

HOMAGE TO BELA BARTOK

DOUGLAS MOORE



A late sketch
by DOLBIN

THE paralysis of cultural life which was one of the contributions of the totalitarian overlords to European civilization brought to the United States, among many other distinguished artists, the three great figures of the post-romantic revolution in music, Stravinsky, Schönberg and Bartok.

Stravinsky, uprooted from his native Russia by a previous political upheaval, had already adjusted himself to the life of an exile, but Schönberg and Bartok were compelled to abdicate a position of leadership in Vienna and Budapest at the height of their careers and to receive in exchange the pallid eminence which is customarily bestowed upon distinguished European creative artists residing in the United States.

Of the three, Bartok was least fitted for the rigors of the American scene. Stravinsky, because of his early ballets, was an established favorite as a composer. With his customary adroitness he realized that in America rewards went to the performer rather than to the composer and therefore embarked upon a career as conductor and pianist, supported by his prestige as a composer. Schönberg, essentially the philosopher and teacher, found a place in American university life where, surrounded by numerous if undoubtedly less congenial students, he has been able to continue in some fashion the pattern of his life in Vienna.

Bartok however was less famous than Schönberg and less popular as a composer than Stravinsky. His aristocratic mind and somewhat aloof personality did not lend themselves to the arts of exploitation as prac-

ticed in this country. He was pursued by ill health and distressed by the news from home. In spite of these handicaps his activity as a composer continued to the end. His latest works, the *Concerto* for orchestra, the *Violin Concerto*, the *Solo Sonata* for violin and the unfinished *Sonata* for cello, show an unimpaired vigor and are in effect the culmination of an art that has progressively broadened and deepened.

Bartok's contribution to the music language of the twentieth century while no less revolutionary than that of Stravinsky and Schönberg has proceeded perhaps less from a conscious repudiation of post-romantic thought than from a directive within his own musical personality which had as its source the composer's love and understanding of the folk music of his native Hungary. He approached this music not in the casual fashion of certain nineteenth century composers, borrowing a melody here and a color effect there, but as a scholar who sought to penetrate the essence of the folk music which had been obscured for many years by the vogue for gipsy melodies masquerading as genuine Hungarian folk art.

Bartok's research as a folklorist not only won for him authority as a scholar but became the dominant influence in his development as a composer. Starting with simple harmonizations of the folk melodies which became ever more closely interwoven, he set up a subtle relation between harmonic and melodic style that led almost unconsciously to a musical language entirely personal and apparently unrelated to post-romantic chromaticism. Together with this new melodic and harmonic language, Bartok's mature music has shown the composer's growing preoccupation with fresh instrumental sonorities. His unconventional treatment of the piano was matched later in the succession of string quartets by the originality of the string writing which is no less striking than the musical texture.

Bartok's music has never won the success accorded to Stravinsky or even to Schönberg in this country but this may be accounted for by the fact that his works of the middle period have had much less opportunity to be heard. His operas and large works for orchestra, which were widely performed in Europe before the war, have been strangely neglected. On the other hand, the works which he later wrote in this country have been received with a growing interest. If the public is prepared now belatedly to receive him, musicians have long regarded him as one of the greatest figures of our time. His reputation has something of the same integrity that was exemplified by his character, it can grow only more honored and revered in the years to come.