

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA WITH SIR SIMON RATTLE, MUSIC DIRECTOR

PROGRAM

BARTÓK Concerto for Orchestra
(1881 – 1945)

Duke Bluebeard's Castle

VILLA-LOBOS Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5
(1887 – 1959)

MAHLER Symphony No. 4 in G Major
(1860 – 1911)

PROGRAM NOTES

Written by Dan Ruccia

BÉLA BARTÓK CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA

Times were rough for Béla Bartók in 1943. He and his wife, pianist Ditta Pászstory, had migrated to the United States in 1940 to escape the pro-Nazi regime in Hungary, but had found limited success as performers. To survive, Bartók did some ethnomusicological work at Columbia and occasionally lectured there and at Harvard, but he was generally unsatisfied with his situation. To make matters worse, his health had recently deteriorated; in February 1943, he collapsed after a lecture at Harvard. When he was admitted to the hospital, he weighed only 87 pounds. It wasn't clear how much longer he had to live. Initially, the nature of Bartók's illness was unclear. Early diagnoses included tuberculosis and polycythemia. It was only in April 1944 that doctors pinned down his actual diagnosis—chronic myeloid leukemia—but by then, there was little that could be done.

In May 1943, conductor Serge Koussevitzky of the Boston Symphony commissioned a new orchestral work from Bartók through the recently formed Koussevitzky Music Foundation. The

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

ailing composer was initially hesitant; he did not want to take a commission that he might not be able to finish. But Koussevitzky insisted that the commission was a *fait accompli* and the money could only go to Bartók. With the commission in hand, it seems that Bartók became energized. He wrote the resulting work, *Concerto for Orchestra*, in a two-month burst between August and October, while staying at a sanatorium near Saranac Lake, New York. "I am working on the commissioned piece," he wrote to his son, Peter, in late September. "I do not know whether there is any connection between this and the improvement in my health, but in any case I am very busy."

The *Concerto for Orchestra* is as multifaceted as anything written by Bartók, and is perhaps the closest he ever got to writing a proper "symphony." Throughout the work's five movements, he juxtaposes different featured groups of soloists with the larger, invoking the idea of the Baroque *concerto grosso*, even if the music has little to do with the Baroque style. In his program notes from the December 1944 premiere, Bartók describes the arc of the piece as "a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death-song of the third, to the life-assertion of the last one." Within that flow are a few notable deviations: in the center of the second movement's stately paired dances (he describes them as "jesting") comes a strange baroque chorale; in the middle of the fourth movement, he aptly parodies the march from Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*. He even mimics the opening texture of *Bluebeard's Castle* at the beginning of the first movement, and pulls out many of his favorite Hungarian folk tunes in the finale, making for a grand summation of his musical voice.

BARTÓK DUKE BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

Synopsis

Bluebeard and his new wife, Judith, enter his empty stone castle, descending a flight of stairs into the dark, windowless great hall. He is afraid that she won't like her new home, especially compared to her father's castle, but she insists that she loves him and wants to brighten up the castle. Noticing the seven large closed doors framing the hall, she asks Bluebeard what lies behind them. He initially refuses to show her, but soon relents in the face of her pleas. As Judith approaches the first door, the castle sighs. She opens the door to reveal a blood-red rectangle of light. Inside, she finds a torture chamber, its walls dripping with blood. Bluebeard asks if she is afraid, but she declares that her resolve and love for him have only been strengthened. She demands the key to the next door.

Behind the second door is Bluebeard's armory, glowing yellowish red. Judith notices that all his spears and daggers are stained in blood. Undaunted, she moves to the third door. The light inside is golden, illuminating the hall. This room contains piles of coins and countless treasures,

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

but Judith observes that the brightest jewels are covered in blood. Bluebeard then encourages her to open the fourth door, to let the sunshine in. Behind the bluish-green light are the most beautiful flowers that Judith has ever seen, but even here the roses are dappled with blood. Judith wonders who has bled to water Bluebeard's secret garden, but he just ushers her to the fifth door, which leads to a balcony overlooking Bluebeard's vast realm. The hall is suffused with even more daylight. As Bluebeard declares that everything she sees is hers, Judith is awestruck until she notices a blood-red shadow cast by some passing clouds. In an attempt to distract her, he asks for a kiss, but she does not move, drawn instead to the final two doors. Bluebeard resists, noting the bright sunlight which now fills the previously darkened hall. Nevertheless, she persists, insisting that the final two doors be opened, whatever the cost.

