

sense of longing, undoubtedly for his native locale. "Bear Dance" could hardly offer greater contrast in its rambunctious manner and somewhat zany theme. The piano version has more bite, but what this Scherzoish orchestral piece may lack in menace and humor it makes up for in its greater range of instrumental color and sense of excitement. These first two pieces are quite popular in both their piano and orchestral versions.

"Melody" is a songful but mournful piece, featuring lovely writing for the woodwinds and strings. Its piano counterpart is simpler and even lighter in its textures, but also darker and somewhat Impressionistic. "Melody" probably exhibits greater expressive depth than any other piece in the Hungarian Sketches set, though it makes no serious attempt to convey profound ideas or emotions. The ensuing "A Bit Drunk" sounds tipsy, all right, and its deliciously grotesque character gives its ubiquitous humor bite. Here, hiccups and a staggering gait mix with low growls and sudden tempo shifts to yield a masterpiece of color and wit. Its piano counterpart, which has a slightly faster tempo marking, holds its own against the orchestral version, sounding a bit more subtly humorous, but lacking the range of colors.

The last piece, "Swineherd-Dance," is a festive piece, the one work in the set using genuine folk material. It sounds considerably richer in texture than its simple piano-arrangement counterpart, which only attempts to present the joyful folk melody in a relatively unembellished manner. The orchestral version is clearly superior and more vital-sounding. In the end, while Bartók's Hungarian Sketches may bleach away some of the flavorful grit of the originals, they invest them with greater color and richer, more folkish atmosphere.

# BARTOK MUSIC FOR STRINGS, PERCUSSION AND CELESTA • HUNGARIAN SKETCHES REINER • CHICAGO SYMPHONY



Mastered in DSD256



Bartók wrote some of his finest music for the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher, in whom he found a particularly sympathetic champion. *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, written for Sacher in 1936, explores with great refinement and mastery the musical concepts that Bartók had been developing since the mid-'20s. In the *Piano Concerto No. 1*, Bartók explored the percussive elements of the piano, coupling it effectively with percussion only in the introduction to the concerto's slow movement. In *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, Bartók ingeniously sets the piano with the percussion instruments, where its melodic and harmonic material functions in support of the two string choirs.

Since the early '30s, Bartók had also incorporated elements of Baroque music into his compositions, inspired partly by his exploration of pre-Classical keyboard composers such as Scarlatti, Rameau and Couperin. In reflection of this, *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* evokes the Baroque concerto grosso, with its two antiphonal string orchestras separated by a battery of tuned and untuned percussion instruments. The work's prosaic title was actually just a working title which was subsequently allowed to stand.

The opening movement, *Andante tranquillo*, is a slow fugue on a chromatic melody that springs from a five-note cell, each subsequent phrase growing in length and elaborating on its predecessor. At this point, the two string orchestras play together. As the string voices accumulate, the fugue's texture increases in complexity and the chromatic implications of the theme are brought to a rigorously dissonant fulfillment. The fugue climaxes at its apogee with an ominous rumble from the timpani and a loud stroke on the tam-tam. As the fugue folds in upon itself the celesta makes its first entrance with an arpeggiated chord, mysterious and remote. The work subsequently grows from the motivic material explored in this first movement.

Bartók deploys antiphonal string choirs for the second movement, a fast, fugitive piece in which the two orchestras chase each other through a breathtaking series of

elaborations on the main theme. In the percussion section, piano, xylophone, and harp take the lead while two side drums (with and without snares) provide emphatic punctuation. The third movement is one of Bartók's most accomplished "night music" pieces, with cricket-like notes from the xylophone, eerie timpani glissandi, fragmentary murmurs, and frightened exclamations from the strings, along with the always-mysterious notes of the celesta floating clear and sphinx-like over the nocturnal weft. The finale, a dance of energy and abandon, restores the antiphonal deployment of the strings and juxtaposes the diatonic aspects of the work's main theme with its chromatic elements. There are also some striking touches like the furious, strummed four-note chords in the violins, violas and cellos that opens the movement, a theme midway through that is based on a repeated note first hammered out on piano and xylophone, and then a grand peroration of the initial fugue theme, now with its intervals doubled and richly harmonized. In the quick coda there is a brief, suspended moment ("a tempo allargando") before the work tumbles to a conclusion in unabashed A major.

The *Hungarian Sketches* are probably Bartók's most popular orchestral transcriptions. Each of the five pieces was originally conceived for the piano: the first two, "Evening in Transylvania" and "Bear Dance," are taken from the *Ten Easy Pieces* (1908; Nos. 5 and 10, respectively); the next, "Melody," is No. 2 from the *Four Dirges* (1910), while the ensuing "A Bit Drunk" comes from the *Three Burlesques* (1911; No. 2), and the concluding "The Swineherd-Dance" from No. 40, Volume 2, of *For Children* (1908-09). All five have folk-like flavors, even though most have original themes.

The first piece, "Evening in Transylvania," has much the same character of the piano version, though Bartók's skillful orchestration enhances the already colorful manner of the piece. It opens with a nostalgic melody of serene mood and follows with a joyous theme of playful, folk-like character. Thereafter, the melodies alternate, and Bartók deftly converts the mood of the first theme at the close to a

**Continued**

# BARTOK

## MUSIC FOR STRINGS, PERCUSSION AND CELESTA • HUNGARIAN SKETCHES REINER • CHICAGO SYMPHONY

### Music For Strings, Percussion And Celesta

- 1 Andante Tranquillo 6:56
- 2 Allegro 6:55
- 3 Adagio 6:55
- 4 Allegro Molto 6:38

### Hungarian Sketches

- 5 An Evening In The Village 2:42
- 6 Bear Dance 1:37
- 7 Melody 2:00
- 8 Slightly Tippy 2:13
- 9 Swineherd's Dance 1:55

Engineer – Lewis Layton    Producer – Richard Mohr  
Recorded by RCA December 1958.



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