

# BARTÓK VIOLIN CONCERTO

# YEHUDI MENUHIN

MINNEAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

ANTAL DORATI

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# Béla Bartók

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EQUIPPED with an Edison phonograph and a supply of wax cylinders, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály set out in 1905 on a song-collecting expedition, coaxing hundreds of folk melodies from the lips of farmers, shepherds and barefooted peasant women. What they heard in the fields, along the roads and in simple cottages across the Hungarian countryside, exploded a myth and gave birth to a new musical language.

The Hungarian peasant had been traditionally regarded as musically inferior to the gypsies, whose brilliant and elaborate instrumental music became popular in the cafés of towns and cities. According to Franz Liszt, the peasant "seized upon the melodies which he heard the Bohemians perform, as a sort of windfall," and appropriated them in his primitive manner. Nineteenth-century composers therefore looked to the gypsies for the vital source of Hungarian music. This was in direct conflict with the discoveries made by Bartók and Kodály in their joint and separate investigations. Far from being crude imitations of gypsy tunes, Magyar folk songs revealed a profound and vigorous musical art, "whose expressive power (wrote Bartók) is amazing, and at the same time . . . devoid of all sentimentality and superfluous ornaments." It was this music which the gypsies adopted; in its embellished *tzigane* form, it came to be known as "Hungarian" through such works as Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies* and Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*.

Musically and politically, Germany dominated the Hungarian musical scene before World War I. The greatest composer Hungary had produced, Franz Liszt, was a full-fledged cosmopolitan who spent little time in his native land, spoke Hungarian poorly, and was part of the mainstream of Teutonic musical evolution. The future of Hungarian music lay elsewhere. Bartók believed in a musical renaissance based on folk idioms. But this entailed a great deal more than mere "quotation." "To reap the full benefits of his studies," declared Bartók, [the composer must] assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his musical mother-tongue."

From 1905 on, Bartók's entire output was permeated with the elements of folk music which, he wrote, were "of decisive influence upon my work, because it freed me from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys . . . It became clear to me that the old modes, which had been forgotten in our music, had lost nothing of their vigor. Their new employment made new rhythmic combinations possible. This new way of using the diatonic scale brought freedom from the rigid use of the major and minor keys, and eventually led to a new conception of the chromatic scale, every tone of which came to be considered of equal value and could be used freely and independently."

Bartók began his musical career as a concert pianist. An exceptionally gifted virtuoso, it was natural that he should devote much of his energy to piano composition. Yet the violin also evoked some of his freshest musical ideas. An extensive list of works for this instrument includes three violin and piano sonatas—1903 (unpublished), 1921 and 1922; *Two Portraits* for violin and orchestra—1907-8; *Two Rhapsodies* for violin and orchestra—1928; 44 duos for two violins—1931; the Sonata for Violin Solo—1944; and the magnificent *Violin Concerto*—1937-8.

When the violinist Zoltán Székely first approached Bartók with the commission for a concerto, the composer responded with a counter-proposal: instead of a concerto, why not a set of variations for violin and orchestra? Székely stood his ground, and a three-movement concerto received its première on April 23, 1939; Székely was soloist with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam under the baton of Willem Mengelberg.

While the new work was unequivocally in the concerto form, Bartók nevertheless carried out his original intention. The second movement is an unabashed theme and variations, and the principal subjects of the finale are variants of their counterparts in the first movement. As Halsey Stevens points out in his definitive book, *The Life and Music of Béla Bartók* (Oxford University Press), "although Bartók had not previously written a large set of

variations . . . the variational spirit had always been strong in his music, and the arch-forms of the 1920's and 1930's are motivated by it. So it was natural that Bartók should have wanted to crown his efforts in this direction with such a work as the Violin Concerto; and it is characteristic that in it he so completely carried through his ideas that he was never afterward impelled to write a variation-form."

The Violin Concerto opens with a serene melody in B Minor played by solo violin above pulsating chords on the harp, lower strings *pizzicato* and a sustained horn note. It is a noble, spacious theme, to which intervals of the fourth lend a characteristically Magyar flavor. The lyrical flow is interrupted by a restless motive, building up to a restatement of the original theme for full orchestra. Secondary ideas emphasize the thematic conflict as the movement develops in true classical sonata fashion.

