

NAXOS

# BARTÓK

## The Miraculous Mandarin (Complete Ballet)

Dance Suite • Hungarian Pictures

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra

Marin Alsop



## Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

### The Miraculous Mandarin • Dance Suite • Hungarian Pictures

Stage music plays a relatively brief but crucial rôle in the work of Béla Bartók. Having finished the one-act opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in 1911, he composed little until the summer of 1914, when he embarked on the ballet *The Wooden Prince*. Completed two years later, its première at the Budapest Opera in 1917 was one of the composer's few great successes in his lifetime. The company proceeded to stage the opera the following year, but it met with an equivocal reception and was withdrawn after eight performances, not to be heard again in Hungary for almost two decades.

An even worse fate awaited Bartók's last stage-work, the pantomime *The Miraculous Mandarin*. Begun as the third part of an intended triple bill, it was drafted in 1918-19 but only orchestrated five years later. Apart from its composer's ongoing uncertainty as to musical direction, the scenario by Menyhért Lengyel was unlikely to pass muster with the Hungarian censor. The work was finally given its first performance in Cologne during 1926, but banned immediately on moral grounds (by the then Mayor of the city Konrad Adenauer) and not staged again in Bartók's lifetime. Although an orchestral suite consisting of almost the first two-thirds of the work quickly found a place in the modern orchestral repertoire, the pantomime has only latterly come into its own, and full stagings remain infrequent. As with Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, to which it is indebted in certain particulars, *The Miraculous Mandarin* has a rapid pace and density of musical incident which are difficult to render visually, and indeed are probably best appreciated by the 'mind's eye'.

As envisaged by Lengyel, a recipient of Freudian psychoanalysis and Hungary's chief Expressionist dancer, the scenario is more concerned with mimed than danced drama, hence the designation 'pantomime' rather than 'ballet', and focuses on the irreconcilability of intuitive nature and corrupt civilisation. The latter is accorded graphic depiction in the *Introduction*, where insistent rhythmic patterns and grinding dissonance evoke the sound of traffic in a busy thoroughfare. The

curtain rises on an upstairs room in a shabby apartment, occupied by three ruffians and a girl. Having no money, the thugs coerce the girl into attracting 'passing trade'. There follow three seduction sequences, each introduced by a clarinet solo. The first sequence lures a shabby old rake (denoted by trombone glissandi), who, penniless, is summarily ejected by the gang. The second sequence lures a shy young man (oboe and cor anglais), whose waltz with the girl suddenly gains in ardour until, also penniless, he is ejected. The third sequence lures the mandarin, his exotic appearance vividly evoked by brass.

There follows an extended sequence in which the girl gradually overcomes her repugnance towards the mandarin, embarking on a waltz which mounts in urgency as the latter's responses become more impulsive. A chase ensues (fugato in strings, woodwind, then brass), building an unstoppable momentum and curtailed only when the thugs pounce on the mandarin. Robbing him of his possessions, they make three attempts to kill him, a dramatic and musical parallel to the three lurings: first they suffocate him under the bedding, but to no avail; then they stab him, only for him to break free and rush at the girl; finally, they hang him from a light fitting, whereupon his body begins to glow with 'greenish-blue' light (wordless chorus). Only now does the girl realise what must happen. The mandarin is duly taken down and his embrace reciprocated; satiated, his wounds begin to bleed and, with a series of shudders, he dies.

Before resuming work on *The Miraculous Mandarin*, Bartók enjoyed considerable success with a piece written ostensibly for 'official' purposes. The *Dance Suite* was one of three commissions, along with Kodály's *Psalmus Hungaricus* and Dohnányi's *Festive Overture*, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the union of Buda and Pest as the Hungarian capital. First performed in November 1923, its clear-cut manner must have seemed out of keeping with Bartók's musical thinking up to that time, but the fusing of a range of folk

characteristics was to have increasing significance in the works that followed.

The suite opens with a *Moderato* dance, its syncopated repetitions denoting a North African influence. The bitter-sweet Hungarian ritornello that follows is to reappear after each of the subsequent three dances, binding the work together musically and culturally. The *Allegro molto* second dance is largely Magyar in origin, then the *Allegro vivace* third dance vigorously alternates Hungarian and Romanian influences. The sensuous *Molto tranquillo* fourth dance is oriental – more specifically, Arabic - in origin, while the brief *Comodo* fifth dance is designated of “primitive peasant character”. It remains for the *Allegro* finale to impart overall unity by alluding to earlier dances and traditions: after a final return of the ritornello, the work concludes with a decisive confirmation of the indivisibility of peoples and musics.

The folk inferences of Bartók’s maturity were to be deployed according to the nature of the work at hand.

Some of the most immediately attractive examples are found in the numerous suites that he orchestrated from earlier piano pieces. One such is *the Hungarian Pictures*, assembled in 1931 from piano music composed over two decades earlier, during the period, in fact, of his first intensive involvement with folk-music research. The poignant *An Evening with the Székely* (as the Hungarian natives of Transylvania are known) and energetic *Bear Dance* are both drawn from the *Ten Easy Pieces* of 1908, while the plaintive *Melody* that follows derives from the *Four Dirges* of 1910. The appropriately titled *Slightly Topsy* originally comes from the *Three Burlesques* of 1911, then the dashing *Swineherd’s Dance*, drawn from the extensive four-part collection *For Children*, completed in 1909, and the one demonstrably authentic folk-song included here, brings the sequence to a lively and engaging close.

