

**Béla Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*:
A Partial and Personal Survey of the Discography
by Ralph Moore**

Bartók composed *A kékszakállú herceg vára* ("Duke Bluebeard's Castle") in 1911 for entry into the Ferenc Erkel Prize and modified it the following year for a second, music publisher's competition; on neither occasion did he win, probably because of its essentially static, internalised dramatic nature and the cast being restricted to only two singers and brief choral interjections in the form of sighing. It certainly would not have been because of any perceived limitation in its orchestration or musical content, which is mostly polytonal and chromatic, centring the dissonant properties of the minor second. Bartók devised a new ending in 1917 and the premiere was on 24 May 1918 at the Royal Hungarian Opera House in Budapest.

The libretto was written by Béla Balázs, the poet and friend of the composer, and is based on the macabre French tale *La Barbe bleue* by Charles Perrault. It really demands to be heard in the original Hungarian, preferably with the chilling spoken Prologue; I do love the unexpected, muscular strangeness of the language (part of the Finno-Ugric language group, hence wholly unfamiliar to anyone used to hearing opera sung in a Teutonic, Slavonic or Latinate tongue). Furthermore, lasting around an hour and with little in the way of action, this psycho-drama plays out perfectly in the mind's eye - in my experience better than on stage or on film - so a CD of a studio recording or a radio broadcast performance constitutes the perfect format for appreciating its unique power. In the solitary confines of one's own listening room, the turning of the lock and swinging open of the first door accompanied by unworldly sighs from the lips of unseen denizens can provide a scalp-prickling thrill, especially on headphones, when those effects can be especially disturbing.

The CLOR catalogue lists some fifty recordings of this opera, including two films (1963, in German, and 1988, in Hungarian). Sixteen of those are studio versions: two in German, two in English and a dozen in the original language. Of the live versions, three are in German, two in English, two in Russian and one in French. Given that so many recordings are available, I had to do some pruning to arrive at a manageable selection before embarking on my survey and have accordingly reviewed below a total of sixteen, including all those made in the studio bar one in English and the two in German.

I will put my cards on the table and declare my prejudices early: my aversion to John Tomlinson's voice, which became rocky and lumpy later in his career, means that I have not here considered here any of his four recordings; in any case none is a studio recording in the original language: three are in Hungarian but live and the other is a studio recording in English for Opera North, and I think a prime recommendation must be a studio recording in Hungarian. Nor do I want to hear this opera in German, especially when it is sung by so unsuitable a voice as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who, especially in his early lighter-voiced prime in 1958, had none of the bass weight the role demands and even less so by the time of his live 1975 and studio 1979 recordings when his voice was distinctly greyer. I really do not think that a wobbly voice or a high baritone will do as Bluebeard, and have therefore excluded those from my survey, with apologies to those whose tastes differ from mine.

However, I have asserted the reviewer's arbitrary privilege by making some exceptions to my rules for the disqualification of recordings, for reasons of their exceptional quality and their accessibility to an English-speaking audience, and included in my survey two other English versions: the 1965 studio recording conducted by Ormandy and Mark Elder's 1992 live broadcast from Cardiff. Otherwise, the recordings below are all in Hungarian, as is my third exception, the 1988 film version with the music conducted by Adám Fischer. Unfortunately, that has never, to my knowledge, been released on CD. My fourth and final exception is one of the most recent: the live performance in Hungarian from Gergiev and the LSO, which has sound as good as any studio recording.

I find Bartók's sole opera to be one of those most absorbing and fascinating ever written and revel in its dark, gothic opacity, culminating in a terrifying dénouement. It is one of the defining works of 20C music, evincing an awareness of Freudian psychology and combining a subtle, poetic, mythically allusive text and retrospectively Gothic tropes with an adventurous and occasionally dissonant, yet still essentially tonal, musical idiom in a manner which would surely have made the composer's predecessor and inventor of the Gesamtkunstwerk proud.

It really is *sui generis* within the composer's output, very different from his later work, little of which engages my interest. Unlike some operas, whereby you simply resign yourself to sitting back and enjoying some great music in spite of the risible plot or lumbering libretto (*Ernani* and *Le Villi* come to mind), or in which the words seems to take precedence over the music, as with some of Hofmannsthal's more abstruse texts for Strauss, this opera embodies the perfect fusion between words and music and offers the ideal balance between drama and beauty of form, much like Debussy's "*Pelléas et Mélisande*" - another clear influence on Bartók. No problem here with "*prima la musica, dopo le parole*" - or vice versa.