In Hindemith's piano suite, *Ludus Tonalis*, the Prelude, when played upside down, is identical with the Postlude (and vice versa). No such technical leger-demain is present in Bartók's Violin Concerto, but its outer movements are related to each other in a more intimate and subtle manner. The finale's savage introduction is harmonically based on the *pizzicato* accompaniment to the opening theme of the first movement. The leaping B Minor theme of the last movement is almost note for note a reflection of the lyrical first movement melody, in a more primitive mood. Subsidiary motives are likewise slightly altered versions of first movement ideas. To complete the picture, the sonata form is utilized here too.

Enveloped between the two allegro movements, is the *Andante tranquillo*, a theme and variations. In this haunting, songlike movement, the scoring is sparse, delicate and transparent; each short variation is a perfect orchestral miniature; and the melodies, though original creations by Bartók, recall the poignant laments of Hungarian peasant music.

NOTES BY HAROLD LAWRENCE

#### ABOUT THE ARTISTS

In 1927, an eleven-year-old violinist astonished the musical public with his interpretation of Beethoven's *Violin Concerto*. Since that time, Yehudi Menuhin has crossed the line from prodigy to mature artist with remarkable ease and success. Born in New York, he began his musical studies at the age of four with Sigmund Anker of San Francisco. He later received lessons from Louis Persinger, and made his New York debut in 1925. Abroad, Menuhin studied with Adolf Busch and Georges Enesco. In 1936, Menuhin (then twenty) announced his retirement from the concert stage for a period of a year and a half, in order to devote himself to intensive study, undisturbed by the exigencies of the performer's life. He resumed his concert career in 1937 and has grown consistently in musical stature, becoming one of the leading instrumentalists of our age.

Yehudi Menuhin's association with Béla Bartók began in November, 1943. In a B. B. C. broadcast on the occasion of the composer's death, Menuhin said: "I shall never forget my first meeting with Bartók . . . Already attracted by the score of his concerto for violin before I had even met him or heard his music, I had performed this work with Dmitri Mitropoulos and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. Some two weeks later, I was to play his First Sonata for Piano and Violin in Carnegie Hall, and I was anxious to play this work for Bartók—to receive his criticism before performing it in public. I had arranged to meet him at a friend's home. Immediately I was transported by his burning eyes, and fascinated by the meticulous, immaculate air of this small and witty person.

"Without further ado he sat down, produced his spectacles and a pencil, laid out a copy of the sonata which he had brought along, and, as there were no further formalities, we began. Though I had had no preconceived idea of his manner or appearance, his music had already revealed to me his innermost soul and secrets: a composer is unable to hide anything—by his music you

shall know him. Immediately, with the first notes, there burst forth between us, as an electrical contact, a bond, an intimate bond, which was to remain fast and firm. It was as if we had known each other for years. In fact, I believe that between a composer and his interpreter there can exist a stronger, more intimate bond, even without the exchange of words, than between the composer and a friend he may have known for years. For the composer reserves the core of his personality, the essence of his self, for his works. As we finished the first movement he got up, came over to me and said the following words, which for Bartók were equivalent to an uncontrolled burst of impassioned exuberance. He said: "I thought works were only played in that way long after the composers were dead."

Present at the recital during which Menuhin played the Solo Violin Sonata, Bartók wrote (in a letter to Mrs. Creel dated December 17, 1943): "He [Menuhin] is really a great artist. . . . My sonata . . . was excellently done. When there is a truly great artist, then the composer's advice and help is not necessary, the performer finds his way quite well, alone. It is altogether a happy thing that a young artist is interested in contemporary works which draw no public, and likes them, and—performs them comme il faut."

