**Suite from *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Op. 19**

Béla Bartók

B. March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary
D. September 16, 1945, New York City

*Stage version premiered November 27, 1926 at the Cologne Opera House, conducted by Jen Szenkár; direction, stage, and costume design by Hans Strohbach; concert version premiered October 15, 1928 by the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Ern Dohnányi.*

*Scored for three flutes (second & third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (two snare drums, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, tam-tam, xylophone), celesta, harp, piano and strings (approx. 21 minutes).*

On January 1, 1917, a short scenario written by dramatist Menyhért Lengyel appeared in *Nyugat* (*West*), a Hungarian literary review magazine. It told of three hoodlums living in the heart of Paris, who force a girl to pretend to be a prostitute and entice men to their apartment so that they can rob them. While they wait in hiding, the girl poses seductively at the second-story window and invites an old dandy upstairs. He has no money, so the hoodlums beat him and toss him down the stairs. A shy young student enters; he too is penniless and meets the same fate. Finally, a well-dressed Mandarin enters the room and seats himself. The girl is frightened by his silence and foreign appearance, but overcomes her reticence and begins to dance, becoming more and more passionate. Suddenly the Mandarin's desire is stirred, and he begins to chase after the girl, much to her terror. The hoodlums realize they have no choice but to kill him. They leap out of their hiding place and suffocate the Mandarin, fire a pistol at his skull, and hang him from the chandelier. But the Mandarin does not die, and continues his pursuit. Finally the girl realizes that she must yield to the Mandarin's desire, and only after they embrace does he fall dead.

Some newspapers at the time claimed that Lengyel had originally written this violent story in 1912 for Sergei Diaghilev, head of the well-known dance company *Ballet russes*, but had been prevented from delivering it because of the approaching war in Europe. But Lengyel's diary suggests he wrote it in 1916 on a whim. Béla Bartók was immediately taken with the text and secured permission from Lengyel to set it as a pantomime; that is, a combination of dance and silent acting with musical accompaniment. The scenario touches on themes that appear in Bartók's other dramatic pieces, such as the opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), the ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1914–16), and the *Cantata Profana* (1930). These include the contrast between lies and reality and the possibility of finding truth through love. The character of the Mandarin, an outsider within the Parisian social world, may have also fascinated Bartók, himself a shy and socially awkward person.

Bartók completed the score over the years 1917 to 1926, but the story's scandalous content made it difficult for him to find a theater willing to stage it. Eventually fellow Hungarian Jen Szenkár, who had become director of the Cologne Opera House in 1924, agreed to conduct the work. The city of Cologne had decidedly conservative morals and taste, and as location of the

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premiere it proved to be a disastrous choice. After the first performance in 1926, headlines such as "The Booed-Off Mandarin" and "Uproar in the Cologne Opera House" appeared in local newspapers. The mixed reactions of approval and outrage among audience members are evident in one particularly vivid review that appeared two days after the premiere in the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*: "…the premiere of the Bartókian prostitute and pimp play with orchestral racket would have ended in calm, noiseless rejection, if small groups… had not tried through hand-clapping and calling for the author to twist the incontestable failure of this work into a success.…When persistent hisses could not overpower the clapping, shouts resounded a hundredfold for minutes: 'Shame! Vulgarity! Scandal!'"

Cologne's mayor summarily banned the piece, and after this single performance Bartók never saw the work staged again. It was revived the following year in Prague and in 1942 in Milan, but by this point the composer had fled to the United States to escape the growing Nazi threat in Hungary. To increase the chance of having his work performed, Bartók created a concert version in 1927 that uses the first two-thirds of the stage version with a new ending.

Bartók's highly dramatic score draws together all of the orchestral effects that he had developed thus far in his career. He pushed his musical language, which combines elements of modern music, impressionism, and Hungarian folk music, to a highly dissonant state, reflecting the violent drama and also the turbulent political state of Europe from the time. It is a score that, in the words of conductor Marin Alsop, "grabs you by the throat and doesn't let go."

The opening of the work, according to the composer, plunges listeners into the "awful clatter and stampeding and blowing horns" of a busy city street. The strings play whirling scales against brief repeated melodic fragments in the woodwinds, whose pitches clash. This polytonal dissonance was a technique that Bartók had first developed in his *Bagatelles* of 1908. A nervous, jagged melody for cellos and violins follows, depicting the hoodlums and the terrified girl.

A long clarinet solo accompanied by cellos playing a pair of low notes in tremolo depicts the girl posing seductively at the window, and acts as an introduction to a grotesque dance. Languid lines in the English horn and ambling accompaniment give a comic depiction of the old man. Another clarinet solo, which begins a third higher, leads to a gentler dance, suggesting the shy young student.

The clarinet begins its solo yet again, but this third time the piano and other winds begin to join its sweeping runs, which become a backdrop for a new theme with a pentatonic flavor (often used to suggest Asia), played softly by the trombones. This leads to the most shattering point of arrival in the work: a portentous descending third played in glissando (that is, with a slide between pitches) by all trombones. This indicates the entrance of the Mandarin. The final dance, introduced by the strings, develops the same falling third motive. It begins mysteriously and gradually becomes more passionate, and finally breaks into a furious final dance depicting the Mandarin's chase. The final section recalls the motoric, primitive rhythms of the composer's early piano piece "Allegro Barbaro," and leads to a hasty and violent conclusion.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

THE SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

*Program note by David Heetderks, doctoral student in music theory at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.*

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