

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

***Contrasts* for Violin, Clarinet, and Piano**

Béla Bartók

Born March 25, 1881 in Nagyszentmiklos, Hungary.

Died September 26, 1945 in New York City.

Composed in 1938.

Premiered on January 9, 1939 in New York City by violinist Joseph Szigeti, clarinetist Benny Goodman, and pianist Endre Petri.

Duration: 17 minutes

When the Nazi threat began to loom over Hungary in the late 1930s, Bartók took what measures he could to protest the accumulating menace threatening his homeland, though, with the soulless rise of fascism, his actions affected him more than they did the authorities – he gave up his membership in the Austrian Performing Arts Society because of its Nazi sympathies, quit his teaching post at the Budapest Academy of Music, forbid broadcasts of his music, refused to perform in Germany and Italy, and left the German publishing firm of Universal Edition for the English house of Boosey & Hawkes. With his income dependent largely on royalties from performances, making a living became increasingly difficult for him. One who showed special concern for Bartók's perilous situation was his friend and long-time recital partner, the noted Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, who had spent much of his time in America following his Carnegie Hall debut in 1925.

Since Bartók flatly refused to accept any assistance even faintly tinged with charity, Szigeti concocted an ingenious plan with the clarinetist Benny Goodman, then one of the most popular figures in American music, that would bring his friend income from a commission, performances, and a recording. Though Goodman was known primarily as a jazz artist, he also had ambitions for a concert career, and he reached an agreement with Szigeti to commission a work from Bartók they could perform and record together. Their request reached Bartók in August 1938 in Switzerland, where he was taking a holiday before returning to Budapest after negotiating his new contract with Boosey & Hawkes in London. The work was to consist of a pair of movements – short enough to fit on two sides of a 78-rpm record – in Bartók's most approachable folk idiom. Bartók accepted the offer, added a piano to the ensemble, and completed the piece in September. By the end of 1939, Hitler had overrun Poland to start World War II, and Bartók's situation became desperate. He traveled to New York in April 1940 to make arrangements for his immigration to this country and brought with him a surprise for Szigeti and Goodman – a slow, middle movement for their piece. Bartók renamed the composition *Contrasts* to denote its varied sonorities.

The quick opening movement is a modern concert realization of the *verbunkos*, a Hungarian dance of alternating fast and slow sections. Bartók's example is based on a vigorous, snapping-rhythm theme introduced by the violin, around which the clarinet weaves elaborate decorations. Formal contrast is provided at the movement's center by a passage in the short-long rhythms characteristic of much Hungarian vernacular music. *Pihenő* (Relaxation) is quiet and mysterious. *Sebes* (Fast Dance) is introduced by a mistuned (*scordatura*) violin whose diabolical associations are familiar from Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* and Mahler's Fourth Symphony. The main body of the movement is occupied by a fiery folk-dance melody cunningly inflected with jazzy elements in tribute to Goodman. The contrasting central episode uses a theme in an irregular meter derived from Bulgarian folk music. The brilliant closing section, which includes a cadenza for the violin, returns the fiery music from the beginning of the movement.

Trio No. 2 in E minor for Violin, Cello, and Piano, Op. 67

Dmitri Shostakovich

Born September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg.

Died August 9, 1975 in Moscow.

Composed in 1944.

Premiered on November 9, 1944 in Moscow by violinist Dmitri Tsiganov, cellist Sergei Shirinsky (both members of the Beethoven String Quartet), and the composer as pianist.

Duration: 27 minutes

November 1943 marked the 50th anniversary of the death of Tchaikovsky, and, despite the difficulties and privations caused by World War II, the Soviet authorities determined to observe the event in grand style in Moscow. One of the country's leading critics and musicologists, and one of Dmitri Shostakovich's dearest friends, Ivan Sollertinsky, was invited to address the musicians assembled for the ceremony and, via radio broadcast, a national audience. Sollertinsky stayed with Shostakovich during his visit, and the two rejoiced over the westward advance of the Red Army and the imminent lifting of the siege of Leningrad, and commiserated over the Nazi atrocities that were being revealed in the wake of the German retreat. Shostakovich tried to convince Sollertinsky to settle in Moscow, and arranged for him to teach a class at the conservatory beginning in February 1944. When the friends parted, they thought their separation would be brief, but Sollertinsky, suffering from a heart condition exacerbated by illness and the strains of the war, died on February 11, just five days after he had given an introductory speech for a performance of Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony in Novosibirsk. As a memorial to Sollertinsky, Shostakovich turned to the piano trio, a musical genre that had noble precedents as the bearer of deep grief: Tchaikovsky wrote such a work at the passing of Nikolai Rubinstein, director of the Moscow Conservatory and one of his most important mentors; and Rachmaninov, in turn, composed a trio "in memory of a great artist" upon the death of Tchaikovsky. Shostakovich's trio was completed quickly that spring and followed immediately by the composition of the String Quartet No. 2, the first significant works that he had undertaken since finishing the Eighth Symphony a full year before.

