



**NATIONAL FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA**  
*WAGNER, BEETHOVEN AND BARTÓK*

**ASHER FISCH**, conductor  
SATURDAY, JUNE 27, 2015 . 8PM  
ELSIE & MARVIN DEKELBOUM CONCERT HALL

**PROGRAM**

Richard Wagner

Prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*

Ludwig van Beethoven

Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60

Adagio – Allegro vivace

Adagio

Menuetto: Allegro vivace

Allegro ma non troppo

- *intermission* -

Béla Bartók

Concerto for Orchestra

Introduzione

Gioco delle coppie

Elegia

Intermezzo interrotto

Finale

## Prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*

RICHARD WAGNER

Born May 22, 1813, Leipzig

Died February 13, 1883, Venice

*Lohengrin, with text by the composer, was completed in 1847, but was not performed until August 28, 1850, when it was presented at the Court Theater in Weimar, with Franz Liszt conducting. The orchestra specified for the Act I Prelude comprises 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals and strings. Duration, 9 minutes.*

In a period of three years, from October 1842 to 1845, Wagner enjoyed three huge successes in Dresden with the premieres there of his *Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*. His next work, *Lohengrin*, might be regarded as the first 100 percent Wagnerian “music drama.” It was the last work to which Wagner affixed the label “Romantic Opera,” and the first to be really *durchkomponiert*, with no semblance of recitative and with every action carried forward by the music itself. Wagner completed his text two years before the music and first read his poem in November 1845 to a gathering that included Robert Schumann, J.A. Hiller and a number of painters and writers. Schumann wrote to Felix Mendelssohn that the poem had impressed nearly everyone favorably (“particularly the painters”), and that it had compelled him to abandon his own plans for an opera on a somewhat similar Arthurian theme. The now forgotten Hiller, however, remarked that “Wagner’s talent as a musician would by no means suffice for this subject; the fine verses would surely yearn for some other composer.”

The origin and significance of the concept of Ideal Knighthood were subsequently discussed in an essay Wagner wrote in 1848, in which he recalled that the Holy Grail had been the goal pursued by Barbarossa, who met his end, after all, by plunging into a stream on horseback out of sheer impatience to get to the Grail. Since the time of Barbarossa, Wagner observed, there had been legends that “once the Keeper of the Grail had really brought the Holy Relic to the Occident and performed great wonders here. . . . In the Netherlands . . . a Knight of the Grail had appeared, but vanished when asked forbidden

questions about his origin.” This was Lohengrin, whose name has been traced to Loheran Garin, or Garin of Lorrain.

Wagner wrote of the Grail as “a symbol of the suprasensual . . . the precious vase from which the Saviour once had pledged his farewell to His people, the vessel into which His blood had poured when he suffered crucifixion for His brethren. . . . Already had this cup of healing been refit from worthless Man, when once a flight of angels brought it back from Heaven’s height to lonely men athirst for love; committed it to the keeping of these men, miraculously blest and strengthened by its presence.”

At the same time, several of Wagner’s letters emphasize his indebtedness to the religions of the East in creating this work. He sometimes referred to Lohengrin as “Ananda” and to Elsa as “Savitri,” signing himself as “Your grateful Buddhist.” He made it clear that, despite the particular symbolism he had chosen, his *Lohengrin* is not a specifically Christian work, but was meant to be spiritual in the broadest, most all-encompassing sense. He liked to speak of the “grand concordance” of all genuine myths, likening both his *Dutchman* and his *Tannhäuser* to Ulysses.

Of the Prelude to Act I, Wagner wrote: “This wonder-working Coming of the Grail in escort of an angel-host, its committal to the care of chosen men, the composer of *Lohengrin* — a Knight of the Grail — chose for his subject a sketch in tone, as introduction to his drama.” The Prelude is built on the simplest of motifs, repeated in subtle variants and building resolutely to an inevitable yet unflinching stunning climax whose power, like that of the work’s hero, lies in its unfeigned simplicity and directness.

## Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

*Beethoven composed his Fourth Symphony in 1806 and conducted its first performance in March of the following year, at Prince Lobkowitz’s palace in Vienna. The score, dedicated to Count Franz von Oppersdorff, calls for flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and strings. Duration, 35 minutes.*

In the fall of 1805, when Beethoven received Count Oppersdorff’s commission for a new symphony, his first thought was to present him with the Symphony in C minor whose first two movements he had sketched the previous year. Instead, however, he set the C minor aside and began this totally new and utterly different Symphony in B-flat, which he completed within a few months. It is one of his very few major works for which no preliminary sketches seem to have been made.

The reason Beethoven gave Count Oppersdorff for this change of plans was that he had been “compelled by want” to sell the C-minor Symphony “with a second one to someone else.” (Nos. 5 and 6, introduced together at the end of 1808, bear joint dedications to Prince Lobkowitz and Count Rasumovsky.) Sir George Grove suggested, however, in his book *Beethoven and His Nine Symphonies*, that the motivation had come from other considerations than merely practical ones: “Perhaps Beethoven’s instinct showed him that it would be an artistic mistake to follow so very serious a symphony as the *Eroica* by one equally earnest and profound. . . . At any rate, the B-flat Symphony is a complete contrast to both its predecessor and its successor, and is as gay and spontaneous as they are serious and lofty.”

The composer of the path-breaking *Eroica* might not have been expected to make any further gesture toward the Classical notion of the symphony, but in the Fourth Beethoven built on the Classical structure an edifice as distinguished by its originality as by its grace. The suspenseful *Adagio* introduction may be more or less according to Haydn’s formula, but it could not possibly be mistaken for Haydn, and the thrust and color of the first movement properly stamp this music even more surely as Beethoven’s and his alone. Here the delicious writing for the winds celebrates the lyric impulse that is to illumine the *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 6), and the rhythmic assertiveness looks ahead still farther, to the Seventh.

A side of the same character that is both softer and, in two quite different senses, darker greets us in the slow movement, a nobly flowing *Adagio* with nocturnal coloring, caressing themes and an inspired use of the drums to set the lyric phrases in high relief. A more animated middle section brings an unexpected

touch of dramatic urgency, with the drums providing both contrast to and continuity with the movement's opening section. Once this passes, the second half is even more intimate in feeling than the first, right up to the ruminative passage for winds that leads to the emphatic conclusion. This is a device characteristic of Haydn's symphonic slow movements, but again the language is so clearly Beethoven's that the similarity is noted only in passing.

Beethoven did not label the third movement a scherzo; as with the corresponding movement of his First Symphony, he called it a minuet. While it is clearly more of a Beethoven scherzo than a Classical minuet, a Classical sense of order seems to provide a rein against boisterousness. The trio section is Beethoven at his most genial and ingratiating, but very clearly on his own terms. The final movement, at once high-spirited and elegant, begins with a sort of *perpetuum mobile* tune, which is contrasted almost at once with a more lyrical and expansive one. These two themes and their offspring sustain the Symphony's dual character of vivacity and geniality to the end, which comes about with a touch of Haydnesque humor that Beethoven, yet again, succeeded in making his own.

For more than a hundred years, the Fourth Symphony was seldom spoken of without reference to Robert Schumann's description of it as standing between the *Eroica* and the C-minor "like a slender Greek maiden between two Norse giants." As the already quoted Grove pointed out back in 1896, though, "humour is hardly the characteristic of a Greek maiden, and when we recollect the humour which accompanies the grace and beauty of the Fourth Symphony, and is so obvious in every one of its movements, it must be admitted, though with great respect, that the comparison loses something of its force."

## Concerto for Orchestra BÉLA BARTÓK

*Born March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary  
(now Sînnicolaul Mare, Romania)  
Died September 26, 1945,  
New York City*

*Bartók composed his Concerto for Orchestra between August 15 and October 8, 1943; the premiere was given by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky on December 1, 1944. The score, dedicated to the memory of Natalie Koussevitzky, calls for piccolo, 3 flutes, 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, 2 harps and strings. Duration, 38 minutes.*

The Concerto for Orchestra, the last work Bartók completed in his own hand and lived to hear performed, quickly established itself as his greatest popular success. A "concerto for orchestra" is by definition a kind of display piece, specifically one in which every section of the orchestra gets its chance to shine, and this one is by all odds the grandest specimen of that genre; at the same time, it is an intensely personal work, and as such its creation proved to be a significant act of regeneration on the composer's part.

