



DECCA

ELOQUENCE

BARTÓK

Concerto for Orchestra
Dance Suite
Two Portraits
Romanian Folk Dances
Music for Strings, Percussion
and Celesta
Piano Concerto No. 3

Julius Katchen
L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande
Ernest Ansermet

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)**CD 1****73'28****Concerto for Orchestra, Sz. 116**

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|----------|-----|--|------|
| 1 | I | Introduzione (Andante non troppo – Allegro vivace) | 9'35 |
| 2 | II | Gioco della coppie (Allegretto scherzando) | 7'02 |
| 3 | III | Elegia (Andante, non troppo) | 6'36 |
| 4 | IV | Intermezzo interrotto (Allegretto) | 3'51 |
| 5 | V | Finale (Pesante – Presto) | 9'34 |

Dance Suite, Sz. 77

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|-----------|-----|------------------|------|
| 6 | I | Moderato | 3'37 |
| 7 | II | Allegro molto | 2'33 |
| 8 | III | Allegro vivace | 3'06 |
| 9 | IV | Molto tranquillo | 3'33 |
| 10 | V | Comodo | 0'52 |
| 11 | VI | Finale (Allegro) | 4'07 |

Two Portraits, (Op. 5), Sz. 37

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| 12 | I | Ideal | 10'13 |
| 13 | II | Distorted | 2'18 |

Romanian Folk Dances for Orchestra, Sz. 68

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|-----------|-----|--------------------------------|------|
| 14 | I | Stick Dance (from Mezőszabad) | 1'26 |
| 15 | II | Sash Dance (from Egres) | 0'26 |
| 16 | III | In One Spot (from Egres) | 0'56 |
| 17 | IV | Horn Dance (from Bisztra) | 1'30 |
| 18 | V | Romanian Polka (from Belényes) | 0'29 |
| 19 | VI | Fast Dance (from Belényes) | 0'15 |
| 20 | VII | Fast Dance (from Nyágra) | 0'40 |

CD 2**Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Sz. 106**

1	I Andante tranquillo	7'44
2	II Allegro	7'37
3	III Adagio	6'31
4	IV Allegro molto	6'36

Piano Concerto No. 3, Sz. 119 (BB127)

5	I Allegretto	6'36
6	II Adagio religioso	9'13
7	III Allegro vivace	7'26

Julius Katchen, piano [CD2 **5**-**7**]
L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande
Ernest Ansermet

52'13

Total timing: 125'41

Although there would be no hesitation in associating Ernest Ansermet with the music of Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky – to name just three of the twentieth century's most prominent composers that he championed (probably the most notable threesome to Ansermet) – the output of Hungarian composer Béla Bartók comes less readily in identification with the great Swiss conductor. Yet Ansermet made enough recordings of Bartók's music to leave a worthwhile legacy; moreover the selected repertoire includes some of the Hungarian composer's most significant (and most popular) pieces.

For all that Ansermet and Bartók are not wholly synonymous, it was a piece of Bartók's that featured in Ansermet's last concert, the *Cantata Profana*. This was in December 1968 (he was to die on 20 February 1969 at the age of 86.) It is reported, before returning to the platform to direct the concert's closing work (Honegger's *Cantata de Noël*), that Ansermet confided to an assistant: 'this is the last work that I shall conduct'. If so and maybe knowing it would be his final concert, it is interesting that Ansermet should include some Bartók; the other works were by Bach (Orchestral Suite No. 4) and Debussy (*Six épigraphes antiques* as orchestrated – and recorded – by Ansermet).

As for Bartók's history, he himself began his musical apprenticeship with lessons from his mother and went on to develop his skills as a pianist (of which he was a notable virtuoso, as recordings testify) studying piano (with a pupil of Liszt's) and composition at the Budapest Academy. Early orchestral compositions betray the influence of Richard Strauss and Liszt, not least the tone poem *Kossuth* (1903). Hungarian folksong greatly appealed to Bartók and he and fellow-composer Zoltán Kodály began collecting the indigenous material from various communities. This music would infiltrate into Bartók's original music as highly sophisticated transcriptions and completely integral to it.