The Violin Concerto, which Yehudi Menuhin performed on February 17, 1957 in an all-Bartók program in Carnegie Hall, with Antal Dorati conducting the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, drew a large and enthusiastic audience. (Immediately following the concert, the work was recorded with the same artists in this Mercury Living Presence release.) The critics greeted the event with lavish praise. Writing in the New York Times, Howard Taubman described Menuhin's interpretation in the following words: "His playing last night had the technical address it required. It had also a ruggedness and a rhapsodic exuberance which gave it earthiness. It was a striking performance." Jay Harrison, music critic of the New York Herald Tribune, wrote: "Mr. Menuhin was in rare high spirits and dashing technical form. His tone sang like a full-throated dramatic soprano's. . . . It was fiddling all lavish and lovely. It was music making that spoke openly and with accents profound."

Of Antal Dorati and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, Jay Harrison continued: "For his part, Mr. Dorati is a maestro who goes about his chores with the utmost economy of gesture and a musical understanding ennobled and wise. Clearly, he regards Bartók as a modern classic and finds no reason, therefore, to impose his own will on the composer's meticulously explicated thoughts and ideas. What one hears from Mr. Dorati, in consequence, is Bartók in its purest form. The conductor's phrasings, his tempos and sonority balances are a model of what Bartók should be. Mr. Dorati, in short, does not play games; he is a solemn, serious and elevated musician."

"Furthermore, there should be no question as to how Mr. Dorati regards his orchestra. If he did not feel his members to make up a crack crew, it would have been the wildest folly to schedule so grueling a program (The Miraculous Mandarin, the Violin Concerto, and the Concerto for Orchestra). And the Minneapolis boys did not let their leader down . . . the playing of the orchestra indicated that it stands securely as one of America's top ranking ensembles."

#### HI-FI FACTS

The present recording was made on the morning of February 18, 1957, between the hours of midnight and five o'clock, after a short break following the all-Bartók concert referred to above. The scene of the recording was Carnegie Hall. The exceptionally large orchestra called for in the *Violin Concerto* included piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, double bassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, timpani, snare drums, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam tam, celesta, harp and strings. The orchestral forces were deployed across the stage in normal concert fashion. A single microphone was suspended approximately 18 feet above the podium. The soloist stood slightly to the left of the conductor. Painstaking efforts were made during a test period to achieve perfect balance between solo and tutti, and also to locate the precise aural focal point of the hall. Once these two objectives were attained, a level check was made. From that point on, the conductor was in complete control of balance and dynamics. Fairchild tape machines, in conjunction with McIntosh amplifiers, recorded the master tapes. The edited tapes were transferred to disc by means of a 200-watt McIntosh recording amplifier and a Fairchild tape machine, driving a specially designed Miller cutting head operating on a Scully automatic variable pitch recording lathe. Wilma Cozart was the recording director for the session; Harold Lawrence the musical supervisor. C. R. Fine was the engineer and technical supervisor; and tape to disc transfer was made by George Piros.

Other Mercury LIVING PRESENCE high fidelity recordings for your record library:

- BARTÓK Hungarian Sketches; Roumanian Dances; KODÁLY Háry János Suite. Minneapolis Symphony, Antal Dorati conducting. MG 50132
- BARTÓK Concerto for Orchestra. Minneapolis Symphony, Antal Dorati conducting. MG 50033
- BARTÓK Suite from "The Miraculous Mandarin"; KODÁLY Peacock Variations. Minneapolis Symphony, Antal Dorati conducting. MG 50038
- BARTÓK Second Suite, Op. 4. Minneapolis Symphony, Antal Dorati conducting. MG 50098
- BARTÓK Music for Stringed Instruments, Percussion and Celesta; BLOCH Concerto Grosso. Chicago Symphony, Rafael Kubelik conducting. MG 50001



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**OLYMPIAN SERIES**

Bartók  
**VIOLIN CONCERTO**  
Allegro non troppo

33 1/2 R.P.M.

MARGIN CONTROL  
SIDE 1

Yehudi Menuhin, violinist  
Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra  
ANTAL DORATI, conducting

MG50140A

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**MERCURY**

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**OLYMPIAN SERIES**

Bartók

**VIOLIN CONCERTO**

Andante tranquillo

Allegro molto

33 $\frac{1}{3}$  R.P.M.

MARGIN CONTROL  
SIDE 2

Yehudi Menuhin, *violinist*

Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra

ANTAL DORATI, *conducting*

MG50140B

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