



Ferenc Fricsay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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GRAMOPHONE

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of reissues and archive recordings

Musical evangelists – A trio of releases that re-energise familiar repertoire

Audite continues its valuable series of radio broadcasts of that most gifted of regenerative post-war conductors, Ferenc Fricsay, with a three-disc, slim-pack collection of 1950-53 Bartók recordings featuring the RIAS Symphony Orchestra. Fricsay's DG Bartók legacy has, for many collectors, long been considered a benchmark, especially the set of piano concertos featuring Fricsay's musical soulmate Géza Anda. As it happens, Anda arrives in this present context with a 1953 studio version of the Second Concerto where, even at this relatively early stage, the watertight rapport between pianist and conductor makes for an enormously exciting performance, wilder than the stereo commercial recording, marginally less incisive ensemble-wise but with a performance of the finale that must rank among the most thrilling ever recorded. There are various Anda versions of the Second around but this is surely the one that best showcases his mastery of what is, after all, a pretty demanding score. The 20-minute Rhapsody is entrusted to a more "classical", and at times more restrained, Andor Foldes, whose generous DG collection of Bartók's solo piano works is long overdue for reissue.

Louis Kentner gave the Third Concerto's European premiere and his big-boned version of the Third calls for plenty of Lisztian thunder, especially in the outer movements, whereas the central Adagio religioso recalls the free-flowing style of Bartók's own piano-playing. Fricsay's commercial record of the Second Violin Concerto with Tibor Varga was always highly regarded, even though not everyone takes to Varga's fast and rather unvarying vibrato. Although undeniably exciting, this 1951 live performance falls prey to some ragged tuttis while Varga himself bows one or two conspicuously rough phrases. To be honest, I much preferred the warmer, less nervy playing of violinist Rudolf Schulz in the first of the Two Portraits, while the wild waltz-time Second Portrait (a bitter distortion of the First's dewy-eyed love theme) is taken at just the right tempo. Fricsay's 1952 live version of the Divertimento for strings passes on the expected fierce attack in favour of something more expressively legato (certainly in the opening Allegro non troppo) and parts of the Dance Suite positively ooze sensuality, especially for the opening of the finale, which sounds like some evil, stealthy predator creeping towards its prey at dead of night. Fricsay's versions of the Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta and Cantata profana (with Helmut Krebs and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, sung in German) combine an appreciation of Bartók's mystical side with a keenly focused approach to the faster music's syncopated rhythms. Both works were recorded by Fricsay commercially but

the extra adrenalin rush – and, in the case of Strings, Percussion and Celesta, extra breadth of utterance – in these radio versions provides their own justification. Good mono sound throughout and excellent notes by Wolfgang Rathert.

I was very pleased to see that Pristine Classical has reissued Albert Sammons's vital and musically persuasive 1926 account of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata, a performance that pre-dates the great Huberman-Friedman version and that, in some key respects, is almost its equal. Regarding Sammon's pianist, the Australian William Murdoch, the critic William James Turner wrote (in 1916), "even when we get to the best pianists it is rarely, if ever, that we find a combination of exceptional technical mastery with tone-power, delicacy of touch, brilliance, command of colour, sensitiveness of phrasing, variety of feeling, imagination and vital passion. Mr Murdoch possesses all these qualities to a high degree."

Pristine's coupling is a real curio and, at first glance, something of a find – Sammons in 1937 playing Fauré's First Sonata, a work which, so far as I know, is not otherwise represented in his discography and that suits his refined brand of emotionalism. But, alas, there is a significant drawback in the piano-playing of Edie Miller, which is ham-fisted to a fault and in one or two places technically well below par, not exactly what you want for the fragile world of Fauré's pianowriting. But if you can blank out the pianist from your listening, it's worth trying for Sammons's wonderful contribution alone. Otherwise, stick to the Beethoven.

A quite different style of Beethoven interpretation arrives via Andromeda in the form of a complete symphony cycle given live in Vienna in 1960 by the Philharmonia Orchestra under Otto Klemperer with, in the Choral Symphony, the Wiener Singverein and soloists Wilma Lipp, Ursula Boese, Fritz Wunderlich and Franz Crass (who delivers a sonorous, warmly felt bass recitative). Inevitable comparisons with Klemperer's roughly contemporaneous EMI cycle reveal some quicker tempi live (ie, in the Eroica's Marcia funebre), an occasionally sweeter turn of phrase among the strings (the opening of the Pastoral's second movement) and a more forthright presence overall, although beware some ragged ensemble and a mono balance that turns Klemperer's normally helpful decision to divide his violin desks into a bit of a liability, meaning that the Seconds are more distant than the Firsts.

Turn to the commercial recordings and stereo balancing maximises on Klemperer's clarity-conscious orchestral layout and the balance is superb, although common to both is the fairly forward placing of the woodwinds. Still, an interesting set, one to place beside Andromeda's recently released Beethoven cycle, the one shared between London (Royal Philharmonic) and Vienna (State Opera Orchestra) under the volatile baton of Hermann Scherchen (Andromeda ANDRCD9078, on five CDs and published last year). If Klemperer invariably fulfilled one's expectations, Scherchen usually confounded them.