## *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*

**By Béla Bartók**
*bay-luh bar-tawk*
**Born:** Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania), 1881
**Died:** New York, 1945
**Work composed:** 1936
**Estimated duration:** 27 minutes

"Our work is modelled after Nature"—Béla Bartók once remarked, referring to his own music and that of his friend and compatriot Zoltán Kodály. (Although they often presented a united front on the outside, their styles were actually quite different.) What did he mean, exactly? Nature has stood for so many different things to so many people; the relationship between art and nature has occupied many great minds for centuries.

For Bartók, nature was important on several different levels. He loved being outdoors all his life and enjoyed collecting and studying plants. But nature also became the basis of Bartók's artistic philosophy. He sought to expand the classical harmonic system in a "natural," organic way, using "natural" ratios and finding new connections among the degrees of the chromatic scale that nevertheless fit in with the "natural" circle of fifths. Some scholars believe that Bartók applied the Golden Section* and the Fibonacci series** in his works, and while there is no evidence that Bartók consciously composed this way, the fact that these "natural" ratios do appear in some of his works suggests that he was instinctively drawn to such symmetrical structures.

The work on which most scholars base their theories is the first movement of *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* which is, without a doubt, one of Bartók's most strictly organized compositions. It is a fugue in slow tempo, sometimes referred to as a "funnel fugue" because of the gradual broadening of the orchestral texture. The violas, in the middle of the spectrum, introduce the theme followed by the violins on top and the cellos at the bottom. The tonal plan of the various entrances also expands gradually. Each of the first 12 entrances is on a different pitch, arranged according to a precise scheme based on the circle of fifths. The climax of the movement occurs at the entrance furthest removed from the initial A: the note E-flat, exactly halfway around the circle. It is marked by a triple *fortissimo* and a strong beat on the bass drum. After this moment, the music begins to move backward. The mutes, used at the beginning and then removed, come back on the strings. It is a compressed sort of recapitulation, with the theme inverted (turned upside down). There is a magical moment where the original and inverted forms of the theme appear at the same time, surrounded by exquisite celesta figurations. The movement ends quietly on a unison A played by the violins.

All this may sound extremely intricate and cerebral, but is really no more so than a Bach fugue or a piece of Renaissance choral polyphony; and as in those earlier examples, the very intellectual precision of the structure becomes a sensual experience.

The second-movement Allegro is in complete contrast to the opening fugue (which is like a sculpture carved out of a single piece of stone). Here Bartók uses a variety of ideas, shaped into a classical sonata form, with a second theme, development, and

recapitulation. It is an eventful movement whose high points include some lively piano solos and an extended passage for *pizzicato* (plucked) strings. At one point, Bartók asks for what has become known as the "Bartók pizzicato," with the plucked string rebounding against the fingerboard with a snap. The recapitulation is preceded by a mysterious *pianissimo* section where the strings develop the main theme (with its melodic steps all compressed into half-tones) in a contrapuntal way, somewhat in the manner of the first movement. The fugue theme is hinted at a little later, as a reminder: we will in fact do well not to forget that melody.

The third-movement Adagio is connected to nature in a different way than the first two. It belongs to a series of Bartókian slow movements evoking the mysterious sounds of nature as heard by a solitary observer at night. The tone is set by a series of high F's on the xylophone, getting gradually louder and faster and then softer and slower again. Then we hear three distinct thematic groups in succession; in another example of Bartókian symmetry, the third theme is followed by a return of the second, then of the first, and the movement ends with the same high F's with which it began.

Many of Bartók's finales incorporate dance motives of more than one nationality. In the case of *Music for Strings*, the finale's first dance is in what Bartók called the "Bulgarian" rhythm: an asymmetrical alternation of units of two and three eighth notes. Once more, there are three separate dance melodies, but then we're in for a major surprise: the first movement's fugue theme returns in its entirety, although in a new melodic shape, as the narrow half-steps of its first appearance are all replaced by broader intervals. This particular transformation, which occurs in numerous works of Bartók, always symbolizes a move from darkness to light, from complexity to simplicity, or from a problem to its solution. In the coda, the irregular Bulgarian rhythm is similarly smoothed out to an even 2/2 time, and the harmonies suddenly assume a more traditional character. Clearly, we have reached the end of our musical journey happy and free from cares. ■

** The Golden Section is a ratio between two segments where the second is related to the first as the first is to the whole.*
*** The Fibonacci series is a mathematical series in which each number is equal to the sum of the preceding two: 1-2-3-5-8-13-21-34-55...*

## Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G major, and Concerto No. 2 in F major

**By** Johann Sebastian Bach
*yo-HAHN suh-BAS-chuhn bahk*
**Born:** Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany, 1685
**Died:** Leipzig, Germany, 1750
**Work composed:** 1721
**Estimated duration:** 30 minutes

Only three times in his life did Bach make special copies of his compositions to be presented to royalty. The set of six Brandenburg Concertos (1721) was the first such instance, followed by the Kyrie and Gloria from the B-minor Mass (1733) and the *Musical Offering* (1747). Each time, Bach selected works that were exceptionally significant in his output. The Mass represented one of the high points of Bach's church music; the *Musical Offering* was a

tour de force in abstract counterpoint; and the Brandenburgs contain everything that could be done with the Baroque concerto form.

