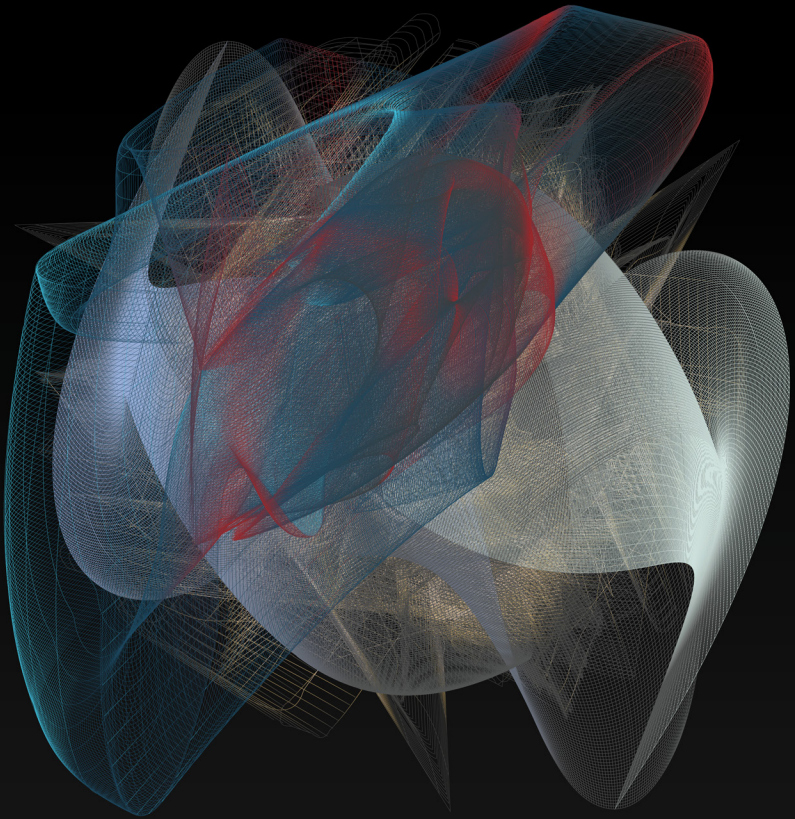
Bartók Piano Concertos
PIERRE-LAURENT AIMARD
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
ESA-PEKKA SALONEN



Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

	Piano Concerto No. 1 in A Major, Sz. 83	
1	I. Allegro moderato — Allegro	9. 27
2	II. Andante — attacca	7. 42
3	III. Allegro molto	7. 25
	Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Major, Sz. 95	
4	I. Allegro	9. 50
5	II. Adagio — Presto — Più adagio	12. 50
6	III. Allegro molto	6. 29
	Piano Concerto No. 3 in E Major, Sz. 119	
7	I. Allegro	7. 59
8	II. Adagio religioso	10. 21
9	III. Allegro vivace	7. 18
	Total playing time:	79. 27

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano

San Francisco Symphony
Esa-Pekka Salonen, Music Director

Esa-Pekka Salonen (l), Pierre-Laurent Aimard & San Francisco Symphony
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Bartók's own recordings teach us the extent to which every musical dimension nourishes every moment of his works - including his virtuosity. By this, I mean the extent to which everything in his work is melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, architectural, and also phrased, pulsed, spoken, sung and experienced.

Hungary attracted me so much in my younger years: I spent a lot of time with Hungarians and their country. It was not only a privilege but also a choice to work in depth with great Hungarian masters such as György Kurtág, Simon Albert and Péter Eötvös. And nothing could have brought me closer to such linguistically singular music than learning the Hungarian language.

For me, Bartók's piano concertos are among the most demanding in the repertoire, due to their combination of instrumental challenge and musical significance. Their intensity is incandescent.

Pierre-Laurent Aimard

Bartók: Piano Concertos

After the *Dance Suite* (1923) and *Village Scenes* (1924), Bartók was unsure about the direction his music should take, writing to his wife Ditta on 21 June 1926: 'I have felt so stupid, so dazed, so empty-headed that I have truly doubted whether I am able to write anything new anymore.' The self-doubt was misplaced, but the new works that emerged — notably the Piano Sonata, the suite *Out of Doors* and the First Piano Concerto — showed a composer forging a distinctive modernist path: music where angular rhythms and abrasive harmonies sat side-by-side with an ever-deepening assimilation of Hungarian folk music. The First Piano Concerto was intended for Bartók himself to play, as means of securing solo engagements with orchestras. While he had often performed the early *Rhapsody* Op. 1, he needed a work that was representative of his mature musical language. It was written between August and November 1926, and first performed by the composer himself at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Frankfurt on 1 July 1927, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler. More performances soon followed with Bartók as soloist, including a BBC broadcast (in an all-Bartók programme) on 10 October 1927, conducted by Edward Clark, and the American premiere, given in New York by the Cincinnati Symphony under Fritz Reiner on 13 February 1928. But from the Frankfurt premiere onwards, the work failed to arouse much enthusiasm from either critics or the musical public. The New York press was particularly brutal, with Henrietta Straus in *The Nation* declaring that 'the only sustained motif is that of bitterness, and the sum total is unmitigated ugliness'. On 20 October 1928, Bartók wrote to Fritz Reiner: 'I've played my piano concerto a few times since I came home; the performances have been as diverse as the receptions! The Budapest performance was conscientious enough, considering how things are here (though the brass instruments simply hadn't the required volume); the Berlin performance — under [Erich] Kleiber — had lots of life, but the orchestra had a few misadventures. Of course, not one of

