

A close-up portrait of Karina Canellakis, a woman with long, wavy, light brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue collared shirt. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a soft expression. The background is solid black.

Bartók Concerto for Orchestra

Karina Canellakis

NETHERLANDS RADIO PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

4 Orchestral Pieces, SZ 51 (Op. 12)

1	I. Preludio. Moderato	8. 13
2	II. Scherzo. Allegro	6. 09
3	III. Intermezzo. Moderato	5. 19
4	IV. Marcia funebre. Maestoso	5. 19

Concerto for Orchestra, SZ 116

5	I. Introduzione. Andante non troppo - Allegro vivace - Tempo I	10. 20
6	II. Presentando le coppie. Allegretto scherzando	5. 52
7	III. Elegia. Andante, non troppo	7. 54
8	IV. Intermezzo interrotto. Allegretto	4. 16
9	V. Finale. Pesante - Presto	9. 45

Total playing time: 63. 15

Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra

Conducted by **Karina Canellakis**



Loneliness and longing can be powerful catalysts for the imagination.

As Beethoven wrote his joyful Second Symphony in the midst of deep despair at the loss of his hearing, so did Bartók write his brilliant, often witty, atmospheric and riveting Concerto for Orchestra in a moment of profound desperation. An outspoken anti-fascist, he and his wife had reluctantly fled Europe in 1940 after he had made his anti-nazi sentiments clear in the midst of the increasingly terrifying political situation. His lack of comfort with New York life was worsened by financial strain and illness, although it wasn't until 1944 that leukemia was diagnosed, too late, before his death in September 1945. It was during the summer of 1943 that he lay in a hospital bed, feverish and dizzy, where the famous conductor Sergei Koussevitzsky visited to offer him \$1000 to write an orchestral work for the Boston Symphony. These five masterfully orchestrated movements then seemed to pour out of him. In the mere two

months it took to complete, he managed to construct something both deeply personal and wildly entertaining. He would never have imagined the success it would achieve.

Unique in its palindromic five-movement form, it opens ominously with a series of slow melodies comprised of ascending and descending fourths, reaching into the abyss for memories of *Bluebeard's Castle* and native Hungary.

Quickly building to a folk dance in irregular rhythms, it hurls itself between reckless abandon and thoughtful contemplation, unable to decide or stay in any one world for very long. It is entirely based on the various folk tunes which he had collected over the years and absorbed to such a degree that they became his own musical language, informing every phrase and harmonic progression he wrote.

The second movement presents instrumental couples in flamboyant fashion,

uniquely orchestrated and set amidst the snare drum commentator sitting at the back. Even this seemingly playful movement stumbles into reflective nostalgia as the brass chorale calms the soul momentarily, before we shake our head and are launched back into the playfulness of the couples, the bassoons now joined by a third partner in their dance. The couples all make one more appearance, and even the two harps are given something to do as they accompany the trumpets' second duet. The snare drum has the final say, retreating into the background as if marching away across an empty field.

Then comes what is, for me, the true heart of this entire work: the Elegy. It reveals the feverish, nighttime delirium of yearning and homesickness that occupied Bartók's inner world. Once again it begins with a shadowed melody in fourths, this time in reverse direction and punctuated by the timpani, which gives way to a haunting oboe melody shrouded in the wafting

night breeze. A lone piccolo repeatedly croaks its strange, rusty B-natural, before the music then surprises us suddenly with a powerfully desperate and declamatory folk melody in the violins, again marked by an irregular pattern of rhythm and speech which takes us into the middle section. This builds in both expression and volume until the climax is screamed out by the trumpets' singular note, and followed by the violins tumbling melodic line, plunging back and forth between extreme outward expression and buried inner yearning. The end of the movement features a prayer-like chorale between violins and woodwinds; this is simply one of the great poetic storytelling moments of the entire 20th century. It is the aftermath of an emotional storm, as the clouds seemingly clear for a moment, intently trying to see light ahead. Ultimately, even the solo horn calling out from the distance fades as we are pulled back down by the tremolo in low strings and visited once again by the squeaky piccolo's B-natural, now disappearing in



a fog of timpani. He has taken us into his most intimate world so that we might feel what he felt: sadness, wonderment, lost, and unsure of what might follow.

To our surprise and delight, the fourth movement, an “interrupted intermezzo,” lightens things once again, a mirror to the second movement, and takes us into a lightweight dance in irregular meter, followed by a pensive and pastoral viola melody, accompanied by specially tuned timpani. The dance is interrupted coarsely by a jab at Shostakovich’s 7th symphony, which Bartók would have heard on a radio broadcast one year earlier, played by the NBC Symphony under Toscanini. Why would the anti-fascist composer make fun of a symphony which stood against the regime? Perhaps he was also quoting the tune “I’m going to Maxim’s” from Hungarian-born Franz Léhar’s *The Merry Widow*. In any case, it serves as a brash and ostentatious interruption which shortly concludes and returns to a soft reprise of the pensive viola

and timpani melody. The movement closes delicately and somewhat cheekily with a short flute cadenza, taken over by the oboe, and finishes this funny dance cutely, leaving the listener unable to decipher what meter we've actually ended up in.