The Recordings

Walter Susskind (1953 Praga Digital, studio, in Hungarian) [61:30]

New Symphony Orchestra; Endré Koréh; Judith Hellwig

(English text of libretto) AAD mono

(Coupled with 9 *Cantata Profana*)

In good mono sound, this early recording is prefaced with an animated narration of the Prologue by Ernő Lorys, then we hear the deep, brooding voice of Hungarian basso profundo, contrasting strongly with the light, bright, penetrating soprano of the aptly named Judith Hellwig (born in Austro-Hungary in 1906) – unusual in a role almost invariably given to a mezzo or at least a dramatic soprano. She sounds insistently girlish despite being in her late forties at the time of recording and he sounds rather...well, paternal if not elderly and just occasionally a little unsteady at forte. Their command of the speech rhythms is masterly. The orchestra is inevitably rather distant in the sound picture but Susskind – a Czech-born conductor who fled Prague two days before the Nazi invasion and became a British citizen - knows what to do with the music; it's a pity about the faintly comical, squeaky sound effect representing the castle sighing but the sound of the doors being unlocked and opened is clear and apt. This might not be a first choice but is still a fine version.

János Ferencsik (1956 Hungaroton, studio, in Hungarian)

Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra; Mihály Székely; Klára Palánkay

(Hungarian-English libretto) ADD mono

This was the first of Ferencsik's three studio recordings and the better of Székely's two but it is in mono sound – perfectly acceptable but obviously lacking the impact of stereo. Székely was coached by the composer, and he and Palánkay performed the opera many times together. Indeed, he sang the role for almost thirty years, but by the time he came to record it for Dorati he was less flexible of voice; here, he is fresher and more resonant, if not as steady as the best Bluebeards. He successfully humanises Bluebeard in his manner of singing the repeated "Félsz-e?" (Are you frightened?) and "Vigyázz" ("Careful"). Palánkay sounds rather mature but like Székely her delivery of the quasi-parlando passages is arresting and she is full-voiced, firm and assertive in the Judit-as-shrew mode – but why does she not sing, or remain inaudible in, the top C on the opening of the Fifth Door? That's a grave disappointment, especially as the orchestra is so grand there. The choral sighs are a bit overt and obvious – I prefer something more amorphous and mysterious – but the vigour of Ferencsik's direction in combination with his frequent use of rubato, giving latitude to his orchestra and singers, means that we are hearing a thoroughly authentic performance.

Eugene Ormandy (1960 Sony, studio, in English) [55:47]

Philadelphia Orchestra; Jerome Hines; Rosalind Elias

(No libretto) ADD stereo

Originally an LP released on Columbia Records in 1963, this magnificent recording made in 1960 was long unavailable on any commercial transfer to CD; my own copy until recently was an expert remastering onto CD by a gifted amateur sound engineer done as a private transaction for just my private use, but it has now finally been released as part of a batch of remastered Sony issues.

It is all the more striking and accessible to Anglo-Saxons for being in English.

Of course, that's not the same as having the opera in the original Hungarian and regrettably the spoken Prologue is omitted, but this is nonetheless a very desirable adjunct to the famous, virtually contemporaneous recording by Kertész or indeed a modern recording by such as Solti or Fischer. The singers here are the great Metropolitan bass Jerome Hines, whose deep, resonant bass immediately makes the listener sit up, and the then rising mezzo-soprano Rosalind Elias.

Ormandy is at home in this music and has the virtuosity of the Philadelphia Orchestra at his command. The stereo sound is standard for the early sixties: mostly a good spread, if occasionally a little cramped and tinny, but spacious enough to encompass the grandeur of the great C major blast as the fifth door swings open to reveal the vastness of Bluebeard's kingdom and the sighing winds are suitably arresting. There is only the faintest background hiss. Elias is expressive: insistent and demanding without being shrewish, while Hines chills the blood with his repeated "'Frightened?" and "For us both, be careful, Judith!" Elias has a lovely, firm voice; she only touches the top C at the climactic fifth door event - which is what the score demands, but I miss the illicit prolongation of Ludwig's shocked, ecstatic shriek.

The playing from America's premier orchestra of that era is superb and Ormandy is master of the score. There is no libretto but the singers' English diction is pellucid, rendering that unnecessary.

