



Ferenc Fricsay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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[Fanfare](#) (Lynn René Bayley - 01.07.2011)

This wonderful three-CD set presents itself as Fricsay's complete recordings of Bartók's music, yet the liner notes refer to DG studio recordings of the Concerto for Orchestra and Bluebeard's Castle, neither of which is in this collection. Curious.

What is present is, for the most part, marvelous, though the tightly miked, over-bright sound of the Violin Concerto No. 2 and the Divertimento for String Orchestra somewhat spoil the effect of the music. In both, the brass and high strings sound as shrill as the worst NBC Symphony broadcasts, and this shrill sound also affects Varga's otherwise excellent solo playing. On sonic rather than musical terms, I was glad when they were over. The remastering engineer should have softened the sound with a judicious reduction of treble and possibly the addition of a small amount of reverb.

Needless to say, the studio recordings are all magnificent, not only sonically but meeting Fricsay's high standards for musical phrasing. I'm convinced that it is only because the famous Fritz Reiner recording is in stereo that his performance of the Music for Strings, etc. is touted so highly; musically Fricsay makes several points in the music that Reiner does not. The liner notes lament that the Cantata profana is sung in German in order to accommodate two of Fricsay's favorite singers, Helmut Krebs and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. No matter, for the performance itself is splendid and, sonics again aside, it has never been surpassed.

In a review I previously wrote of a modern pianist's recordings of the Bartók concertos, I brought up the Annie Fischer-Igor Markevitch recording of No. 3 as an example of what the music really should sound like. The Anda-Fricsay recording of No. 2 is yet another example. The music flies like the wind, none of the brass interjections or rhythmic propulsion are ignored, yet none of it sounds like a jackhammer chopping up the pavement of your brain. Indeed, the Adagio enters and maintains a particularly soft and mysterious sound world that is the essence of Bartók's post-Romanticism. The notes take Kentner to task for glossing over "some of the intricacies of the fragile dialogue between soloist and orchestra in the middle movement" of the Third Concerto, but I find this a small if noticeable blemish in this live concert performance. Many of the orchestral textures completely contradict what one hears in the modern recording on Chandos, and even Kentner's very masculine reading has more of a legato feeling.

If you take in stride some of the harshness in the live performances (particularly the violin concerto), you'll definitely want this set in your collection. So much in these performances represents Bartók's music as it should sound, and it should be remembered that Kodály, Bartók, and Dohnányi were Fricsay's teachers at the Liszt Music Academy in Budapest. Historically informed performance students, take heed.