

# ABOUT THE *Music*

## PROGRAM NOTES FOR THE HARRISBURG SYMPHONY

Masterworks 4: February 11-12, 2012



by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

### **Divertimento for String Orchestra**, (1939) — Béla Bartók

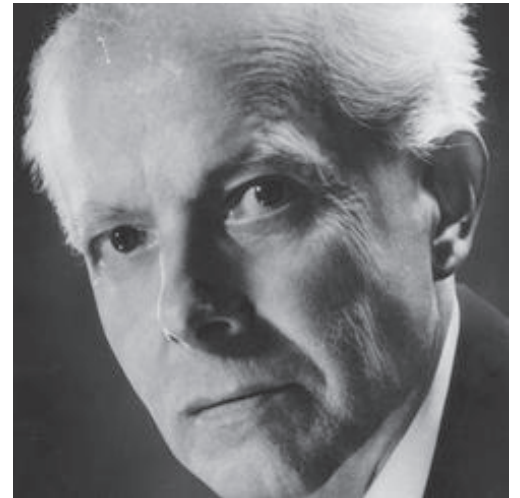
Born March 25, 1881 in Nagy Szent Miklos, Hungary

Died September 26, 1945 in New York City

Kaleva — “Land of Heroes” — is the Finns’ ancient poetic name for their country, which was Given the unsettled and frightening political situation under which all eastern Europeans found themselves during the terrible days of 1938 and 1939, it is little wonder that Bartók’s creativity was undermined. He managed to complete the Violin Concerto No. 2 in December 1938, but then found himself too preoccupied to undertake any further original work. Paul Sacher, the conductor of the Basle Chamber Orchestra and a close friend who had commissioned the Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta two years before, recognized that Bartók needed to leave Budapest if his creativity was to be revived. Sacher invited the Bartóks to spend the summer of 1939 at his chalet at Saanen in the massif of Gruyère in Switzerland, and commissioned a new piece from him for his orchestra. Bartók accepted both of the invitations, and he arrived at Saanen in July. Even in Switzerland, however, he could not escape the ominous European political situation. “The poor, peaceful, honest Swiss are being compelled to burn with war-fever,” he wrote to his son Béla in Hungary on August 18th. “Their newspapers are full of military articles, they have taken defense measures on the more important passes, etc. — military preparedness. I saw this for myself on the Julier Pass; for example, boulders have been made into road-blocks against tanks, and such like attractions. It’s the same in Holland. I am worried whether I shall be able to get home from here if this or that happens.”

Once installed at Saanen, however, Bartók retreated into a welcome isolation to undertake Sacher’s commission. “Fortunately I can put this [war] worry out of my mind if I have to — it does not disturb my work,” he continued in his letter to Béla. “Somehow I feel like a musician of olden times — the invited guest of a patron of the arts. For here I am, as you know, entirely the guest of the Sachers; they see to everything.” It was at Saanen that he composed the Divertimento for String Orchestra, one of his most immediately accessible compositions. The peaceful Swiss interlude during which he produced this piece was not to last, however. Almost as soon as he had begun the Sixth Quartet at Saanen, word came from Budapest of his beloved mother’s death. He returned home immediately and spent the winter in Hungary, but in April 1940 he sailed to America for a concert tour with Joseph Szigeti. After an arduous journey home that summer to settle his affairs and collect his wife, he went back to New York in October and never again saw his native Hungary.

The main theme of the Divertimento’s opening sonata-form movement is a lively violin strain in swinging meter given above a steady accompaniment in the lower strings. The complementary melody, ushered in by widely spaced octaves, is presented by the soloists with



interjections from the ensemble. The development section is intricately imitative and spills over into the recapitulation, where the themes are subject to still further elaborations. The somber nature of the second movement, which stands in strong contrast to the surrounding music, may well have been influenced by the tragic events of 1939. It is in a three-part form (A–B–A), whose outer sections, based on a restless, chromatic theme, enclose highly charged music that grows from a dramatic, repeated-note outcry of the violas. The joyous finale, which resumes the high spirits of the opening movement, is disposed in several sections, with the principal theme, first presented by the solo violin, returning to mark the movement's progress.

## Concertstück for Four Horns and Orchestra in F major, Op. 86 — Robert Schumann

Born June 8, 1810 in Zwickau, Germany

Died July 29, 1856 in Endenich, near Bonn

Early horns for concert use were valveless, and therefore limited to only those notes available in the natural overtone series, just as is a simple bugle today. Beginning in 1718, crooks came into common use. These devices were additional lengths of tubing that could be plugged into the horn to create another overtone series with its extra, supplementary set of notes. By the middle of the 18th century, one Anton Joseph Hampel of Dresden formalized the technique of hand-stopping, which served both to mellow the tone (previously, the horn's bell had been held above the player's head, and produced a harsh, strident sound) and to fill in some of the gaps in the overtone series. (Complete stopping of the bell lowers the pitch by a half step, but muffles the tone.) It was for this awkward instrument, with its interchangeable crooks and cumbersome hand-stopping, that Mozart wrote his four delightful concertos.

