

Bartok is Balogh's

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Music: Balogh Spins a Tale

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The distinguished pianist-composer Erno Balogh has been a prominent figure in Washington's musical life for many years. In this article, written especially for The Sunday Star, he tells a charming story involving Antal Dorati, Yehudi Menuhin and Bela Bartok. Balogh was only 12 years old when he became a pupil of Bartok's in 1909 — in later years the two men became close friends. Dorati also studied with Bartok, but some years later than Balogh.

Recently in Washington a work of Bartok's was performed that, like many of his musical creations, was stimulated by an interesting circumstance. The story of this composition—the Sonata for solo

violin — began on shipboard in the middle of the South Pacific and ended happily, though not without difficulties, in New York.

Antal Dorati, who played a key role in this story, sailed from the United States to Australia in 1940 for an extended tour with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. At that time he was chief conductor of this ballet company, after holding important positions as a conductor in Europe.

On this same ship, also bound for an Australian concert tour, was the violinist Yehudi Menuhin. As this boat trip took several weeks, it provided ample opportunity for the two musicians to share their interest in contemporary music as they strolled on deck.



Erno Balogh (right) and Bela Bartok in 1940.

At that time Bartok was known to connoisseurs of music in Europe but was not widely performed, and his works were known in the

United States only to some professional musicians. In fact, although Bartok's significance as a composer was recognized by members of the pro-

fession early in his career, during his entire lifetime he was never generally appreciated by the public and press.

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It was for this reason that Bartok, like Chopin, always made his living as a piano teacher. Bartok was forced to confine his composing to periods during the summer when he was not teaching. It is interesting to note that other famous composers, such as Mahler and Rachmaninoff, were also "summer composers," using the remainder of the year to earn their living.

During their trip together, Dorati drew Menuhin's attention to Bartok's sonatas for violin and piano, which at that time were not known in the United States. As a consequence, at his next New York recital in Carnegie Hall, Menuhin performed one of these sonatas and invited Bartok, who was living in New York, to be present.

Bartok was always sparing in his praise and it was a high tribute to Menuhin when Bartok told me that Menuhin's interpretation was exactly as he wanted it and he had never before heard the composition so well performed.

After this, Menuhin asked Bartok to compose for him a sonata for solo violin. Bartok gladly consented because of his high esteem for Menuhin and because he knew that the performance would be to his liking. When the sonata was completed, Menuhin sent Bartok \$500 for the composition.

Although it was not unusual for a performer to pay for a composition that he had commissioned, to Bartok this was unheard of. He had never received money for any commissioned composition, nor had he ever received a fee when his works were performed.

Almost every composition of Bartok's was written at the request of a performer and Bartok expected no more than the satisfaction of hearing his work well played. Bartok felt that he would not accept payment from Menuhin and was adamant in his refusal.

To fully understand this incident, it must be viewed in the perspective of Bartok's financial plight at the time. When he came to the United States in 1940, he had few financial resources and barely eked out a living from a few concerts, an occasional lecture-recital, and by teaching piano to a few students. By choice, Bartok never taught composition. No college or music institute in this country was willing to engage him to teach piano.

Those of us who were his friends made every effort to convince Bartok that he should accept the money so generously offered by Menuhin. After much resistance, the strategy that finally succeeded was to tell Bartok that Menuhin was paying for the exclusive right to perform the sonata during the next three years. Menuhin helpfully participated in this charade. Bartok accepted the fee but remained puzzled that he was paid to do something that he would have done anyway, without financial reward but for the satisfaction of having his work presented by a great performer.

The impetus to this chain of events which resulted in Bartok's Sonata for solo violin was provided by the next conductor of the Washington National Symphony, Antal Dorati, who leads the Stockholm Philharmonic in Constitution Hall this afternoon.