

# Bartók's Retreat

by Jimmy J. Gilmore  
Photos by Jess Levin

It was a modest, somber crowd of perhaps ten people that gathered at Ferncliff Cemetery on the afternoon of September 28, 1945. The group was unusual because almost everyone in attendance was a musician, and all were present to honor the great Hungarian composer, Béla Bartók, who had died two days earlier at Westside Hospital in New York. Word that Bartók had died of leukemia spread quickly in the music world and was no surprise to many who knew that he had been in failing health for several years. Also well known were the difficult economic circumstances that Bartók and his wife, Ditta, had faced since coming to America in 1940. Like many Europeans who sought refuge in this country during World War II, the Bartóks struggled to find enough work to sustain even a modest standard of living.

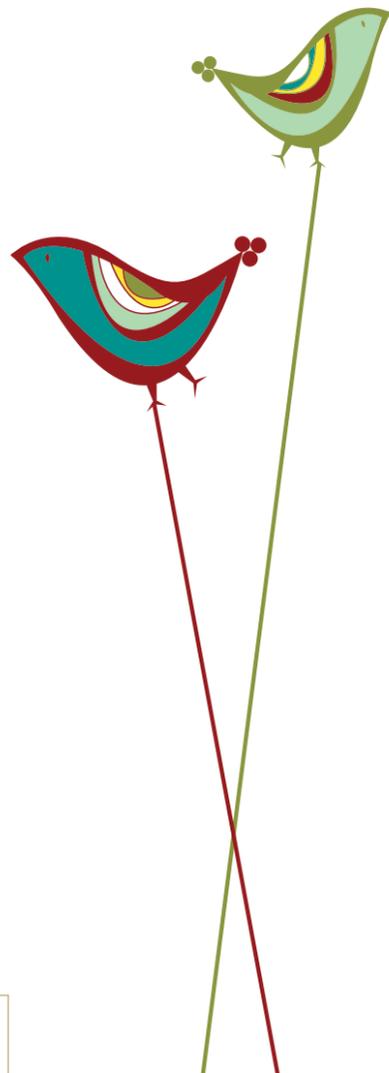
Even before he knew the true extent of his illness, Bartók had requested a simple, non-religious funeral. And this was simple to be sure; there wasn't even a gravestone. He was buried in Plot St. Peter, Grave #470. Perhaps this would not have bothered Bartók, but so little ceremony and such a humble burial seemed an unfitting farewell to a composer of his stature.

Bartók was shy and sensitive, but at the same time a proud and exacting man who stood firmly by his principles. He steadfastly refused to accept charity of any sort. However, his musician friends and organizations such as the Association of Composers, Authors and

Publishers (ASCAP) made sure that the composer had some gainful employment. The Ditson Fund, a foundation set up to aid artists, gave Bartók a grant to catalogue Columbia University's collection of eastern European folk music. Also, he received a significant commission from Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony to compose his greatest and best loved orchestral work, the Concerto for Orchestra.

Bartók was never comfortable in America, no doubt due in part to his illness, but most importantly because of the vast cultural differences between Hungary and the United States.

WE COULD WELL  
IMAGINE BARTÓK FROM  
HIS TREETOP ROOM,  
BEING SERENADED BY  
AN AVIAN CHORUS AS  
THE SPRING DAWNED IN  
MARCH OF 1944.



Bartók was not Jewish. He came to America because he could not abide the Nazi juggernaut or the Hungarian government's seeming acquiescence to the horrors they perpetrated. Exile from his beloved country was self-imposed, not prompted by threats to his security. But Bartók still had an abiding love for his people and understood them well from his extensive travels with Zoltán Kodály, recording and notating folk music throughout Hungary. He knew he would have a hard time adjusting to life in America, but it was a far better alternative than trying to work under the Nazis. Bartók took refuge in America but was never at home here.

After his death, his American friends had a lingering sense that something wasn't quite right about the greatest Hungarian composer of the twentieth century being interred on foreign soil in what could be viewed as a pauper's grave. Finally, in 1950, five years after his burial, admirers of Bartók, led by publisher Milton Feist, arranged for a bronze marker to be placed on Bartók's grave. Aaron Copland was asked to speak at the dedication on behalf of the League of Composers, but he was unable to attend. He asked North Carolina composer Robert Ward to speak in his place at the ceremony. Ward, only 32-years-old at the time and on the faculty at The Juilliard School of Music, was a former student of Copland. It was quite an honor for the young composer to be asked to speak at an historic event honoring one of the giants of twentieth century music.

Earlier in his career, as a student at the Eastman School of Music, Ward became an admirer of Bartók's music. He had a tremendous appreciation for the set of the piano pieces "For Children" which preceded the "Mikrokosmos," as well as the Second Violin Sonata, the First, Second, Fifth, and Sixth String Quartets, and, of course, the Concerto for Orchestra. Ward had met the Hungarian composer only once – a very brief encounter at a reception for Bartók at the New York Public Library. He remarked that Bartók appeared frail and seemed very uncomfortable greeting the public. He was thin and diminutive, yet his eyes stood out like two dark orbs probing the space around him.

When Ward rose and spoke that day, he talked about the music, as well as the man. He alluded to specific musical examples in the Bartók catalogue, and paid tribute to the amazing originality and variety of his compositions. Ward did not know of the poignant statement Bartók made to his physician during his last days: "What I most regret is having to leave with a full trunk." Bartók meant that he was still overflowing with creative ideas. Ward ended his tribute with a quote from Yeats's poem "The Tower," which perfectly illustrated the sad, inevitable dilemma Bartók faced at the end of his life:

"When the swan must fix his eye  
Upon a fading gleam,  
Float out upon a long  
Last reach of glittering stream  
And there sing his last song."

