

Bartók: The Miraculous Mandarin Suite (programme note for 10 March 2012)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945), Hungarian composer, ethnomusicologist, concert pianist, and professor of piano, enjoyed limited recognition in his own life-time but ultimately he became one of the most influential figures in twentieth century music.

His early works, such as the Suite Op 3 (performed by OSO 1994) and the symphonic poem 'Kossuth', follow romantic traditions, being inspired by the music of Wagner, Liszt and Richard Strauss. His later works, such as the Concerto for Orchestra (performed by OSO 2004), piano concertos nos. 2 & 3, and the violin concerto no. 2, owe much to the plangent melodic forms and complex rhythms that Bartók discovered in authentic Hungarian and Romanian folk music. Now, many of Bartók's mature orchestral works figure in the regular repertoire and other works, the six string quartets, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste and the opera 'Bluebeard's Castle', are also counted amongst his masterpieces.

Bartók's music combines poignant melodies with striking harmonic and rhythmic structures and although it is sometimes aggressively modernist in its impact (he is renowned for the 'Bartók pizzicato' where a string is plucked so strongly that it rebounds with a 'thwack' on the fingerboard) some works feature ethereal 'night music' in which he imitated the sounds of insects and birds that were a particular interest to him. In structure his compositions are often based around palindromes, arch forms and proportions based on the 'natural' form of the golden section.

Bartók was quiet in demeanour but ascetic and exacting in temperament. Strongly nationalistic, he loved the Hungarian countryside and peasant culture. When towards the end of his life, his fierce opposition to fascism forced him to seek exile in the USA, he sorely missed his homeland. In these final years Bartók endured both ill-health and poverty but after his death his music not only gained unforeseen popularity, it became a rich source of research for a new generation of composers, including Olivier Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Peter Maxwell Davies and György Ligeti.

It is apposite that a major Bartók work should feature in tonight's concert since three of the works recently performed by OSO (Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*) were of particular interest to him. The legacy of that interest can clearly be discerned in *The Miraculous Mandarin*: an approach to thematic development derived from Liszt, a detailed evocation and illustration of story and character as found in Strauss' tone poems, and elements of orchestral colour that are reminiscent of Stravinsky.

Bartók composed three works for the stage and in all of them love and barriers to its fulfilment are an underlying theme. His ballet *The Wooden Prince* is a fairy-tale story about the trials of courtship and his opera *Bluebeard's Castle* is a heart-rending but beautiful articulation of a failing marriage. In the brutal and grotesque *Miraculous Mandarin* pantomime (a work with dance, silent acting and musical accompaniment) the protagonist only wins an embrace as he dies.

Whether or not Bartók was deeply attracted by the allegorical content of these extraordinary dramas, or whether he drew parallels between them and his personal

experience, it is difficult to say but, unquestionably, Menyhért Lengyel's expressionistic play *The Miraculous Mandarin*, and the challenges to social and artistic conventions of the time that it reflected, quickly caught his imagination. These were troubled and changing times for when in 1918 Bartók set to work composing *The Miraculous Mandarin* the old empires in Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary had recently been swept away and Hungary was being torn apart. In Budapest, where Bartók lived, food was in short supply and, within a period of just nine months, the city was rocked by three political revolutions.

Lengyel's play is set in a noisy modern city. Three thugs in an upstairs room are forcing a girl friend to stand at the window and entice men to come upstairs so that they can rob them. An old roué and a timid youth succumb to the girl's invitations but, having no money, they are both thrown out. Following them a Chinese Mandarin appears. The girl dances for him but when he holds her she runs away in terror and a wild chase ensues. Bartók's orchestral *Suite* ends at this point in the story but in the stage version a series of attacks and counter attacks follow. The Mandarin survives suffocation, wounding with a sword and being hung from a lamp hook. It is only when the thugs cut him down and the girl embraces him, that his wounds bleed and he finally dies.

Bartók began work on *The Miraculous Mandarin* in 1918 but it was not until 1924 that he completed the orchestration and the orchestral *Suite* dates from 1927. During these years Bartók was still influenced by the music of his significant contemporaries; he had a piano score of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, he was aware of Schoenberg's work in developing serial music outside established key structures and in *The Miraculous Mandarin* he himself was his most experimental.

The work opens with a vivid representation of the hurly burly of traffic and motor horns in a busy street; violas then play an urgent theme which introduces the thugs. Soon the girl is set to work. Each time she lures men up to the room her seductive behaviour is portrayed by an expressive *rubato* clarinet solo. The old roué is represented by trombone glissandos and the timid youth by a wistful oboe solo – he can be heard dancing briefly with the girl before he is thrown out.

The Mandarin is an eerie and impassive individual. Trumpets and trombones announce his arrival with an ominous theme accompanied by glissandos in the violin and by piano and woodwind tremolos. His appearance frightens the girl – when Lengyel wrote his play Asian people were regarded with suspicion in the west. The girl's fear is palpable. After much hesitation and a frightened shudder she begins to dance and from melodic fragments played by woodwinds a waltz tune emerges, becoming livelier and developing into a wild erotic dance. To the sound of an agitated trombone theme, the Mandarin trembles in feverish excitement, and as the *Suite* heads towards its frenetic end the music of the chase becomes wilder and wilder. Here Bartók, the often highly cerebral composer, seemingly abandons all inhibition. To understand and enjoy this amazing work he probably expected us to do likewise.