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Sylvia Parker & Béla Bartók
CD Review
By Jim Lowe

Sylvia Parker's new album of Béla Bartók's folk music reflects not only the deep musical abilities of the Berlin pianist, but her lifelong passion for the Hungarian composer who looked to his homeland for inspiration.

"Béla Bartók: Peasant Jewels," a two-disc set just released by Centaur, can be enjoyed in two ways: one, as a University of Vermont senior lecturer's compilation of Bartók's complete arrangements of folk melodies for piano, or as a concert pianist's sympathetic and excellent performances of intriguing and beautiful music. For this critic, it was mostly the latter.

Bartók (1881-1945) loved the folk music of his native Hungary and it inspired his life's work. He collected thousands of peasant melodies from not only Hungary, but from sounding Eastern European regions. From these, he composed hundreds of arrangements for voices and various instruments. Of those, some 150 are for solo piano.

Bartók, a successful concert pianist, made them more palatable for audiences by spicing up the rhythms and harmonization. Parker includes a few of the absolutely charming field recordings of singers and instruments the pieces are based upon — and comparing the versions is simply fascinating.

According to Parker's excellent liner notes, Bartók wrote, "We must penetrate into ... the special character of a folk melody ... feel it, and bring it out in sharp contours by the appropriate setting. The composition round a folk melody ... must be a work of inspiration."

Parker, who has long taught piano and theory at UVM, has made a study of this composer who lived a summer in Riverton. Her performances of these short piano pieces capture Bartók's spirit, reflecting the varying character of these miniatures. The playing is fluid, with a light singing touch and rhythmic sensitivity. With beautiful articulation, Parker delivers the music's intimacy and simple profundity.

The first of the two CDs is "For Children" (BB 53), written in 1908-09, divided between Hungarian (42) and Slovak (43) melodies. Most are less than a minute; the longest is 1:47.

The Hungarian melodies sound a bit like nursery tunes with a slightly spicy, modal edge. Many sound familiar but with irregular rhythms. Some were written to be played by beginners, while others are more advanced. In fact, they seem to increase in complexity and difficulty progressively.

The Slovak melodies have a slightly different harmonic and rhythmic flavor, perhaps a bit less acerbic. Some are more complex, deeper, with that same sense of familiarity — with a twist.

There is no sameness in these 82 miniatures, only endless variety. Parker said this is the original version, not the revision published posthumously in 1947.

Disc 2 offers more variety, including works heard in the concert hall. The Six Romanian Folk Dances (BB 68) of 1915 are regular concert fare, though they are simply Bartók's arrangements of authentic folk melodies. Parker also included three of his 1932-39 "Mikrokosmos" (BB 105), eliminating those that were more the composer's work than the original.

The 15 Hungarian Peasant Songs (BB 79) of 1914-18 are certainly meant for the concert hall. They're very different — darker, modal, more complex, more strident, much bigger and more virtuosic. In much the same vein is the six-dance movement Petite Suite (BB 113) of 1936.

Contrasting that are two of the composer's 1908 10 Easy Piano Pieces. There are also 20 Romanian Christmas Carols (BB 65) of 1915, bearing no relationship to what Americans know. But they're folksy, charming, intriguing and very short — and some are quite complex rhythmically.

Parker has beautifully combined erudition and heartfelt performance in creating a window into the deeply authentic ethnic world of Béla Bartók.

Béla Bartók: Peasant Jewels

Sylvia Parker, piano