The Piano Trio No. 2 (he suppressed his first work in the form, written in 1923, when he was 17, as a student exercise unfit for public dissemination) is one of Shostakovich's most brilliant formal inventions and one of his most deeply felt creations. The trio consists of the Classical four movements, the last two played without pause: sonata-allegro with introduction, scherzo, *Largo*, and finale. The working-out of this plan, however, is accomplished with a rare craftsmanship and ingenuity that casts the old forms in a distinctly contemporary idiom. The trio begins with a slow introduction in fugal style based on a theme whistled eerily in the high, glassy harmonics of the cello. The violin, muted, and then the piano take up this mournful chant, which, transformed into a quicker tempo, becomes the main theme of the movement. As is characteristic of many of Shostakovich's works, the subsidiary theme, a terse, downward, scalar motive in simple rhythms bandied among the three participants, grows directly from the preceding material. A vigorous discussion of the themes ensues before a compact recapitulation and a dying coda bring the movement to a close. The second movement is a sardonic scherzo whose central section is occupied by a folkish ditty embellished with plucky grace notes from the violin. The tragic third movement is a stark, modern realization of the *passacaglia*, the ancient form built above a recurring series of chords that Shostakovich also employed in his Eighth Symphony and yet again in his magnificent Violin Concerto No. 1 of 1948. The finale is closest in its structural type to a rondo into which are incorporated reminiscences of the themes from the opening movement and the *passacaglia*. The thematic profile of this closing movement is strongly influenced by the quirky melodic leadings and fiery rhythms of Jewish music, an ethnic group whose persecutions during those years affected Shostakovich deeply for

the rest of his life—the stunning Symphony No. 13 (“Babi Yar”) of 1962 commemorated the Nazi massacre of some 70,000 Jews near Kiev in 1941.

Though Shostakovich provided no explicit program for his Piano Trio No. 2, the circumstance and time of the work’s creation marked it indelibly with a strong emotional progression, which David Rabinovich in his 1959 biography of the composer expressed in the following terms: “The first movement begins with a short lyrical ‘landscape’ introduction, slow moving, with a tinge of light sadness or, perhaps, elegiac thoughtfulness.... The whole movement leaves the impression of a calm and clear poetic picture of everyday, specifically Russian life that is not marred by any dramatic conflict. The energetically bubbling second movement, the *scherzo*, with its dance rhythms, conveys a turbulent *joie de vivre*.... Quite different, even astounding in the suddenness of its appearance, is the world of emotions and images evoked by the third movement. This *Passacaglia*, however, is only the introduction to the sphere of tragedy that is unfolded in the finale. Never has Shostakovich’s fantasy created anything more awe-inspiring than this (typically Jewish) dance music. In the automatism of its rhythm, in the inevitability of its accents that fall all the time on the same sounds, in the savage screech of the second theme there is something deathly. In this ‘revelry’ there is the impudent, cynical saturnalia of death.... The Trio is not descriptive, [but] it is a wrathful protest against monstrous brute force. In the Trio, as in the Eighth Symphony, Shostakovich appeals passionately to people and their conscience. There is no ray of light in the Piano Trio ... [but] the composer reminds us of death for the sake of life. He appeals to his listeners not to submit to death but to fight against it.”

Quintet in A major for Clarinet, Two Violins, Viola, and Cello, K. 581

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born January 27, 1756 in Salzburg.

Died December 5, 1791 in Vienna.

Composed in 1789.

Premiered on December 22, 1789 in Vienna, with Anton Stadler as clarinetist and the composer as violist.

Duration: 33 minutes

Mozart harbored a special fondness for the graceful agility, liquid tone, and ensemble amiability of the clarinet from the time he first heard the instrument as a young boy during his tours, and he later wrote for it whenever it was available. His greatest compositions for the instrument were inspired by the technical accomplishment and expressive playing of Anton Stadler, principal clarinetist of the Imperial Court Orchestra in Vienna and a fellow Mason, for whom he wrote not only this quintet, but also the Trio for Piano, Clarinet, and Viola (“Kegelstatt,” K. 498), the clarinet and basset horn parts in the vocal trios, the clarinet solos in the opera *La Clemenza di Tito*, the clarinets parts added to the second version of the G minor Symphony (K. 550), and the flawless Clarinet Concerto (K. 622), his last instrumental work, completed in October 1791, just two months before his death. The last years of Mozart’s life were ones of troubled finances, ill health, and family problems that often forced him to beg for loans from others. It says much about his kindness and sensitivity that he, in turn, loaned Stadler money when he could, and even once gave him two gold watches to pawn when there was no cash at hand. The final accounting of Mozart’s estate after his death showed that Stadler owed him some 500 florins—several thousand dollars. The clarinet works that he gave to his friend are beyond price.

The quintet opens with a theme that is almost chaste in its purity and yet is, somehow, deeply introspective and immediately touching. As its initial punctuating arpeggios indicate, the clarinet’s role in the piece is not so much one of soloist in a miniature concerto (as is the wind instrument in the Horn Quintet, K. 407) as that of an equal partner to the string ensemble. The second theme, a limpid, sweetly chromatic melody such as could have been conceived by no other musician of the time, not even Joseph

Haydn, is given first by the violin and then by the clarinet above a delicate syncopated string accompaniment. A reference to the suave main theme closes the exposition and serves as the gateway to the development section, which is largely concerned with permutations of the arpeggiated figures with which the clarinet made its entry in the opening measures. The recapitulation provides exquisite closure of the movement's formal structure and emotional progression. The *Larghetto* achieves a state of exalted sublimity that makes it the instrumental counterpart to Sarastro's arias in *The Magic Flute*, which George Bernard Shaw once said were the only music fit to issue from the mouth of God. The *Menuetto* is fitted with two trios: the first, a somber minor-mode essay for strings alone, is perfectly balanced by the clarinet's lilting, *Ländler*-like strains in the second. The variations-form finale is more subdued and pensive than virtuosic and flamboyant, and serves as a fitting conclusion to one of the most precious treasures in Mozart's peerless musical legacy.

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