the European performances came up to the standard of precision shown in Cincinnati.' A decade later, in 1939, Bartók wrote that, while he considered the concerto a success, 'its writing is a bit difficult — one might even say very difficult! — as much for orchestras as for audiences.' He was more explicit in a letter dated 12 January 1939 to Hans Priegnitz about a planned broadcast on Berlin radio: 'the orchestral part ... is extraordinarily difficult, and if the conductor and orchestra are not absolutely first class, and if there is no adequate time for rehearsals, it would be better to abandon the performance.' Bartók was also well aware of the incongruity of a radio station in Nazi Germany wanting to play this work in 1939, telling Priegnitz that 'I am astonished that such "degenerate" music should be selected for, of all things, a radio broadcast.'

With its troubled early history in mind, it comes as a relief to find Bartók's biographer Halsey Stevens writing in 1953 about the concerto's 'immense vitality, at white heat throughout' and that 'its élan ... carries everything before it.' Perhaps its most remarkable feature is Bartók's deliberate decision to explore the use of the solo piano as a percussion instrument, and, indeed, to integrate it with the rest of the section in a kind of *concertante* group: a note in the score states that 'percussion instruments (including timpani) are to be placed, if possible, directly behind the piano'. This gives the concerto a unique sonority — something which baffled early audiences but which can now be appreciated as a highly innovative contribution to the form — even though the overall design (three movements: *Allegro*, *Andante* and *Allegro molto*) seems, on the surface, to be conventional.

As we have seen, Bartók was acutely aware that his First Concerto had won him few friends, and its complexity and rather forbidding nature provided the spur for a new concerto: Bartók wrote that 'a few years later (1930–31), while working on my Second Concerto, I wanted to produce a piece which would be less bristling with difficulties for

the orchestra and whose thematic material would be more pleasing.' The Second Concerto was no less demanding for the soloist (like the first, Bartók composed it for himself), and in its more approachable way, it is every bit as original. Perhaps the most striking feature is the sheer exuberance of the musical ideas: there's as much *bravura* and vitality as in the First Concerto, but from the start we find cheerfulness and high spirits. The instrumentation is also unusual as Bartók ingeniously creates a range of colours by omitting the strings entirely from the first movement (which is scored for piano, woodwind, brass and percussion). The start of the *Adagio* comes as a startling contrast to the angular jubilation of the opening movement: for the first time in the work, we hear the strings, muted, and directed to play 'non vibrato'. The rest of the orchestra joins for the wild central *Presto* section, before the *Adagio* returns, leading a final reminiscence of the opening. The finale, marked *Allegro molto*, is a rondo in which almost all the thematic material is derived from transformations — sometimes remote ones — of ideas originally heard in the first movement, bringing the concerto to a joyous conclusion.

The scoring of the first movement — and the two main ideas heard at the start — both suggest that this concerto was a conscious reaction — or maybe homage — to Stravinsky. The absence of strings suggests a clear parallel with Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments (1923–4), but the themes themselves indicate a nod to other works: although speeded up, the opening trumpet flourish uses the same notes as the theme in the finale of Stravinsky's *Firebird*, and the piano entry two bars later bears a close resemblance to the melody (and crunchy chordal texture) of the 'Russian Dance' in *Petrushka*. It's difficult to imagine this being an accident, but, at the same time, Bartók manages to infuse these themes with the vigour and character of Hungarian folk music. Bartók gave the first performance in Frankfurt on 23 January 1933, conducted by Hans Rosbaud, and the British premiere on 8

November 1933 at the Queen's Hall in London, when the composer was joined by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. The work had a much warmer critical reception than its predecessor. Reviewing the London performance, *The Times* wrote that 'it is certainly a much more immediately convincing example of [Bartók's] style'. Following the success of the Second Concerto, Bartók dropped the First from his repertoire.

The Third Piano Concerto was Bartók's last completed work, written during his final exile in the United States, and its mood is one of serenity and lucidity. A note in the front of the score states that it was composed 'during the summer of 1945. By this time [Bartók] was gravely ill; however, he was able to finish the score with the exception of the last seventeen bars, which he notated in a kind of shorthand. These [bars] were deciphered and scored by his friend and pupil Tibor Serly.' The start of the opening *Allegretto* presents a simple theme in octaves on the piano, over gently oscillating strings, and the rest of the movement continues in this genial vein. The central *Adagio religioso* recalls the spiritual intensity of late Beethoven (specifically the Op. 132 String Quartet), opening with a chorale-like string theme, but at the heart of the movement Bartók evokes an enchanted sound-world of insects and bird calls (a fine example of his 'night music') before returning to the chorale. The closing *Allegro vivace* is among the most untroubled of all Bartók's finales: an ebullient rondo, rooted in Hungarian dance. Perhaps the most poignant feature of this valedictory work is that Bartók — dying of leukemia, far from home, and largely ignored in America except by a few loyal friends — was moved to produce music of such untroubled hope. While he had composed the first two concertos for himself to play, this one was a present for his wife, Ditta Pásztory. The posthumous premiere was given by György Sándor with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy, on 8 February 1946.

Nigel Simeone

San Francisco Symphony

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This album was recorded on June 16-19th 2022 and February 17th-19th 2023. All works recorded in hi-res audio live at Davies Symphony Hall – a venue of the San Francisco War Memorial & Performing Arts Center, City and County of San Francisco.

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