



Ferenc Fricssay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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The powerful affinity between Hungarian conductor Ferenc Fricssay (1914-1963) and countryman Bela Bartok shines through this assemblage of live and studio RIAS inscriptions, 1950-1953, in which the lingua franca of music speaks most eloquently through a host of sympathetic collaborators. Many of the artists who congregate to conductor Fricssay are themselves alumnae of the Budapest Academy and imbibed the Bartok style directly from the composer or compatriots Kodaly, Weiner, and Dohnanyi.

The set opens with Bartok's potent Violin Concerto No. 2 (1938), originally performed by Zoltan Szekely and Willem Mengelberg but here intoned by Tibor Varga (1921-2003), Fricssay's preferred violinist. The Concerto performance (13 September 1951) emanates magisterial lyricism, passionate and melancholy. The refined expressiveness of Debussy merges with Bartok's "apocalyptic" style as he spiritually bids Europe adieu. The riffs from the harp and tympani, along with the plaintive B Minor affect, create a dirge-like litany for a fallen world. As in the Beethoven Concerto, the Andante is set as a theme and variations in G Major, an urge to a simpler life, with rhapsodic arias from Varga and Fricssay's harp principal. Following Liszt in his Faust-Symphony, Bartok utilizes the first movement themes in lyrically demonic parody for the finale. In the 1911 Deux Portraits (11 September 1951, studio) we come close to an inscription of the First Violin Concerto, withdrawn by the composer in 1907. The notes of a D Major seventh chord represent Bartok's infatuation with violinist Stefi Geyer. The exquisite anguish of the first "Ideal" portrait finds grotesque "relief" in the Presto – a savagely ironic Valse – each performed with noble devotion by Rudolf Schulz and Fricssay.

The 1930 Cantata Profana or "The Nine Enchanted Stags" finds Fricssay in a less "authentic" mode for his 12 September 1951 studio inscription, using a German translation rather than the Hungarian original. Based on a Romanian legend, the piece falls into three movements, the outer sections called "Once there was an old man." Besides the jarring punctuations from the chorus, the rhythmic propulsion and eerie scoring capture our interest, often reminiscent of the Piano Concerto No. 2. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (b. 1925) and tenor Helmut Krebs (1913-2007) provide the voices of the son – the latter transformed into a stag – and his father. The stag laments to the pleas of his father that his antlers no longer fit into human habitations, and his mouth is fit only to drink from mountain streams. The epilogue proclaims the "triumph" of the natural world over the domestic world, the scoring fraught with a kind of uneasy nostalgia. Lovely but colorfully unnerving, the piece held a special place in conductor's Fricssay's heart.

The 1936 Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta rivals Stravinsky for its ingenuity of scoring and the contrapuntal intricacy of its forms. Fricssay's grand studio recording

(14 October 1952) aims for a virtually perfect symmetry of execution, with the greatest divergence of time the Allegro molto's being 35 seconds shorter than the other movements. The slow, fugal opening movement maintains an obsessive focus (on A) even as its thickening textures build, swell and relent. Typically, Fricssay elicits a pained expressivity from his RIAS ensemble, a paradoxically slashing, soft yearning. In the manner of the first two piano concertos, the Allegro moves percussively and fleetly, alternating 2/4 and 3/8, with virtuoso elements for strings – especially pizzicato – in the extremes of treble and bass, the piano's making an impressive percussion instrument along with the celesta's special color. The Adagio extends the notion of Bartok's "night music," a meditation close in spirit to the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. The rhythm forms a palindrome, a "fearful symmetry" of eerie, sliding, haunted effects, in which the xylophone adds to the danse macabre. Strummed sonorities and frenetic movement combine for a stylized folk dance finale with piano obbligato, the RIAS tympani truly in his element.

The 1923 Dance Suite originally provided less a rural celebration than a commemoration of the anniversary of the establishment of the city of Budapest. The Fricssay studio performance (10 June 1953) has the bassoon clearly laying down the ur-figure of half steps, seconds, and thirds that permeates the entire sequence of six movements. A ritornello tune in varied keys aligns the succession of movements. The Allegro molto plays on a stomping dance, adumbrating moments from The Miraculous Mandarin. The third movement, a Bulgarian rondo, centers on the key of B, with a middle section set as a music-box for piano four hands. Drone figures, harp riffs, and brilliant high woodwind work make the movement exotically alluring. Bartok called the fourth movement Molto tranquillo his "Arab" movement, and its intent is to suspend time and substitute wafting colors instead. Perfect fourths and viola sonority dominates the little Comodo movement, which serves as a moody transition to the Finale – Allegro. For a Fricssay tribute, the Dance Suite exemplifies his capacity to make stylized colors in bagpipe effects and Magyar rhythms – a splendid amalgam brilliantly performed.

