NAXOS

# Leó WEINER

## Violin Concerto No. 2

### Ballade for Clarinet and Orchestra

### Suite on Hungarian Folk Dances

**Júlia Pusker, Violin • Csaba Klenyán, Clarinet**

**MÁV Symphony Orchestra, Budapest**

**Valéria Csányi**



## **Leó Weiner** (1885–1960): **Violin Concerto No. 2**

### **Ballade, Op. 8** (version for clarinet and orchestra) • **Suite on Hungarian Folk Dances**

Leó Weiner, a Hungarian composer and music teacher, was born on 16 April 1885 in Budapest to a middle-class Jewish family. He took piano lessons for three months, but after that he had to teach himself. He learned the tricks of the piano from his elder brother. At the age of eleven, his parents took him to a concert by Emil von Sauer, which was a pivotal experience for him. It was then that he began to take music seriously. When he took the entrance exam for the Liszt Academy in Budapest at the age of 16, he was driven primarily by a thirst for knowledge. 'I saw composers as something sacred and unattainably distant,' he recalled. 'It was unimaginable to me that a simple, ordinary person could join the ranks of the greats of music history. It never even occurred to me that I could be a composer myself. I wanted to enter the Academy solely so that serious study would allow me a deeper insight into the masterpieces of the classics.' Like almost all of his renowned contemporaries, he studied with Hans von Koessler (1853–1926, known as 'János' Koessler in Hungary), an outstanding composer who was the custodian of the German Romantic musical tradition of Brahms. Koessler's students included Ernő Dohnányi, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, who became world famous as 'serious' composers, as well as Emmerich Kálmán, Victor Jacobi, Albert Szirmai and Jenő Huszka, who made lasting contributions to the operetta genre.

After completing his studies with outstanding success, Weiner, following a brief European tour and a stint as a répétiteur-conductor at the Népszínház (folk theatre), was appointed a professor at his alma mater, where he remained until his death. For half a century, he taught generations of musicians in the departments of composition, music theory and chamber music. Virtually every musician who graduated from Budapest during this period was a student of Leó Weiner. He trained an orchestra without a conductor, launched world famous string quartets (including the Léner, Bartók, Pauk and Végh quartets), and raised the standard of wind chamber music to new heights. His pedagogical work was also immortalised in his theoretical textbooks and published scores.

Weiner's most inspired works were composed in his youth, when his musical language fortunately converged with the musical tastes of both his hometown and the wider world. He succeeded in creating a unique synthesis between German/French Romantic traditions and the Hungarian musical language of the turn of the century. He composed music that was Hungarian through and through in these pieces, though we find hardly any folk song quotations in them. Géza Csáth, a critic of the time, wrote about Weiner's first work, the *Serenade*:

> He sensed how much the ornamental elements of Hungarian music can be shaped and moulded if we wish to work with them in a broad, flowing sonata form. Its rhythm is stylised from Hungarian dances and, through original counterpoint, weaves itself into an intimate, charming, cheerfully melancholic, and at the same time orchestral language. We sense that he does not experiment with forms, that he does not attempt to give his music its ethnic character through ethnic-sounding harmonies, but rather feels everything sincerely and clearly.

Indeed, with this new, captivating voice, he immediately made a splash: the works of the composer in his twenties, published by renowned European publishers, were eagerly performed on prestigious international concert platforms.

The *Ballade, Op. 8*, written for clarinet and piano and premiered in 1912, was one of Weiner's most successful works: at the premiere, the audience requested an encore of the entire piece, which was an unusual occurrence both then and now. The premiere of the musically identical orchestral version, also bearing the opus number 8, took place on 7 February 1921, in the Grand Hall of the Liszt Academy, performed by Lutz Lambert with the Budapest Philharmonic Society orchestra conducted by István Kerner. In the orchestra, unusually for that time, the woodwinds are represented by only two bassoons; the flute, oboe and *tutti* clarinets are absent so as not to drown out the solo clarinet part. The form is also ingenious: a sonata exposition is followed by an *attacca* slow movement, then a restless quasi-*scherzo*. It is only upon the recapitulation that it becomes clear we are not hearing a single-composed multi-movement fantasia, as the previous two parts are the development section of a larger sonata form. The main theme is a typical, meandering Weinerian melody, developed with a sure hand and a lyrical character. The secondary theme begins with a mysterious atmosphere following a fading transition, which gradually segues into the triumphant outburst of the closing theme, suddenly becoming tender as the clarinet rises to ethereal heights. The first section of the development is one of the most beautiful expressions of Weiner's lyricism, with the orchestra's lush counterpoint accompanying the clarinet's endless melody – contemporary critics perceived some eroticism in this. After the clarinet's solo cadenza, the tempo and metre change; the music becomes agitated and dramatic, then a chorale melody emerges with hymn-like solemnity on the solo violin rising above the orchestra; finally, after the climax, the agitation subsides, and the return follows. The piece's coda is essentially an extension of the closing theme. The movement fades away intimately, like a beautiful dream.