When Bartók came to America in October 1940 he was in poor health and financially insecure. The solo recitals he gave as pianist met with little success and he came to feel his compositions were being shunned by the big orchestras. He accepted low-level academic work procured for him by friends and, while he adapted some earlier works for different performing forces, he attempted no new creative effort until May 1943. By then he had been confined to a New York hospital for some three months, and it was there that Serge Koussevitzky, the legendary conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, visited him to offer him a commission (in the name of the newly formed Koussevitzky Music Foundation) for a major symphonic work. That gesture provided effective therapy. Bartók was well enough to leave the hospital a short time later; he began work on his new score at Saranac Lake in upstate New York in mid-August, and completed it in less than two months. A sense of spontaneity

and urgency is one of the work's conspicuous characteristics. When Koussevitzky conducted the premiere, in December 1944, he pronounced the Concerto for Orchestra "the best orchestral piece of the last 25 years." Two months later, at Koussevitzky's suggestion, Bartók added a 22-bar coda to the original finale, and by the end of the decade the Concerto was a prominent part of the international repertory.

By the time this work was introduced, Bartók had completed his Sonata for unaccompanied violin, commissioned by Yehudi Menuhin; he had undertaken the last of his three concertos for piano and accepted a commission for a concerto from the violist William Primrose. He lived long enough to complete the Third Piano Concerto, except for the last 17 bars of orchestration, which were eventually filled in by his associate Tibor Serly — who also managed, in a heroic four-year undertaking, to sort out the wildly unorganized sketches for the Viola Concerto so that it could be performed and published. The remarkable success of the Concerto for Orchestra created a receptive audience for those works, and its sustained popularity made it possible for Bartók's earlier works in various forms to make their way into the mainstream at last.

The period in which the Concerto for Orchestra was composed — the mid-1940s, the final years of World War II — gave rise to a number of orchestral works by various composers that were conceived in a spirit of optimism and undisguised warmth of heart, and were similarly well received. Among these we may count Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony, Paul Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis of Themes by Carl Maria von Weber* and, from our own Aaron Copland, the music for the ballet *Appalachian Spring* and the broad-scaled Third Symphony. Just as the Prokofiev is unmistakably Russian, and the Copland unmistakably American, the Concerto for Orchestra could only have been written by the Hungarian musician and patriot Béla Bartók.

The work's five movements are organized symmetrically around a central slow movement that is separated from the two outer ones by a pair of scherzos — the same layout Bartók used for his Fourth String Quartet in 1928. For the Boston premiere, he provided a program note of his own (in English), which he headed "Explanation to Concerto for Orchestra":

“The title of this symphony-like orchestral work is explained by its tendency to treat the single instruments or instrument groups in a *concertant* or soloistic manner. The ‘virtuoso’ treatment appears, for instance, in the fugato sections of the development of the first movement (brass instruments) or in the *perpetuum-mobile*-like passages of the principal theme in the last movement (strings), and, especially, in the second movement.

“As for the structure of the work, the first and fifth movements are written in a more or less regular sonata form. The development of the first movement contains fugato sections for the brass; the exposition in the finale is somewhat extended, and its development consists of a fugue built on the last theme of the exposition.

“Less traditional forms are found in the second and third movements. The main part of the second movement consists of a chain of independent short sections, played by wind instruments consecutively introduced in pairs (bassoons, oboes, clarinets, flutes, and muted trumpets). Thematically, the five sections have nothing in common and could be symbolized by the letters A, B, C, D, E. A kind of ‘trio’ — a short chorale for brass instruments and side drum — follows, after which the five sections are recapitulated in a more elaborate instrumentation.

“The structure of the third movement is chain-like: three themes appear successively. These constitute the core of the movement, which is enframed by a misty texture of rudimentary motives. Most of the thematic material of this movement derives from the introduction to the first movement. The form of the fourth movement — *Intermezzo interrotto* — could be rendered by the letter symbols A, B, A — interruption — B, A.