The music of Debussy was now becoming an influence (a pertinent reference for Ansermet, maybe) and Bartók increasingly absorbed the native music of his country. Bartók's single opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) followed, so too exposure to Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Further stage-works – ballets – followed, *The Wooden Prince* and *The Miraculous Mandarin* (very different scores – the former impressionistic, the latter reveling in the backwash of *The Rite of Spring*, *Mandarin's* scenario, if not the music, requiring the intervention of the censor!).

Yet, like all great composers, Bartók's music is immediately recognizable as his, no matter how advanced it became, how percussive (Piano Concerto No. 1, Piano Sonata, Sonata for two pianos and orchestra, *Music for strings, percussion and celesta*) or indeed with a 'softening' of his stance with the final works, such as Piano Concerto No. 3 (written for his pianist wife as a bequest – by now Bartók, in America, knew that he was terminally ill with leukemia).

Those final works, including the Concerto for Orchestra (which was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky for the Boston Symphony Orchestra), showed a return to lyricism without losing sight of nationalism (geographically speaking now far away for the self-exiled composer). This is most gratefully heard in the piano concerto (which was completed by his friend Tibór Séry, who also made a performing version of sketches for a Viola Concerto).

Piano Concerto No. 3 here features Julius Katchen (in the first of his two Decca recordings of the work; the second was conducted by István Kertész). The music is lyrical, playful and – in the slow movement – spiritually searching and with the contrast of including another of Bartók's night-music episodes (the scurrying of nocturnal insects) before reaching the rhythmic

exuberance of the finale. Lucidly scored throughout, a powerful coda ensues.

Ansermet's conducting of Bartók's music is of his customary clarity. In the *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* we hear a clear-sighted and passionate traversal to the climax of the first movement, a bustling but articulate account of the second movement, its rhythms poised but not at the expense of energy and a suitably restless and intensely expressive account of the 'night music' third. The finale is not as headstrong as it can be but is infectious, especially in the specific points of folk-inflected material. Ansermet's integration of episodes provides strong links in the structural chain.

In the *Dance Suite* (written in 1923 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the union of Buda and Pest), Bartók invests a folksy and impressionistic style into this orchestral showpiece that is both estimable and inimitable of the composer. Ansermet's conducting of the faster sections is energetic and considered, the slower music revealed for its 'local' melody, the score closely observed for detail and construction. Similarly Ansermet's observance of 'small' details (grace notes and approximations to folk instruments) gives us a flavoursome and loving account of the *Romanian Folk Dances*.

Two Portraits, the first a deeply eloquent slow movement featuring a solo violin (and musically related to Violin Concerto No. 1) enjoys a gentle and radiant release at the close. To contrast this is the wildness, brevity, pointillist orchestration and changeable metres of the second Portrait.

Ansermet was not one to exaggerate or to make himself the dominant feature of performances he conducted. He was first and foremost a musician. Nevertheless, a degree of calculation (in the best sense) informs Ansermet's conducting in the sense of proportion and relationship: ideal qualities for Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra directed here by Ansermet with discernment for the composer's careful construction and internal relationships. The first movement grows imperceptibly from its undergrowth opening to full and energetic flowering; slower contrasts always seem to belong rather than appearing to be interludes. Attention to Bartók's scoring is exemplary.

