

Béla Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*

"Snare drum, I want jazz."

By James W. Doyle

In 1943, conductor Serge Koussevitzky convinced an ailing Béla Bartók to accept a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation for a new work for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.¹ This new piece, the *Concerto for Orchestra*, was dedicated to "the memory of Natalie Koussevitzky," the conductor's late wife.² The work was premiered on December 1, 1944.³ Despite suffering from leukemia, Bartók composed *Concerto for Orchestra* from August 15 until October 8, 1943 during a period of good health.⁴ This five-movement work is one of the "most performed works of the twentieth century" and "holds a coveted position in the orchestral repertory."⁵ The snare drum part in the second movement, *Giuoco delle coppie (Game of Pairs)*,⁶ regularly appears on orchestral percussion auditions. This snare drum part, referred to as "side drum" in the score, is played without snares and appears at both the introduction and conclusion of the movement.⁷

The introduction appears as shown in Example 1.

The second movement, marked at quarter note equals 94, is a chain of five dances in instrumental couples, with a chorale separating a return of the five instrumental couples in slight variation.⁸ The side drum provides an "integrating feature of the movement" and "acts as the master of ceremonies, initiating and terminating the proceedings."⁹ Because the side drum is solo and doesn't merely enhance another part within the score, it is a defining factor within Bartók's composition.

As written, the side drum part does not present any particular rhythmical challenges, leaving

the performer to focus on sticking and phrasing. However, the manner in which it is traditionally performed and interpreted is dramatically different from the earliest performances in 1944, regardless of sticking and phrasing.

The first performance took place during a matinee concert with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on December 1, 1944, with a repeat performance the following evening. Against his doctor's recommendation, Bartók attended the rehearsals and premiere and was pleased with the performance.¹⁰ A second pair of performances took place on December 29 and 30, 1944. The Boston Symphony Orchestra then gave the New York premiere on January 10 and 13, 1945.

An early recording, originally said to be the premiere performance broadcast was released on compact disc by the Italian label Stradivarius. Although the Stradivarius release states the recording is from December 1, 1944, veteran broadcaster and critic Martin Bookspan said in a 1990 *New York Times* article that the recording is from December 29, 1944.¹¹ Regardless of this contradiction, what is clear is the side drum part in the second movement is interpreted in a most interesting fashion. The performance almost has a swing feel, as heard in Audio Excerpt 1.

Another recording demonstrates a similar interpretation. The December 30, 1944 performance of *Concerto for Orchestra* exists as a broadcast recording and was released to compact disc by NAXOS in 2000.¹² Liner notes authored by British music writer Rob Cowan are available on the NAXOS website, where Cowan makes a peculiar statement regarding

Audio Excerpt 1



the second movement. He states, "The accented side drum that opens the playful *Giuoco delle coppie (Game of Pairs)*, second movement is freer than we are used to hearing nowadays."¹³ Upon listening to the work, he is absolutely correct. The side drum once again seems to swing in style, as heard in Audio Excerpt 2.

Audio Excerpt 2



Why would the percussionist on these early live recordings interpret a very straightforward rhythm in such a deliberately loose manner?

In the fall of 2015 percussionist Gary Cook shared with me an email dated October 5, 2003 from percussionist Michael Quinn that included insightful information regarding the premiere performance of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*. Quinn's former teacher at the Boston Conservatory from 1962–63, Simon Sternberg, was a percussionist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and performed the snare drum part for the premiere of *Concerto for Orchestra*.

Quinn had purchased the NAXOS reissued recording of the December 30, 1944 performance of the work. British music writer Rob Cowan, the author of the liner notes for this recording, cited the side drum as being "freer than we are used to hearing nowadays." After reading Cowan's notes, Quinn wrote Cowan and shared the following story:

I thought you might be interested in the following story that comes from a former teacher of mine, Simon Sternberg, who played this performance and the world premiere just a few weeks before: Bartók

Example 1

Allegro Scherzando $\text{♩} = 94$

mf 9 *dim. - - p*

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Example 2

II. GIUOCO DELLE COPPIE

Allegro scherzando $\text{♩} = 94$
SIDE DRUM (without snares)

S. Dr. 9 17 25

1st Bsn.

