Vermont pianist Sylvia Parker has recorded Béla Bartók's arrangements of folk music for piano.

CD REVIEW

Sylvia Parker & Béla Bartók

By JAN LUME
STAFF WRITER

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 Century, can be enjoyed in two ways. As a University of Vermont senior lecture’s compilation of Bartók’s complete arrangements of folk melodies for piano, or as a concert pianist’s sympathetic and excellent performances of outposting 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 surrounding 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 to 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 Roshbury. 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 vivacity.

With beautiful articulation, Parker delivers the music’s intimacy and simple profundity.

The first of the two CDs is "For Children" (BB 55), written in 1908-09, divided between Hungarian (42) and Slovak (45) melodies. Most are less than a minute; the longest is 1:47.

The Hungarian melodies sound a bit like nursery tunes with a slightly spacy, modal edge. Many sound familiar but with irregular rhythms. Scene were written to be played by beginners, while the Slovak pieces are more complex.

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others are more advanced. In fact, they seem to increase in complexity and difficulty progressively.

The Slovak includes five of 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 that is the original version, not the revision published posthumously in 1947.

The 2 more offer variety, including works heard in the concert hall. The Six Romanian Folk Dances (BB 60) of 1914 are regular concert fare, though they are simply Bartók’s arrangements of authentic folk melodies. Parker also included three of his 1930/39 "Mikrokosmos" (BB 105), eliminating those that were more the composer’s work than the original.

The 18 Hungarian Peasant Songs (BB 79) of 1914-18 are certainly meant for the concert hall. They’re very different — darker, modal, more complex, much bigger and more visceral. In much the same vein is the existence movement Peinture Suite (BB 115), of 1936.

Contrasting are two of the composer’s 1909 10 Easy Piano Pieces. There are also 10 Romanian Christmas Carols (BB 60) of 1915, bearing no relationship to what Americans know. But they’re folk, charming, intriguing and very short — and serve as quite complex rationally.

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

Thursday, May 14, 2015 | The Arts and Entertainment Guide of the Times Argus
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For this critic, it was 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 similar sounding Eastern European regions.

From there, 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 harmonies. 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 Roxbury. 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.59), written in 1908-09, divided between Hungarian (42) and Slovak (43) melodies. Most are less than a minute; the longest is 4:47.

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

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**Bartók**

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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 1925 are regular concert fare, although they are simply Bartók's arrangement of austere folk melodies.

Parker also included three of his 1929-30 "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 working; much bigger and more virtuosic. In much the same vein is the adeption movement Peinte Suite (BB.115) of 1936.

Contrasting that are two of the composer's 1908-09 Easy Piano Pieces. There are also 20 Romanian Christmas Carols (BB.65) of 1915, bearing no relationship to what Americans know. But they're folk, charming, intriguing and very short — and serve as quite complex rhythmically.

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