We are then thrown into the Finale by a towering horn call: a summons to dance recklessly and party. Now the fun begins as fiddling ensues, shoes are thrown in the air, and rowdy, drunken festivities invade the concert hall. Never mind with the longing and nostalgia, except for two brief "Tranquillo" moments of calm and intimacy, the second of which buries us momentarily in the soft, metallic murmuring of a lost soul in a hospital room, before finally breaking out into the final climactic chorale, in clear defiance of his condition, determined to be triumphant. Fireworks erupt at the end as the entire orchestra becomes reinvigorated with bombastic dance-energy and we are catapulted into the final, silvery flourish of this magnificent journey.

Bookending the majority of Bartók's creative output, we begin this album with his Four Pieces, originally written for two pianos in 1912 and then orchestrated in 1921. Bewilderingly unknown even to experienced listeners and musicians, these four vignettes give a brilliant and enchanting look into his earlier mentality as a composer, reveal the immense influence of Debussy, and foreshadow many of the works he would write during the following three decades.

Still a relatively young man focused on recording and documenting Moravian folk tunes sung by peasants, 1912 was a year in which he found himself deeply disappointed by the cold reception to his haunting 1911 masterpiece: *Bluebeard's Castle*. Along with his Hungarian friend, the composer Zoltán Kodály, he would therefore invest a great deal of his time in ethnomusicology, embarking on countless field trips which eventually amounted to years of scholarship in these "true" folk melodies, sung by peasants in the most remote areas in and

around Hungary. These authentic, first-hand experiences etched these rhythms and characters in his soul, feeding him with the material he needed in order to naturally and gradually continue to develop his own unique musical language during the following decades based entirely on what he had heard during these ventures.

The Four Pieces are therefore born out of *Bluebeard's* darkness. The Preludio, tempo "Moderato," unexpectedly throws us into lush, fairy tale colors: harps take center stage in soft, gentle, rolling arpeggios, as floating melodies played by the horn and then strings remind us of the music from *Bluebeard's* door number 4, the flower garden, but devoid of dissonant tension and even more perfumed. For a moment, the folk music elements seem masked in a Debussy-like bath of sensuousness, the only recognizable "Bartók" being the actual melodic intervals he seems to favor: fourths and fifths. These string melodies long for something far away, searching passionately

through the mist for a tangible reality to hold onto. The eerie effect of string ponticello (the metallic noise produced by placing the bow over the bridge) combined with his favorite dissonance — the minor second — creates a tremendous tension which builds to a final outpouring of emotion, dissipating slowly to close. Dreamy, beautiful and full of heartache, it lulls us into a trance.

Unexpectedly we are hit over the head with the first shockingly violent outbursts of the Scherzo, in two rhythmic gestures similar to that of the scherzo of Beethoven's 9th symphony. We then launch into a fierce and exciting chase; biting, snarling brass open their fierce jaws and bombast ensues. Manic and ominous, it scurries and changes tempo in the most fiendishly difficult ways. Coming to a brief and breathless stop, a short waltz begins, only to be taken over again by the insistent timpani, and then giving way to an off-kilter series of five-note exchanges, his signature odd-

numbered-rhythms playfully thrown back and forth delicately by solo woodwinds. This playfulness gives way once more to the chase, which comes back with a vengeance and builds with a crazed vehemence, hurling itself towards the final sharp-toothed bites of the trombones, the entire orchestra now swallowing itself whole. It shares the sound world and relentless character of *The Miraculous Mandarin*, which he was writing during the same time period that he orchestrated these four pieces.

The Intermezzo blows in with the wind, a calming and intoxicatingly slow night waltz. Shadowy and ghostly, it plunges us into the misty world of his old castle once again. Shrouded in fog, it moves as though a seductive and ghostly beast dances in from the past, beguiling and mesmerizing.

The Funeral March grabs the listener immediately with a searing intensity, unforgiving and bursting with emotional

tension. This soon evaporates into a brief and lonely woodwind chorale, only to then return to the declamatory and dramatic theme, this time even more insistent and fervent. With ardor, grief and ferocity, it burns through us, and then once again disintegrates into the second woodwind chorale: hollow and poetic harmonies support melodies in the clarinet followed by English horn, revealing Bartók's desolate inner world to us once again. After a final climactic outburst from the entire orchestra, accompanied by the failing heartbeat of the timpani, the horns take us far away into the distance, and strings "col legno" (with the wood) stumble upon the last two utterances before falling completely silent.

Karina Canellakis

Acknowledgements

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