

Bartók: Extended play for a magical Magyar

There's no special reason for the South Bank's year-long celebration of Bartók, says Jessica Duchen. But who needs one?

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No big anniversary, no excuse – but who needs a reason to celebrate the music of as great a genius as Béla Bartók? Throughout 2011, the South Bank will thrum with his work in a celebration entitled *Infernal Dance*. Its top-notch performers include the Philharmonia Orchestra with its principal conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, plus the brilliant half-Hungarian Takács Quartet; and the climax in November is the composer's sole opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. Bartók was born in 1881; 130 years doesn't really qualify as a major anniversary. Nevertheless, it is still a series to relish.

From his staggeringly original string quartets to his dazzling orchestral imagination, reflected in such works as the three piano concertos, two violin concertos and the ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Bartók's sounds are utterly his own: astringent, sometimes frightening, often fantastical and always compulsive in their intensity.

Paradoxically, though, he also has an extraordinary capacity for boundary-crossing. My husband and his duo partner once played Bartók violin duets to teenagers in a West Bank refugee camp: these young Palestinians, who had rarely, if ever, heard Western classical music before, were soon clapping along. Bizarrely, Bartók has the ability to speak to everyone.

Perhaps that is because, even at his most experimental or pessimistic (he was no bundle of laughs), his music is deep-rooted in the songs and dances of Hungary. Its resonances stem so strongly from this that it remains peculiarly universal, as it seems only folk music can be. Combined with the influences of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Debussy and Richard Strauss, folk music helped Bartók to become more than just the ideal voice of his time: he was a forward-looking visionary with high ideals and a generous humanity.

Bartók's last Hungarian home, in the hills above old Buda, is now a museum, housing memorabilia including the recording equipment he used during his research tours with his fellow composer Zoltán Kodály. From 1908 until the outbreak of the First World War, the two made field trips to record peasants and Gypsies singing and playing their traditional music. Bartók used these sounds in his compositions for the rest of his life.

It was only when I first visited Hungary that I fell for Bartók in earnest. His rhythms seem anchored in the Hungarian language, with its emphasis on first syllables, which creates dizzying, irregular accents in speech. And hearing the galvanising brilliance of the Concerto for Orchestra just after that visit, it seemed as if I was back in Budapest: the music held virtually the same atmosphere I had encountered in that dark, thrilling and multifaceted city.

But by the time he wrote the Concerto for Orchestra in 1943, Bartók – a passionate anti-fascist and strongly opposed to Hungary's pro-German position – had left war-torn Europe for America. He spent his last five years in New York, living in miserably straitened circumstances, and died of leukaemia in 1945. Hungary stayed in his musical soul to the end.

The more time goes by, the more prophetic Bartók's music seems. He was a pioneer in countless elements of composition. And he wrote fabulously idiomatic music for real musicians.

The trouble was that the shy, over-intense Bartók was perhaps too genuine for his own good. That could be why, for so long, his reputation was somewhat overshadowed by that of Stravinsky, who by contrast was an excellent self-promoter and self-reinventor. It's a little ironic, therefore, that the South Bank's series has taken its title, *Infernal Dance*, not from Bartók himself, but his rival Stravinsky (it's a number in the latter's ballet *The Firebird*). But by the time Bartók has a really big anniversary, he will surely have attained the towering stature he has deserved all along.

Infernal Dance: Inside the World of Béla Bartók, Southbank Centre, London SE1 (0844 875 0073; www.southbankcentre.co.uk) opens 23 January