



Ferenc Fricsay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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The 1950s was the great decade for Bartók performances — would that the composer had been still alive! It was a remarkable recovery considering the comparative obscurity of his last years. But the 1950s were also a dicey decade for the interpretation of 20th Century works, because success came at the cost of homogenizing performance practices that deracinated some of the more exciting elements in modern music. Ferenc Fricsay, much admired then and since, was both a champion of Bartók and of the mode of conducting then displacing the more spontaneous mode associated that earlier Hungarian conductor, Artur Nikisch. These museum-friendly performances, made in 1950-53, lack the warmth and rubato one might expect in “authentic” Bartók. Fritz Reiner is much racier in the Concerto for Orchestra.

The RIAS Symphony doesn't help: they are competent in what must have been unfamiliar repertoire, but they certainly come across as Berliners: their sound is smooth and attractive but lacking in earth tones. That said, Fricsay's soloists, Hungarian compatriots all, supply the necessary ingredients to make Bartók sing.

The concertos are all wonderful, particularly Tibor Varga in the violin concerto and Geza Anda in the Third Piano Concerto. Conceding that Bartók performances can work even in the mode of high-modernist abstraction, I much prefer the color and inflection that typified central European music-making in the composer's lifetime. Since Bartók concertos are not heard so often now as in the 1950s, and since this collection has been admirably produced from original sources (studio and broadcast) it is well worth seeking out.