TIMP. P

mf Poch. rit.

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attended rehearsals and when he heard the drum played as written he said, "Snare drum, I want jazz!" (Surrealism in keeping with the movement's beginnings as a dream, no doubt.) Sternberg retained however that Bartók's idea of jazz was ragtime (Surely it's only coincidence that the 4th and 5th measures of the drum solo are the same rhythm as the second subject of Joplin's "The Entertainer"), and about the only thing "jazzy" to do with such stiff rhythms was to "swing" them (broken triplets rather than duplets), which he proceeded to do with Bartók's approval, and explains the lilt in the above 4th and 5th measures, and the closing up of the 16ths in the first three measures. (Of course, in the chorale there's no fooling around.)

For this article, Quinn shared the sticking used by Sternberg for the premiere and subsequent live broadcast recordings (see Example 2).

Additionally, Quinn provided this photograph of the 1920s Ludwig Black Beauty snare drum played by Sternberg for the performances (see Example 3).

Bartók passed away less than a year after the work's premiere. It's likely he never attended another rehearsal after the early rehearsal referenced by Sternberg and relayed to Quinn. Based on this evidence, is it possible we've been playing it wrong for the past seventy years? In his letter to Cowan, Quinn suggests he believes so, stating, "I have preached this information for years in the hopes that some enterprising conductor will risk the original interpretation. And it has happened, but as yet not enough or with a name big enough to receive attention."

Bartók, a Hungarian, was widely known for collecting folk music and incorporating these aspects into his compositions. In ethnomusicological circles, Bartók is revered as one of the "founding fathers of the objective study of popular music."¹⁴ Could this include the ragtime and/or jazz idioms in the United States where Bartók lived while writing *Concerto for Orchestra*? He visited the U.S. in April 1940 for a series of concerts and arrived in New York again with his wife on October 29 of the same year. Bartók would remain in the U.S. until his death in 1945.¹⁵

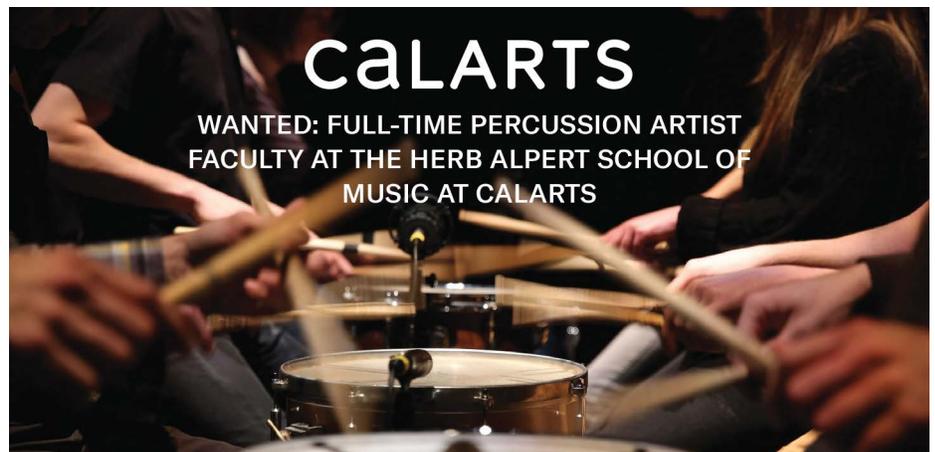
In an article published in the *Pittsburgh Press* on January 23, 1941, Bartók said, "American jazz music has had some 'influence' on his recent compositions."¹⁶ Although he was commissioned by clarinetist and jazz great Benny Goodman and violinist Joseph Szigeti in 1938 to write *Contrasts*, a trio for clarinet, violin, and piano (Bartók, Goodman, and Szigeti also recorded *Contrasts*), Bartók stated in the *Pittsburgh Press* he had never heard Goodman "play any popular music."¹⁷ *Contrasts*, as expected, utiliz-

