

BARTOK TRIBUTE

Appreciation of the Composers' Music Grows in the Past Decade

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It will be ten years tomorrow that Béla Bartók died. A concert in his memory will be presented tomorrow evening at Columbia University. The following appreciation of the great composer has been written by a friend and associate.

By TIBOR SERLY

MUCH has been said about how Béla Bartók and his music were neglected during the years he spent in America. And though this now may be embarrassing as well as unpleasant to recall, it must be permanently recorded, if only for the sake of historic documentation.

On the other hand, rumor has had it, particularly in his homeland, that the Bartók family was constantly in dire straits, even going so far as to suggest that Bartók's illness developed as a result of fear for his future. This is grossly exaggerated. While Bartók naturally was concerned about his family—not having the security of a salaried position such as he had enjoyed as a professor in the Budapest Royal Academy of Music—it should be made clear that at no time was the Bartók family without adequate food and shelter in America. One probable reason for the false rumors may have been due to some casual acquaintance's having observed Bartók's Spartan, economical mode of living which to him, however, was perfectly normal, as one instance will well illustrate.

Bartók habitually purchased the cheapest manuscript music paper and never more than a few sheets at a time. Not only did he clutter the pages thick and full with his sketches, but besides would continually add more writing space by ruling out lines beyond the regular staff, to the very end of each sheet. It mattered not that he was later presented with reams of music paper gratis; he still continued relentlessly crowding the pages.

Declining Popularity

Reverting to the neglect of his music, it must be reported that had it not been for an incurable disease that wore down his strength during the last two years to such extent that his friends became alarmed and were obliged to seek outside help, it is quite conceivable that his situation could have changed for the worse. For had he not bitterly stated, shortly before he became bedridden: "Not only do they not like my music, but they also do not like my piano playing."

Suffice it to say, his friends turned first to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers for assistance. ASCAP not only responded generously, but knowledge of his plight brought sympathy and offers of help also from other sources. Thus a visit by the late conductor Serge Koussevitzky heartened and cheered him, and a commission to write a work for the Koussevitzky Founda-

tion set him to work with a new lease on life. Later this was followed by other commissions, including one from William Primrose to write a viola concerto. It should be mentioned, however, that Bartók never accepted either commission fees in advance, nor would he consider offers of advance royalties from his publishers.

Nevertheless, Bartók continued to live on borrowed time for another two years, and not only rewarded the Koussevitzky Foundation with his Concerto for Orchestra, perhaps destined to become his most popular work, but composed three other major compositions, the Solo Sonata for Violin, the Third Piano Concerto and the posthumous Viola Concerto, before he died in New York.

The significance of this little story is that help came generously at the eleventh hour, not through recognition here of the greatness of the man or artist, but because we Americans, being a sentimental people, could not



Louis Melancon

Joseph Szigeti, violin soloist
at Bartók Memorial Concert.

bear to witness the unfortunate plight of a distinguished foreign musician without doing something about it.

In the decade gone by since Bartók died in exile from his native Hungary, I can think of no composer's music, comparatively unappreciated during his lifetime, that parallels the steady progress and speed with which Bartók's music has climbed to the top.

Bartók's real tragedy was not that the ever-conservative public could not appreciate his music. This has happened to others before and will surely happen again. It was the painful knowledge that in the midst of perhaps the most revolutionary half century, 1900-50, of iconoclastic changes music ever went through, Bartók's superior talent was all but obliterated by those legions of mediocrities of the experimental Twenties and Thirties who could have benefited most by the teachings engendered by his music. And without intent either to belittle, or to take credit away from, the contributions made in this century by several of Bartók's more illustrious contemporaries, the fact remains that Bartók during his lifetime had neither the following Stravinsky enjoyed among the avant-garde, nor the religious fervor, at times mounting to idolatry, that Schoenberg's disciples aroused. All the more astounding has been the unprecedented upsurge of Bartók's name during the past decade as a musical prophet as well as composer of genius.