The 1939 Divertimento – composed in an astonishing fifteen days – represents Bartok's last association with conductor Paul Sacher and his Basel Chamber Orchestra, responsible for some of the great commissions in classical music. Ferenc Fricssay recorded the three movement neo-classical work 11 February 1952 in live performance. Bartok imitates a Baroque concerto grosso's large-and-small ensemble design in the first movement, a form which Fricssay never recorded from a master from that period. Bartok's use of mode and non-traditional scales propels this form along the evolutionary road, here rife with syntactical nuances and metric challenges. A farewell to European tonality, the Molto adagio pushes both harmony and technique to the limit, bordering on atonality in double stops and harmonics. Fricssay slows the tempo so that the harmonic crevices seem to open to chromatic worlds rife with feverish danger. Gypsy blood pulsates in the Allegro assai finale, a modal rondo into which Bartok injects polyphonic elements and violin cadenza for Rudolf Schulz to enjoy. The chamber music ensemble contrasts with the ripieno group to emphasize the play of light and dark. The writing and the playing become quite virtuosic, a playful yet dirge-like farewell to a Europe bordering on cultural dissolution and savagery.

The last disc traces Bartok's development as a composer for piano and orchestra, beginning with his Op. 1 Rhapsody (1904) which Fricssay later recorded commercially for DGG with Geza Anda; but here (12 December 1951) he collaborates with another brilliant Hungarian virtuoso, Andor Foldes (1913-1992), who has another inscription with Roger Desormiere (for Vox; transferred on the Jecklin label). The performance with Fricssay proceeds in a linear classical manner, less fraught with the big periods and pregnant pauses we find in Anda's version of the lassu section. The friss section

moves with polished verve and potent brio, a testament to virtuosity in the Liszt tradition.

The Second Concerto (1931) receives yet another fervent account 7 September 1953) by Geza Anda (1921-1976), its most committed veteran, having performed it with Fricsay alone some sixty times. The concerto's romantic, symmetrical style meets a sympathetic and colossally equipped devotee in Anda, who finds the interplay of winds, brass and percussion in contrapuntal forms exhilarating. The clarion, brittle textures more than point to Stravinsky of *Petrouchka* cross-fertilized by Bartok's own *Allegro barbaro*. Somehow, for the sound and fury of the piece, the key of G manages to trump everything. Fricsay molds his strings for the "night music" of the *Adagio*, a luminous but ghostly galleon in the form of a chorale in layered fifths. The brisk *Presto* section tests Anda's fingers in the manner of a percussive etude, a hint of the Prokofiev style. A convulsively percussive style marks the last movement, a variant of the first, a technique anticipating the 1938 Violin Concerto. Piano and RIAS brass light up the hemisphere, a jubilant pungent sound, Bartok riding the crest of a wave.

The Third Concerto has at the keyboard Louis (Lajos) Kentner (1905-1987), who gave the European premier of this work. The live collaboration with Fricsay dates from 16 January 1950. Kentner seems intent to divest the concerto of any "feminine" qualities, due to the piece's association with Ditta Pasztroy, for whom Bartok composed it. The "polymodal chromatics" of the first movement appeal to Kentner's ravishing palette, and the sheer speed plays to his naturally muscular technique. More night music – *Adagio religioso* in C Major – comprises the second movement, a delicate colloquy between piano and orchestra that nods to late Beethoven as a model. Its middle section twitters and purls with insects, birds, and nocturnal animation. Turbulent motor energy characterizes the Kentner *Allegro vivace*, which he called a *danse macabre* in the Liszt manner. The counterpoint has the facility and clear texture of Stravinsky, the bite of Magyar folk music, with more than a touch of Mozart irony. The explosive last pages confirm the authenticity of spirit of all principals, a sweeping conclusion to a masterful realization of a composer's best intentions.