



Ferenc Fricssay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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Ferenc Fricssay (1914–63) was a master of many musical styles but brought particular passion and insight to the works of his fellow Hungarian Béla Bartók. Audite's inexpensive set brings together all the extant live and studio radio performances of Bartók recorded by Fricssay in Berlin between 1950 and 1953; RIAS (now Deutschland Radio) acknowledges that it has lost the tapes of an October 1958 concert reading of Herzog Blaubarts Burg (Bluebeard's Castle in German translation.) The lone vocal work here is the exciting three-movement cantata for tenor, baritone, chorus and orchestra Cantata Profana. Almost nineteen minutes in length, it was composed in 1930 and given its premiere in 1934 by the BBC Symphony.

The swift, vivid piece has some choral roots in Bach but also might be compared in theme and musical texture to Mahler's Klagende Lied. Something of a rarity in performance — though Solti (using Hungarian soloists) and Boulez have ventured recordings, and Robert Shaw made one in English — it bears the subtitle A Kilenc Csodaszarvas (The Nine Splendid Stags). Here, we hear a 1951 mono taping under Fricssay in German as Die Zauberhirsche. The chorus narrates how a father trained his nine sons to hunt, only to have them transformed by a magic bridge in the woods into stags unable to accommodate the erstwhile ways of their grieving parents. One can't go home again.

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was a frequent, trusted Fricssay collaborator, appearing on several of his fine DG recordings, including Die Zauberflöte and Fidelio, as well as a German-language Bluebeard opposite Hertha Töpper. (DG has reissued that effort, paired with this Cantata Profana performance.) Fischer-Dieskau, as the sorrowful father, offers beautifully executed melismatic writing and legato-based phrasing of often long-sustained lines. The lines of the transformed eldest son/stag are taken by Helmut Krebs (1913–2007), a tenor known for opera and concert work ranging from the Baroque through the contemporary. Krebs displays a somewhat nasal timbre (akin to those of Karl Erb and Julius Patzak) and initially struggles with the part's high tessitura, but he too copes well with melismatic passages and relaxes vocally as he proceeds. The choral work is good. The live sound, rather grainy, is quite decent for a sixty-year-old broadcast. Of the remaining orchestral riches, one highlight is the wonderful pianist Géza Anda in a 1953 studio performance of the Second Piano Concerto, which in 1960 he and Fricssay recorded together in stereo for DG with the same forces.