Example 3



es Hungarian folk music ideas but does not seem to contain jazz elements.¹⁸ Possibly contradicting Bartók's Pittsburgh Press statement, musicologist Malcom Gillies states that Bartók studied recordings of Goodman's trio, and *Contrasts* is "filtered Hungarian jazz."¹⁹ Gillies also suggests Bartók's piano pieces, the *Mikrokosmos*, have elements of jazz, and Bartók himself referenced George Gershwin's influence on No. 151 of the *Mikrokosmos*.²⁰

With clues to the influence of jazz on Bartók's compositions and his desire for Sternberg to interpret the side drum part in style, maybe there are other examples in his music open to greater interpretation. This speaks to the value of curated recordings, seventy years or more later, as being invaluable to the understanding of the true intentions of composers.



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ENDNOTES

1. Michael Mauskapf, "Collective Virtuosity in Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra," *Journal of Musicological Research* 30, no 4 (October 2011): 1, accessed March 27, 2016, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.
2. Klára Móricz, "New Aspects of the Genesis of Béla Bartók's 'Concerto for Orchestra': Concepts of 'Finality' and 'Intention,'" *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, (1993): 203, accessed March 27, 2016, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost.
3. Michael Mauskapf, "Collective Virtuosity in Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra," *Journal of Musicological Research* 30, no 4 (October 2011): 277, accessed March 27, 2016, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.
4. David Cooper, *Bartók Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20.
5. Michael Mauskapf, "Collective Virtuosity in Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra," *Journal of Musicological Research* 30, no 4 (October 2011): 2, accessed March 27, 2016, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.
6. The title of the second movement was later changed to *Presentando le Coppie*, "presenting of the couples."
7. Bela Bartók, *Concerto for Orchestra* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1946), 29.
8. Sir George Solti addresses this tempo marking in an August 1983 amendment. Despite early copies of the score in the New York Bartók Archive and the Library of Congress having quarter note equals 94, a likely error occurred when the manuscript was sent to the engraver. The published parts, in error, read quarter note equals 74 and were addressed by Solti in the Boosey and Hawkes score.
9. David Cooper, *Bartók Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45.
10. David Cooper, *Bartók Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.
11. Martin Bookspan, "Recordings; Koussevitzky Treasures Through a Sonic Mire," *The New York Times*, January 28, 1990, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/28/arts/recordings-koussevitzky-treasures-through-a-sonic-mire.html>
12. Bartok: Concerto for Orchestra / Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition, Koussevitzky, 1943-1944, NAXOS, accessed March 24, 2016, http://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=8.110105
13. Bartok: Concerto for Orchestra / Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition, Koussevitzky, 1943-1944, NAXOS, http://www.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.110105&catNum=8110105&file-type=About%20this%20Recording&language=English#
14. David Cooper, *Bartók Concerto for Orchestra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.
15. *Ibid.*, 16.
16. "Bartók Admits Jazz Influence in Compositions," *Pittsburg Press*, January 23, 1941, accessed March 23, 2016, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=dy8bAAAAI-BAJ&sjid=Y0wEAAAAlBAJ&pg=4342%2C6987152>
17. *Ibid.*
18. "Bela Bartók, Contrasts for Violin, Clarinet, and Piano," Los Angeles Philharmonic, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.laphil.com/philpedia/music/contrasts-for-violin-clarinet-and-piano-bela-bartok>
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2007): 7 Accessed March 27, 2016. http://www.boosey.com/pages/cr/composer/composer_special.asp?composerid=269

20. *Ibid.*

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- A special thank you to the late **Michael Quinn** for the information provided for this article. Michael Quinn studied timpani and percussion in the USA with Alexander Lepak, Simon Sternberg, and Vic Firth, and in Munich with Karl Peinkofer. He held percussion positions with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and the Bavarian State Opera in Munich. He was timpanist with the Tonhalle-Orchestra, Zurich, and the La Scala Opera in Milan, and was percussion tutor for the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra, Vienna. He taught at the Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana, in Lugano, Switzerland and was a long-time guest teacher at the Civica Scuola di Musica, Milan. He collaborated with the Toscanini

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