Weiner provided his highly successful piece with a full symphonic orchestral accompaniment; under the new opus number 28, he recomposed only the first orchestral interlude. In addition to the clarinet-piano version, he also composed a viola part in the 1920s, which he later dedicated in the published edition to Pál Lukács, professor of singing and viola at the Liszt Academy.

The rise of modern musical trends that diverged from his own style plunged Weiner into a creative crisis – he even handed over his position as a composition professor at the Liszt Academy to Kodály. Folk melodies provided the inspiration that led him out of this crisis. In 1931, his friend László Lajtha introduced him to folk music and took him to the phonograph collection at the Museum of Ethnography, where he was able to explore the results of decades of folk song collection and research. Weiner not only studied the existing transcriptions of folklorists but also made his own initial transcriptions from the phonograph cylinders. He selected vocal and instrumental melodies of the most diverse styles according to his own aesthetic principles. He wrote these down into three music books, which can still be found in the Weiner estate today. Later, as his folk song arrangements were completed, he crossed out the notations of the melodies he had used. His approach differed somewhat from that of Kodály and Bartók. As his monographer, Melinda Berlász, writes, 'In Weiner's eyes, folk music represented an exclusively musical perspective: musical material rich in valuable, individual characteristics which – as he professed – he could stylise into "classical" works with "great compositional restraint".' For his part, this attitude is not evidence of the city dweller's reserve, but rather, in the opinion of the author of these lines, an artistic humility toward musical quality that is particularly characteristic of Weiner.

*Suite, Op. 18* is one of Weiner's most significant works, and one of his most frequently performed pieces internationally. The composition was premiered in Rochester, in the United States, on 12 January 1933. *The New York Times* wrote the following in its preview:

> The first performance anywhere of Leo Weiner's *Suite for Orchestra* will be given Thursday afternoon by the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra under Fritz Reiner, its guest conductor. Mr. Weiner sent Mr. Reiner the manuscript from the Royal Hungarian Academy in Budapest, where he is a Professor of Ensemble and Theory. Which irresistibly prompts the following saga, with apologies to Mother Goose: Mr. Reiner met friend Weiner / Going down the street. / Said Mr. Reiner unto Weiner, / "Let me see your Suite." / Crafty Weiner whispered to Reiner, / "Promise first I'll hear it." / Cried Reiner to the doubting Weiner, / "You shall, for I'll premiere it!"

The premiere was a huge success; in a move unprecedented by local standards, the fourth movement had to be repeated after the conductor was called back six times for an encore. The premiere was followed by numerous performances at Reiner's concerts. The Budapest premiere took place a month later, on 11 February 1933, performed by the Budapest Philharmonic Society conducted by Ernő Dohnányi at a concert organised by the Liszt Society, where the prize-winning works of a composition competition founded by its honorary president, Count Kuno Klebelsberg, who had passed away three months earlier, were presented. The concert was part of a series of commemorative events honouring the most influential Hungarian Minister of Culture to date, which is why it took place at the Műcsarnok ('Hall of Art') in the presence of dignitaries from the worlds of politics and culture. Critics complained about the acoustics, a shortcoming that was soon remedied by the next concert. On 10 May, at the Liszt Academy, Fritz (Frigyes) Reiner conducted the Budapest Concert Orchestra (the predecessor of the current National Philharmonic), which had been founded three years earlier, under no less festive circumstances. The concert, also organised by the Liszt Society, was dedicated to the memory of Albert Apponyi, a politician who had passed away in Geneva three months earlier, and whom his contemporaries called the greatest living Hungarian. The work was a resounding success with audiences here as well, just as it had been everywhere else in the world following its premiere.

