

# JANUARY 31, 2025

## Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Sz.110 BÉLA BARTÓK

Born: 1881

Died: 1945

Composed: 1937

I. Assai lento — Allegro molto

II. Lento, ma non troppo

III. Allegro non troppo

Bartók was interested in the piano as a percussive rather than a lyric instrument, and he was drawn in particular to the combination of percussion (that is to say, *struck*) instruments and piano, which produces its sound when hammers strike strings. In Bartók's *First Piano Concerto* of 1926, much of the slow movement is scored only for the pianist and four percussionists, and in the work that many consider Bartók's masterpiece—the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* of 1936—he combines a string orchestra with a vast percussion section that includes piano. When the Basel section of the International Society for Contemporary Music commissioned a new piece from him in May 1937, Bartók was ready to explore the combination of piano and percussion even further, and he composed the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* in July and August 1937. The formidable percussion battery of the *Sonata* requires three timpani, xylophone, two side drums (one of them without snares), cymbals, suspended cymbals, bass drum, triangle, and tam-tam. Bartók and his wife Ditta Pásztor were the pianists at the first performance in Basel on January 16, 1938; Fritz Schiesser and Philipp Rühlig were the percussionists.

The *Sonata* is not often performed—it requires the unusual combination of two superb pianists and two superb percussionists—but it is one of Bartók's most individual works, combining a brilliant exploration of the sonorities of this combination of instruments with complex music and a beautifully-balanced formal structure. Those coming to the *Sonata* for the first time might best listen for its incredible variety of sound. In detailed notes in the published score Bartók explained exactly the kinds of sounds he wanted, and in an article at the time of the premiere he discussed his intentions: "For some years now I have been planning to compose a work for piano and percussion. Slowly, however, I have become convinced that one piano does not sufficiently balance the frequently very sharp sounds of the percussion. That is why I changed my mind and included two pianos instead of only one . . . Both percussion parts rank equally with the piano parts. The role of the percussion is manifold: often the sound merely colors the

piano sound, sometimes it reinforces the more important accents, at other times it carries motifs serving as counterpoint to the piano part, while the timpani and xylophone often play themes acting as main parts."

The *Sonata* is in three movements that move from the dark drama of the opening through the nocturnal second movement to the sunny spirits of the finale. The first movement is as long as the final two movements combined. Its slow introduction, marked *Assai lento*, begins with a quiet timpani roll, followed by a brooding, chromatic, seven-note figure in the first piano. Gradually the music accelerates into the *Allegro molto*, hammered out by the timpani and massed chords from the two pianos. This sonata-form movement offers a wealth of thematic ideas, all derived from its quiet opening figure. It also features a propulsive fugue, marked *Vivo* and built on the upward leap of a sixth, before the music pounds its way to a violent conclusion.

In sharp contrast, the *Lento ma non troppo* is one of Bartók's night-music movements. In ternary form, it opens with quiet percussion, quickly joined by the pianos. The middle section, much more animated, is full of exotic color; in contrast to the opening movement, where Bartók used the percussion largely for emphasis and accent, here he fully exploits the range of sounds possible from those instruments. The opening material, now richly embellished, returns to close the movement out quietly.

The opening of the *Allegro non troppo* sounds very much like the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*. Over steady piano accompaniment, the xylophone stamps out the perky main theme of this dance movement, a theme that sounds as if it might have its origin in folk dances (in fact, it was Bartók's own). This movement, in sonata rondo form, swirls through a series of episodes before the surprising coda. Just when one expects a fiery finish, the music dissolves with a playful insouciance, and it is left to one soft snare drum to tap the *Sonata* into silence.

## Octet for Strings in C Major, Op. 7 GEORGE ENESCU

Born: 1881

Died: 1955

Composed: 1900

I. Très modéré

II. Très fougueux

III. Lentement

IV. Mouvement de valse bien rythmée

A child prodigy, George Enescu left Romania at age 7 to enter the Conservatory of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, then went on to study at the Paris Conservatory. Along the way, he worked with a spectacular array of musicians: in Vienna he played in orchestras conducted by Brahms, and in Paris he studied with Massenet and Fauré, became friends with Saint-Saëns, and was a classmate of Ravel. He graduated from the Paris Conservatory with a first prize in violin in 1899 at the age of 18, then embarked on a career as violinist and composer.