Bartók left this world with many songs left unsung.

The last five years of Bartók's life were spent in America. During that time he found very few places where he could work in tranquility. The composer worked best in absolute, concentrated silence, with no distractions. His most extended stay away from New York was the five months he spent in Asheville, NC, from December 1943 through April of 1944. At this time his health, tenuous at best, seemed to be improving, and his doctors were anxious to avoid any possibility of a relapse. Fortunately ASCAP took an interest in Bartók's situation and arranged the trip to Asheville in hopes that his health would continue to improve. In Europe he had always sought to restore his sense of well-being in the mountains. Asheville, famous as a mountain resort, would provide a quiet work environment and put him in closer contact with nature.

Bartók lived in North Carolina sixty-five years ago, and it was widely assumed that he spent the winter of 1943-44 at the Grove Park Inn. Perhaps this impression has been reinforced by the fact that Bartók's picture is on display along with other famous guests who stayed at the Grove Park Inn, such as Thomas Edison, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Enrico Caruso, Harry Houdini, William Jennings Bryan, General John J. Pershing and Will Rogers.

In reality, Bartók did not reside at the Grove Park Inn. According to Peter Bartók, Béla's son, his father lodged instead at the Albemarle Inn. Happily, it turned out to be the perfect location for Bartók, away from the constant noise and teeming bustle of New York. At the Albemarle Inn, a boarding house at the time, Bartók accomplished much, putting the finishing touches on the Concerto for Orchestra, completing the Solo Sonata for Violin, which was dedicated to Yehudi Menuhin, cataloguing folk songs and notating bird calls which were to appear later in the Piano Concerto No. 3, sometimes referred to as the "Asheville Concerto."

Encountering the shy, mysterious composer, other boarders recalled to the *Greensboro Daily News* that, "he was a very quiet man who stayed alone most of the time. While other guests at the inn would sit around and talk after dinner, Bartók would leave the table immediately and go for a stroll through the grounds and surrounding woods, often with a notebook in hand to record bird songs."

Peter Bartók, on leave from the U.S. Navy, visited his father in Asheville in the spring of 1944. In his book, *My Father*, he relates the importance of the birds of North Carolina to the composer. "The second movement of the Third Piano Concerto, written a year later, begins quietly, slowly; it could be night. But in the middle of the movement, things begin to stir and, suddenly, there are the Asheville birds! You can hear them (beginning in measure 58) and sense the country morning as the mists clear up and the world awakens to new life."

On a recent North Carolina Symphony tour of western North Carolina I decided to pay a visit to the Albemarle Inn. Several of my orchestra colleagues, including Jess Levin, violinist and photographer; Petra Berenyi, cimbalom player, violist and native of Budapest; and cellist John McClellan accompanied me to the Inn. We received a gracious welcome from the owner, Cathy Sklar. She and her husband, Lawrence, have renovated the building beautifully and currently run it as a bed and breakfast.

We were amazed to find that the memory of Bartók is a major theme at the Inn. Mrs. Sklar pointed out the parlor, just off the

main entrance, where Bartók often played the piano. How many of the other lodgers realized the eminence of the pianist in the next room? On display just outside the parlor door is a book about the piano music of Bartók. Tasteful period furniture and antiques adorn the Inn throughout. And the sweeping staircase ascending to the second floor landing is truly impressive, with its carved oak banisters.

Our greatest thrill was actually getting to see the room where Bartók stayed during his sojourn in Asheville. With great anticipation we climbed the steeply graded stairs to the third floor. Bartók's room is at the top of the stairs, and on the door is a brass plaque that reads, "Bartók's Retreat." We gasped and smiled as if we had found the Ark. Here it was, Bartók's room. In decades of travel to Asheville, we never realized how close we were to this important historic site. The room is quite cozy, and feels very private. Though not original, the furnishings are modest and tasteful, much in keeping with the persona of the shy, quiet composer. We could well imagine Bartók from his treetop room, being serenaded by an avian chorus as the spring dawned in March of 1944.

On display at the Inn is a plaque presented in 1995 by the Embassy of the Republic of Hungary and the City Council of Asheville in remembrance of Bartók and the house he worked in during the winter of 1943-44. Inscribed on the plaque is Bartók's credo: "My own idea, however – of which I have been fully conscious since I found myself as a composer – is the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. I try – to the best of my ability – to serve this idea in my music; therefore I don't reject any influence, be it Slovakian, Romanian, Arabic or from any other source. The source must only be clean, fresh, and healthy!"

Postlude: In 1988, as the Iron Curtain disintegrated, the Republic of Hungary arranged to have Bartók's remains returned to his homeland. Forty-eight years after his death in America, Bartók made his final journey home to Budapest as a hero of the Hungarian people. Ironically, the man who had requested a simple good-bye to the world was finally laid to rest with an elaborate state

funeral. It was as if a collective conscience had, at last, erased the embarrassment of relegating a great man to a grave marked only with a number.

Though he is now at rest in his homeland far away, the Bartók legacy lives on. What he accomplished during his time in North Carolina is a significant part of that legacy. We can be proud that Bartók's visit to our state inspired him to write some of the greatest night music ever composed – the centerpiece of his Third Piano Concerto – the magnificent Concert of the Birds.



More photos at [www.ncsymphony.org/photos](http://www.ncsymphony.org/photos)

