

Rarely does one encounter two master musicians who leave their spheres as virtuosi and soloists to allow time for chamber music and play it at an exalted level. We read of duos from the past such as Huberman and D'Albert, Bruno Walter and Rosé: fortunately one can hear Szigeti with Schnabel. When Erica Morini (1904-1995) and Rudolf Firkusny (1912-1994) briefly collaborated in sonata repertoire, their interaction proved to be of interest beyond the immediate. While documentation is sparse, some three concerts are known. An initial performance was given in New York (30 December 1959) at which they offered Mozart's Sonata K.454, Beethoven's Op. 30/3 and the Brahms Sonata Op. 108. A year later the two again performed (20 January 1961) the Mozart K.481, Beethoven's Op. 30/2, and the Franck sonata. A critic who attended both performances wrote "they keep improving as a team, and it is safe to say that they have not played more beautifully together than they did at this concert."

An executive from Decca Records heard their performances and commissioned Morini and Firkusny to record their sonata programs. After focusing on sections from each work for four hour sessions each day for nearly a week, the sonata takes were completed and edited, impressing as solid and accurate renditions. However, the discovery of three sonatas recorded during their too few concerts reveals a more inspired, risk-taking bravado, sensitivity to detail and expression which inhibiting studio conditions and the drudgery of repeatedly playing segments to be strung together by an editor failed to capture the continuity of a genuine performance. Firkusny once stated that for him, studio work resulted in an end rather than opening any horizons, finding that accuracy supplanted the spontaneity of his public performances. For Morini, working with a pianist such as Firkusny was a rare opportunity in her career, as she usually combined sonatas with virtuosic works, requiring a partner more attuned to serving as an accompanist. In the 1930s, Morini recorded with Louis Kentner, and in the 1960s played with Horszowski in Milan and New York. In Firkusny she found an artist who was not only musically simpatico ("We just clicked!" they enthuse to an interviewer) but a musician whose ideas inspired her to leave some of her finest accounts of sonatas. Their collaboration had difficulty in continuing, as demands on their time and extensive touring somehow placed them into back into orbit, lacking a chance for further projects: or perhaps they sensed that their few recitals had been sufficient.

Morini's life and career have been documented in our previous CD publications (Arbiter 106, 107, 128). (We wish to correct an erroneous fact provided by Leon Pommers, that the family name had been changed from Morgenstern: the violinist's brother Frank Morini has informed us that their birth certificates bear the name Morini and to his knowledge, no change was ever made.)

Rudolf Firkusny was a consummate pianist whose earliest guidance came from a composer, Leos Janacek, as both lived in the Moravian city of Brno. Their first encounter when the pianist was five years old found the composer rushing to the piano after hearing the boy play a Slavonic Dance (Dvorak) too slowly: Janacek illustrated his idea of the correct tempo, then followed it by playing the last movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 27/2, the boy's first vivid musical experience. Firkusny described Janacek's teaching as having been unconventional in the sense that it focused more on Janacek's desire to explore music rather than rely on any systematic or academic preparation (which Firkusny contemporaneously received from Vilem Kurz, who prepared him for a debut at age ten), yet he was even more fortunate in having been favored by the composer, who displayed a paternal attachment to Firkusny. A creator's insight guided his advice and observations. Firkusny recalled "he started to show me his own scores - his operas and [symphonic poems] - and he put me in touch with contemporary works by Stravinsky and Debussy [including La Mer], reading from the score [either four-hands or on two pianos]." Firkusny affirmed that "Janacek made a musician out of me."

Firkusny expanded his involvement with the music of his nation by studying works of Dvorak with the composer's son-in-law, violinist Josef Suk, leader of the renowned Bohemian Quartet and a composer. One

contemporary he championed throughout his life was Bohuslav Martinu, giving the Prague premiere of the Second Piano Concerto.

Firkusny briefly took lessons in Paris from Alfred Cortot, who accompanied him as a conductor for a concerto performance, commenting that Firkusny hadn't any need for lessons, only a public. Firkusny initially toured in the United States in 1938, making his debut in New York (12 January 1938) with Bach-Busoni: Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland, Nun freut euch Lieber Christen; Liszt's Sonata, three Etudes and a Mazurka by Chopin, works by Smetana, Suk, Martinu, and encores by Debussy and Prokofiev. There followed studies with Artur Schnabel before the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis. Firkusny escaped "with the necessary paper, signed by some German who didn't read it." In France he joined the Czech Army in Exile, only to be forced to flee towards Portugal, where he sailed for America. Firkusny had performed in Europe under the batons of Vaclav Talich, Erich Kleiber, Fritz Busch, Bernardino Molinari, Cortot, and Philippe Gaubert. In America, he was welcomed by Szell, Stokowski, Cantelli, his colleague Rafael Kubelik, Rodzinski, and became a desired soloist and recitalist. As an interpreter, Firkusny placed himself at the service of the composer's works, playing in a patrician, elegant manner, endowed with a remarkable awareness of form, structure, and nuance, all conveyed with a naturalness and colorful tone.

Drawn to the visual arts, Firkusny also enjoyed perusing Agatha Christie novels while travelling. Fluent in French and German, he frequently read poetry, especially Paul Valery, and Proust's epic, reading both in their original French. He kept abreast of Czech literature: Milan Kundera's works were familiar to him (as was his father Ludvik, from Brno, who had also studied with Janacek.) According to his daughter Veronique Callegari, Firkusny would unwind after a day's teaching by playing through operas at the piano.

In 1990, Firkusny was invited as a living link to his nation's pre-Soviet culture to return and perform Martinu's Second Concerto (after having introduced the work fifty-five years earlier) in a free Czech Republic. Reflecting on the role of a musical interpreter, he described it as being a philosopher's continuing search for the meaning of existence: "If, throughout my life, I had not been asking myself exactly those questions, I would feel today that my life has been wasted by piano playing which was basically useless."

In addition to the three surviving sonatas from Morini and Firkusny's concerts, one movement from Mozart's C major Sonata, K.296, was salvaged, as the other movements suffered from extensive interference during the broadcast. The Brahms Hungarian Dance was recorded by Morini in Berlin with pianist Michael Raucheisen. Morini later recorded a series of these dances with pianist Artur Balsam, but this earlier account is a more involved collaboraton and burns with the fire of her youth. Morini's links to Brahms came through her studies in Vienna with Jakob Grun (1837-1916), who also taught Karl Flesch. Grun's own teacher, Joseph Böhm, had worked directly with Beethoven on the interpretation of his late quartets.

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