

Bartok's Bluebeard

TWO opposing criteria of value collide head-on with the appearance of two versions of Bartok's one-act "opera" on the subject of the "Bluebeard" legend. One is the worth of a work recorded with the text as the composer set it; the other is the virtue of a musically excellent interpretation done in the language of the listener.

What might help in a determination of the reader's need is mention that the work in question, as recorded by Antal Dorati, the late Mihaly Szekeley and Olga Szönyi (both of the Budapest Opera) and the London Symphony Orchestra (Mercury SR 90311, \$5.98, mono MG 50311, \$4.98) is neither *Bluebeard's Castle* nor *Herzog Blaubarts Burg* (as it is familiarly known here or on the Continent) but *A kékszakállú herceg vára*. That is to say it is sung in Hungarian, a language with which, traditionally, only Hungarians are familiar; and the record sleeve offers no more enlightenment than a condensation of the "story" with no extended reference to the text in any language.

By contrast, the version by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy, with Jerome Hines and Rosalind Elias as the vocalists (Columbia stereo MS 6425, \$5.98, mono ML 5825, \$4.98) is not only sung in pleasingly pure English, but is also provided with a complete copy of Chester Kallman's excellent advantage of the Philadelphia Orchestra's special quality of sound, something not within the ability of the

London Symphony Orchestra to match.

As tends to be the case, with two recordings, direct comparison flounders on the reef that catches one in one vulnerable place, the other in another. In the case of the Mercury it is the rather quavery voice of Miss Szönyi, which gives a disaffecting image of Judith to the ear. Certainly she has no part of the sensuous sound with which Miss Elias draws her likeness of the new wife doomed to the fate of the others. On the other hand, Hines, for all the weight of sound he produces and the care he gives to enunciating the text, doesn't match the sinister overtones with which Szekeley (who died suddenly last month in Budapest) infuses his effort. Finally, as both Ormandy and Dorati are compatriots of Bartok, they may be presumed to be equally conversant with the tradition of the work and its preferred mode of performance.

Both versions make clear that *Bluebeard's Castle* (the typesetter may be spared another citation of the Hungarian equivalent) profits from the codifying and clarifying effect of his later masterworks. Having learned from the Concerto for Orchestra, the violin concerto, the third piano concerto, and the Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta where Bartok was headed all his life, it is now possible to see where he was circa 1910 and evaluate it accordingly. Taking the orchestra of Strauss and modifying it for his own purposes, Bartok in *Bluebeard's Castle* has turned the piercing

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light of *Salome* and *Elektra* on its subject and made an image of his own with it.

In these terms, the harsher, more astringent impulse in the Dorati treatment strikes my ear as more suited to the elements of the psychotic and perverse in Bluebeard's nature. Ormandy's unquestionably fine sense of sonority for the same values tends to refine and soften them, which has to affect the impact they convey. Thus, more for the preference of the conductor rather than the superiority of one pair of singers or the other, my conclusion would be that there is more of the essential Bartok in the Mercury than the Columbia. But this is against the strong reservation that a very poor service has been done to the purchaser in denying him a translation. Perhaps Columbia will consider renting its translation to Mercury on a royalty basis?

—IRVING KOLODIN.



Antal Dorati—for Bluebeard, a "harsher, more astringent impulse."

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