

Next on

Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

Listen to WRTI 90.1 FM Philadelphia or online at wrti.org.

Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, January 7th, 2011, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Béla Bartók (1881-1945). [Two Images, Op. 10](#) (1910). Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Boulez. Deutsche Grammophon 445825, tr 7-8. 18:28

Bartók. [Romanian Folk Dances](#) (1917). Chicago Symphony Orchestra, George Solti. London 443444, tr 9-15. 6:06

Bartók. [Four Orchestra Pieces](#), Op. 12 (1921). London Philharmonic, Leon Botstein. Telarc 80564, tr 6-9. 25:01



The Fine Arts Commission told Bartók that his opera, the only one he would ever write, was no good, not suitable for the stage. With only two singers and no set changes, *Bluebeard's Castle* just wasn't operatic. He'd later tinker with it some, but the immediate effect of the rejection was that, for four years, he almost completely stopped writing music. Now recognized as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, Béla Bartók, just entering the height of his powers, in 1911 went into a composing blackout.

It may have been the best action he could take. A few years before, he had started to collect folksongs with his friend Zoltán Kodály. They had been classmates in conservatory, and, discovering a common interest, traveled throughout the countryside to find and transcribe old tunes, sung to them by old villagers and farmers. The music liberated the two students, and started to creep into their own creations.

The effect on Bartók would be profound. He was a devotee of Richard Strauss and Debussy, which can be picked up in his *Four Orchestra Pieces*, finished and put away in 1912, not orchestrated until 1921. The strange peasant music with asymmetrical rhythms, however, started influencing him right away. We can hear it already in *Two Images*, with the movements "In full flower" and "Village dance." Bartók and Kodály discovered that the music wasn't all "Gypsy," either, at least what concert audiences had considered (by way of Liszt) to be Gypsy. There were five-note scales thought only to be Asian, and surprising harmonies that didn't trudge along well-worn European paths.

So instead of giving up after the 1911 disappointment, Bartók decided to be useful. He went back to the field and started collecting folk music again. Recording tunes throughout Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, he made arrangements of them as he went. And then, when World War I brought his traveling to a halt, he started composing revitalized, original music. The popular *Romanian Folk Dances* come from this time, 1915, when he put them together for piano, orchestrating them two years later.

In 1918 he would write the century-shifting work *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Later would come the great *Cantata Profana*, *Music for Strings*, *Percussion and Celesta*, and the last four of his six string quartets. His immensely successful *Concerto for Orchestra* and Piano Concerto No. 3 were decades away, after he was forced, by another war, to leave Europe and move to America. But his self-education from the music of the people was the springboard for his entire output.

That his career was steeped in folk music is no revelation; he talked of it himself. He thought that a composer could use folk music in three ways. It could be lifted; it could be copied (with new tunes sounding just like old ones—no different from the first way); or it could be absorbed to create something completely new.

That is Bartók. His music could be highly dissonant, but it would always remain tonal and vocal, if wildly so. Quirky and relentless rhythms abound, and harmonies follow their own rules. But it took a crashing rebuff and a return to the country for Bartók to absorb and create anew. These three middle-period works show the emergence of a composer who would define the 20th century in entirely new terms.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).