

RECORDS: The Complete Bartok

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Star Special Writer

The Hungarian recording industry is involved in producing a uniform "Complete Edition" of the music of Bartok. The label is "Hungaroton." This is, of course, a state-subsidized project and quite a full-dress one, undertaken with a view to wide international distribution. When completed, the set will run to some 45 discs.

While this is obviously a worthy undertaking, it is not as important as it would appear to be at first glance. A quick check through the long list of Bartok's works in the Schwann record catalog will show that almost everything he wrote has already been recorded and is available commercially. I was surprised to find that, in addition to the great works, even his drabest little teaching pieces for piano, which surely have a limited audience, are on the market.

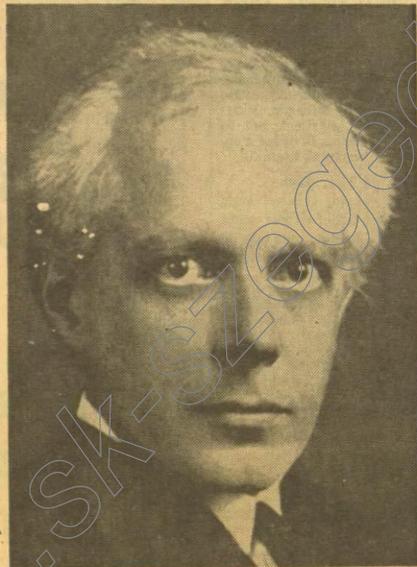
Anyone so fond of Bartok that he must have the complete works will no doubt want to shop around — getting what he thinks is the best recording of the quartets, or the best of the "Concerto for Orchestra," and using the Complete Edition principally to fill in the lacunae.

However, the edition offers two distinct advantages.

First, in providing sensible combinations of the shorter works.

Bartok wrote a great many 10-, 12- and 15-minute pieces which are not long enough to command a whole record face and consequently, when they are recorded, get mixed up with other pieces, often by other composers, which may be of no interest whatever to the buyer. Whoever is planning this series has, so far, come up with good balances, so that if you get a record with four or five pieces on it, you can be sure that they have a family relationship to each other.

Second, in the descriptive booklets that take the place of conventional liner notes. These are unusually detailed little



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studies, crammed with information not readily available elsewhere, and lavishly illustrated. The English translations are awkward but serviceable.

As for the performances: from the sampling I have heard, anything calling for one

or two players is fine and, on that basis, my guess is that all of the chamber music will be well-played and well-recorded. Gabor Gabos, who recorded five groups of short piano pieces, is a spectacular young virtuoso and was an ideal choice. And the works for two pianos, including the Concerto, that Mme. Bartok recorded with Erzsebet Tusa and Maria Comensoli, are top drawer.

Regrettably, the same thing is not true of the recordings of

the Budapest Symphony. One need not compare it with the New York Philharmonic to realize that it has considerable deficiencies.

So, evidently, the Complete Edition is not going to be a complete success. The set is distributed in this country through Quilton Records, Ltd., 39-38 58th St., Woodside, N.Y. 11377, and you can probably pick up individual records at a good recordstore. There is a special price of \$140 for the whole set if you order now and send payment with your order. But it is just as well that you don't have to subscribe in order to get the records you really want.

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