Enescu's music took two distinct paths at first. There were consciously nationalistic works like the *Romanian Rhapsodies*, composed in 1900–01. But at this same moment, just as he left the Conservatory, the teenaged Enescu set to work on quite a different piece, an *Octet for Strings*. In contrast to the *Romanian Rhapsodies*, which string together a series of Romanian folksongs in an episodic structure, the *Octet* was very carefully conceived and composed as a complex musical structure. The *Octet* grows out of its powerful opening idea, which will reappear in many subtle transformations across its forty-minute span. The process of composition was difficult for the young composer (it took him eighteen months to complete the *Octet*), and Enescu, who planned the piece with great precision, noted that “An engineer who would have thrown over a river his first suspension bridge wouldn't have been so anxious as I was blackening the paper with staves.”

An *Octet for Strings* of course calls to mind the other great octet for strings, also written by a teenager: Mendelssohn's *Octet* of 1825, composed when he was 16. But how different these two works are! Mendelssohn's *Octet* is all fleetness, grace, and polish, but Enescu's plunges us into a world of violence, sonority, and conflict. Its premiere in Paris produced varied responses. The French violinist and conductor Edouard Colonne brought his son to the premiere, and at the conclusion the son remarked, “Well, but this is awfully beautiful.” To which the father replied, “Of course, it is more awful than beautiful.” (Enescu, who had a wonderful sense of humor, loved to tell this story.)

The principal influence on Enescu's *Octet* was not Mendelssohn, but—surprisingly—Berlioz, who wrote no chamber music of his own. Enescu saw a role model in Berlioz, who had been dead for thirty years when he began work on the *Octet*: Berlioz had fought against hidebound French musical traditions and had introduced a nightmare element into his music, one that strongly attracted Enescu (who in fact quotes the *Symphonie fantastique* in the closing moments of the *Octet*). Enescu noted that he wanted to bring the extravagance of the earlier composer to the civilized world of chamber music: “Sometimes I felt myself like a Berlioz in chamber

music, if it is possible to imagine the man who used five orchestras composing such a kind of music.”

The opening instantly establishes the character of this powerful music. Over steady accompaniment from the second cello, the other seven instruments hammer out the opening theme, a sinuous, angular, and propulsive idea that takes nearly a minute to unfold. This is the seminal subject of the *Octet*, and all subsequent material will, in some way, be related to this theme. This is very densely argued exposition: much of it unfolds canonically, and the writing makes virtuoso demands on all eight players. The second subject, announced by the first viola and marked *expressive and grieving*, seems to strike a different note, but this theme is simply a derivation of the powerful opening idea. After a dynamic development, this extended movement trails into silence on a muted re-statement of the main idea.

Enescu calls for only a brief pause between the first and second movements (long enough only to remove the mutes), and suddenly the second movement leaps violently to life. Marked *Très fougueux* (“fiery, impetuous”), it opens with the same sort of unison explosion that launched the first movement, but now that theme has evolved into something spiky and fierce. Enescu marks this opening statement *agité*, and it alternates with slower, gentler material marked *caressant*: “caressing.” The movement develops principally through a violent fugue based on its opening gesture; along the way the principal theme of the first movement makes a reappearance, and the music drives to a huge climax full of massed chords.

This fury subsides, and the music proceeds without pause into the third movement, marked *Lentement*. This opens with a series of slow, muted chords (once again derived from the seminal theme), and soon the first violin sings the grieving main idea (one of Enescu's recurring markings in this movement is *velouté*: “velvety”). Gentle as its opening may be, this movement too rises to a conflicted climax, recalling themes from the opening movement as it proceeds. The finale, which begins without pause, is a sort of grand waltz, full of energy and sweep. The movement drives aggressively to its closing pages, which bring a surprise: the music slows, and the first violin sings a phrase that appears to be derived from the theme of the Beloved in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. After all the violence of the *Octet*, this episode—however brief—seems to offer a moment of relief, of purity. And then the furies return to drive the *Octet* to its surprisingly fierce conclusion.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger