

Dead Man's Diamond

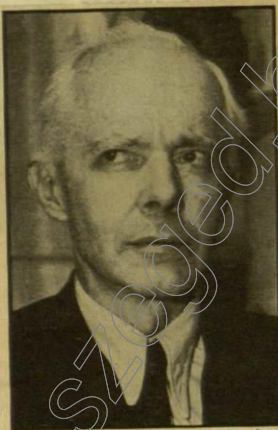
One of the last acts of frail, white-haired Composer Bela Bartok before his death in 1945 was to complete a viola concerto for William Primrose. In the University of Minnesota's Northrop Memorial Auditorium last week, a near-capacity crowd brought Violist Primrose back onstage six times with thunderous applause. With Conductor Antal Dorati's Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, he had given the first public performance of Bartok's tragic, lyrical swan song.

In writing the concerto, Hungarian Bela Bartok knew he was racing against death. Hating to waste one moment of time or one inch of score paper, the poverty-stricken composer wrote in a highly individualized musical shorthand, sometimes indicating whole passages with one or two pothooks, often squeezing in bars off

the clef—at the edges and bottom of the sheet—without even indicating where they belonged. His most puzzling short cut was in the correction of notes: instead of erasing, Bartok grafted his improvement right onto the original.

After holding the confusing scraps of paper for two years after Bartok's death, his executor handed them over to Bartok's close friend and fellow composer Tibor Serly, who had earlier spent four months of skull-cracking labor trying to decipher the piece. Serly later said: "No man ever had such a task in his life. . . . In order to finish this work as Bartok would have finished it, I had to put myself in a dead man's mind." Serly completed the score for viola (after rejecting the notion of adapting it for the more popular cello) and worked out the full orchestration.

After the concert last week, William



Acme

BELA BARTOK

In shorthand, a whole man.

Primrose said: "There isn't anything missing in this concerto. It has everything—excitement, pathos, deep feeling and in places an almost folksong quality." Added Hungarian-born Conductor Dorati, who introduced Bartok's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* in Dallas last year: "I think of this work as a wonderful and beautiful white diamond. It is just as hard, just as crisp and just as white. I think it is an explanation of the whole man who was Bela Bartok."

The Minneapolis audience welcomed the piece wholeheartedly, from the poignantly elegiac first movement to the brilliant and stirring folk dance at the end. Wrote *Tribune* Critic Norman Houk: "The Bartok concerto was a major success. . . . It was given an alert, keyed-up performance by a soloist, orchestra and conductor who had been working on the complex score for a strenuous week. . . . A permanent and important addition to the viola repertory."

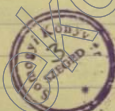
TIME, DECEMBER 12, 1949

Obituary NY Times

1945 Sep 27, 21:1

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