In terms of its length and structure, this four movement work corresponds to a Classical symphony. In the original sense of the word, however, it is a suite – a series of dance sequences even within the individual movements. In terms of form, the first movement is in sonata form without a recapitulation. Musicologist and ethnographer Lujza Tari researched the folk music sources of Weiner's works, and from her we know that the first movement contains a hint of melodic folk inspiration, while the themes are Weiner's own inventions. The main theme is a masculine soldier's dance (*verbunkos*) derived from a flute melody, and a dance tune performed on the violin. The secondary theme and the closing theme developed from it are reminiscent of a folk song that Kodály also arranged (*Hej, két tikom tavali* – 'Hey, my two chickens from last spring'), first appearing as a playful flute dance and then as the closing theme in a robust, almost menacing character. The compositional interplay of modulation, rhythm, and character in the development section, along with its tension-building anticipation – emphasised by a general pause – resolves in the triumphant return of the main theme. The second movement begins with a stylised pentatonic improvisation of a slow clarinet solo. After a powerful crescendo, the first theme bursts in, a two-part Szekler folk clarinet dance melody from Transylvania, Maros (Mureș) County. Both parts of the similarly structured second theme are folk clarinet melodies: the first was recorded as a 'Hungarian folk song', the second as a 'barn dance'. Weiner arranged this latter dance on several occasions. The third similarly constructed theme has no direct folk counterpart; a faint precursor can be found in one of the themes of the slow movement of Weiner's own *String Trio, Op. 6*. There is no further thematic material in the movement; through the free grouping of thematic units, Weiner follows both the traditions of instrumental folk music and the formal structure of European dance music. The third movement begins with the rubato clarinet cadenza from the previous movement, this time a semitone lower. The movement is built on two bagpipe tunes in ternary form, with a short, lyrical coda based on the theme of the middle section. The first theme, a slow dance, appears six times, and the second, with an atmospheric violin solo, appears three times. In the recapitulation, the first theme appears five times, and in the coda, the first half of the second theme appears twice, in various characterisations. The theme of the rondo-form fourth movement is a more playful, less common version of a dance melody still found today, featuring alternating time signatures (2/4 and 3/4), to which is added a fast *csárdás* melody originally performed on the flute. The first episode of the rondo is a variation on the second theme of the work's second movement (barn dance). The second episode is again a powerful bagpipe tune. The sparklingly witty, fast dance movement concludes with these notes. Weiner transcribed the piece for piano four hands and also for two pianos; the latter remained unpublished.

The hell of the Second World War once again led to a creative crisis in Weiner's artistic work, which lasted for seven years. After the war, he wrote a series of works for educational purposes, composed his culminating work, the *Toldi* symphonic poem, and refined and orchestrated his early pieces.

One of the most significant of these is the *Violin Concerto in F sharp minor, Op. 45*, which Tibor Ney premiered on 8 December 1957, accompanied by the Hungarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Tamás Bródy at the Central Officers' Club of the People's Army. Weiner had this to say about the history of the work's creation:

> Erika Morini, the world famous violinist, asked me in the 1930s to arrange my *Sonata in F sharp minor for violin and piano* [premiered in 1917, *Op. 11*] as a violin concerto for her. She loves the piece very much, but feels that the violin part exceeds the scope of a sonata, and that the lyrical and impassioned elements inherent in it would come to the fore much better if the violin were supported not by a piano but by an orchestra. Incidentally, the cadenza in the introduction to the fourth movement is also concerto-like. I was inclined toward the arrangement, but the intervening war and the great distance (Morini lives in America) prevented the plan from being carried out. Now, however, I felt that, having passed my seventieth year, I would either compose my concerto now or never. Thus my *Violin Concerto in F sharp minor* was born.

