

## Program notes

### **Bohuslav Martinů: Madrigal Sonata for Flute, Violin and Piano**

—Notes by David Gruender and Cathleen Partlow Strauss

Martinů, a very prodigious and one of the great Czech composers of the 20th century, was born on December 8, 1890, in eastern Bohemia. Although his family had no particular musical interests, he began taking violin lessons with the local tailor at age seven and demonstrated a precocious talent for the instrument. He also started composing and produced a fair number of works on paper where he drew in all the staves himself. In 1906, he was accepted into the Prague Conservatory as a violin student but was expelled in 1910 for “incorrigible negligence.” After WWI, he served as a second violinist in the Czech Philharmonic and studied composition with Josef Suk. In 1923 he was given a small scholarship that enabled him to travel to Paris where he spent the next 17 years living the life of a starving artist. During his Paris years, he joined the neoclassical movement and began to establish a respectful reputation for himself in Parisian musical circles.

During the thirties Martinů began to take a stronger interest in Czech nationalism and folklore. He married in 1931 and his wife, Charlotte, worked tirelessly to enable him to devote his full attention to composition. In June of 1940 after the outbreak of the World War II and the occupation of Paris, they were forced to leave behind all their belongings. They finally managed to arrive in New York in 1941, but Martinů spoke no English and had little evidence of his ability as a composer other than a very few scores he had managed to bring with him. A commission from Serge Koussevitzky of the Boston Symphony, however, saved the day and led to the composition of his first symphony, which enabled him to establish himself in the United States. He accepted the Chair of the composition department at Princeton in the fall of 1948, which offered a period of stability for Martinů. However, after three years he became restless and returned to France. He came back to the United States to teach at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia in 1955, but unable to feel comfortable with the American life-style, he returned to Europe in 1956 to accept a professorship at the American Academy in Rome. He divided his last years between Italy and Switzerland, where he died of cancer in 1959.

The Madrigal Sonata for Flute, Violin and Piano was written in 1942, shortly after Martinů's arrival in the United States. He wrote it while living in New York City and dedicated it to the 20th Anniversary of the League of Composers. The work received its premiere at New York City's Town Hall series with Ruth Freeman, Roman Totenberg, and Elly Bontempo performing. In an interview with the New York Herald Tribune in 1942, Martinů was asked what were the sources of his strong individualistic style. He named Bohemian and Moravian folk music, the English madrigal and the impressionistic idiom of Debussy. The Madrigal Sonata (1942) is considered one of his most important and elegantly crafted works. In a letter to his biographer Milos Safranek dated 1946, the composer wrote, "It is in pure chamber music that I am in my element."

In addition to the Czech influences, sweet melodies and quirky rhythmic turns, the technically sophisticated and polished Madrigal Sonata for piano, flute and violin conjures the spirit of French harpsichordists with "old-fashioned" trills.

### **Béla Bartók: Rumanian Folk Dances**

—Notes by Cathleen Partlow Strauss

The town in which Bartók was born is near the shifting borders of Hungary, Serbia and Romania. Originally named Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary, the small town of Sînnicolau Mare is now in Romania. He was brought up in pre-World War I Hungary and during his tenure at the Budapest Academy of Music he watched his country shrink away as political events changed the national identity of every town he had lived in. In Hungary, Bartók was known principally as an ethnomusicologist. His musical training was essentially Germanic, in the tradition of Wagner and Richard Strauss. He and Zoltán Kodály had started to investigate the authentic folk music of Hungary in 1905. Bartók emerged from the German influence that had

dominated Hungarian composers and began to develop his own style, which was considered eccentric since it was so unlike the prevailing Western style.

Bartók collected his native Magyar folk music, studying the unusual harmonies, scales and rhythms inherent in the Hungarian folk song, later incorporating these elements into his compositions. He also studied the music of other cultures such as the Romanians, Carpathians, Slovaks, Serbs, Turks and North-African Arabs. After Hungary was partitioned in 1920, the remote parts of the country that he had visited were then practically inaccessible because of all the red tape required to get permission to enter them. His commitment to collect and study original sources of folk music finally ran into insurmountable road blocks with the advent of World War II. He fled to the United States in October 1940.

The six Rumanian Folk Dances for violin and piano were transcribed from Bartók's original piano setting. The first dance, translated as "dance with a stick" is from the Maros-Torda region. The following Bràul is a dance that involves the use of a waistband or sash. The lovely third dance, in which the violin imitates the sound of a rustic flute, while the piano acts as a drone, translates into "the Stomper." Both of these dances are from Torontál. Another melody is presented in The Dance of the Buscum People from Torda-Aranyos. Next we have a Rumanian "Polka" from Bihar. Finally, the last movement is made up of two fast dances, a Maruntel for couples is from Behar and Torda-Aranyos.

### **Grigoras Dinicu: Hora Staccato**

—Notes by Cathleen Partlow Strauss

Dinicu was a superb Romanian gypsy violinist with classical training. He studied with Carl Flesch and it is rumored that Jascha Heifetz called him the greatest violinist he had ever heard. The Hora Staccato was made famous by a transcription that Heifetz wrote, recorded and performed widely. The Hora Staccato based on a Rumanian melody performed tonight is the original one that Dinicu penned.

### **Ernö Dohnányi: Sextet in C, Op. 37**

—Notes by Cathleen Partlow Strauss

A Hungarian composer, pianist and conductor, Ernő Dohnányi's compositional style recalls the hyper-romanticism of Erich Korngold. His music is lyrical, with a certain childlike innocence to it. Dohnányi drew upon eclectic influences ranging from Hungarian folk music to the strongest traditions of European classical music (particularly Brahms.) He also absorbed other diverse styles including American folk music and jazz.

He first studied music with his father, a professor of mathematics and amateur cellist. Later he was admitted to the Royal Academy in Budapest, where he briefly was director. In 1897, Dohnányi made his debut as a concert pianist in Berlin and was at once recognized as a consummate artist. Unlike most other famous pianists of the time, Dohnányi did not limit himself to solo recitals and concerto solos, but also played chamber music. As a pianist he toured successfully throughout Europe and the United States until 1908, when he became professor of piano at the Berlin Hochschule. He was permanent conductor of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra from 1919 to 1944 and became musical director of the Hungarian State Radio in 1931.

After World War II, which had claimed the lives of both of his sons in combat, Dohnányi moved to the United States. He had remained in fascist Hungary during the war, using his influence to protect Jewish musicians. In 1949, the new communist government of Hungary forced him to the point where he found it necessary to leave. He was not able to revive his career as a concert pianist, but continued to compose. In the United States he found a position teaching at Florida State University, a post he held for ten years until his death.

The Op. 37 Sextet is a broad and muscular work written for the unusual combination of piano, clarinet, horn, violin, viola and cello. Recalling Brahms in sonority and structure in the opening movement, this first movement is propelled by sweeping themes and is almost symphonic in length. After the huge climax of the

first movement, then enters the "Intermezzo." It is marked Adagio and is in effect the slow movement. The first theme is introduced by the piano and strings in rich harmony. The mood is interrupted by a stumbling dotted rhythm in the piano against which the winds intone a broad Brahms-like melody. The third movement, a scherzo, opens with the clarinet playing a delicate melodic line. For contrast, there is an agitated middle section. These two elements alternate, leading eventually to a recollection in swaying rhythm of the horn theme of the first movement.

Dohnányi moves into 20th-century Vienna in the high-spirited finale, filled with rhythmic vitality and satirical little waltzes reminiscent of Richard Strauss. Ultimately, Dohnányi's clever genius makes the work wholly original, exploiting inventive twists of character.