

Zoltán Kodály: Chamber Music for Cello

aud 97.794

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Kodály was less prolific than his great friend Bartók and most of his works come early in his life. Composition was for him secondary to improving music education in Hungary, and the Kodály method became famous and influential. His chamber works, in particular, are all early. The main ones are his two string quartets, which are moderately well known, and these works for cello.

In them he practises a fusion of traditional Western music with the techniques he and Bartók had learned from the folk music they assiduously collected. These used different scales and rhythms from those in the Austrian and German music which had previously been dominant. Kodály was also influenced by Debussy, who himself had been impressed by the music of East Asia which he had heard at the Paris Expositions Universelles and from which he had adopted techniques in his own music.

The three works here are similar in their idiom and all require a great deal of virtuosity from the cellist. The instrument is frequently taken up into its highest register, is required to perform complicated double and multiple stopping and deliver a range of special sound effects. Kodály also uses frequent changes of tempo and a good deal of freedom in rhythm, to give the impression of improvising, though everything is carefully notated.

We begin with the sonata for solo cello. This was, I believe the first such work since the cello suites of Bach, although Max Reger was also writing for the solo cello at around the same time. Kodály requires the cello to adopt scordatura, a baroque device in which the tunings of the strings are different from the standard ones. Here, the two lower strings, normally C and G, are tuned down to B and F-sharp, which changes the timbre and resonance of the instrument and not only in the lower range. There are three movements, respectively fast, slow and fast, and the first movement particularly exploits the higher range. The central Adagio has the feel of an improvisation while the final Allegro is one of those fast dance movements which Bartók also liked to write.

The Sonata for cello and piano is in only two movements, Kodály having rejected his original opening movement. We begin with a Fantasia, starting with the cello unaccompanied. When the piano joins in, it is given the kind of writing we associate with the Hungarian cimbalon, in which the player uses beaters directly on the strings. We then have another fast movement, but with sudden pauses and virtuosic outbursts and, surprisingly, with a quiet ending.



Some twelve years after composing this sonata Kodály thought again about providing an opening movement and wrote one, though it was not published until 1969, after his death. It is titled Sonatina. It begins with a piano solo and then moves into an elegiac movement. It is a little strange that on this disc it is placed after, rather than before, the work for which it was written as a prelude.

Finally, we have the Duo for violin and cello. This preceded Ravel's rather better-known sonata for this combination, which dates from 1920-2. This is in three movements. In it the violin and cello vie with each other, throwing scraps of melody to and fro and urging each other to technical display. Kodály writes for this difficult combination as to the manner born, and the result is an exhilarating work.

The solo cello sonata is the best-known of these works and has become famous. At first it was received poorly, but the composer said presciently 'In twentyfive years no cellist will be accepted who has not played it.' It was the cellist János Starker who made the work well-known, first playing it to the composer in 1939 when he was fifteen. He went on to record it four times. I must admit to not having heard a performance by him, but I can't believe it is superior to the one here by Marc Coppey, whose playing seems to me outstanding. I was gripped throughout. He is also very ably partnered by Matan Porat in the sonata for cello and piano and by Barnabás Kelemen in the Duo. These works are all masterpieces and here they receive performances they deserve. The recording is superb – splendidly present without being harsh. The booklet is good, though it discusses the works in chronological order and not that on the disc. It is a shame that Kodály did not continue to write chamber music.

RECOMMENDED

Zoltán KODÁLY (1882-1967)

Sonata for solo cello, Op 8 (1915) [31:06]
 Sonata for cello and piano, Op 4 (1910) [17:59]
 Sonatina for cello and piano, Op posth. (1922?) [8:37]
 Duo for violin and cello, Op 7 (1918) [23:21]
 Marc Coppey (cello)
 Barnabas Kelemen (violin), Matan Porat (piano)
 rec. September 2020, KulturKirche Nikodemus, Berlin
AUDITE 97.794 [81:03]

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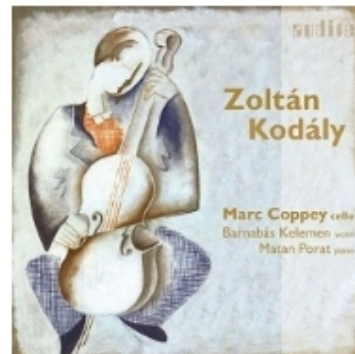
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