

BÉLA BARTÓK

Piano Concerto No. 1

BORN: Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary, March 25, 1881

DIED: New York, September 26, 1945

WORK COMPOSED: 1926

WORLD PREMIERE: July 1, 1927, in Frankfurt, Germany. The composer played the solo part, and Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted.

The first movement begins with timpani, solo piano and brass instruments playing purely rhythmic figures. Horns give out a brief idea whose long–long–short–long rhythm will prove consequential as the movement unfolds.

As the music accelerates into the main portion of the movement, Bartók continues to use the piano as an elaborate percussion instrument. The rhythm of the horn phrase in the introduction recurs repeatedly in different contexts.

The second movement, even more than the first, starts with the piano participating as part of a percussion ensemble. Later, wind instruments trade chant-like phrases over an unvarying rhythm.

Strong rhythmic figures throughout the orchestra and in the piano give the finale an exotic and exhilarating energy.

Béla Bartók was one of the most important composers of the 20th century, the author of a vital, original and highly influential body of music. He also was a brilliant pianist who performed throughout Europe, as well as in the United States and the Soviet Union. In view of this, it is surprising that Bartók had reached age 46 before he composed the first of his three concertos for piano and orchestra. This work dates from 1926. Not coincidentally, Bartók enjoyed his greatest period of success as a concert artist during the 1920s, and he played the solo part in many performances of the piece.

With more than a quarter-century of experience as a composer behind him, and having created a very individual musical voice, Bartók was able to produce an unusually accomplished Piano Concerto No. 1. Specifically, the piece partakes of a determined modernism forged by combining the kind of new harmonies and rhythms that Stravinsky and other composers had developed during the preceding 15 years with elements of Balkan, Hungarian and North African folk music, which Bartók had been studying diligently for the past two decades.

This last point merits some attention. Bartók was unstinting in his admiration of the folk music he knew and loved. “Its expressive power is amazing,” he would write of it, “and at the same time devoid of all sentimentality and superfluous ornaments. It is simple, sometimes primitive, but never silly. It is the ideal starting point for a musical renaissance.” The First Piano Concerto manifests Bartók’s concept of what that renaissance might produce. Although the composer uses no actual folk melodies in this work, a folkloric spirit subtly pervades the work. It shapes most of the composition’s melodic ideas; it helps determine the orchestration, which subordinates the orchestral strings to the woodwind and, especially, the percussion sections; and it dictates the importance of rhythm in the music’s substance and texture.

Bartók cast this work in the traditional concerto design of three movements in a fast–slow–fast arrangement. This is practically the only thing traditional about the piece. The opening moments let us know that the composition will be built on a bedrock of rhythm. As the first movement unfolds, we find Bartók using the piano as much as a percussion instrument as for its melodic qualities. This is equally true in the central slow movement. The recurring main idea in the finale seems the modern refraction of some whirling North African folk dance.

Scored for solo piano; 2 flutes (the 2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes (the 2nd doubling English horn); 2 clarinets (the 2nd doubling bass clarinet); 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani and percussion; strings.

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