

SCHOENBERG *Pelleas und Melisande*. **VARÈSE** *Amériques*¹ • Zoltán Kocsis, cond; Hungarian Natl PO; Amadinda Percussion Group¹ • BUDAPEST MUSIC CENTER CD 102 (59:28) Live: Budapest 12/23/2001; 1/11/2002¹

Schoenberg's early tone poem has blossomed in a variety of interpretations at a wide range of tempos. Among the better recordings, Bruno Maderna's is the slowest, lasting 47:41, whereas Dimitri Mitropoulos and Hermann Scherchen cut 10 minutes off that time. Zoltán Kocsis sets a new speed record, at 35:46. His Hungarian orchestra plays with power and accuracy, but the excitement of the performance comes primarily from its speed. No pressing vision of the work surfaces, as is the case with the three older recordings. Once the listener becomes accustomed to the tempos on this disc, the excitement vanishes, leaving only hurry. On the other hand, the recorded sound is warm and full, and much of the fiendishly complex score comes through, so those comfortable with the speed will be well rewarded. For me, the matter was settled by an Andante three-CD set entitled "Vienna Philharmonic: 20th Century Music" (*Fanfare* 27:2), which perched atop my Want List 2003. Among many superb live performances, it includes Karl Böhm's magnificent 1969 *Pelleas und Melisande* (39:11), gorgeously played and sounding even better than on this new disc. This Budapest Music Center issue allots but one track to the work, while Andante gives us a track for each of its 11 sections; on page 270 of the cited *Fanfare* is a table matching the start of each track with its number in the Dover score.

This performance of Edgard Varèse's *Amériques* is dark and powerful; the recording, made at a different Budapest milieu than the Schoenberg, is even more stunning. Kocsis is more outgoing and less analytical than Pierre Boulez with the New York Philharmonic. The Boulez is a series of percussion effects backed by a distant symphony orchestra, the Kocsis a single mega-ensemble—despite the employment of a separately named percussion group—which sounds as gigantic as it looks on paper: five of each woodwind, eight horns, six trumpets. Sirens are excessively polite in New York; they roar in Budapest. Boulez builds a precise machine, while Kocsis brings the score to life. The *Amériques* in Riccardo Chailly's two-CD Decca set, "Varèse: The Complete Works," is not strictly comparable, as it is a reconstruction of the original version. Its editor (Chou Wen-chung, a Varèse associate) has done a great job, the Concertgebouw Orchestra is magnificent, and the recording captures the thrilling acoustics of the Amsterdam hall with no excess reverberation. The Decca set remains a first choice for all of Varèse's music, but I like the Kocsis enormously; the once-admired Boulez now seems to miss the essence of the music. I have not heard the Boulez/Chicago *Amériques* on DG, or the Nagano on Erato.

This disc demonstrates that the Hungarian National Philharmonic (formerly known as the Hungarian State Symphony) is a world-class orchestra, able to compete with the New York Philharmonic and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. It didn't sound this fine on a recent Hungaroton SACD of Bartók; score one for Budapest Music Center Records. **James H. North**

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