

Gershwin, Marsalis & Bartók – September 26–28, 2025

Composers George Gershwin and Wynton Marsalis both drew inspiration from the sights and sounds of their neighborhoods and communities. Like them, 21st century audiences of “classical” music have become accustomed to the sound of music that routinely includes regional sounds, the music of a particular culture, and other musical genres such as jazz. But that was not always the case. It was Béla Bartók who led the way, studying and recording the music of a vast number of folk traditions. Today, Bartók is recognized as the undisputed founder of ethnomusicology, the study of the music of a particular region or people. This *Prelude* explores Bartók’s life, his music, and his passion for collecting, analyzing and cataloging roughly 20,000 folk songs, which paved the way for the musical sounds and themes that are now more commonplace in the concert hall. Bartók’s own words reveal that he embraced concepts far ahead of his time: **“The study of all this peasant music... opened the door to liberation from the former tyranny of the major and minor systems.”**



Bartók as a child

Béla Viktor János Bartók was born on March 25, 1881, in Nagyszentmiklós, located in Greater Hungary of Austria-Hungary, which was partitioned by the Treaty of Trianon after World War I. Today, his birthplace is known as Sânnicolau Mare, Romania, which reveals the extent to which wars and treaties resulted in changing borders that often bisected and separated pre-existing Slavic cultures throughout the region. Upon his father’s passing in 1888, Bartók’s mother (Paula) moved the family to Pozsony in her native Slovakia.

Both of Bartók’s parents were musical. His father played cello and was the headmaster of a local school, and his mother was a trained pianist. A smallpox inoculation caused the infant Béla to suffer from an eczema-like rash that persisted until he was five years old. As a result, his early years were spent in isolation from other children, often listening to his mother play the piano. From the earliest age, Bartók displayed a precocious musical ability, and his mother encouraged his musical gifts. According to his mother, he could play the piano before he could speak complete sentences. By the age of four, he could play 40 pieces on the piano, and his mother began

giving him formal instruction the next year. He began to compose dances at the age of nine and at age 11 gave his first public performance, which included a composition he had written two years earlier. In large part, Paula’s decision to move the family reflected her determination to secure the best possible music education for her son.

Bartók’s training as a young pianist continued with multiple distinguished teachers, but he taught himself composition by voraciously reading scores. A teenage Bartók wrote chamber music in the style of Brahms. In 1899, at the age of 18, Bartók enrolled in the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest. He focused on piano performance but immersed himself in the musical dramas of Wagner and the works of Liszt. While still in school, he heard a performance of Richard Strauss’ *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, which enthralled him and stimulated his passion for composition.



Bartók and sister

To understand the world into which Bartók was born and lived, it is important to recognize the geopolitical forces at play. When Bartók was born, the Austro-Hungarian Empire included Hungary, but

the Empire's major strands of power (military, fiscal and foreign policy) were controlled from Vienna. The ethnic population of Hungary and the larger empire was diverse and, according to 1890 census returns, about 40% of the population was ethnically Magyar, while the balance was Romanian, Slovakian, German, Ukrainian and Croatian, with significant numbers of Jewish and Roma people. Hungary was partitioned after World War I, with the result that Bartók's birthplace was ceded to Romania, and his mother's hometown of Pozsony, renamed Bratislava, was ceded to the newly-formed state of Czechoslovakia. In 1918, Bartók was living in Budapest (as he had a teaching position at the Academy), and although he and his mother had both been living in one nation, they suddenly found themselves in two different countries.

In 1902, while Bartók was still studying at the Academy in Budapest, a spirit of optimistic nationalism was sweeping through Hungary, inspired by Ferenc Kossuth's Party of Independence. Instead of demonstrating in the streets with classmates, Bartók composed his first major work, a symphonic poem, *Kossuth*, dedicated to the life of Lajos Kossuth (Ferenc's father), who had led the revolution of 1848-49. (That uprising gave rise to a movement for Hungarian independence.) Bartók's nationalistic composition was followed by a Liszt-inspired *Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra* in 1904.

After graduation, Bartók began a career as a concert pianist and was soon in great demand. In his adult life, he performed 630 concerts in 22 countries.



Bartók at age 22

Although he held a teaching position at the Budapest Academy of Music, he did not care for teaching and much preferred performance and composition. In 1904, while living in the Slovakian countryside to practice and compose, he heard a Hungarian woman, Lidi Dósa, sing the song *Piros alma* ("Red Apple") and soon interviewed

her to find out what other folk songs she knew. The encounter marked the start of a lifelong fascination

with folk music, a journey that expanded when Bartók met Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály.

Kodály had already begun to collect recordings of Hungarian folk music using an Edison cylinder (phonograph) that had been invented in 1877. Bartók and Kodály joined forces and together they engaged in long journeys throughout Hungary, Romania and the other Slavic nations, tracking down original folk tunes in tiny villages. They notated and collected thousands of original tunes, ultimately preserving an entire culture.

