

NAXOS

MARTINŮ

Piano Concertos Nos. 1, 2 and 4

Giorgio Koukl, Piano

Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra, Zlín
Arthur Fagen



Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959) Piano Concertos • 2

Bohuslav Martinů was born in a church tower in Polička, a small Bohemian town about eighty kilometres north of Brno, in what is now the Czech Republic. He was a prolific composer, with over four hundred pieces of music to his credit. His composing began precociously at the age of ten, after beginning his study of the violin two years earlier. Although he attended the Prague Conservatory, Martinů failed to complete his courses, and while a young man worked as an orchestral violinist in Prague before moving to Paris in 1923 in order to study with Albert Roussel. He moved to the United States at the beginning of the 1940s to escape the spreading Nazi occupation of Europe. Following the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, with the imposing influence of the Soviet Union immediately to the east, a communist coup took place in Czechoslovakia in late February 1948. Martinů subsequently abandoned any plans of returning to his homeland. Although he visited France and Switzerland that summer, he returned to the United States in the autumn to become a professor of composition at Princeton University, a post which he held until 1951. In 1953, he left the United States with his wife Charlotte to settle in Nice, returning in late 1955 for a few months to teach at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and the Mannes School in New York.

Martinů's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 4, 'Incantation'*, H. 358, with which this second volume opens, was completed in early 1956, prior to his final departure from the United States in May. It had its première in New York City on 4th October of that year with the pianist Rudolf Firkušný, and Leopold Stokowski conducting *The Symphony of the Air*, an American orchestra comprised of former NBC Symphony Orchestra musicians. The concerto's form is distinctive in that it is free and asymmetrical, comprised of only two movements.

The first movement, *Poco allegro*, is a high tension affair that would fit the opening scene of a Hollywood science fiction thriller. When the piano finally makes its appearance with Martinů's "bells", the tension is hardly dissipated, but actually increased to a shimmering white heat. Likewise, the following dreamlike sequence does little

to ease the blood pressure level of the listener. The rat-tat drum version of Martinů's signature three-note motive adds to the sinister character of the proceedings. Finally a solo oboe brings some relief while the piano tries to calm things down with Martinů's typical cadences, but of course there is a return to the tension of the opening. The surprising ending in a swirl of pianistic dust comes not with a bang, but with a whimper.

The *Poco moderato* second movement is interesting for the strong element of dialogue between the orchestra and soloist. They each go on for considerable stretches of time without interference from the other. High drama is maintained throughout, with captivating colouristic effects, and it is fascinating to hear piano and orchestra pass the baton back and forth as if they were team-mates in a relay race. In his notes for the Martinů Institute's catalogue of the composer's works, musicologist Aleš Březina quotes Martinů as saying that the piece is an "expression of the never-ending search for truth and the meaning of life, as well as an homage to music, the musician's reclusion, his powers and his arms."

Martinů's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1, H. 149*, written in 1925, was given its première the following year by the pianist Jan Heřman and the Czech Philharmonic, conducted by Robert Manzer. The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, is totally delightful from start to finish. Brilliant tunes are treated in a fashion designed to appeal even to less sophisticated listeners. Even the fugal passages are fun. There is something of the trademark Martinů cross-rhythmic patterns along with echoes of Prokofiev and Poulenc, and even a smattering of English band music. This is Martinů at his tuneful and playful best.

A chorale-like tune serves as the foundation of the *Andante* second movement, a set of variations much in the nature of a neo-baroque chorale-prelude. It begins with orchestral strings and a solo oboe. The piano joins in an understated fashion like Bloch's *Concerto Grosso* but it gradually becomes more brilliant with shades of Ravel's *Ondine*. A stunningly impressive cadenza evolves into a Lisztian treatment and from there into pure Martinů before

the movement returns to the calm sounds of the opening of the movement.

Neo-baroque references continue in the *Allegro* third movement, sounding much like something Vivaldi might have written had he lived during the early twentieth century. A fugal passage which serves as second theme is full of charm and delight. The middle of the movement reminds us that Martinů had not finished working with the chorale from the second movement. A final romp through the first and second themes brings this movement to a close with a constant feeling of tongue-in-cheek high frivolity. There is a sense that Martinů is daring us to guess whom he is quoting: Is that a bit of the Liszt *Spanish Rhapsody* there, or is it Gottschalk? Of course the movement cannot end without a cadenza featuring the bells that permeate so much of Martinů's music.

The *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 2, H. 237*, composed in 1934 during Martinů's Parisian period, also had its première in Prague with the Czech Philharmonic, but with Firkušný as pianist and Václav Talich conducting, some nine years after the first concerto.

In contrast to the first, which bubbles over itself with infectious fun-loving enthusiasm, this second concerto seems to take itself more seriously. This is not to say that it is heavy

or morose, but there is an earnest quality that immediately engages the listener with Martinů's own personal language. The *Allegro moderato* first movement (occasionally reminiscent of Prokofiev, Copland, Stravinsky, and even Brahms) is both dramatic and romantic, with those characteristics working together to make a convincing statement.

The second movement, marked *Poco andante*, begins with sublime flowing music in the orchestra answered by a questioning recitative in the piano that develops into a dramatic cadenza. Much of the music here seems to be an unabashedly romantic homage to Brahms, including what amounts to a direct quotation of that master's famous double concerto for violin and cello, with very satisfying results.

