



Béla Bartók: Piano Works

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[Fanfare](#) (James H. North - 01.07.2010)

The Two Romanian Dances is major Bartók: an Allegro Vivace lasting a full five minutes, and a Poco Allegro of four. In dazzling performances, Nicolas Bringuier, born in Nice and not yet 30, makes the sparks fly—without ever seeming to rush. His instrument, a Shigeru Kawai (previously unknown to me), has a dryer, tighter tone than most grand pianos, which suits this music well, pointing up the asperity that Bartók carried over from his folk sources. Performances by Loránt Szűcs in Hungaroton's Bartók Complete Edition have more local color but nevertheless pale by comparison. Bringuier and his instrument serve the Dirges equally well, allowing generous use of the sustaining pedal without spreading or romanticizing the music. This time Szűcs is bland, characterless.

In Out of Doors, it is Bringuier who suffers by comparison, lacking both the imagination and potency of Murray Perahia on a Sony disc as well as the subtle touch of Erzsébet Tusa for Hungaroton. Reverberant recorded sound (from Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin) doesn't help Bringuier, blurring some of the most rapid passages. One of the composer's most distinctive piano works comes across as rather ordinary. The magic is back in the eight Improvisations (by the composer, not the pianist), subtle pieces that require careful attention to mood and much rubato. Perhaps Bringuier is best suited to music that does not rely on great virtuosity; the recorded sound certainly serves better at less than presto.

Bringuier's Sonata is on a par with Perahia's, but both are blown away by a stunning 1980 live performance by Yuri Egorov in the Concertgebouw (Canal Grande CG 9214). His allegro movements have unmatched excitement, and his daringly slow tempo in the Sostenuto e peasants is mesmerizing. That performance is one of many that made the short-lived Egorov my favorite pianist.

The SACD layer produces smoother, rounder piano tone, but doesn't help the reverberation—nor does surround sound. I prefer the edgier CD, on which the piano is better able to cut through the reverb. There is some fine playing here, keenly attuned to Bartók's idiom, but some of the performances are not up to the best available.