

philharmonia orchestra

Bartok - Concerto for Orchestra Listening Guide

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During the Second World War, Hungarian composer Bela Bartok fled to America, hoping to forge a new career. But he failed to make much impact and became seriously ill. Soon after he was diagnosed as having leukemia.

Whilst in hospital, he was visited by Serge Koussevitzky, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He asked Bartok for a new work, uncertain if it would ever be written - but hoping that the advance would help cover some of Bartok's medical expenses. Bartok threw himself at the challenge and wrote the entire *Concerto for Orchestra* in just 55 days. It's a stunning showpiece that requires some staggering virtuosity from the orchestra.

The music is divided into five contrasting movements - rather than the standard four found in a symphony. And it begins with a wonderfully atmospheric phrase played by the cellos and basses.

Cello extract - 1st 7 bars

But how does Bartok create that ice-cold atmosphere? Well, in the opening phrase the cello moves almost entirely in fourths.

Cello extract - individual notes

The opening gesture from the cellos and basses gives way to a rather curious sounding phrase from the flutes.

Flute extract - Bars 10 & 11

If we listen again to the higher flute part again, notice that we are simply rising upwards, through the interval of the 4th.

Flute extract - Bar 11

So far the title *Concerto for Orchestra* seems to be misleading, because the promise of a vibrant work isn't evident in the opening bars. So how does Bartok plot that transition? Well, he takes the opening phrase and he starts to develop it, stretching it upwards like so....

Cello extract - 1st 7 bars - then bars 12 to 18 - then bars 22 to 30

And finally the flute breaks free and starts to shine as a soloist.

Flute extract - Bars 30 to 35

This short solo is infused with a rhythm borrowed from Hungarian folk music, and it's by far the easiest rhythm to spot reappearing through the concerto.



The flute solo finished at exactly 1 minute and 38 seconds into the Concerto. But how can I be so accurate? Well Bartok has inscribed his score with precise timings, detailing exactly how long each section should last. It's an incredible detail, but it's also an important milestone, because by this point, Bartok has revealed his key musical ideas. Soon after the orchestra explode with the 1st main theme of the movement.

Musical extract

One of the most challenging aspects of the Concerto is that even though Bartok was inspired by the world of folk music, he doesn't write tunes that you're going to go home singing. This 1st theme of the Concerto is athletic and energetic, but it is also incredibly angular, and it's full of 4ths.

2ND MOVEMENT

The 2nd Movement is entitled *The Game of Pairs*. It features a series of duets for wind instruments that are linked together one after the other in a chain-like structure. Bartok brilliantly captures the character of each instrument. Although he seems to have forgotten his obsession with 4ths, he is just as particular about his harmonies, as each pair of instruments play their duet, harmonising using just one interval.

So the bassoons play a 6th apart - with that spacing preserved for their entire duet. The oboes play harmonised in the 3rd. The clarinets - the 7th, and the flutes play using a bright and clear 5th.

Flute excerpt - Fig 60 to bar 87

3RD MOVEMENT

Some people say that the *Concerto for Orchestra* is a gradual journey from darkness to light. But that description is entirely wrong because although the second movement, *The Game of Pairs*, offered us a much brighter musical experience, the third movement, *Elegia*, plunges us into total darkness, with very little sign of hope.

Cello excerpt - 3rd movement - Bars 5 to 11

As Bartok's obsession with 4th's returns once more, the Hungarian rhythm we met in the flute solo, back at the beginning of the 1st movement reappears - but here, it's fully orchestrated and it gains unprecedented power.

Orchestral excerpt - 3rd movement - Fig. 34

4TH MOVEMENT

The next movement is the curiously titled *Interrupted Intermezzo*. Given that an intermezzo usually describes music, inserted between acts of the *Opera* - Bartok's actually called the 4th movement - 'The Interrupted Interruption'. It begins innocently with an almost primitive sounding melody inspired by Hungarian folk music.

Flute excerpt - 4th movement - Bars 13 to 21

It's a typically Eastern European melody - made of just five pitches and it dances gracefully through multiple time signatures. No sign of an interruption yet, but two minutes later, Bartok starts to show a much lighter and brighter side to his personality. When the 'interruption' finally arrives, Bartok transforms this serious and soul-searching Concerto into something much more appropriate for the circus.

Orchestral excerpt - Fig. 75 to Fig. 92

The big surprise here is that the interrupting melody isn't actually Bartok's - it's a quote from Shostakovich's 7th Symphony. It's given the most zany orchestration and to my ears, it sounds more like a 'Looney Tunes' cartoon. So why would Bartok do that? There are several theories. Some people say the Bartok was angered by the huge success Shostakovich's *Leningrad Symphony* was enjoying in the States. So here he literally pokes fun at it. A more credible explanation is that Koussevitzky was a huge fan of that symphony, and Bartok uses the quote as a sign of gratitude for the commission. I think it's important not to forget that this music was written at a time of global crisis. With conflict raging throughout the world, perhaps Bartok is commenting on the stupidity of war. Whatever the reason, for the interruption from Shostakovich, and the movement concludes on a much more serious note.

Flute excerpt - 4th movement - Bar 139 to 144

5TH MOVEMENT

Horn section excerpt – 5th movement - 1st four bars

The finale of the Concerto is unlike anything we've heard so far. It's positive, it's uplifting and it opens with the most spectacular statement, reminiscent of an Alpine horn call. This movement truly confirms Bartok's position as a master of orchestration. There are wonderful details to be found in the score, such as cellos strumming their instruments more like an Eastern European folk band.

Cello excerpt – 5th movement – Bar 5, for 4 bars

...to melodies which literally zoom past at breakneck speed:

Flute excerpt – 5th movement - Bars 96 to 100

Although this music has a 20th century sheen, Bartok uses older musical forms such as fugue and canon in the Concerto. Imitative entries play a key role in the structure, literally racing through each orchestral section.

Flute extract – 5th movement - Bars 344 to 356

The 5th movement appears to promise a happy ending, and is a million miles away from the dark opening of the Concerto. However, with a triumphant end in sight, Bartok plunges the audience into a moment of sheer terror.

Cello extract - Bars 484 to 508

The string section play *sul ponticello* – by bowing very close to the bridge, this creates a terrifying texture, that sounds more akin to a horror movie.

Bartok's music is a stunning sonic adventure. When you consider how ill he was when he wrote the Concerto, this is anything but a requiem for a dying man. The music is dramatic, imaginatively orchestrated and requires precision and virtuosity from the players on stage. It truly is a Concerto for the entire orchestra.