



Edition Géza Anda (IV) – Bartók

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[Fanfare](#) (James H. North - 2009.05.01)

These are the first CD issues of radio recordings from WDR Cologne. Most of these performers are Hungarian musicians who had studied in Budapest in the 1930s and had known the composer/pianist or heard him play. Solti (and Fritz Reiner) studied piano with the composer; Anda did not, but he attended many of Bartók's performances. Fricsay recorded the Concerto for Orchestra for Deutsche Grammophon in 1957; Varga joined him for the Violin Concerto No. 2 in 1951, and Anda for the three piano concertos and the Rhapsody in 1959 and 1960. All have seldom been equaled.

The First Piano Concerto, led by Gielen, does not come off as well in this live performance as in the studio recording. Tempos are similar—the Andante a bit slower here—but the Cologne orchestra lacks the polish of Fricsay's Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, which he had honed into a superb ensemble rivaling that city's Philharmonic. The Cologne brass have some awkward moments. This monaural radio recording is nowhere near as clear as DG's stereo one, and many orchestral details fail to surface.

The Second Concerto, led by Fricsay, is better on all counts. The notes say that Anda performed this work more than 300 times, and this live performance at Salzburg was one of his first. His playing has moments of extra frisson, and the accompaniment is fine, although there are a few woodwind shrieks and brass blasts—this was difficult music for orchestras as well as pianists in the 1950s. Things get a tad messy at one moment in the Presto section of the slow movement. Anda may not have had the chops of Pollini or Richter, but his Bartók was more colorful than that of either. This 1952 live recording is much cleaner than the 1957 radio one of the First Concerto. Balances are quite different than in the 1959 stereo; here the piano is in front of the orchestra, there it is more integrated into it. Although DG's early stereo recording remains preferable, it does suffer from poorly judged post-production: when the focus shifts to one side of the orchestra to hone in on some detail, the piano slides across the soundstage.

This recording of Contrasts is wonderful. Varga, Blöcher, and Anda set a daring tempo for the Verbunkos—more than 10 percent slower than Szigeti, Goodman, and Bartók—and they are not afraid to screech and scratch. The result has a dusky folk flavor beyond any performance I have heard. Varga is mesmerizing, his almost demonic pizzicatos and double stops keeping the intensity level at a peak. Blöcher—WDR Cologne first clarinet—also seems to the manner born, playing as if he were at a village fair rather than in a big-city studio. They turn Contrasts into a masterpiece.

That Anda was a major force in the interpretation of Contrasts is reinforced by his

performance of the op. 14 Piano Suite. Again tempos are relaxed, the virtuosic side of the writing played down (but never short-changed), with no loss of intensity. In two other performances at hand, Murray Perahia plays with crystal-clear precision, with every note sounding, but—heard next to Anda—the result is clinical; Dezső Rankí, too, produces little atmosphere, making the Suite seem mere digital exercises. Anda makes these four movements sound like Bartók.

The Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion is often played as a pure virtuoso showpiece, fast and furious and damn the subtleties. This is a thoroughly musical performance, and a most rewarding one. That the pianists are not always together doesn't matter one whit; it suggests an improvisatory performance relying on the inspiration of the moment. Again, color and atmosphere are brought to the fore, as opposed to sheer technique. I don't mean to defend a sloppy performance—which this is not—but rather to revel in the spirit and freedom found here.

The recorded sound throughout the second disc is excellent, its monaural character no limitation in any way. Whereas early performances of Schoenberg were universally dreadful, and those of Stravinsky inconsistent at best, the 1950s witnessed the peaks of Bartók performances, many of them by these musicians. This issue is to be treasured, in particular for the stunning Contrasts, which makes it Want List material.