish another response, asking for the matter to be put to rest:

"...Now they have again published my statement with the mistaken addition that I made it for or sent it to the German officials. I would be very obliged to you for your publication of the fact that to this date, that is until the twenty-seventh of March 1938, I have never made any kind of statement for the German officials, I did not send them anything of the kind .... Whose interest can it be in to continually stir up this matter?..."

In the words of David E. Schneider, "Bartók's two communications to the Hungarian papers regarding the Radio ban are finely-tuned pieces of writing designed to defuse as much as possible the political content of his stance. While his reluctance to have his views publicized was in part due to the potential dangers of offending the Germans and the pro-German sympathizers in Hungary, Bartók could also have wanted to avoid too close an association with various anti-German factions in Hungary. Articles focusing on his opposition to Germany were likely to be at least as disturbing to Bartók for their domestic

## Bartok Violin Concerto

implications as they were for their potential to destroy what little relationship he had with institutions in the Third Reich. In Hungary, opposition to Germany was a characteristic common to many factions, from the extreme right, the fascist Turanians—who saw the Magyars (not the Germans) as the true master race—to the far left, the communists. Publicity that painted him as an outspoken opponent of Germany thrust Bartók into a position of prominence that had the potential to allow his stance to be co-opted by any number of political camps.”

Regardless, it is important to stress that the composer did eventually resist (in the most public way possible) the German onslaught. Though not a Jew, he publicly rejected the Nazi request for a baptismal certificate and other documentation to prove the “purity” of his ethnicity, fully cognizant that continued public performances of his works depended upon his servile adherence to the request. And when there could no longer be any moral ambiguity of the political situation, Bartók withdrew completely, leaving his beloved homeland for a very uncertain future in America on October 12, 1940.

If there is no hint of his political mindset in the lyricism and accessibility of the *Violin Concerto*, there is an interesting opposition of a musical nature. Bartók was not above including derisive passages in his compositions alluding to other composers he felt did not deserve public adulation. Thus later he would include a passage in his *Concerto for Orchestra* that is clearly a reference to the Seventh Symphony of Shostakovich (a piece he despised) followed by notated “raspberries” from the trombone section. Bartók was notorious for his opposition to the dodecaphonic (“twelve tone”) system of Arnold Schoenberg. In the *Violin Concerto*, the second theme of the first movement is clearly twelve tone. It is immediately followed by an angry orchestral section that seems to repudiate the solo line.

Unlike his first concerto for the instrument, Bartók’s *Violin Concerto #2*, adheres to the standard three movement form and exploits both the virtuosic capabilities of the solo instrument and the color and narrative abilities of the orchestra. Written for the Hungarian violinist Zoltan Szekely, the first movement is in a sonata allegro form that uses several motifs to create a very integrated and tight structure. After the harp clearly establishes the tonality of B Major, the bass line establishes the first motif which is immediately claimed by the soloist and amplified as the first theme. Though a technical discussion of the movement is beyond the scope of this note, Bartók combines implications of traditional pentatonic Hungarian folk song style with the modal characteristics of newer folk music styles to create the 12 tone second theme. As a preserver and champion of folk music, Bartók was uniquely capable of using this representative material to create an interesting and invitingly accessible movement based on a highly sophisticated framework.

One other element found prominently in the first movement needs clarification. In initial rehearsals of the piece with Szekely, Bartók wrote “Tempo di verbunkos” into the solo part. This is a reference to nineteenth-century Hungarian national music that included gestures of so called “recruiting music” for the army (*verbunkos* from the German *Werbung*-recruiting). This style is still heard today in the gypsy orchestras in Budapest in which verbunko tunes are played by strolling violinists accompanied by a stationary ensemble in which the cimbalom plays the traditional accompaniment role. In the opening, Bartok invokes the “gypsy” style, using the harp to mimic its’ more peasant cousin, the cimbalom.

The second movement is the most formal and complex set of variations to be found in Bartók’s published works and the third movement is based on variations of material from the first movement. The ending seems to have troubled him, leading the composer to write two alternative endings, though the one performed tonight is the one most consistently heard. It provides a satisfying conclusion to a work born in sad times that nonetheless gives voice to the highest expression of human optimism and creativity.

-Stephen Heyde