Béla Bartók: the 100 most inspiring musicians of all time

Béla Bartók (b. March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hung., Austria-Hungary–d.Sept. 26, 1945, New York, N.Y., U.S.) Hungarian composer, pianist, ethnomusicologist, and teacher Béla Bartók is known for the Hungarian flavour of his major musical compositions, which include orchestral works, string quartets, piano solos, several stage works, a cantata, and a number of settings of folk songs for voice and piano.

Career in Hungary

Bartók spent his childhood and youth in various provincial towns, studying the piano with his mother and later with a succession of teachers. He began to compose small dance pieces at age nine, and two years later he played in public for the first time, including a composition of his own in his program.

Bartók undertook his professional studies in Budapest, at the Royal Hungarian Academy of Music. He developed rapidly as a pianist but less so as a composer. His discovery in 1902 of the music of Richard Strauss stimulated his enthusiasm for composition. At the same time, a spirit of optimistic nationalism was sweeping Hungary, and the 22-year-old composer wrote a symphonic poem, Kossuth (1903); in a style reminiscent of Strauss, though with a Hungarian flavour, the work portrays the life of the great patriot Lajos Kossuth, who had led the
revolution of 1848–49. Despite a scandal at the first performance, the work was received enthusiastically.

Shortly after Bartók completed his studies in 1903, he and the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály, who collaborated with Bartók, discovered that what they had considered Hungarian folk music and drawn upon for their compositions was instead the music of city-dwelling Roma (Gypsies). A vast reservoir of authentic Hungarian peasant music was subsequently made known by the research of the two composers. The initial collection was begun with the intention of revitalizing Hungarian music.

Both composers not only transcribed many folk tunes for the piano and other media but also incorporated into their original music elements of rural music.

Bartók was appointed to the faculty of the Academy of Music in 1907 and retained that position until 1934, when he resigned to become a working member of the Academy of Sciences. His holidays were spent collecting folk material, and he soon began the publication of articles and monographs.

At the same time, Bartók was expanding the catalog of his compositions, with many new works for the piano, a substantial number for orchestra, and the beginning of a series of six string quartets that was to constitute one of his most impressive achievements. His first numbered quartet (1908) shows few traces of folk influence, but in the others that influence is omnipresent. The quartets parallel and illuminate Bartók’s stylistic development: in the second quartet (1915–17) Berber elements reflect the composer’s collecting trip to North Africa; in the third (1927) and fourth (1928) there is a more intensive use of dissonance; and in the fifth (1934) and sixth (1939) there is a reaffirmation of traditional tonality.

In 1911 Bartók wrote his only opera, Duke Bluebeard’s Castle, an allegorical treatment of the legendary wife murderer with a
score permeated by characteristics of traditional Hungarian folk songs, especially in the speechlike rhythms of the text setting. The technique is comparable to that used by the French composer Claude Debussy in his opera Pelléas et Mélisande (1902). A ballet, The Wooden Prince (1914–16), and a pantomime, The Miraculous Mandarin (1918–19), followed; thereafter he wrote no more for the stage.

Unable to travel during World War I, Bartók devoted himself to composition and the study of the collected folk music. During the short-lived proletarian dictatorship of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, he served as a member of the Music Council with Kodály and Dohnányi. Upon its overthrow Kodály was removed from his position at the Academy of Music; but Bartók, despite his defense of his colleague, was permitted to remain.

His most productive years were the two decades that followed the end of World War I in 1918, when his musical language was completely and expressively formulated. He had assimilated many disparate influences; in addition to those already mentioned—Strauss and Debussy—there were the 19th-century Hungarian composer Franz Liszt and the modernists Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg.

Bartók arrived at a vital and varied style, rhythmically animated, in which diatonic and chromatic elements are juxtaposed without incompatibility. Within these two creative decades, Bartók composed two concerti for piano and orchestra and one for violin; the Cantata Profana (1930), his only large-scale choral work; the Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta (1936) and other orchestral works; and several important chamber scores, including the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion (1937). The same period saw Bartók expanding his activities as a concert pianist, playing in most of the countries of western Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union.
U.S. Career

As Nazi Germany extended its sphere of influence in the late 1930s and Hungary appeared in imminent danger of capitulation, Bartók found it impossible to remain in his homeland. After a second concert tour of the United States in 1940, he immigrated there the same year. An appointment as research assistant in music at Columbia University, New York City, enabled him to continue working with folk music, transcribing and editing for publication a collection of Serbo-Croatian women’s songs, a part of a much larger recorded collection of Yugoslav folk music. With his wife, the pianist Ditta Pásztory, he was able to give a few concerts. His health, however, had begun to deteriorate even before his arrival in the United States.

Béla Bartók’s last years were marked by the ravages of leukemia, which often prevented him from teaching, lecturing, or performing. Nonetheless, he was able to compose the Concerto for Orchestra (1943), the Sonata for violin solo (1944), and all but the last measures of the Piano Concerto No. 3 (1945). When he died, his last composition, a viola concerto, was left an uncompleted mass of sketches (completed by Tibor Serly, 1945).

Sheet Music download here.

The best of Béla Bartók

Divertimento for Strings, II. Molto adagio [Sz 113] 52:03


Concerto for Orchestra Sz. 116, BB 123 – Hungarian State Orchestra/Antal Doráti Violin Concerto No. 2 Sz. 112, BB 117 – Dénes Kovács (violin), Budapest Symphony Orchestra/Ervin Lukács Piano Concerto No. 2 – Zoltán Kocsis (piano), Budapest Symphony Orchestra/György Lehel Piano Concerto No. 3 – Dezső Ránki (piano), Hungarian State Orchestra/János Ferencsik Piano Sonata – Erzsébet Tusa String Quartet No. 2 and No. 6 -Tátrai Quartet