The final movement, *Poco allegro*, is in three parts, with the outer parts typified by extended dialogues between the piano soloist playing increasingly complex broken chord passages and the orchestra exploring the characteristic three-note pattern that permeates so much of Martinů's music. The middle section begins gently and gradually grows in intensity and excitement, finally blossoming into a soaring melody supported by lush harmonies. A final coda brings everything to a crashing dénouement.

Cary Lewis and Mark Gresham

Giorgio Koukl

Giorgio Koukl is a pianist/harpsichordist and composer who lives in Lugano, in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino in southern Switzerland. He was born in Prague in 1953, and studied there at the State Music School and Conservatory. In 1968 he moved to Switzerland and continued his studies at both the Conservatories of Zürich and Milan. By a strange parallel of history, much as the Martinůs left for Switzerland in 1938 to escape the Nazi armies rolling into Paris, in 1968, thirty years later, when Koukl moved to Switzerland, Soviet tanks rolled into Prague. While studying in Zürich and Milan, Koukl took part in the master-classes of N. Magalov, J. Février, S. Neuhaus, and Martinů's friend and advocate Rudolf Firkušný. During classes with the last Koukl first encountered Martinů's music, prompting him to search out his compatriot's solo piano works. Since then he has developed these into an important part of his concert repertoire and is now considered as one of the world's leading interpreters of Martinů's piano music.



Photo: Chiara Solari



Arthur Fagen

A former assistant of Christoph von Dohnányi (Frankfurt Opera) and James Levine (Metropolitan Opera), Arthur Fagen is a regular guest at the most prestigious opera houses, concert halls, and music festivals at home and abroad. Born in New York, he studied with Laszlo Halasz, Max Rudolf (Curtis Institute) and Hans Swarowsky. His career has been marked by a string of notable appearances including the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Staatsoper Berlin, Munich State Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin, New York City Opera, and orchestras including the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the Czech Philharmonic, Munich Radio Orchestra, Tokyo Philharmonic, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, and RAI Orchestras of Turin, Naples, Milan and Rome, among others. From 1998 to 2001 he was invited regularly as Guest Conductor at the Vienna State Opera. He has served as Principal Conductor in Kassel and Brunswick, as Chief Conductor of the Flanders Opera of Antwerp and Ghent, as Music Director of the Queens Symphony Orchestra and a member of the conducting staff of the Chicago Lyric Opera. From 2002 to 2007 he was Music Director of the Dortmund Philharmonic Orchestra and Opera, and in 2008 he was appointed Professor at the Indiana University in Bloomington. Arthur Fagen has recorded for Naxos and BMG.

Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra

The home of the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra is Zlin, a town in the east of the Czech Republic. With a population approaching one hundred thousand, it is a modern industrial centre, owing its development to the BATA company, the founder of which, Tomáš Baťa, succeeded in successfully combining his entrepreneurship and his philosophy

of life. Established in 1945 as the Symphony Orchestra of Bata National Enterprise, the orchestra has been known under various names, early in 1989 becoming the Bohuslav Martinů Philharmonic Orchestra. The orchestra has worked with a number of distinguished conductors and since the 2008-2009 season the principal conductor has been Stanislav Vavřínek. The repertoire of the orchestra includes a wide range of symphonic works of different periods and a considerable number of contemporary compositions. Cooperation with radio and television stations together with recording companies have become a regular part of the orchestra's work.

Photo: Alena Rychlíd



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The music of Bohuslav Martinů, whose complete solo piano works have also been recorded by Giorgio Koukl for Naxos, can ring like bells, shimmer like a mirage or pulse with sheer rhythmic vitality as is the case with these three piano concertos, where high drama, brilliant tunes, captivating colouristic effects and tongue-in-cheek frivolity all find their place. Volume 1 – *Piano Concertos Nos. 3 & 5* (8.572206) has been acclaimed for its ‘Buoyant and exuberant performances’ (*Gramophone Editor’s Choice*) and as ‘an auspicious debut [and] extremely well played’ (*International Record Review*).

Bohuslav
MARTINŮ
(1890–1959)

Piano Concertos • 2

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| Piano Concerto No. 4, H. 358, ‘Incantation’ | | 20:24 |
| 1 | Poco allegro | 9:45 |
| 2 | Poco moderato | 10:38 |
| Piano Concerto No. 1 in D major, H. 149 | | 29:20 |
| 3 | Allegro moderato | 10:44 |
| 4 | Andante | 7:47 |
| 5 | Allegro | 10:46 |
| Piano Concerto No. 2, H. 237 | | 24:50 |
| 6 | Allegro moderato | 9:44 |
| 7 | Poco andante | 7:38 |
| 8 | Poco allegro | 7:25 |



Giorgio Koukl, Piano
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Arthur Fagen



Recorded at The House of Arts, Zlín, Czech Republic, 28–31 May 2009
Producer: Karol Kopernický • Engineer: Otto Nopp • Editor: Ladislav Krajčovič
Publishers: Bärenreiter-Verlag • Schott Music (tracks 3–8) • Booklet notes: Cary Lewis and Mark Gresham
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