**Béla Bartók**

**“Dance Suite”**

BÉLA BARTÓK was born in Nagyszentmiklos, Transylvania (then part of Hungary, now Sînnicolau Mare, Romania), on March 25, 1881, and died in New York on September 26, 1945. He began the “Dance Suite” in Budapest in April 1923 and completed it in Radvány that August. The first performance took place on November 19, 1923, in Budapest, with Ernő Dohnányi conducting the Philharmonic Society Orchestra.

THE SCORE OF THE “DANCE SUITE” calls for two flutes, two piccolos, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, celesta, harp, piano, timpani, two kinds of side drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, chimes, and strings.

Bartók was already in his forties when he received his first commission for a composition. (All his earlier work had been composed “on spec,” in the hope that someone would perform it.) The commission came from the Budapest City Council for three works—one from each of the leading Hungarian composers of the day (Zoltán Kodály and Ernő Dohnányi were the other two), to write a piece in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of the cities of Buda and Pest, facing one another on opposite banks of the Danube, into the metropolis of Budapest. At the celebratory concert it was Kodály’s *Psalmus Hungaricus* that was the great hit; Bartók’s piece did not go well (he blamed lack of sufficient rehearsal time). But at a performance in Prague a year later under Václav Talich, the audience demanded—and got—an immediate encore.

Bartók was a pioneering ethnomusicologist, and folk music, especially that of Hungary, was a constant influence on his own compositions throughout his life. In the *Dance Suite*, he took considerable pains to write music that might appeal to the general public, devising the work as a collection of dance-type movements in the styles of many the areas where he had collected folk music, though without ever actually quoting folk tunes, but instead creating musical gestures in the various folk styles. The work is constructed in six sections played without pause. A ritornello passage, heard initially at the end of the first movement, recurs at the end of the second and fourth movements as well as within the finale.

Bartók identified the first section as Arabic in character, and it also shows some melodic links to his ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin*, which he had begun much earlier but did not complete in its final version until after finishing the *Dance Suite*. The ritornello is pastoral in sound with its dreamy, muted violins and later the clarinet. Bartók described the vigorous second section as Hungarian; it is dominated by the interval of the minor third, which shows up particularly in sliding trombones, a sound that immediately recalls the *Mandarin*. A harp glissando brings in the clarinet for the ritornello again.

The third dance, a rondo introduced by the bassoon, is one that Bartók thought of as the alternation of “Hungarian, Rumanian, and even Arabic influences,” an Allegro vivace movement that suggests bagpipe drones (the bagpipe is a nearly universal folk instrument, by no means restricted to Scotland). Next comes a mysterious night scene of Arabic character, with unison woodwinds sounding the exotic melody and muted string sounds creating the atmospheric effect.
The fifth section is short, mostly an assertion of a rhythmic idea. This idea, at a much faster tempo, also begins the finale. This is the most elaborate movement, including quotations from most of the earlier sections of the work, and ending in the high spirits entirely suitable to the celebratory purpose for which it was written.

Steven Ledbetter

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCES OF BARTÓK’S “DANCE SUITE” were given by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra with Fritz Reiner conducting on April 3 and 4, 1925.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES OF THE “DANCE SUITE”—the BSO’s first of any music by Bartók—were conducted by Serge Koussevitzky on November 12 and 13, 1926, subsequent BSO performances being led by Ferenc Fricsay, David Zinman, Kazuhiro Koizumi, Charles Dutoit (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on August 22, 1998), and Iván Fischer (the most recent subscription performances, in April 2003).