The concertos received their name from their dedicatee, Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, who was the uncle of King Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia. Bach included a long and extremely flowery "cover letter" with his score, written (from one German to another) in French, a language many German aristocrats, impressed by the splendor of Versailles, had adopted for formal occasions. At the very end of the letter, Bach revealed that he was in fact asking the Margrave to give him a job.

Since the sudden death of his wife in 1720, Bach had been restless at the tiny court of Cöthen, where he had been employed since 1717, and longed for a wider range of activities in a less isolated location. Yet the Margrave failed to fulfill Bach's hopes. He had only a small band of musicians at his disposal, who were not equal to the intricacies of Bach's music. The concertos went unperformed, and we don't know whether the Margrave ever replied to Bach or even opened the score. Fortunately, he kept it in his archives, which after his death were inherited by members of the royal family. Bach did not have a copy made for himself, since he intended the works as the Margrave's exclusive property; so, it was not until much later that the Brandenburg Concertos finally began to circulate in manuscript copies. They were not printed until the 19th century.

The fourth concerto has three soloists: two flutes (originally recorders) and a violin. It is the only one in the set to have a first movement in triple meter; this makes the opening much more dance-like than that of the other concertos. Also, the three protagonists don't wait for the presentation of the opening theme (the so-called *ritornello*) to be over before they enter but intervene from the very start. The two flutes form a "team" that is consistently opposed to the solo violin on one hand and the orchestra on the other. The slow movement—the only one in the six concertos to use the entire ensemble—is a dramatic dialog between the solo group and the orchestra, with carefully marked *forte-piano* contrasts, bittersweet chromatic harmonies, and occasional big moments for the first flute.

The last movement is a fugue that brilliantly combines erudite counterpoint with virtuoso display. The orchestra becomes independent to a degree rarely seen in the Brandenburgs. There are two successive fugues, one for the orchestra and one for the soloists, after which the first fugue returns. Then the whole fugue idea is brushed aside as the solo violin launches into cascades of scales and arpeggios. (At one point during these, the orchestra subtly reminds us of the fugue theme.) The fugue eventually returns in its full form, and counterpoint continues to dominate proceedings until the very end, when all the voices suddenly come together in the same rhythm, to end the piece with a cadence of startling originality.

The second concerto has four solo instruments: trumpet, flute (originally recorder), oboe, and violin. Of these, the trumpet, which appears in none of the other concertos, is of special importance. In Bach's time, both the trumpet and the horn were "natural" instruments, which means that

they could only play the natural overtones of their fundamental pitch. The higher we go in the series of overtones, the closer the notes will be to one another. For this reason, Baroque trumpet parts make frequent use of the instrument's highest register, because it is only there that they can play a complete scale. The sustained notes and fast passage-works of the trumpet soar high above the other instruments, determining the character of the first and last movements. The slow movement, however, dispenses with the trumpet, which evidently needed some rest. In fact, the orchestra is also silent during this movement, which is scored only for flute, oboe, and violin with *continuo* (harpsichord and string bass). The three soloists engage in a heartfelt lyrical conversation, repeating and continuing one another's phrases. The last movement opens with a spirited trumpet call, imitated in turn by the other solo instruments in a texture that in some ways resembles a fugue, without actually being one. ■

## Shubho Lhaw Qolo (Glory to the Voice)

**By Sami Seif**
*SAH-mee sayf*
**Born:** Abu Dhabi, 1998
**Work composed:** 2019
**Estimated duration:** 8 minutes

Born in Abu Dhabi to Lebanese parents, Sami Seif has lived and worked in Toronto and Cleveland before moving to New York City, where he is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in composition. Technically still a graduate student, Seif has already attracted considerable attention for his unique synthesis of Arabic and Western music.

**Seif has offered the following comments on *Shubho Lhaw Qolo:***
*Shubho Lhaw Qolo* is a Syriac-Aramaic chant which is traditionally sung during Christmas season. Having grown up with this chant, it deeply resonates with me. Most modern settings of this chant are bilingual, using both Aramaic and Arabic. I wrote my own setting of the chant to be performed by a solo viola rather than sung. The music draws upon a lot of exotic sounds in order to evoke sublime, otherworldly divinity, awe and marvel.

> Glory be to this voice which became man, and to the high (sacred) word which became embodied.
>
> It was heard by the ear, seen by the eye, touched by the hand and eaten by the mouth.
>
> Glory to the word, the great sacrament, he who adopted (appropriated) our bodies, the ancient God.
>
> Coming to save us from the terror of hell, distancing us from every dark night.
>
> May there be peace in our homes, love and security, our guest Jesus has enriched us for all time. ■

*—Peter Laki*