



Christian Ferras plays Beethoven and Berg Violin Concertos

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EAN: 4022143955906



[Fanfare](#) (Robert Maxham - 01.05.2012)

Audite's program of violin concertos by Ludwig van Beethoven and Alban Berg captures two moments in the life of Christian Ferras, the first a studio recording from November 19, 1951, made in the Jesus-Christus-Kirche after the 18-year-old violinist had given a live performance of the work at the Titania Palast and more than a decade before he would record the work with Herbert von Karajan and the same orchestra. The young Ferras sounds both flexible and sprightly in the first movement's passagework, producing a suave tone that might be described as almost gustatory in its effect as he soars above the orchestra. That tone lacks the sharp edge of Zino Francescatti's and even the slightly reedy quality of Arthur Grumiaux's, and he never seems to be deploying it simply for the sheer beauty of it: As sumptuous as it might sound, it always serves his high-minded concept of the work itself. And his playing of Fritz Kreisler's famous cadenza similarly subordinates virtuosity to musical effect. Karl Böhm sets the mood for a probing exploration of the slow movement, in which Ferras sounds similarly committed; he never allows himself to be diverted into mannerism or eccentricity, as Anne-Sophie Mutter does in her performance with Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon 289 471 349, Fanfare 26:5 and 26:6). What the young Michael Rabin achieved in the showpieces of Wieniawski and Paganini, Ferras arguably exceeded in the music of Beethoven. The finale's passagework allows Ferras to snap his bow authoritatively (and rhythmically), while without creating nary a soupçon of virtuosic frisson; Böhm, despite his elevated conception of the stamping orchestral part, never severs the music's contact with earth. Böhm, in fact, proves himself a profoundly sympathetic collaborator, while the engineers provide well-balanced recorded sound that represents the variety and splendor of Ferras's tonal palette and the full weight of the orchestra. Overall, it's a monumental performance.

The live reading of Alban Berg's Concerto came more than a decade later, when Ferras had not quite yet reached the age of 33. Ferras's recording of the concerto, paired with Igor Stravinsky's, appeared on Claves SO-2516 in a live performance from Geneva in 1957 with Ernest Ansermet and the Suisse Romande Orchestra, Fanfare 32:4 (he would record the work in the studio in 1963 with Georges Prêtre and the Paris Conservatory Orchestra). Although the timings of the first section differ by only a few seconds between live performances, the later one with Massimo Freccia seems more forward-moving (I noted the almost static quality of the earlier reading in my review in 32:4), although both parts of the first movement nevertheless sound moody, if not gloomy—and atmospheric, if not surreal—in this reading with Freccia, and the engineers have captured it with striking fidelity. Listeners who remember the powerful effect of recordings of Berg's Concerto by Arthur Grumiaux (from 1967, reissued on Decca Eloquence 480 0481, Fanfare 34:1), and André Gertler (reissued on Hungaroton 31635) might begin to wonder whether the Franco-Belgian manner might not, perhaps paradoxically, be uncannily suited to

Berg's temperament. The last page of the end of the first movement epitomizes the dreaminess yet desperation that Ferras manages to project. He's equally at home in the tumult of the second movement's opening section, representing the violin's part in the catastrophe with ferocious intensity and the moments of remission with eerie calm. In the final section, based on one of Bach's most chromatically harmonized chorales, he ascends from moments that seem intentionally lethargic, to reach a shattering conclusion and a sublimely untroubled dénouement. Massimo Freccia seems to share Ferras's view of the concerto's dramatic design, not only overall but in detail.

Despite the unquestionable depth and technical command evidenced in these readings, Ferras never became a household name in the United States, even among violinists, and several reference works give him only scant if any mention. Still, it's hard to imagine that these recordings could sound too French, or too slick, or, in fact, too anything, to capture listeners' imagination. And perhaps now the reissue of recordings like these will give collectors something to treasure, thereby effectively offering him a second chance at the general fame he seemed to deserve. Urgently recommended, as a recording of special merit.