The 'Game of the Couples' second movement is slyly witty in its syncopation, the middle section a chorale of heartfelt gravitas. With the central movement 'Elegy' Ansermet finds a nervous intensity, which is given an uproarious foil in the 'Interrupted Intermezzo' that is the fourth movement, music gently imbued with

Hungarian inflexions and rudely interrupted by trombone 'raspberries' (Shostakovich's 'Leningrad Symphony', then very popular, the butt of Bartók's acerbic humour). The finale, our attention called to it by summoning horns, is fast and furious (in fact Ansermet prefers a musically articulate approach), reflective and fugal before descending into a labyrinth of shady polyphony, which re-forms into a triumphant apotheosis (as revised – Bartók's original was rather curt, and has been recorded by such as Koussevitzky, Slatkin and Gatti). This closes a work that is a victory of form and content and also of emotions, the struggling and self-exiled composer writing one of his most winning scores to a prestigious commission and here realised in Geneva by an orchestra schooled by its conductor to perform both the meticulous notation and what lies behind it, the final bars punched out with vindication.

Colin Anderson

Swiss conductor **ERNEST ANSERMET** was born in Vevey on 11 November 1883 and died aged 85 in Geneva on 20 February 1969. He was inclined to music from an early age, learning the violin and the clarinet. He was also interested in mathematics and taught the subject. Ansermet studied music in Paris and Geneva and made his conducting debut in 1910. Although Ansermet is particularly associated with the Geneva-based L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, he also guest-conducted throughout his career – including in America (with numerous top orchestras there and in 1962 conducting Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, an opera Ansermet twice recorded, at the Metropolitan, New York) and England (with London orchestras and not least when he conducted the première of Benjamin Britten's opera *The Rape of Lucretia* at Glyndebourne in 1946). Ansermet had previously made his debut at the Salzburg Festival, conducting the Vienna Philharmonic in 1942.

Ansermet's relationship with the Suisse Romande Orchestra lasted for 50 years – from 1918, when he founded the orchestra, to 1967 when he stood down as its conductor (and handed the reins to Paul Kletzki). Ansermet continued to work in Geneva until his death; his final concert was in December 1968 and consisted of a typically eclectic mix of composers

– on that occasion it was J.S. Bach, Bartók, Debussy and Honegger. In his early days (between 1911 and 1927) Ansermet held appointments in Montreux and Buenos Aires and also conducted for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company. It is however the Ansermet/Suisse Romande association that remains an indivisible partnership – one kept alive by the many recordings they made for Decca and which document Ansermet's highly-regarded interpretations of Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky (he knew all three composers) as well as lucid and satisfying versions of symphonies by Beethoven, Brahms (both complete) and Haydn as well as copious further examples of French, German and Russian repertoire, both core and less familiar. LP collectors have long treasured these recordings, which fully exploit the splendid acoustics of the Victoria Hall in Geneva, and they continue to grace the catalogue on compact disc for their musical and audiophile excellence.

Ansermet prepared performances notable for their clarity and intelligence; he took all he needed from the composer's score and saw no need to add his own gloss (or vanity) but to focus on the composer's intentions and – as Ansermet himself said – 'to touch the heart of the music so as to make its heart-beats heard by the listener'. Thus Ansermet's art is not only

authoritative it is also timeless and cuts through fads and fashions.

Criticism has been levied on the technical quality of the Suisse Romande Orchestra. While it is true that the ensemble was not super-virtuoso or immersed in centuries-old tradition, what is always apparent in these recordings is that the orchestra consisted of dedicated and knowledgeable musicians very much attuned to Ansermet's direction and leaving the listener in no doubt as to their candid commitment to musical truth. Sometimes fallible in execution, maybe – but also capable of inspiration – there is a musical focus that engrosses, illuminates and sustains.

Colin Anderson



Ernest Ansermet



Recording producers: James Walker (Concerto for Orchestra, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta); Michael Bremner (Dance Suite, Romanian Folk Dances, Two Portraits); Victor Olof (Piano Concerto)

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Eloquence cover image: A caricature of Ernest Ansermet

Eloquence series manager: Cyrus Meher-Homji

Art direction: Chilu Tong · www.chilu.com

Booklet editor: Bruce Raggatt