With the invention of the Edison cylinder, they were also able to record and preserve the original voices they heard in the



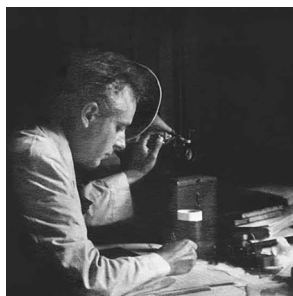
Bartók using an Edison phonograph

countryside. Over the course of more than a decade, until wars and civil unrest deterred their work, the two composers, clad in heavy woolen overcoats and fedoras, scoured the countryside in a rickety horse-drawn cart that took them through the most remote areas of Hungary, Transylvania, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, North Africa and Turkey. They studied the music of ethnic groups such as the Székely people, whose musical tradition had developed in isolation. The scale of their work is phenomenal, and the tireless efforts of these two men preserved more than 2,700 Hungarian melodies, 3,500 Romanian songs, plus 3,400 Slovakian tunes, with an additional 10,000 melodies recorded by other field workers.

Both composers not only transcribed the many folk tunes they heard for the piano and other instruments, but also incorporated the melodic, rhythmic and textural elements of the peasant sounds into their own music. Ultimately, their compositions became distinctive, suffused with the sounds of the ethnic people who inhabited the region.

In 1909, Bartók married Marta Ziegler, and their son, Béla, Jr., was born in 1910, but the couple divorced in 1923. Within months, Bartók married a piano student, Ditta Pásztory, and their son, Péter, was born in 1924.

Bartók's multi-ethnic focus was impeded after World War I, when Slovaks and Romanians were suddenly no longer part of Hungary. Geographic areas Bartók had previously explored were closed to him, and he endured endless criticism at home for his "unpatriotic" interest in the people of other nations, especially those groups that, thanks to the revisions of borders, were now residing in nations hostile to Hungary. Bartók longed for the rich ethnic diversity of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, and he expressed a desire to build "a brotherhood of people, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts." Making his mission even more difficult was the fact that Bartók strenuously objected to the fascist regime that governed Hungary. As political retaliation both he and Kodály were suspended from their academic posts because of their outspoken views and interest in multi-ethnic studies.



Bartók with an Edison cylinder

In the two decades between the two world wars, as his ability to travel was hampered, Bartók devoted himself to composition and performance, but his strong political conscience made him selective about venues for his music. While he performed throughout most countries in western Europe, as well as the United States and the Soviet Union, he refused to perform or have his works broadcast in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. He avoided performing in Budapest and, when awarded the Corvin Medal in 1931, he refused to attend the awards ceremony because he would have had to accept the award from the hand of Hungary's dictator, Admiral Horthy.

During this same period, Bartók wrote two concerti for piano and orchestra, and one for violin. He composed the *Cantata Profana* (1930), his only large-scale choral work, the *Music for Strings Percussion and Celesta* (1936), and a number of other orchestral works. He also composed several important chamber scores including *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (1937) written for the Swiss conductor, Paul Sacher. In 1938, famed clarinetist Benny Goodman commissioned his composition *Contrasts* for clarinet, violin and piano.

As Nazi Germany extended its takeover of Europe in the late 1930s, Bartók found it impossible to remain in Hungary. His ballet, *The Miraculous Mandarin*, composed in 1918, was banned by the Nazi government because of its sexually explicit plot. After a second concert tour of the United States in 1940, Bartók and his wife Ditta immigrated to the U.S., and he secured an appointment as a research assistant in music at Columbia University in New York City. The couple's son, Péter, joined them in 1942, and later enlisted in the United States Navy. (Bartók's older son, Béla Jr., remained in Hungary.) Bartók became a U.S. citizen in 1945 but viewed his time in the U.S. more as exile, as opposed to emigration. Thankfully, the appointment at Columbia University allowed him to resume and continue his work with folk music, transcribing and editing for publication a collection of Serbo-Croatian women's songs. At that point, ethnomusicology did not exist at other universities in this country. With his second wife, the pianist Ditta Pásztory, he was able to give a few concerts but Bartók was largely unknown in the U.S., and the couple struggled financially. They lived in a third-floor apartment at 309 West 57th Street, a gothic apartment building in Manhattan, that now bears his image as a historical marker.



Bartók composing at Piano

This video by Esa-Pekka Salonen explains the difficulties and struggles Bartók faced when he arrived in New York City: [**Béla Bartók: In New York, with Esa-Pekka Salonen - YouTube**](#)

In the U.S., the Bartók family lived in relative obscurity and despite Bartók's fame (almost entirely based in Europe), they were not well-off. When Bartók became ill with leukemia it was ASCAP (the American Society for Composers, Authors and Publishers) that paid his medical expenses and helped him secure better treatment, even though the composer was not one of their members. After treatment Bartók went into a two-year period of remission and was able to compose again. To help

ease his financial burdens, the conductor Fritz Reiner and Bartók's friend, violinist József Szigeti, took it upon themselves to convince conductor Serge Koussevitzky to have his foundation commission an orchestral work. The result was Bartók's much beloved and most popular orchestral work, *Concerto for Orchestra*, composed in 1943. The following year, violinist Yehudi Menuhin commissioned a sonata for solo violin. Bartók was working on a third piano concerto and a viola concerto when he was again hospitalized, suffering from the escalating effects of leukemia. He died shortly after his re-hospitalization. Both works were left unfinished, but were completed by his Hungarian colleague, Tibor Serly.

