



Ferenc Fricsay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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This set contains all the surviving RIAS recordings by Ferenc Fricsay of Bartók's music (a 1958 recording of Bluebeards Castle was woefully destroyed). All the works listed above were recorded commercially by Fricsay and his orchestra for DG except the Cantata profana. The 1951 radio recording of this work has been issued before as part of a 1994 DG Fricsay Bartók collection in its "Portrait" series (C 445402-2). The sound in Audite's transfer is a little clearer, though this strange, complex composition does need more modern, stereo sound. Fricsay evokes a pungently dark, heavy atmosphere in a performance whose only defect is that it is sung in German instead of the original Hungarian.

Though the radio recordings of the remaining works all date from 1950-53 they are all more than adequate in sound – sometimes they are startlingly good. Varga's live recording of the Second Violin Concerto is the only failure in Audite's set. The soloist's playing is frankly very poor, since it is technically fallible, with bad intonation and an unpleasantly insistent, rapid vibrato, and as recorded Vargas tone quality is squally and scratchy. (In their "Portrait" issue DG offered Varga's commercial recording, made some months earlier. Here the playing is more accurate, but the unpleasant vibrato and undernourished tone are again in evidence.) It is a relief to hear Rudolf Schulz's solo violin performance in the First Portrait, for he plays most beautifully.

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, with its separate instrumental groups, does really need stereo recording, but Fricsay's lithe, intense performance is superlative. In common with the Violin Concerto the Divertimento performance derives from a concert performance, rather than one prepared in the radio studio. Fricsay uses a big string group and neither intonation nor ensemble are accurate, but the performance is characterful – strong, poetic and full of energy. In the Dance Suite Fricsay, as opposed to Dorati in his equally authoritative but very different performances, is more flexible, less insistent rhythmically, and his tempi tend to be a bit faster. Two equally valid views of this appealing work.

Audite's third disc comprises works for piano and orchestra played by three pianists famous for their Bartók. Andor Foldes is given a forward balance in the Rhapsody, but not even his advocacy can convince me that this early, derivative work is an important item in the composer's output. Géza Anda's commercial stereo recording of the Second Concerto with Fricsay is familiar to Bartók admirers. In his 1953 performance the younger Anda chooses quite fast tempi in the outer movements, but Fricsay follows willingly, and the result is a fine combination of virtuoso playing and conducting. Both the poetic sections of the middle movement and its quicksilver elements come to life vividly. It's good to have such an important souvenir of Kentner's Bartók in the Third Concerto. He brings a satisfyingly tougher than usual

approach to the work as a whole – nothing is 'prettified', and his performance and that of the orchestra are quite brilliant.