At the beginning of the 19th century, horn players still had to switch crooks for each piece (in some cases, for each movement) to match the key of the rest of the orchestra. This problem was solved by the use of a valve mechanism patented in 1818 by Heinrich Stolzel and Friedrich Bluhmel. Their system allowed the player to deflect the main air stream into side tubes of different lengths by depressing valves, essentially making a series of crooks available at the touch of a key, and allowing the production of the complete chromatic scale. It is the system still used on all brass instruments except the slide trombone. One important remnant of the old playing technique, however, was incorporated into the design of the modern horn: the valves are operated by the left hand, unlike the right-handed trumpet, allowing the right hand to rest in the bell to mellow the sound and produce a variety of tonal effects. Though the horn is one of the most treacherous of all instruments to play, in the hands of a master performer its beautiful, noble tone is among the most stirring of all musical sounds.

During Schumann's residence in Dresden, from 1844 to 1850, he was naturally in frequent contact with the local musicians. Richard Wagner, filled with revolutionary political and musical ideas, was conductor at the Royal Opera House, which boasted one of the finest orchestras on the Continent at the time. A chief adornment of that ensemble was a player named Lewy, a virtuoso who headed up the orchestra's horn section and was also one of the earliest exponents of the new valved instrument. Schumann was so impressed with the possibilities of the improved horn, and with the expressive avenues for it that Wagner had opened in his operas (*Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* had all been staged by 1845), that he undertook a grand, concerted piece for not just one horn, but for an entire quartet of the instruments. The *Concertstück* that he devised was certainly a showpiece for the valved horn, but it was also so hard as to be proclaimed by some as virtually unplayable — Schumann's biographer Robert Schauflier decided that "the difficulties are so horrendous that it needs almost the trump of an archangel to cope with them." Performances of the *Concertstück* ("quite a curiosity," the composer called it) have, understandably, been rare over the years, but when a company of master hornists rises to its challenge, it proves to be one the most exciting entries in all of Schumann's catalog.

The *Concertstück*, written in 1849, is in the standard three movements, though played without pause. The first movement abounds with breathtaking feats of virtuosity and intricate ensemble (the opening fanfare may well stay in the listener's mind for days) couched in a fine orchestral accompaniment with expansive harmonies and rich sonorities. Schumann called the autumnal second movement "Romanze," using as the theme of its center section a broad melody that returns in transformation in the last movement. The finale resumes the quick



tempo and the flashing musical pyrotechnics of the opening movement, though it contains some episodes of contrasting character that Alfred Nieman believed were “not far from the impressionistic images of Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, woven together with effortless spontaneity.” Schumann piled one challenge upon another as the movement progresses, ending with an admonition to the soloists that the final, rousing pages are to be delivered “mit Bravour.”

## **Symphony No. 5 in C minor Op. 67** (1804, 1808) — Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770 in Bonn.

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna

Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, more than any work in the musical repertory, is the archetypal example of the technique and content of the form. Its overall structure is not one of four independent essays linked simply by tonality and style, as in the typical 18th-century example, but is rather a carefully devised whole in which each of the movements serves to carry the work inexorably toward its end. The progression from minor to major, from dark to light, from conflict to resolution is at the very heart of the “meaning” of this work. The triumphant nature of the final movement as the logical outcome of all that preceded it established a model for the symphonies of the Romantic era. The psychological progression toward the finale — the relentless movement toward a life-affirming close — is one of Beethoven’s most important technical and emotional legacies, and it established for following generations the concept of how such a creation could be structured, and in what manner it should engage the listener.



The opening gesture is the most famous beginning in all of classical music. It establishes the stormy temper of the Allegro by presenting the germinal cell from which the entire movement grows. Though it is possible to trace this memorable four-note motive through most of the measures of the movement, the eminent English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey has pointed out that the power of the music is not contained in this fragment, but rather in the “long sentences” that Beethoven built from it. The key to appreciating Beethoven’s formal structures lies in being aware of the way in which the music moves constantly from one point of arrival to the next. The gentler second theme derives from the opening motive, and gives only a brief respite in the headlong rush that hurtles through the movement. It provides the necessary contrast while doing nothing to impede the music’s flow. The development section is a paragon of cohesion, logic and concision. The recapitulation roars forth after a series of breathless chords that pass from woodwinds to strings and back. The stark hammer-blows of the closing chords bring the movement to its powerful end.

The second movement is a set of variations on two contrasting themes. The first theme, presented by violas and cellos, is sweet and lyrical in nature; the second, heard in horns and trumpets, is heroic. The ensuing variations on the themes alternate to produce a movement by turns gentle and majestic. The Scherzo returns the tempestuous character of the opening movement, as the four-note motto from the first movement is heard again in a brazen setting led by the horns. The fughetta, the “little fugue,” of the central trio is initiated by the cellos and basses. The Scherzo returns with the mysterious tread of the plucked strings, after which the music wanes until little more than a heartbeat from the timpani remains. Then begins another accumulation of intensity, first gradually, then more quickly, as a link to the finale, which arrives with a glorious proclamation, like brilliant sun bursting through ominous clouds. The finale, set in the triumphant key of C major, is jubilant and martial. The sonata form proceeds apace. At the apex of the development, however, the mysterious end of the Scherzo is invoked to serve as the link to the return of the main theme in the recapitulation. It also recalls and compresses the emotional journey of the entire Symphony. The closing pages repeat the cadence chords extensively as a way of discharging the work’s enormous accumulated energy.