

Bartók - Violin Concertos 1 & 2 (Kyung Wha Chung, Solti) [1990]

Written by bluesever

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1. Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. Posth.: I. Andante Sostenuto 2. Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. Posth.: II. Allegro Giocoso 3. Violin Concerto No. 2: I. Allegro Non Troppo 4. Violin Concerto No. 2: II. Andante Tranquillo 5. Violin Concerto No. 2: III. Allegro Molto Kyung Wha Chung – violin
London Symphony Orchestra Georg Solti – conductor

This recording of Bartok's Violin Concerto, dating from 1976, was seminal in my catching the collector's bug. Until then I knew Bartok's Concerto through the famed 1953 recording of Menuhin-Furtwängler (Violin Concerto 2, on a cassette tape poorly transferred from the LP), and decided to try this new one (which I bought also in cassette form - I preferred tape hiss to scratching surfaces). I didn't like it. But then, I decided to try and understand why. I didn't read scores then, so I painstakingly made an A-B comparison, phrase after phrase, juggling back and forth with the two cassettes. I didn't go further than the first movement, but came to the conclusion that Chung-Solti were in fact BETTER than Menuhin-Furtwängler, not only on account of their better sonics, but also because they had an extra bite which I recognized as truly Bartokian, as opposed to the gentler and mellower Menuhin. And I realized that my initial reaction derived simply from the fact that I had become used to the sonic perspective of the earlier recording, and acoustically enslaved to a given interpretation, confusing it with the composition. I decided that this should never happen again, and that when possible I'd buy multiple versions of one work, so never again to confuse the composition and the interpretation.

Years and a few thousand records later and with many more versions of Bartok's Violin Concerto under my belt, I was curious to see if, returning to Chung-Solti, it would still hold up. To a large extent, it does. I find that in the outer movements, Chung has an ideal blend of the urgent/biting and the songful/lyrical (with fine response too to Bartok's "grazioso" markings in the finale). Her command of the tempo and emotional changes is masterful, and has rarely been equaled. This is a version that both has great drive in the more urgent sections, and truly sings, but (unlike Menuhin) never gives you the impression of lingering just for the sake of it. And more important still: while my preference goes to the early recordings (by the premiere performer

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Zoltan Szekely Bartok: Violin Concerto No. 2, Gitlis The Art of Ivry Gitlis, Stern A Life In Music: Isaac Stern, Volume 9) that keep the lyrical sections flowing, with Chung, despite her great contrasts of tempo, it unfolds very organically and entirely convincingly. Likewise, her opening tempo in the slow movement is significantly slower than Bartok's metronome indication and the tempo adopted by Szekely and Gitlis, but her lean tone fortunately avoids any trace of sentimentality and again she brings off the marked contrasts of tempo in an entirely convincing way. What I'm not so satisfied with is the orchestral sonics, at least in the first movement. They sound somewhat distant, some woodwind details don't come out clearly enough and the brass lack a degree of bite. Strangely, things are much better in the finale. Chung re-recorded the Concerto in 1990 with Rattle (Violin Concerto 2 / Rhapsodies 1 & 2). She had lost nothing of her purity of tone, her conception remained remarkably similar (and still as songful), although she adopted a perceptibly more urgent approach in the faster sections - and Rattle/Birmingham's sonics were of demonstration quality (although a few woodwind details in the first movement still didn't stand out enough). So it seems that the newer version supersedes the older one... with the provisos that there is something to be said in favor of the slightly less driving approach of the previous Chung, and that, in the slow movement of the newer version, I feel that she has slightly crossed that fine line between deliberation and sentimentality, and her even stronger contrasts of tempo now feel a bit contrived.

The pairing might make the difference. The EMI recording has the two Rhapsodies, arguably more interesting than Bartok's youthful Violin Concerto from 1907 which opens this disc. Nonetheless Decca's decision to pair Chung and Solti's 1983 recording can't be disputed, in view of its program coherence. It originally came with their recording of Berg's Violin Concerto, part of Decca's earliest batch of CDs (Violin Concerti), a mating not really satisfying stylistically and short on total time (the Berg has been coherently reissued with the composer's Kammerkonzert, Violin Concerto / Chamber Concerto). Since the masterful 1961 premiere recording by Stern and Ormandy of the newly discovered work (link above), basically two conceptions have been brought to bear on the slow-moving, lyrical first movement: one, possibly more immediately effective, is the approach favored by Stern and Oistrakh (with Rozhdstvenski in 1962, like Stern's a great version, unfortunately let down by the crude and rustic early Soviet stereo, Szymanowski Violin Concerto No 1; Bartok Violin Concerto No. 1 ; Hindemith: Violin Concerto (Urania)) and closer to us by Midori and Kremer; it is indeed very slow, with a pulse almost to the note rather than to the beat (it is a 6/8 time signature), highlighting the ecstatic, time-suspended nature of the music. Like Menuhin in 1965 (Bartok: Violin Concertos, Viola Concerto, 6 Duo for 2 Violins, Violin Rhapsodies; Yehudi Menuhin) and Sitkovetsky in 1991 (Violin Concertos 1 & 2), Chung here adopts the second approach, with a more flowing tempo, in fact truer to Bartok's metronome mark, eliciting more of a sense of bleakness and gloom (enhanced by the fact that Solti doesn't really observe the "poco meno sostenuto" indication at 4:36) that anticipates on the slow movement of the divertimento. But I find Chung a little too dry in tone for the Concerto's luscious, Straussian textures. In the same vein Sitkovetsky's luminous and intense tone is more effective. But those who find that the Concerto is already too over-ripe as it is, will find an appeal to Chung's approach. Her qualities and dynamism are better suited to the scherzando and sardonic second movement, and although I think she lacks a touch of radiant luminosity in the lyrical passages I appreciate her

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refusal to linger and fuss there. Throughout the orchestra is, again, a bit too recessed, depriving it of its full impact in the climaxes. At the beginning of the first movement the solo violin dominates so much that it covers the orchestra's quartet of violins, ruining the whole effect written by Bartok.

It's a hard call then between Chung's two recordings of Bartok's VC #2. Both are excellent. The small interpretive details I am unhappy with in the newer version will most likely be indifferent to most listeners, who will in turn prefer the better sonics. But I am happy to have this one also, if only for sentimental reasons (but not only). ---Discophage, amazon.com

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