



Ferenc Fricsay conducts Béla Bartók – The early RIAS recordings

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[Hi-Fi News](#) (Christopher Breunig - 01.10.2011)

Hi-Fi News Radio revelations

All Fricsays' 1960s Bartók recordings made by RIAS engineers have been collected as an Audite set. In some ways they surpass the DG studio equivalents. Christopher Breunig explains why

Few music premieres have created such uproar as *Le Sacre du printemps*, given in Paris in 1913 under Pierre Monteux. Nowadays the score presents few problems either to conductors or orchestras; the same may be said of much 20th century music. But have we lost something along the way? It's an argument often put by the critic Robert Layton – citing early recordings (such as those by Stravinsky) as evidence.

Look back 40 years to the 1961 Gramophone catalogue and there's a substantial Bartók listing: six versions of the relatively popular Concerto for Orchestra, for instance – though none far better than the 1948 Decca 78rpm set by van Beinum. One name that recurs is that of the Hungarian conductor, signed to DG, Ferenc Fricsay. He was in charge of the RIAS Orchestra (Radio in American Sector, Berlin), with access to the Berlin Philharmonic for certain projects. Sessions were held in the Jesus-Christus-Kirche, which had excellent acoustics. The classical director of the orchestra Elsa Schiller invited Fricsay to Berlin in 1948; later she would become a key figure in organising Deutsche Grammophon's postwar repertory.

The German company Audite has now issued a 3CD set [21.407] from radio tapes duplicating most of the DG material but with different soloists, eg. Foldes in the Rhapsody; Kentner in the Third Piano Concerto [live]. A 1953 studio Second with Géza Anda adds to his live versions with Karajan, Boulez, et al. There's no Concerto for Orchestra or First Piano Concerto, but Audite offers alternatives for the Second Violin Concerto (Tibor Varga) [live]. Cantata profana (Fischer-Dieskau/Krebs), Dance Suite, Divertimento for strings [live], Two portraits (Rudolf Schulz) and Music for strings, percussion and celesta.

These RIAS recordings were also made in the Berlin church; the live tapes are from the Titania-Palast. The booklet note veers from dry facts to contentious opinion!

Some tape!

We all know that, as Allied bombers were flying over Germany, radio engineers were still tinkering with stereo and were able to record on wire (precursor to tape). The tape quality on DG mono LPs has always amazed me and in this Audite set there's a prime example with the Third Piano Concerto. The levels were set, frankly, far too

high and with the soloist rather close. But even when the overload is obvious, somehow it still sounds 'musical'.

This is the performance which stands out for me as most significant. Louis Kentner, born in Hungary (as Lajos), had come to the UK in 1935, marrying into the Menuhin family, and had, with the BBC SO under Boult, given the European premiere of this work – they recorded it the very next day, in February 1946.

A Liszt specialist, he plays here with total aplomb, notably in the counterpoint of the finale. The 'night music' section of the Adagio religioso, instead of bristling with insects and eery rustles, sounds more akin to a Beethoven scherzando. His touch put me in mind of something the composer had demonstrated to Andor Foldes: 'This [playing one note on the piano] is sound; this [making an interval] is music.' The last two notes of movements (ii) and (iii) here are very much musical statements. Notwithstanding the limitations of the 1950 source, many orchestral colours struck me anew. In sum: this may not be a version to introduce a listener to the concerto, but it's a version those familiar with it should on no account miss. And it illustrates perfectly the thesis that today's smoother readings lose something indefinable yet essential.

Brilliant illumination

Fricsay died aged only 49. If you don't know his musicianship, the intensity in the slow movement of the Divertimento here (far greater than on his DG version) will surely be a revelation. He appeared, said Menuhin, 'like a comet on the horizon ... no-one had greater talent.'