

## **Concert review on Berlin Philharmonic online concert on 12 Mar 2020**

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### **In what ways did the cultural-political background affects Bartok's composition on the 'Concerto for Orchestra'**

While some regarded the Concerto for Orchestra written by Bartók as far too accessible, some heard it as truly deep human music that provokes emotions and goes beyond the boundary of the social class and the literati. Given the opportunity to watch a live concert of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra performing the famous masterpiece of Béla Bartók, it would be amusing to do a further investigation on the background of and insights gained from appreciating the piece.

#### **1. Introduction**

The Concerto for Orchestra is valued as a reflection of Bartók's experience of the world. There are two ways of how musical works are analysed, one is to make reference to other musical works and the other one is to utilize our own knowledge of the work's history in the analysis. In this digital narrative, I will be exploring the inspirations that the composer has gained from the cultural and the political background during the composition period of the piece, and the psychological impact brought by the cultural-political situation to the music in the 1940s.

#### **2. An inspiration to the birth of this composition**

Culturally, Bartok was fascinated towards nationalistic music during his studies in Budapest. He was born in Nagyszentmiklós, on the south-eastern part of Hungary with a domination of Romanians and Germans. As an Hungarian composer, he combined the elements of Western art music and eastern European folk music, especially music from his

homeland, Hungarian music into most of his composition. There were great uses of non-traditional tonality, non-traditional modes and artificial scales found in most of his composition.

A classic example is the artificial acoustic scale on C that was derived from the harmonics series by Hungarian musicologist Erno Lendvai, which dominates the last movement of the concerto. Also, whole-tone fragments are found in the second movement of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, who made use of the pentatonic phrases contained in Debussy's music.

Being a National Composer has made him fully synthesized approaches to folk music in his composition. In the second movement of the concerto, Bartók was influenced by traditional Dalmatian folk songs and used a two voice counterpoint in the melodic line of the oboe and bassoon sections. In Dalmatia, now Croatia, one of the traditional song forms involves 2 voices that are a fixed interval apart moving up and down exactly the same way but with different notes. Such forms are also used in Yugoslavian music.

Another example to illustrate the folk elements affected by the Hungarian culture in this composition is the use of pentatonic scale in the fourth movement of Concerto for Orchestra, Bartók used a pentatonic scale and a changing rhythm to create a playful melodic line that imitated a village bagpiper, with other indigenous instruments that were usually replaced by a string orchestra of the Gypsy in Hungary. In the fourth movement, the count keeps changing from bar to bar alternating between 2/4 and 5/8.

In fact, traditional music from around the world uses pentatonic scales. Each scale has its own variation due to differences in the stress and the intervals of the notes. Some examples of musical forms that use their own pentatonic scales other than Hungarian music includes traditional Chinese music, Celtic folksong and American Blues.

As a composer, Bartók struggled for recognition in the musician world because audiences criticized his work as being too challenging, with clashing harmonies and irregular folk rhythm that made it difficult for trained musicians to accept. However these characteristics found in Bartók's composition works still made him one of the most influential composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **3. Political background**

Béla Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra was composed in 1943. After the First World War, which was way before the composition of the piece, Hungary was partitioned in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. As a result, Bartók's place of birth was ceded to Romania and his mother's hometown was ceded to Czechoslovakia. The piece was written during the middle of the Second World War by a dying refugee. The concerto was first premiered in the United States on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1844 and first performed in Hungary 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1947, 2 years after Bartók's death.

Distressed over his beloved country's capitulation to the Nazis, Bartók arrived in the USA in autumn 1940 as a refugee. During the period between the World Wars, Bartók was greatly respected as an ethnomusicologist. However, in the middle of the Second World War, Bartók was in exile in New York suffering fiscal problems due to infrequency of performances of his works and poor health condition in his late years in an unfamiliar environment, but not in immediate physical danger. It was believed that the concerto served as a testimony to the composer's expression and reaction towards the Second World War as an exile. In Simon Rattle's interview during the online concert, he commented that in the middle of the third movement, the sound of the tearing from the violins shows the devastating dead heart of the man.

Throughout Bartók's career, he engaged in the politics of national identity and attempted to represent his distinctive ethnicity. However, with the composer's affection for his homeland, his love of its people and his musical style based on folklore, the Stalinist Campaign that was against the formalism in arts and the moderate opposition from his country has resulted in the banning of Bartók's work in Hungary. Furthermore, Bartók's letters from this time revealed him as being highly disturbed by the rise of National Socialism. As a result, Bartók never became fully at home in the United States and found it difficult to compose because it was hard to adapt to the new environment and chaotic political situation at that time. There was little American culture and detail in his music during his final years. As we can see, the Concerto for Orchestra is composed with the circumstances surrounding during the creation of the work.

#### **4. Psychological impact on his health**

The worsened political situation in the 1940s has caused serious disturbance to the composer. The banning of his composition has provoked negative emotions and pressure, and his fragile health just took a drastic downturn before this concerto. As discussed previously, the culture of Hungary and the society's politics had a great impact on Bartók's strategies and desire as a composer, teacher and scholar. His aim was to prove to the world that western culture should not exceed other cultures, in this case the Hungarian culture. The special circumstances of the early 20th century in his native land have contributed mostly to the modernism in his music. However, being separated from his homeland, Bartók was still desperately homesick: "I would like to go Home – forever", he said. At last, the war had ended but he was never granted the wish.

In 1943, the concerto was finally composed as a piece of work of his gratitude on recovering temporarily from his serious illness. However, just after the premiere of the piece,

his health deteriorated and he died two years after this. The piece, which comprises the mournfulness and a sense of reassertion, appears to be a life statement of the composer.

Finally, the concerto preserves the concertante elements of different sections of the orchestra and shows the ability of the orchestra to adapt and transmute virtuosic solo. Between the vibrant movements lie the composer's deep emotions and sentiments under all states of affairs during the 1940s.

## **5. Conclusion**

The emergence of a persuasive cultural political nationalism throughout Eastern Europe in the post-communist world has caused a huge difference in the composition style of the composer, and subsequently, contributed to the completion of the masterpiece. It is my hope, that this digital narrative has instilled contemplation, and aroused deep reflective thoughts in my listeners of this story on the composer's intention and passion for the piece.

*(Reference list removed, text shared with the writer's consent)*