As Judith approaches the sixth door, she hears a sobbing sigh. When she opens it, the hall darkens as though a shadow were passing over. She sees a mysterious lake, which Bluebeard says is filled with tears. He once again asks her to come closer, which she does. Once in his embrace, she asks about his previous wives, inferring that it must be their blood and tears she has seen, and that they must be behind the seventh door. He hands her the key, but says the tears are actually his. Judith unlatches the door. Silver moonlight emanates as Bluebeard's three previous wives, resplendent in precious gems and very much alive, walk into the great hall. He praises each of them individually, as Judith, resigned and broken, joins them in line. After the three older wives leave, Bluebeard grabs a cloak and crown from inside the third door and places them on Judith's head. Slowly, Judith walks through the seventh door. The stage is swallowed in darkness.

Program Notes

Bluebeard is one of folklore's great womanizers. Originally recounted in Charles Perrault's 1697 *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (popularly known in English as *The Tales of Mother Goose*) the story of Bluebeard has undergone hundreds of variations over the centuries. The general story is nearly as dark as Bartók's adaptation: Bluebeard is a nobleman whose several wives have all mysteriously disappeared. Shortly after marrying his neighbor's daughter (against her will), he is called away from his castle and tells his wife she has free reign save for one room in the basement, which she is forbidden to open. Overwhelmed by curiosity, she unlocks the door only to find the butchered remains of Bluebeard's previous wives. Bluebeard returns, unexpectedly early, and finds the key still covered in blood. As he prepares to kill his wife, her brother appears and kills Bluebeard instead. She then takes Bluebeard's riches for her family.

By the late nineteenth century, Bluebeard had entered the literary realm as the topic of many short stories, plays, and other theatrical works, including several operas. Between 1907 and 1910, the Hungarian writer Béla Balázs (born Herbert Bauer) began working on a new play based on the character. His original idea involved a meeting in a bar between Bluebeard and Don Juan,

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

though nothing came of it. Instead, drawing inspiration from Maurice Maeterlinck's 1899 symbolist play *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*—particularly Maeterlinck's decision to give Bluebeard's castle seven locked doors—Balázs's final play returned Bluebeard to his castle and focused on the story's symbolist core, stripping away nearly all the action and reducing it to the interactions between Bluebeard and his new wife, Judith.

Balázs met Bartók in 1906 while collecting folksongs with their mutual friend, composer Zoltán Kodály, and the two began an often tenuous friendship, nevertheless marked by their respective admiration for the other's art. When Bartók received the manuscript of Balázs's play *Bluebeard's Castle* in 1911, he immediately set about adapting it into an opera, completing work in just over six months. Balázs's symbolist, recitative-like text proved a perfect vehicle for Bartók's goal of using Hungarian folk music to craft a new form of expression. Throughout the work, he sets Bluebeard's and Judith's lines in unevenly divided rhythms reminiscent of the everyday patterns of Hungarian speech, using a harmonic language derived from various kinds of pentatonic scales he had found during his ethnomusicological fieldwork of the 1900s. Bartók maintains the play's episodic form by constructing scenes of discrete and largely unrelated musical materials, which gradually change colors in tandem with the changes in light onstage.

Though Bartók completed the work in 1911, it wasn't premiered until 1918, though not for a lack of trying. Bartók entered it into two separate competitions in fall 1911: the Lipótvárosi Kaszinó and the Rózsavölgyi. Famously, the work wasn't selected for either prize, despite there being only one other entry in the Lipótvárosi Kaszinó. Over the years, the story of these rejections has grown to mythic proportions—an egregious instance of genius unrecognized—though the politics behind those rejections is, of course, a good deal more complicated. When *Bluebeard's Castle* was finally premiered, Bartók brushed off the incidents of 1911, writing merely that “conditions were not suitable for its performance.”

HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS BACHIANAS BRASILEIRAS NO. 5

At some point in Villa-Lobos's youth around the turn of the twentieth century, his aunt Zizinha gave him a copy of JS Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The young musician was fascinated by Bach's counterpoint, even as he dove into the musical life of the chorões on the streets of São Paulo. That duality between Bach and European art music on one hand, and the many forms of Brazilian popular music on the other, would obsess him for the rest of his life. Nowhere would he bring those two styles closer together than in his series of nine *Bachianas Brasileiras*, written between 1930 and 1945 at the height of the nationalistic fervor of the Vargas era. The “Bach” in the title is indeed a reference to the composer, whom Villa-Lobos “consider[ed] a kind of universal folkloric source, rich and profound ... [a source] linking all peoples.”

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

Each piece is written as a kind of stylized baroque suite, with movement titles that mix the baroque (Prelude, Aria, Toccata, Giga, Fugue, etc.) with the Brazilian (desafio, modinha, choro, etc.). Additionally, they all bring certain aspects of Brazilian rhythm, melody, or harmony into dialogue with baroque counterpoint. That said, it is folly to attempt to separate the Bachian from the Brazilian in these works, so tightly intertwined is Villa-Lobos's conception.

