Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2019-2020 Mellon Grand Classics Season

January 17, 18 and 19, 2020

MANFRED HONECK, CONDUCTOR
SEONG-JIN CHO, PIANO

BÉLA BARTÓK — Concerto for Orchestra

- I. Introduction: Andante non troppo — Allegro vivace
- II. Game of the Pairs: Allegretto scherzando
- III. Elegy: Andante non troppo
- IV. Interrupted Intermezzo: Allegretto
- V. Finale: Presto

Intermission

FRANZ LISZT — Concerto No. in A major 2 for Piano and Orchestra

Adagio sostenuto assai
Allegro agitato assai
Allegro moderato
Allegro deciso
Marziale un poco meno Allegro
Allegro animato

Played without pause

Mr. Cho

MAURICE RAVEL — *Boléro*

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

BÉLA BARTÓK

Concerto for Orchestra (1943)

Béla Bartók was born in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary on March 25, 1881, and died in new York City on September 26, 1945. He composed his Concerto for Orchestra in 1943, and it was premiered by the Boston Symphony and conductor Serge Koussevitsky on December 1, 1944. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the work in January 1946 with music director Fritz Reiner, and most recently performed it in May 2015 with conductor Michael Francis. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings.
Approximate duration: 35 minutes

Béla Bartók came to America in October 1940, sick of body and afflicted of spirit. He had been frail all of his life, and the leukemia that was to cause his death five years later had already begun to erode his health. Adding to the trial of his medical condition was the war raging in Europe, a painful source of torment to one of Bartók's ardent Hungarian patriotism. Upon leaving his homeland, he not only relinquished the native country so dear to him, but also forfeited the secure financial and professional positions he had earned in Budapest. Compromise in the face of Hitler's brutal inhumanity, however, was never a possibility for a man of Bartók's adamantine convictions. "He who stays on when he could leave may be said to acquiesce tacitly in everything that is happening here," he wrote on the eve of his departure. "This journey [to America] is like plunging into the unknown from what is known, but unbearable." Filled with apprehension, he made the difficult overland trip to Lisbon, then sailed on to New York.

Sad to say, Bartók's misgivings were justified. His financial support from Hungary was, of course, cut off, and money worries aggravated his delicate physical condition. He held a modest post as a folk music researcher at Columbia University for a number of months, but that ended when funding from a grant ran out. His health declined enough to make public appearances impossible after 1943. His chief disappointment, however, was the almost total neglect of his compositions by the musical community. At the end of 1942 he lamented, "The quasi boycott of my works by the leading orchestras continues; no performances either of old works or new ones. It is a shame — not for me, of course." It is to the credit of ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) that the organization provided money for the hospital care that enabled Bartók to continue composing to the end of his life.

It was at this nadir in his fortunes that the commission for the *Concerto for Orchestra* was presented to Bartók. Phillip Ramey related the circumstances: "By early 1943, things had gotten so bad that two old friends of Bartók, [violinist] Joseph Szigeti and [conductor] Fritz Reiner, suggested to Sergei Koussevitzky [music director of the Boston Symphony] that he commission an orchestral work in memory of his wife, Natalie. Koussevitzky agreed and, one spring day, while Bartók was in a New York hospital undergoing tests, he appeared unexpectedly and startled the composer by offering him a commission for $1,000 on behalf of the Koussevitzky Foundation. Bartók, as fastidious as ever, would initially only accept half of that amount because he feared that his precarious health might prevent him from fulfilling Koussevitzky's request." The commission and an ASCAP-sponsored stay at a sanatorium in Saranac Lake in upstate New York fortified Bartók's strength enough so that he could work on this new orchestral piece "practically night and day," as he wrote to Szigeti. Upon its premiere, the *Concerto for Orchestra* was an instant success. It was accepted immediately into the standard repertory and led to a surge of interest in Bartók's other works. He died less than a year after this work, the last he completed for orchestra, was first heard, not realizing that he would soon be universally acclaimed as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.

"The title of this symphony-like work is explained by its tendency to treat single instruments or instrument groups in a '*concertant*' or soloistic manner," wrote the composer to clarify the appellation of the score. Concerning the overall structure of the *Concerto*'s five movements, he noted, "The general mood of the work represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death-song of the third, to the life-assertion of the last

one." The first and last movements, Bartók continued, "are in more or less regular sonata form," while "the second consists of a chain of independent short sections by wind instruments introduced in five pairs (bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes and muted trumpets). A kind of 'trio' — a short chorale for brass instruments and snare drum — follows, after which the five sections are recapitulated in a more elaborate instrumentation.... The form of the fourth movement — 'Interrupted Intermezzo' — could be rendered by the symbols 'A B A — interruption — B A.'" The interruption to which Bartók referred is a parody of the German march theme from the first movement of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 "Leningrad," which was in turn a mocking phrase based on a song from Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, a favorite of Adolf Hitler.

FRANZ LISZT

Concerto No. 2 in A major for Piano and Orchestra (1839, 1849)

Franzt Liszt was born in Doborján, Hungary (now Raiding, Austria) on October 22, 1811, and died in Bayreuth, Germany on July 31, 1886. He sketched scores for both of his piano concertos in 1839, but did not complete the Second Piano Concerto until 1849, and it was not ultimately premiered until January 7, 1857, with Hans von Brosart as soloist and Liszt himself conducting. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the concerto with soloist Herman Kortheuer and conductor Frederic Archer in January 1897, and most recently performed it with soloist Yefim Bronfman and music director Manfred Honeck in June 2015. The score calls for piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals and strings.
Approximate duration: 22 minutes

"Franz Liszt was one of the most brilliant and provocative figures in music history. As a pianist, conductor, composer, teacher, writer and personality — for with Liszt, being a colorful personality was itself a profession — his immediate influence upon European music can hardly be exaggerated. His life was a veritable pagan wilderness wherein flourished luxuriant legends of love affairs, illegitimate children, encounters with great figures of the period, and hairbreadth escapes from a variety of romantic murders. Unlike Wagner and Berlioz, Liszt never wrote the story of his life, for, as he casually remarked, he was too busy living it." If it were not for the fact that Liszt's life had been so thoroughly documented by his contemporaries, we might think that the preceding description by Abraham Veinus was based on some profligate fictional character out of E.T.A. Hoffmann. Not so. By all accounts, Liszt led the most sensational life ever granted to a musician. In his youth and early manhood, he received the sort of wild and unbuttoned adulation that today is seen only at the appearances of a select handful of rock stars. He was the first musical artist in history with enough nerve to keep an entire program to himself rather than providing the grab-bag of orchestral, vocal and instrumental pieces scattered across an evening's entertainment that was the typical early-19th-century concert. He dubbed those solo concerts "musical soliloquies" at first, and later called them by the now-familiar term, "recitals." ("How can one *recite* at the piano? Preposterous!" fumed one British writer.)

By 1848 Liszt had made his fortune, secured his fame, and decided that he had been touring long enough, so he gave up performing, appearing in public during the last four decades of his life only for an occasional benefit concert. Amid the variegated patchwork of duchies, kingdoms and city-states that constituted pre-Bismarck Germany, he chose to settle in the small but sophisticated city of Weimar, where Sebastian Bach held a job early in his career. Once installed at Weimar, Liszt took over the musical establishment there and elevated it into one of the most important centers of European artistic culture. He stirred up interest in such neglected composers as Schubert, and encouraged such younger ones as Saint-Saëns, Wagner and Grieg by performing their works. He also gave much of his energy to his own original compositions, and created many of the pieces for which he is known today — the symphonies, piano concertos, symphonic poems and choral works. Liszt had composed before he moved to Weimar, of course — his total output numbers between 1,400 and 1,500 separate works — but the early pieces were mainly piano solos for use at his own recitals. His later works are not only indispensable components of the Romantic musical era in their own right, but were also an important influence on other composers in their form, harmony and poetic content.

As if composing, conducting and performing were insufficient, Liszt was also one of the most sought-after piano teachers of the 19th century. He was popular with students not just because he possessed an awesome technique that was (and remains) the model of every serious pianist. Liszt was also a direct link

to that nearly deified figure, the glorious Beethoven, who had, so the story went, actually kissed the young prodigy on the forehead with his own lips. Furthermore, Liszt was a pupil of Carl Czerny, the most eminent student of Beethoven. To make this already unassailable combination of technique and tradition absolutely irresistible, Liszt brought to it an all-encompassing view of man and his world that enabled the mere tones of the piano to surpass themselves and open unspeakable realms of transcendent delight. One friend once remarked about the composer's wide variety of interests, "One could never know in which mental stall Liszt would find his next hobby horse." He was a truly remarkable man, one of the most important figures in terms of his cumulative influence on the art in all of 19th-century music.

Liszt sketched his two piano concertos in 1839, but they lay unfinished until he went to Weimar. He completed the Second Concerto, in A major, in the summer of 1849, but he did not get around to having it performed for more than seven years. Liszt required of a concerto that it be "clear in sense, brilliant in expression, and grand in style." In other words, it had to be a knockout. While it was inevitable that this Concerto would have a high percentage of finger-churning display, it was not automatic that it should also be of high musical quality — but it is.

