



Edition Friedrich Gulda – The early RIAS recordings

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American Record Guide (Alan Becker - 2010.05.01)

Although a product of the Vienna Music Academy, which he entered at the age of 12 to study under Bruno Seidlhofer and Joseph Marx, Gulda was eventually to develop a disdain for authority. His unorthodox life eventually led him on a path of discovery and an attraction to jazz in the 1950s. Stories of him faking his own death in the late 1990s and his various nicknames (“terrorist pianist”, “Freddy the Ghoul”) point to a true eclectic. In addition to appearances at concerts around the world, he appeared with such jazz greats as Chick Corea and Dizzy Gillespie for improvisation sessions. He expressed a wish to die on the birthday of his adored Mozart, and did so on January 27, 2000 at the age of 69.

These recordings of the pianist in his 20s give us an opportunity to review his early accomplishments in the classical repertory. After being without these for many years, it was refreshing to hear them once again and resp[ond to some grand and astonishing music-making. The sound is generally fine— clear and warm, if close and monaural.

The Beethoven sonatas (10, 28, 30), Eroica Variations, and 32 Variations in C minor are sometimes brusque, with sharp accents and wide contrasts. They are not, however, out of keeping with what we know of Beethoven’s personality. The beauty of the composer’s slow sections is not slighted in the least, as Gulda’s marvelous concentration and phrasing come fully to the fore. Also present, as in the final movement of Sonata 10, is Beethoven’s sense of humor—this Scherzo rides the wind with gale speed.

Debussy’s Pour le Piano, Suite Bergamasque, and the few excerpts from the Preludes, Estampes, and Images are not patted down with layers of Impressionist gauze. They are very direct—forceful and impetuous. They are also, as in the final ‘Toccata’ from Pour le Piano virtuosic to the extreme. Gulda plays all of this music full out. The famous ‘Clair de Lune’, while refined, grows heavy with nostalgia as it unfolds its beauty; but these along with Ravel’s Gaspard de la Nuit show the artist considerably short of the imagination needed to be fully convincing.

The 24 Chopin Preludes do not find the pianist at his most persuasive. While there are certain niceties, Prelude 3 uses the pedal too much, causing a smear in the rippling left hand. Prelude 10, on the other hand, is most spirited, with the right hand always sparkling. Prelude 11 has perhaps more expressive rubato than it needs, while the ensuing Presto of Prelude 12 is driven and choppy, as it should be. The Allegro of Prelude 14 is thrilling, especially with its spare use of pedal and clear-sounding organized chaos. Prelude 15 (Raindrop) begins daintily but soon finds Gulda, drenched with emotion, squeezing everything he can get out of the piece. The violence of Prelude 18 is well conveyed as it seizes one by the throat until its energy

has been spent. The gentle but speedy 19th Prelude is just about perfect—one of the best I have heard—but the very last of the set puts you through the emotional wringer once again. In all, a mixed bag.

Chopin's Nocturne in C minor, Op. 48:1, is not a laid-back performance. It moves in a positive way, and the contrasting stormy middle section is most effectively realized. The Barcarolle, on the other hand, is uneven, with rhythms that may be pulled about too much for some tastes. On the positive side, it's certainly a big-boned approach to one of the composer's finest compositions.

Prokofieff's wartime Sonata 7 is appropriately demonic, with the final 'Precipitato' hammering away towards its violent conclusion. There is a respite in the slow movement's lyricism, though the dark clouds are never far away.

Recorded in 1950, the sound can be a bit murky when razor-sharp vividness is what's really called for.

The only work with orchestra in this set is Mozart's dramatic Concerto 24 in C minor. Markevitch conducts with all the drama one could wish for, but the overall sound is astringent, with a sour sound in the oboes. All this is of small matter in view of the stirring musicmaking of Gulda. Wolfgang Rathert's essays contribute substantially to the value of this album.