The first movement is in Classical sonata form. The main theme is a broad, flowing violin melody with a soft, static syncopated chordal accompaniment, which in the secondary theme is followed by a lyrical dialogue between the orchestra and the violin, followed in the closing theme by a passionate duet between the *tutti* first violins and the solo violin over the undulating accompaniment, with an emotional intensity that rises and then falls. In the brief development section, the soloist and the orchestra reach a climax through an imitative technique, then the musical texture thins out, comes to a halt, and a return follows. The short *coda* is the fading out of the closing theme. The second movement is a virtuoso *scherzo*, but not in the usual trio form. The movement begins with a miniature, repeated, regular sonata exposition, which moves from F sharp minor to C minor via the tritone (that devilish interval!). This is followed by the return of the main theme; the secondary theme is omitted, and instead the closing theme follows in F sharp major, and the short movement fades away. The third movement is built on three themes, in the character of a romance in free fantasia form – an autumnal poem with floating textures, French-inspired colours, and a stunningly beautiful climax. The fourth movement begins with an explosive, improvisational-like introduction by the orchestra, followed by the material of the *scherzo* re-appearing in a reminiscence-like manner. Then, accompanied by the orchestra, the solo instrument evokes the themes of the first and third movements, nostalgically and in dark colours, followed by a violin cadenza whose conclusion serves as a decisive transition before the actual finale begins. The main theme of the sonata form is a military march with a quasi-habanera character, which is, however, not at all cheerful – it is introduced by the orchestra, then by the violin. One element of the secondary theme group is a steadily moving plaintive melody, accompanied in the background by an intermittent undulating triplet figure, while the opening part of the main theme appears here and there. The first element of the closing theme group is the main theme itself in condensed form, followed by a major melody moving in thirds and resting on an organ point – a sort of highlight in the gloom – before the musical material becomes fragmented and uncertain. The development section is brief, typically a restless intensification woven from the material of the main theme. In the recapitulation, the composer suggested an *ad libitum* long pause affecting the entire secondary theme group and the first formal element of the closing theme group, totalling 80 bars. We have not included this, as we believe it alters the very essence of the sonata form. The coda, following a crescendo in tempo and emotion, ends in a jubilant F sharp major.

Weiner gave the score of the work to Yehudi Menuhin, who visited Hungary in both 1958 and 1959, and this manuscript remains in his estate to this day.

Weiner passed away on 13 September 1960. ‘He was neither an innovator nor a revolutionary,’ wrote Louis Kentner, Weiner’s student. ‘Even in his early years, he knew exactly where the line was in the process of “progress” that he was unwilling to cross, and he stubbornly adhered to it throughout. This could be called conservatism, or the courage of established taste. […] Throughout his life, he hated fashionable “isms” and denied that art’s task was to express the age in which we live; he wanted art that would lead humanity out of this age – an age he hated from the depths of his soul.’

**István Kassai**

*English translation: Paul Merrick*

## Júlia Pusker


Photo: Szilvia Csibi-Müpa

Júlia Pusker came to international prominence for her prizewinning performances at the 2019 Queen Elisabeth Violin Competition. Recent highlights include her Wigmore Hall recital debut with Christia Hudziy, as well as her performance of Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* with the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège under Gergely Madaras, which was broadcast live on Medici TV and later streamed on Mezzo. Pusker was selected for the Rising Stars programme of the European Concert Hall Organisation (ECHO) for the 2023/24 season, and as a chamber musician has collaborated with artists such as Kristóf Baráti, Frank Braley and Jean-Yves Thibaudet. She has been a recipient of various notable awards, including the renowned Junior Prima and Cziffra Festival prizes, and between 2016 and 2021 was artist-in-residence at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel in Brussels. Recent recordings include Eric Tanguy's *Second Violin Concerto* (Ondine), and her solo album *Schubert on Violin* (Hungaroton). Pusker studied at the Liszt Academy, Budapest and the Royal Academy of Music, London. She plays the c. 1714 'Massart' Antonio Stradivari violin kindly loaned to her through the Beare's International Violin Society by the Pauk family. www.juliapusker.com

## Csaba Klenyán


Photo: Csaba Aknay

Csaba Klenyán is the solo clarinettist of the Concerto Budapest Symphony Orchestra. As a soloist and chamber musician he is a regular participant in major festivals, and is a founding member of the UMZE Chamber Ensemble and a member of the Ligeti Ensemble and New Dimension Workshop. At the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music he became acquainted with the music of György Kurtág and Péter Eötvös, which had a deep impact on his art and vision. In addition to standard classical repertoire Klenyán also places great emphasis on the interpretation of contemporary music, and regularly collaborates with many composers who often dedicated their works to him. His discography includes releases on the Hungaroton, BMC, Brilliant Classics, Logos Publishing House, Fonó Records and Tacet record labels.