The procedure on which Liszt built this Concerto and other of his orchestral works is called "thematic transformation," or, to use the rather more jolly phrase of American critic William Foster Apthorp, "The Life and Adventures of a Melody." Never bothered that he was ignoring the Classical models of form, Liszt concocted his own new structures around this transformation technique. ("Music is never stationary," he pronounced. "Successive forms and styles can only be like so many resting places — like tents pitched and taken down again on the road to the Ideal.") Basically, the "thematic transformation" process consisted of inventing a theme that could be used to create a wide variety of moods, tempos, orchestrations and rhythms to suggest whatever emotional states were required by the different sections of the piece.

There are at least six such sections in Liszt's Second Piano Concerto. The composer provided no description for these, but wrote music of such extroversion that it is not difficult for imaginative listeners to provide their own expressive progression: languor, storm, love, strife, resolve and battle is only one possible sequence. The melody on which this Concerto is based is presented immediately at the beginning by the clarinet and courses through each section of the work. It can most easily be identified by the little half-step sigh at the end of the first phrase.

MAURICE RAVEL

Boléro (1928)

Maurice Ravel was born in Ciboure, France on March 7, 1875, and died in Paris on December 28, 1937. *Boléro* was written as a ballet in 1928, and premiered in the same year at the Paris Opéra with the Ida Rubenstein Dance Company conducted by Walter Straram. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed *Boléro* at the Syria Mosque under the direction of Carlos Chavez, founder of the Mexican Symphonic Orchestra, on November 11, 1937. Most recently, Yan Pascal Tortelier led a performance of *Boléro* in March 2017. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, oboe d'amore (alto oboe), English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, three saxophones, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbals, gong, celesta, harp, and strings. **Performance time: approximately 13 minutes.**

"Ravel's *Boléro* I submit as the most insolent monstrosity ever perpetrated in the history of music," fumed the critic Edward Robinson in 1932. He was hardly the only music lover disparaging the piece when it was new — the composer himself informed his colleague Arthur Honegger, "I have written only one masterpiece. That is the *Boléro*. Unfortunately, it contains no music." When told that a woman at the Paris premiere had pointed in his direction and cried out, "He is mad," Ravel smiled, and said that she truly understood the work.

Despite critical misgivings, however, the public, always the ultimate arbiter, made *Boléro* one of the most popular pieces of concert music written in the 20th century. Within weeks of its American premiere, it carried Ravel's name and music to more ears than had any of his other works of the preceding four decades: virtually every major American orchestra scheduled *Boléro* for immediate performance; six recordings appeared simultaneously; the melody was arranged for jazz bands and just about every conceivable instrument and ensemble, including solo harmonica; it appeared in a Broadway revue and a cabaret; it served as background music for the 1934 film of the same name starring Carole Lombard and

George Raft, as well as another Hollywood effort of more recent vintage in which Dudley Moore pursued a beautiful fantasy on a beach in Mexico. Even the city fathers of Ravel's hometown were moved to name the street on which he was born in his honor. Soon after the Paris orchestral premiere in 1930, Ravel was in Monte Carlo with the conductor Paul Paray. When they walked past the Casino, Paray suggested, "Let's go in and play." Ravel replied, "No. I have played, and I don't play any more. I have won." Indeed he had.

Ravel originated what he once called his *"danse lascive"* at the suggestion of Ida Rubinstein, the famed ballerina who also inspired works from Debussy, Honegger and Stravinsky. Rubinstein's balletic interpretation of *Boléro*, set in a rustic Spanish tavern, portrayed a voluptuous dancer whose stomps and whirls atop a table incite the men in the bar to mounting fervor. With growing intensity, they join in her dance until, in a brilliant *coup de théâtre*, knives are drawn and violence flares on stage at the moment near the end where the music modulates, breathtakingly, from the key of C to the key of E. So viscerally stirring was the combination of the powerful music and the ballerina's suggestive dancing at the premiere that a near-riot ensued between audience and performers, and Miss Rubinstein narrowly escaped injury. The usually reserved Pitts Sanborn reported that the American premiere, conducted by Arturo Toscanini at Carnegie Hall on November 14, 1929, had a similar effect on its hearers: "If it had been the custom to repeat a number at a symphonic concert, *Boléro* would surely have been encored, even at the risk of mass wreckage of the nerves."

Of the musical nature of this magnificent study in hypnotic rhythm and orchestral sonority, Ravel wrote in 1931 to the critic M.D. Calvocoressi, "I am particularly desirous that there should be no misunderstanding about this work. It constitutes an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from or anything more than it actually does achieve. Before its first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece lasting about seventeen minutes and consisting wholly of 'orchestral tissue without music' — of one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, there is practically no invention except the plan and the manner of execution. The themes are altogether impersonal ... folktunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind, and (whatever may have been said to the contrary) the orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.... I have carried out exactly what I intended, and it is for listeners to take it or leave it." Take it, listeners have.

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