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| **Martinů, Bohuslav (1890-1959)** |
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| Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959). Czech composer of Austro-Hungarian, Czechoslovak, and American citizenship. He left his native Polička in Eastern Bohemia in 1906 to study violin at the Prague Conservatory. Although initially expelled for negligence, he transferred to the organ department and passed his state examinations in 1912. He continued residing in Prague until 1923, playing as a deputy violinist with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra from 1913 and then as a full member under Václav Talich during the years 1920-23. Largely self-taught in composition, he studied briefly with Josef Suk during the years 1922-23 and with Albert Roussel from the time of his arrival in Paris in 1923; he remained in the French capital until 1940. |
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Injuries from a severe accident in 1946 and the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948 discouraged him from returning to Prague. With no reversal in the communist regime’s stance against him, he took American citizenship in 1952. His one-year fellowship at the American Academy in Rome formed the pretext for him to resettle in Europe in 1956. The Paul Sacher Estate in Switzerland became his final residence; he died of stomach cancer in nearby Liestal in 1959.  His first major performance was in Prague in 1919 with his neo-romantic, patriotic cantata *Czech Rhapsody* (1918). Composed in the atmosphere of Czechoslovakia’s independence, it was an exception stylistically among his early works, when Dvořák, Mozart, and Debussy had been his greatest influences. After his arrival in Paris, he came under the spell of Stravinsky, leading to rhythmically oriented, ‘dynamistic’ works such as *Half-time: Rondo for Large Orchestra* (1924) and String Quartet No. 2 (1925). During the later 1920s, jazz and pastiche emerged in works that included his entertaining ballet *Kitchen Revue* (1927).  These influences disappear from his instrumental works by the 1930s, when he embraced an austere, neo-classical idiom; his polyphonically mannered Piano Trio No. 1: Five Short Pieces (1930) was a decisive work in this transition. The eighteenth-century concerto grosso influenced his orchestral works, which resulted in his *Inventions* (1934), *Concerto Grosso* (1937), *Tre Ricercari* (1938), and the *Double Concerto for Two String Orchestras, Piano, and Timpani* (1938). During the 1930s, he launched an ambitious project for the Czech Theater, where he mined Czech folk sources for works that embraced anti-Wagnerian principles; products of this included his ‘singing-ballet’ *Špalíček* (1932) and his operatic cycle of medieval mystery stories *Plays of Mary* (1934). Forming the culmination of his work for the Czech stage was his surrealist opera *Julietta, or the Key to Dreams* (1937), premiered under Talich at the Prague National Theater in 1938.  Patronage by top musical personalities in the U.S. such as the conductor Serge Koussevitsky led him to embrace the symphony, resulting in his Symphonies Nos. 1-5 (1942-46). Under the influence of renaissance polyphonic genres, he developed the lyrical, ametrical style heard in the first movements of his Cello Sonata No. 2 (1941) and Symphony No. 1 (1942). Another new element from this time includes a cadential progression he borrowed from his opera *Julietta*, which he deployed in numerous works throughout the rest of his career; the progression, often called the ‘Julietta Chords’, is a kind of plagal cadence from a dominant 13th chord on the subdominant to the tonic, which he often repeats right away a whole-tone lower. Masterful chamber works from his early American years include his Piano Quartet (1942), *Madrigal-Sonata* (1942)*,* and Trio for Flute, Cello, and Piano (1944). By the end of his American residence, he had taught composition at Tanglewood, Mannes, Princeton, and Curtis. It was while on staff at Tanglewood during the summer of 1946 that he suffered his near-fatal fall from an unprotected terrace, resulting in partial deafness in one ear for the rest of his life.  During the 1950s, he developed a rhapsodic, neo-impressionistic idiom; works featuring an expanded orchestral palette and a greater focus on instrumental textures included his *Symphony No. 6: Fantaisies Symphoniques* (1953), *Les Fresques de Piero della Francesca* (1955), Piano Concerto No. 4 ‘Incantation’ (1956), *Parables* (1958), and *Estampes* (1958). Soon after its publication in Czechoslovakia in 1956, his folk cantata *Opening of the Springs* (1955) was performed in schools throughout the country, leading to his revival and widespread acceptance in the Czech musical community. Work on his opera *The Greek Passion*, which resulted in two different versions (1957, 1959), formed the thread of his creative activity throughout his final peripatetic years.  A champion of musical craft, he believed in the principles Gestalt guiding the composer in the act of musical creation. Becoming his axiom was his insistence that the work speaks alone rather than being a personal expression of the composer. Provoking misunderstanding among critics and historians was his emotionless exterior and reticence in public situations; he has been diagnosed posthumously as having suffered from Asperger Syndrome, offering an explanation to his savant-like abilities for composition that made him one of the most productive composers of the twentieth century. His harmonic language remained triadically based throughout his career and he never embraced atonality or artificial systems. Instead, he constantly sought out new solutions to form, content, rhythm, phrasing, and invention in the various synthetic styles he developed over the course of his career. |
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