The fifth installment of the series, written for soprano and at least eight cellos, is quite possibly the best-known piece ever written by Villa-Lobos, particularly its first movement, "Ária (Cantilena)." Written in 1938, it sees most of the cellos playing racing, intertwined chords reminiscent of the pontiero style of guitar playing, outlining a vaguely baroque chord progression. Meanwhile, other cellos double the soprano's endlessly floating vocalise; its aching lyricism seeming to presage the bossa nova of a few decades later. In the middle, Villa-Lobos sets a poem by Ruth Corrêa, whose woozy personification of the moon only adds to that portent.

The second movement, "Dança (Martelo)," completed in 1945, is somehow less well known than its partner. Like the first movement, the music is built around running sixteenth notes in tightly woven patterns. But this time, the soprano joins in with a rapidly declaimed embolada, a style of improvised poetry/song from northeastern Brazil. The text, by poet Manoel Bandeira, speaks of and imitates different bird species, with the singer cackling and cawing.

GUSTAV MAHLER SYMPHONY NO. 4

By summer 1899, Gustav Mahler hadn't written a note of music since completing his Third Symphony in summer 1896. Part of that silence was due to his rapid rise through the ranks at the Vienna Hofoper from Kapellmeister to director over the course of 1897 and his appointment as conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic in 1898. Mahler's modernization and ultra-detailed management of the Hofoper, in particular, took all of his time, even the summer months he normally reserved for composing.

That changed at the end of an otherwise unpleasant summer of 1899 in Aussee. After four unproductive and generally miserable weeks, Mahler was struck by inspiration, drafting roughly half of what would become his Fourth Symphony in just ten days. Upon returning to Vienna, he wrote to his friend Natalie Bauer-Lechner, "I rolled up the sketches that were not legible for anyone else, threw them into the last compartment of my desk, and did not even look at them—in fact I could not even think of them without greatest, stinging pain." The following summer, though, he went back to them. His new composing hut near the shores of the Wörthersee in Carinthia proved a much more amenable working environment, and he finished the symphony in August 1900.

CAROLINA PERFORMING ARTS

This symphony stands in marked contrast to the one that precedes it. The Third is massive and all-encompassing, seeking to do nothing less than describe the variegated force of life itself over six wildly diverse movements, powered by a gigantic orchestra, alto soloist, and women's and children's choruses. For his Fourth, as he told Bauer-Lechner, he "only wanted to write a symphonic Humoresque." (Reflecting on his previous symphonies, he added, "When I thought it should become a symphony, it grew into something of threefold length.") Mahler's conception of musical humor was influenced by the German Romantic writer Jean Paul, who defined humor as "the inverted sublime." Instead of making the individual disappear next to the vastness of the world, the world is reduced to human scale, which results in a laughter tinged with anguish. For instance, the sleigh bells that open the work (reappearing at key moments throughout) point not to the innocence of childhood but rather the jingling bells on a fool's cap. In the second movement, Mahler calls for a solo violin whose strings are tuned up a whole step, making its tone "screeching and rough, as if Death would strike up [the music]." Mahler himself recognized that he was working with a strange kind of humor in this symphony; in a 1903 letter to conductor Julius Butts he wrote, "Humor of this type (as distinct from wit or good humor) is frequently not recognized even by the best of audiences."

Elsewhere, Mahler offered another possible interpretation of the work to Bauer-Lechner, saying, "What I had in mind here was extraordinarily difficult to bring off. Think of the undifferentiated blue of the sky, which is harder to capture than any changing and contrasting shades. This is the basic tone of the whole work. Only once does it become overcast and uncannily awesome—but it is not the sky itself which grows dark, for it shines eternally blue. It is only that it seems suddenly sinister to us—just as on the most beautiful day, in a forest flooded with sunshine, one is often overcome by a shudder of panic dread. The Scherzo is so mystical, confused, and uncanny that it will make your hair stand on end. But you'll soon see, in the following Adagio—where everything sorts itself out—that it wasn't meant so seriously after all."

In either case, the rhetorical core of the symphony comes in its final movement, a setting of the Wunderhorn song "Das himmlische Leben." He originally intended this to be the seventh movement of the Third symphony, and you can hear echoes of that symphony's tumultuous fifth movement throughout. Mahler places fleeting references to the song throughout the first three movements of the Fourth Symphony, giving the work a kind of thematic unity rare in his music. In fact, he was so proud of those connections that he gently corrected a later conductor whose analysis overlooked them. He also instructs the soprano to sing "with childlike and serene expression; absolutely without parody!" perhaps out of concern that the song's childlike vision of heaven would come off as insincere or overwrought. But there is a biting contrast here, between the lancing return of the opening movement's bells (placed alongside Herod butchering the lamb and St. Luke slaughtering the ox) and the luminous glow from the rest of the movement. Through that contrast, the work's laughter and anguish sublimate into something entirely new that remains unspoken.