Bartók died on September 26, 1945, in a New York hospital, with Ditta and Péter by his side. There was no eulogy and just 10 people attended his funeral. He was buried in Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, N.Y. In 1988, as the "iron curtain" that divided Eastern Europe from the west was lifted, Béla Jr. was able to have his father's remains transferred to Budapest. A state funeral was arranged for him on July 7, 1988, and Bartók was reinterred in the Farkasréti Cemetery next to the remains of Ditta, who had died in 1982. A statue of Bartók stands in front of the Second Unitarian Church in Budapest.



JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on September 26 - 28, 2025, to enjoy an exciting performance of Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, the *Concerto for Tuba and Orchestra* by Wynton Marsalis, the Suite from *The Miraculous Mandarin* by Béla Bartók, and George Gershwin's iconic *An American In Paris*, all under the baton of HSO's Music Director, Carolyn Kuan, in the opening performance of the 2025-2026 season. HSO's very own Principal Tuba, Jarrod Briley, is our featured soloist.



Bartók historical marker at
309 W 57th Street in NYC



Bartók

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Interested in hearing more music from Bartók? Try these suggestions:

Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, performed by Martha Argerich and Helson Goerner, may be enjoyed here:

[Martha Argerich and Nelson Goerner perform Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Sz. 110 - YouTube](#)

The composition *Contrasts*, written for Benny Goodman and scored for violin, clarinet and piano, may be heard here, performed by Benny Goodman on clarinet Joseph Szigeti on violin and the composer, Béla Bartók, on piano:

[Bartók: Contrasts - Benny Goodman, clarinetto; Joseph Szigeti, violino; Bela Bartok, piano](#)

This 1968 recording of *Divertimento for Strings*, composed in 1939, is performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, under the direction of Eugene Ormandy:

[Bartok Divertimento for Strings \(Ormandy, 1968\)](#)

One of the most thrilling compositions and a 20th century orchestral masterpiece is Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*. Enjoy this link to a performance by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony:

[Bartók: Konzert für Orchester · hr-Sinfonieorchester · Andrés Orozco-Estrada - YouTube](#)

Enjoy this performance of *Romanian Folk Dances for String Orchestra* performed by the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra:

[Béla Bartók - Romanian Folk Dances for String Orchestra Sz.56 BB 68](#)

Join Esa-Pekka Salonen as he embarks on a journey to better understand Bartók:

[Béla Bartók: Esa-Pekka Salonen on Bartók](#)

A&E's *Breakfast With the Arts* presented a two-part documentary about Bartók's life and music:

[Bartok Documentary Pt.1; Bartok documentary Pt.2 - YouTube](#)



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Dukas' classic *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, is performed by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Louis Langrée during his final concert as Music Director:

[Fantasia-fueled classic | Paul Dukas | The Sorcerer's Apprentice](#)

Enjoy the Canadian premiere of Marsalis' *Concerto for Tuba and Orchestra*:

[Wynton Marsalis: Tuba Concerto / Shelley · Lee · Canada's National Arts Centre Orchestra](#)

To get the most out of the tuba concerto, we've included a conversation between tubist Carol Jantsch (Philadelphia Orchestra), and Wynton Marsalis, who composed the concerto for her:

[Wynton Marsalis Discusses Tuba Concerto with Carol Jantsch - YouTube](#)

The *Miraculous Mandarin Suite* is truly unique in sound and intensity, as you will hear in this performance by the Philharmonia Zürich:

[Bartók: The Miraculous Mandarin | Philharmonia Zürich and Jukka-Pekka Saraste](#)

Gershwin's beloved *An American in Paris* is beautifully performed by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra conducted by Leonard Slatkin:

[GERSHWIN An American in Paris - YouTube](#)



L to R: Statue of Bartók, Bartók at event, Bartók Graduation Photo

SOURCE MATERIAL

[Béla Bartók | Hungarian Composer & Innovator | Britannica](#)

[Bartók, Béla \(1881-1945\) | Harvard Square Library](#)

[Béla Bartók: Biography](#)

[How Béla Bartók Redefined Classical Music | Strings Magazine](#)

[Béla Bartók \(1881-1945\) - Mahler Foundation](#)

[Béla Bartók: pioneering Hungarian composer who fused folk melodies with classical music](#)

[Breaking Through to Bartok : NPR](#)

[Music: The Bartók Revival | TIME](#)

[Klavier-Festival Ruhr | Explore the Score | Béla Bartók: Piano Works | Bartók and his world | A closer look: The story of a melody](#)

[Béla Bartók: how music broadened the mind of a 'nationalist' composer – The Irish Times](#)

[Béla Bartók and the Importance of Folk Music | NLS Music Notes](#)