



Edition Géza Anda (IV) – Bartók

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2008.08.22)

The last of the four volumes devoted to Hungarian piano virtuoso Geza Anda (1921-1976) documents his immense, natural gift for the music of Bela Bartok in collaborations taped by the Cologne Radio, 1952-1957. Anda had attended various solo and concerto appearances by Bartok the pianist, including a much-heralded interpretation of Liszt's Totentanz. Anda's partnership after 1952 with conductor Ferenc Fricsay (1914-1963) solidified Anda's respect and familiarity with the three Bartok piano concertos (and the Op. 1 Rhapsody), which he and Fricsay inscribed 1959-1960 as a permanent record for DGG. The 1926 First Concerto appeared infrequently in Anda's concerts; and after 1960 he dropped it from his repertory, holding fast to the latter two as perennial warhorses for his vast technique. The jagged objectivity and emphatic, Magyar rhythms of the First Concerto find in Anda and Gielen (29 April 1957) kindred spirits, willing to negotiate its eerily hued colors and often savage, primeval energies with nothing less than committed gusto. The last movement, particularly, gallops headlong through the maze of percussive and surreal colors--debts to Debussy notwithstanding--with blazing, variegated and piercing articulation from all principals.

The 1930 Piano Concerto No. 2 (27 June 1952, Salzburg) takes G as its key-center, and it projects an altogether happier, more irreverent persona, cross-fertilized by Stravinsky and the brassy confidence of Les Six. Anda obviously found its buoyant, sassy charm compelling, since he performed the concerto more than 300 times with various conductors. Anda's wrists move constantly, his non-legato pushed to the hilt as he wends his way through what sound like chains of exercises in staccati, glissandi, trills, and semi-parlando execution. Fricsay has the brass choir punching out sonic firecrackers in the first movement. The huge Adagio--with its marvelous tympani part and middle section that becomes a jazzy moto perpetuo--plays like an aural transcription of an uneasy picture by Egon Schiele, clearly a model for the sound-world of Ligeti. Jungle drums and a liberated keyboard fioritura combine for the cacophonous last movement, a sanguine affair, to say the least. Repeated scales, a bit of Beethoven, Stravinsky's Le Sacre, polyrhythms, and a bitonal moment or two make for a heady witches' brew of the first order. That the passagework resembles Liszt as several points is a sentimental homage that passes quickly on our merry way to a brightly colored pandemonium, to which the live audience applauds with relish.

For the 1938 Contrasts (8 January 1953)--one of the rare appearances of Geza Anda in chamber music--Anda had the well-known inscription by Goodman, Szigeti, and Bartok as his living example. Bloecher and Varga contribute their distinctive, Hungarian sound to the mix, a powerful statement of national identity and imminent, emotional loss. Varga, who performed the Second Violin Concerto of Bartok with Fricsay for DGG, sports a raw but sweet tone, while Bloecher's reedy clarinet is all

liquid. The high pitches from the clarinet remind us of the strangling motif in *Till Eulenspiegel* by Strauss. The shimmering *Lento* proves a high point in this studied rendition, with Anda's playing the figures in a manner reminiscent of both Ligeti and Schubert at once. The blends of color, like muted pizzicati from the violin, become quite haunted. The last movement directly quotes Saint-Saens' *Danse Macabre* and then invades a Hungarian nightclub which might find Kurt Weill seated with Liszt at a booth, each a bit tipsy. Jazz and Grappelli suit the latter sounds of this perky opus in the late pages, a touch of Viennese schmaltz insinuating itself in the dervish playing that any Anda connoisseur will cherish.

The *Suite for Piano* (22 June 1955) comes in the same year as Anda's recital performance of the work in Edinburgh. We can hear in the testy, morose Magyar rhythms, bravura, and moments of atonality the influence of Bartok's having read through the Debussy etudes. The Lisztian third movement *Allegro molto* pulsates with particular, rhetorical fervor, quite savage; then the music mellow for the final *Sostenuto*, one of Bartok's many impressionistic meditations in modal harmony. Anda manages a tender film of velvet over the otherwise distant objective patina in Bartok - memorable. Finally, the most anomalous of chamber pieces from Bartok, his 1935 *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* (9 January 1953), modeled freely after Debussy's *En Blanc et Noir* suite. With the assistance of another Budapest Conservatory graduate and student of Leo Weiner, Georg Solti (1912-1997), and percussionists Peinkofer and Porth, the blazing rhythms and sonorous clarity of the piece--often imitating the clangor of the *First Piano Concerto*--remind us of the gamelan sound that equally impressed Debussy. The counterpoint becomes quite strict at the end of the first movement, so with the addition of the snares and tympani, it sounds like an aggressively martial transcription of Beethoven's *Op. 111*. More stealthy tiptoeing through Kafka-esque passages in the *Lento*, the dark labyrinths of Moussorgsky never far away. The cruel beauty of the piece several times recalls *The Miraculous Mandarin*. The last movement *Allegro non troppo* exhilarates us from first to last, a bright, often disarmingly diatonic sound that likes to wander off into modal byways. Perfect synchronicity of parts makes this seamless experience an especially rewarding moment by which to celebrate the troubadour's art of Geza Anda.