**Richard Whitehouse**

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## Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1893 by Sir Dan Godfrey, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra has had among its Principal Conductors some of the finest musicians in the world, including Rudolf Schwarz, Constantin Silvestri, Sir Charles Groves and Paavo Berglund. More recently Andrew Litton raised the orchestra's standards to new levels, crowning its centenary season with a triumphant début tour of the United States in April 1994, followed by Yakov Kreizberg and débuts at the Musikverein, Vienna, the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, and Carnegie Hall, New York. In October 2002, Marin Alsop became Principal Conductor, the first woman to hold this title for any British symphony orchestra. The name of the orchestra is internationally known through over three hundred recordings, including the award-winning release of Anthony Payne's sketches for Elgar's *Symphony No. 3* with Paul Daniel (8.554719), the symphonies of Vaughan Williams with the former Chief Guest Conductor Kees Bakels and Paul Daniel, and a recording of works by John Adams under Marin Alsop for Naxos (8.559031), this last chosen as Editor's Choice in the November 2004 issue of *The Gramophone* magazine. The orchestra is also now well known through increasing international exposure in overseas tours. In addition to its recording and international touring commitments, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra is dedicated to providing orchestral music across the South and West of Britain, with a varied programme of educational and outreach commitments, and makes regular appearances in major festivals and concert-halls throughout the country.

## Marin Alsop



Photograph by Grant Leighton  
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Principal Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra since 2002, Marin Alsop won the Royal Philharmonic Society Conductor of the Year award that season and was named *Gramophone* magazine's Artist of the Year in 2003. She regularly conducts the Chicago Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic and the London Symphony Orchestra, and recent guest engagements include the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the NDR SO, Hamburg and the Munich Philharmonic. Marin Alsop studied at Yale and at the Juilliard School and won the Koussevitzky Conducting Prize at Tanglewood, where she studied with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa. Her recordings for Naxos include the Brahms *Symphonies* and *Overtures* with the London Philharmonic, the complete orchestral works of Samuel Barber (6 CDs) with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* (Naxos 8.555714) with the Colorado Symphony. This is her fourth disc with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, following upon the success of Bernstein (Naxos 8.559177), John Adams (Naxos 8.559031) and Philip Glass (Naxos 8.559202) releases.



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Bartók's "pantomime in one act" *The Miraculous Mandarin* caused such an uproar at its première in Cologne in 1926 that it was banned immediately and not seen again in the composer's lifetime. It tells the story of three thugs who use a beautiful prostitute to ensnare a succession of men, whom they then brutally rob. Bartók's score reflects the menace and melodrama of the story; he himself described the music as "hellish".



## Béla BARTÓK

(1881-1945)

### The Miraculous Mandarin (Complete Ballet)

The Miraculous Mandarin, Sz73 (Op. 19):  
Pantomime in One Act (1926) 32:52

- |   |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| 1 | Opening – The girl and three tramps   | 3:18 |
| 2 | First seduction game:<br>the shabby old rake  | 3:41 |
| 3 | Second seduction game:<br>the young student   | 3:10 |
| 4 | Third seduction game  | 1:39 |
| 5 | The Mandarin enters and remains<br>immobile in the doorway  | 2:31 |
| 6 | The girl begins a hesitant dance...   | 5:48 |
| 7 | The Mandarin stumbles – the chase<br>becomes even more passionate                                 | 0:41 |
| 8 | The three tramps leap out, seize the<br>Mandarin and tear him away from<br>the girl               | 2:52 |
| 9 | Suddenly the Mandarin's head<br>appears between the pillows<br>and he looks longingly at the girl | 3:20 |

- |  |   |              |
|--|---|--------------|
| 10                                     | The terrified tramps discuss how they<br>are to get rid of the Mandarin | 1:56         |
| 11                                     | The body of the Mandarin begins to<br>glow with a greenish blue light*  | 1:52         |
| 12                                     | She resists no longer – they embrace                                    | 2:04         |
| <b>Dance Suite, Sz77 (1923)</b>        |   | <b>17:33</b> |
| 13                                     | I. Moderato   | 3:55         |
| 14                                     | II. Allegro molto   | 2:21         |
| 15                                     | III. Allegro vivace   | 3:10         |
| 16                                     | IV. Molto tranquillo  | 2:52         |
| 17                                     | V. Comodo - Finale  | 5:16         |
| <b>Hungarian Pictures, Sz97 (1931)</b> |   | <b>11:47</b> |
| 18                                     | I. An evening in the village  | 3:04         |
| 19                                     | II. Bear dance  | 1:47         |
| 20                                     | III. Melody   | 2:08         |
| 21                                     | IV. Slightly Tipsy  | 2:26         |
| 22                                     | V. Swineherd's Dance  | 2:21         |

### Bournemouth Symphony Chorus\* and Orchestra • Marin Alsop

To hear Marin Alsop introduce Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*, go to [naxos.com/alsop/mandarin](http://naxos.com/alsop/mandarin)

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Cover image: *Backdrop for Scene II of The Miraculous Mandarin, production designed by Enrico Prampolini for La Scala, Milan, c.1930* (The Art Archive / Private Collection / Marc Charmet)