

Suite from *The Miraculous Mandarin*

BÉLA BARTÓK

BORN 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary

DIED 1945, New York, USA

FIRST PERFORMED 15 October 1928, Budapest, Hungary, by the Budapest Philharmonic Society Orchestra conducted by Ernő Dohnányi

DURATION 20 minutes

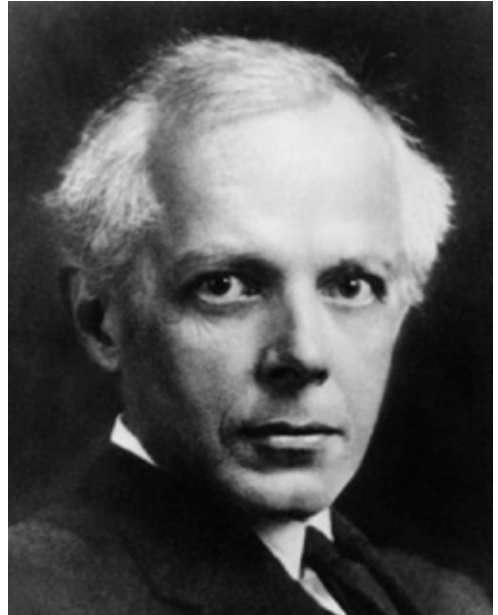
'We have lived to see the city's first true musical scandal. Catcalls, whistling, stamping and booing that did not subside even after the composer's personal appearance, nor even after the safety curtain went down. The press, with the exception of the left, protests; the clergy hold meetings; the major of the city intervenes dictatorially and bans the pantomime from the repertoire. Waves of moral outrage engulf the city.'

No, you're not reading the wrong programme note. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, which famously caused a riot at its 1913 premiere in Paris, comes in the *second* half of tonight's concert. This newspaper report on a similarly scandalous premiere is about a different work entirely. The year is 1926, the city is Cologne, and the work in question is the ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin*, with music by Béla Bartók.

(The outraged major of Cologne, incidentally, who banned the work after just a single performance was none other than Konrad Adenauer, who went on to become West Germany's first Chancellor and one of the 20th century's most influential statesmen.)

Contrasting fortunes

There are undeniable similarities between the premieres of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Both are ballet scores, for a start. But there are stark differences as well. Shocking and



violent though they both are, the two works explore entirely contrasting themes: for *The Rite*, those themes are primitive tribal culture, cruel nature and death; but for the *Mandarin*, they're modern urban existence, human exploitation, money and sex.

Furthermore, Stravinsky was cosmopolitan, confident, effortlessly authoritative, and transformed into an international celebrity by the *succès de scandale* of *The Rite*. Bartók, on the other hand, languished in relative obscurity despite his championing by certain notable musicians, and after its 1926 ban the *Mandarin* wouldn't be staged again in Hungary until December 1945, two months after his death. Rather than a *succès de scandale*, the *Mandarin* simply caused a scandal.

A story designed to shock

Which is a great tragedy, for the *Mandarin*'s colour, invention and power to shock and

provoke are every bit as pioneering as those qualities in *The Rite*. Bartók first came across the tale in 1917, as a short story by the Hungarian expressionist writer Menyhért Lengyel in literary magazine *Nyugat*. He was immediately seized, sketched out some musical ideas for a staging, and played them to Lengyel, who himself became excited about a collaboration. Rather than a ballet, however, the two men were careful to call their finished work a 'pantomime grotesque' – a description that, given its subject matter, seems only appropriate. (Lengyel went on to become a successful playwright and screen writer in Hungarian and English, incidentally, writing the original screenplay for Greta Garbo's 1939 *Ninotchka* and also contributing to Marlene Dietrich's *The Blue Angel* in 1930.)

And if the *Mandarin's* story feels a bit like an expressionist nightmare, that's not far from the truth: Lengyel had taken himself for an early consultation with Sigmund Freud in Vienna, complaining about fears of imminent catastrophe, and the pioneering psychoanalyst had diagnosed hysteria and psycho-neurosis.

By the time of writing *The Miraculous Mandarin* (in 1918–19, orchestrating it by 1923), Bartók was already known as a composer unafraid to stare life's darker experiences straight in the face, in works such as his 1911 opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. But despite his description of the *Mandarin* as 'very much like an Eastern fairy tale, containing nothing to which objection can be taken', its lurid tale of prostitution, fraud, theft and murder is clearly intended to shock and provoke.

And it drew from him music of a savagery that he never again attempted, with shattering climaxes designed to overwhelm but also passages of an eerie, sinister delicacy that get under the skin and unsettle. The Suite you'll hear tonight is in fact roughly the first two thirds of the ballet, and the work

is performed far more often in concert than on the stage – helped enormously by Bartók's microscopic musical storytelling that leaves the listener in no doubt as to what's going on.

The music

Of the very opening, Bartók wrote to his wife: 'It will be hellish music. The prelude before the curtain goes up will sound like pandemonium.' The score plunges us straight into the hurly-burly of a modern metropolis, with rushing violins, raucous brass fanfares and stuttering woodwind conveying the traffic, aggression and congestion of the city. As the din calms and subsides, the curtain rises.

We're in an urban slum, where three thugs make their money by forcing a girl to stand in a window to attract passing trade, then beating and robbing the men she snares. A nervy viola theme shows the three thugs entering the room, searching in vain for money, and at a wail of anguish high on the violins, the girl is forced to make her way to the window.

Games of seduction

The girl's three seduction sequences (or 'decoy games' as Bartók describes them in the score) are accompanied by slow, sultry clarinet solos, more intricate and agitated (or perhaps desperate) each time. Her first visitor is a shabby old drunkard, represented by a braying, sliding trombone, but as he's penniless, it's not long before the thugs spring from their hiding place and throw him out. Second comes a bashful young man, represented by a wide-eyed melody on oboe and cor anglais, and with him the girl begins a tremulous dance against a bassoon tune with harp accompaniment – it's almost as if she feels some genuine attraction. He's also skint, however, and soon thrown out by the thugs.

With the third visitor, however, the atmosphere and power balance shift entirely. This is a terrifying exotic apparition, a Chinese

Mandarin, whom the terrified girl sees in the street to music straight from a horror film, with swirling, sliding figures on piano and violins. He arrives in the room to snarling, monumental, seemingly immovable brass chords, reducing the girl, the thugs and the orchestra to a stunned silence.

The man who wouldn't die

Reluctantly, however, she attempts to seduce the Mandarin in an almost tender waltz that begins quietly and slowly on the strings, gradually mounting in energy and urgency. She collapses in the Mandarin's lap to braying, whooping horns and screaming woodwind, and he begins to tremble in feverish anticipation as trombones bark out a mischievous theme. The Mandarin grabs the girl, but she escapes, only to be pursued by the horrific figure in a brutal, stomping dance on pounding drums and scrubbing strings. He stumbles once – a sudden break in the

music – before the thugs wrestle him to the ground in a violent dance that's every bit as unpredictable as the conclusion of *The Rite of Spring*.

And there the Suite from *The Miraculous Mandarin* ends. But if you want to know how the full ballet's nasty little tale concludes, read on. First the thugs steal the Mandarin's money and jewels, then they try to smother him in bedclothes – but he remains stubbornly alive. They stab him a few times with a rusty sword, but this too fails to kill him. They even hang him from the room's light fitting, but it collapses and the Mandarin's body begins to glow an eerie green. Finally the girl realises what she must do: she succumbs to his desires and, his longings finally fulfilled, the Mandarin's wounds begin to bleed, and he dies.

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