## MÁV Symphony Orchestra, Budapest




The MÁV Symphony Orchestra, Budapest is one of the leading orchestras in Hungary. It was founded in 1945 after the Second World War by the president of the Hungarian State Railway (MÁV). The orchestra's repertoire ranges from Baroque to contemporary works, with an audience of over 50,000 people annually, reaching out to many more through radio and television broadcasts and online platforms. Successful tours have gained the orchestra acclaim across Europe and South America, as well as in China, Egypt, Hong Kong, Japan, Lebanon, Oman and South Korea. During its more than eight decades of activity, it has worked with numerous world stars including Kiri Te Kanawa, Plácido Domingo and José Carreras, among many others. Many internationally celebrated conductors have conducted the orchestra, including Kurt Masur, Christoph Eschenbach and Neeme Järvi. Devoted to promoting contemporary music, the orchestra has performed several world and Hungarian premieres, most recently the Hungarian premieres of Péter Eötvös' *Harp Concerto* and Fazıl Say's piano concerto *Mother Earth*. www.mavzenekar.hu

## Valéria Csányi



The Hungarian conductor Valéria Csányi (b. 1958, Budapest) studied at the Liszt Academy of Music, obtaining a music teacher's and choral conductor's diploma in 1982 and a conductor's diploma in 1984. She has attended masterclasses given by Karl Österreicher in Vienna, Péter Eötvös in Szombathely and Milan Horvat in Salzburg, and since 1983, has been a member of the Hungarian State Opera, initially as a répétiteur. She was given the opportunity to conduct opera in 1988, leading several works, including premieres, and between 1995 and 2009 she took part in all of the ballet productions of the State Opera. She has worked extensively at the Hungarian State Opera, conducting more than 700 performances. She has toured Austria, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and Mexico. Csányi has made recordings for Naxos including the operetta *Fürstin Ninetta* by Strauss II with the Stockholms Strauss Orkester [8.660227-28] as well as the first complete recording of Erkel's opera *István király* ('King Stephen') [8.660345-46], Széchényi's *Complete Dances for Orchestra* [8.573807], and Weiner's ballet *Csongor and Tünde* [8.573491], *Toldi – Symphonic Poem* [8.573847] and *Divertimentos Nos. 1 and 2* [8.574125]. In November 2025, Csányi conducted the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra in Doha at the invitation of BAFTA, Golden Globe and GRAMMY Award-winning composer Gustavo Santaolalla, with whom she had previously collaborated with in Pécs in November 2018.

**Leó Weiner created a unique synthesis between German/French Romantic traditions and the Hungarian musical language at the beginning of the 20th century. The *Ballade*, admired for its beautiful dreamlike lyricism, was one of his most successful works. Weiner took inspiration from folk music as an escape from the 20th-century rise in modernism – his *Suite* integrates dance melodies into a work of symphonic scale and structure. The *Second Violin Concerto* is a defiantly Romantic post-war masterpiece in which darkness and light co-exist as an expression of humanity in an age of violence.**

MÁV SZIMFONIKUS ZENEKAR

# Leó WEINER
(1885–1960)

## Complete Works for Orchestra • 5

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|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Ballade, Op. 8** (1911) (version for clarinet and orchestra, 1921) | **11:21** |
| | **Suite on Old Hungarian Folk Themes, Op. 18** (1931) | **26:56** |
| 2 | I. Allegro risoluto e ben marcato | 6:52 |
| 3 | II. Andante poco sostenuto – Allegro con fuoco | 5:47 |
| 4 | III. Andante poco sostenuto – Pesante, poco maestoso | 7:57 |
| 5 | IV. Presto | 6:20 |
| | **Violin Concerto No. 2 in F sharp minor, Op. 45** (1957) | **27:57** |
| 6 | I. Allegro non tanto, ma appassionato | 6:30 |
| 7 | II. Presto | 2:47 |
| 8 | III. Larghetto | 5:50 |
| 9 | IV. Moderato – Presto – Larghetto – Allegro alla marcia | 12:50 |

**Csaba Klenyán, Clarinet 1 • Júlia Pusker, Violin 6–9**

**MÁV Symphony Orchestra, Budapest • Valéria Csányi**

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