“The general mood of the work represents — apart from the jesting second movement — a gradual transition of the first movement and the lugubrious death song of the third, to the life-assertion of the last one.”

What Bartók did not state in his program note, but did confide to various Hungarian associates, is that the Concerto for Orchestra was conceived and created as a personal expression “of homesickness and hope for his country, and of peace and brotherhood for the world.” Vilmos Juhász, in his study *Bartók’s Years in America*, remarked that the Concerto for Orchestra “is the

portrayal of Hungary’s tragic fate, as Bartók himself has said. In this work the nation finally rises above the chaos of destruction. Bartók always believed that even a people’s outward fate can change for the better only through inner purification.”

What the composer described as “sterness” in the first movement, with its prominent passages for brass, is modified by lyric episodes. The conspicuously Hungarian style of the first two movements has been cited by various commentators as an expression of homesickness on Bartók’s part, and this feeling is reinforced and expanded upon in subsequent sections. Another compatriot, the musicologist György Kroó, wrote that the “atmosphere of the opening movement . . . is evoked by a fanfare-like theme resembling a call for battle, a broader Hungarian-style continuation of the same, and a contrasting infinitely sensitive, shy, quiet *dolce* melody lyrically orchestrated.”

The second movement, is labeled *Giucco delle coppie* (“Game of Pairs”) in the printed score, but Bartók’s original title for it was *Presentando le coppie* (“Presenting the Couples”), which reflects the folk tradition known in parts of Hungary as the “Sunday order of dances.”

Feelings of nostalgia and loss define the central *Elegia*, which is dominated, according to the late István Csicsery-Rónay (a writer and publisher, whose Occidental Press published the Juhász book quoted above), by a Székely threnody that may have been connected in Bartók’s mind with the loss of Transylvania, a region he especially loved and in which, as a collector or Hungarian folk songs, he found his oldest specimens. The Székelys were the oldest Hungarian tribe in Transylvania, and there are thousands of such laments in their music. Material from the first movement, as the composer noted, also appears here in slightly altered form.

The fourth movement, *Intermezzo interrotto*, returns us to a lighter form of homesickness, its playfulness on a more robust level than in the *Giucco delle coppie*. The second theme is Bartók’s somewhat idealized quotation of an operetta song by Zsigmond Vincze that was popular in the 1930s: its text includes the line, “You are lovely, you are beautiful, my Hungary.” The burlesque section of this movement struck some listeners as a parody of Danilo’s song about the girls at Maxim’s in the Hungarian-born Franz Lehár’s famous operetta *The Merry Widow*, but

Bartók advised that it was actually a reaction to an insistently repeated motif in the first movement of Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, which he had heard on the radio in his hospital room.

Apart from the matter of parody, listeners familiar with Bartók’s *Contrasts* for violin, clarinet and piano (composed in 1938 for Joseph Szigeti and Benny Goodman, and performed and recorded by them with Bartók at the piano) may notice here a recollection of a fleeting gesture in that work’s final movement. György Kroó quotes the pianist György Sándor as having had Bartók spell out his source of inspiration and the description of this “only programmatic portion” of the Concerto: “The artist declares his love for his native land in a serenade which is suddenly interrupted in a crude and violent manner; he is seized by rough, booted men who even break his instrument.”

The Concerto’s final movement is based largely on bagpipe tunes Bartók collected on his field trips in Transylvania about a hundred years ago. Early in the movement is a brisk, unpeated phrase that seems to echo the first of Grieg’s four Norwegian Dances (originally for piano duet, better known in Hans Sitt’s orchestration) — possibly an unconscious reminiscence of the time Bartók spent immersed in Grieg’s works in an attempt at tracing the latter’s inspiration in Norwegian folk music. It fits in seamlessly amid the rumbustious and exuberant proceedings. The entire movement is dancelike, open-hearted and close to the earth in feeling, and is said to represent, in Bartók’s words, “the brotherhood of all nations, in spite of wars and conflicts . . . a whirling paroxysm of dance in which all the peoples of the world join hands.” The coda, one of the happiest of musical afterthoughts, brings the work to a brilliant and resoundingly affirmative conclusion.

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