Antal Doráti (1962 Brilliant/Mercury, studio, in Hungarian) [52:30]

London Symphony Orchestra; Mihály Székely; Olga Szönyi

(Hungarian-English libretto download available from the Brilliant website)

(Coupled with three excerpts from Berg's *Wozzeck*) ADD stereo

The early 60's stereo sound is as good as you would expect from Mercury, rich and deep with a minimum of hiss, even if the sound effect depicting the walls sighing is a bit odd and electronically overdone and has a touch of the Tube train about it. Mihály Székely died only a year after this recording and he sounds rather old, but the colour of his bass is still the right voice for the role, even if he is stretched by the higher-flying passages, most damagingly when he proclaims the immensity of his kingdom, which needs to be absolutely bronze-toned and steady. His Judit is more than adequate without being especially memorable or characterful; something of a wobble can creep into her rather monochromatic delivery and the middle of the voice become opaque where more tonal centre is required. She only flicks the famous top C for a beat and even if that is as per the score, we are now used to rather more excitement.

Dorati's conducting is swift but not especially energised. The orchestral playing is very good: the instrumental depictions of the scintillating jewels behind the Third Door, the grand vista onto which the Fifth opens and the pool of tears are vividly played. In short, this remains a fair version which idiomatic and satisfactory but has been surpassed by several others in various ways.

István Kertész (1965 Decca, studio, in Hungarian) [59:30]

London Symphony Orchestra; Walter Berry; Christa Ludwig
(Hungarian-English libretto) ADD stereo

This has long generally been accepted as one of the most complete and involving performances in the whole catalogue.

First, as so many have already noted, the Decca sound engineers triumphed; you would never guess that this recording is well over fifty years old, so full and atmospheric is the sound. The unearthly groans accompanying the opening of Bluebeard's doors to his secret chambers are otherworldly and the major chord sequence accompanying the flinging wide of the door onto Bluebeard's kingdom is one of the great moments in recording history.

The performances are superlative, too; Berry has just the right combination of power and mystery in his voice and Ludwig manages to make Judit shrewish and importunate without dehumanising her or making ugly sounds - quite the reverse; her voice is in prime condition. I have to smile at other English speakers passing judgement on the authenticity of their Hungarian; I speak some other languages but have absolutely no idea whether their accents are good. They certainly sound convincing and I cannot imagine that either Kertész or the (then) husband and wife team of Ludwig and Berry would have allowed poor preparation to scupper such a great enterprise. Pronouncements such as those made by some English-speaking reviewers that their delivery "lacks the full bite and snap of singers emoting in their native language" seem pretentious; they sound snappy enough to me and I would be interested to hear the judgement of a native speaker. My only regret is that the decision was taken not to include the spoken prologue which serves as a very effective introduction to the BBC English language version with Gwynne Howell as a memorable Bluebeard, and in the recordings by Solti and – somewhat less effectively – Iván Fischer.

János Ferencsik (1970 Hungaroton, studio, in Hungarian) [54:19]

Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra; György Melis; Káatalin Kasza
(No libretto) AAD stereo

The sound is good here, a little opaque but with a proper balance between the voices and the orchestra and I like the characteristically astringent Budapest woodwind. Ferencsik directs an urgent, nervy account – this is one of the fastest on record - and there is a notable freedom in the manner in which the two native-Hungarian-speaking singers deliver the text. Melis has a mostly smooth, even baritone which develops a bit of a beat in louder, higher notes; some listeners might prefer their Bluebeard to have a darker sound, which bass-baritones or lyric basses can bring to the role. There is a fair amount of edge and astringency, too in Kasza's Judit, especially at high volume, which makes her more of a termagant than some but she gives Judit a vivid personality and her ecstatic, top C shriek is splendid, but not prolonged. The sighs are not melodramatic, just eerie. This might not be the most strikingly sung version but all the right dramatic accents are squarely struck.

Pierre Boulez (1976 Sony, studio, in Hungarian) [61:14]

BBC Symphony Orchestra; Siegmund Nimsgern; Tatiana Troyanos
(Hungarian-English libretto) ADD stereo

In some ways I am pretty hopeless as a reviewer of this work as there are so many good recordings of it that I am prepared to recommend whichever I have most recently been listening to. Almost every one I know has something about it which distinguishes it as praiseworthy; this one is no exception; in fact, I think I am prepared to go as far as saying that I would place it alongside the classic Kertész as my favourite.

However, I have just one or two minor reservations: first, I always want to hear at least part of the Bard's Prologue by librettist Béla Balázs, preferably in the original Hungarian, and have some objection to the little catch or bleat which afflicts Siegmund Nimsgern's bass-baritone, despite the otherwise undeniable beauty and drama of his assumption of the Big, Bad Duke.

Apart from that, the three great glories of this recording are: the sound quality, Tatiana Troyanos' Judit and the subtlety of Boulez' conducting. He brings out both the best of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, which plays sublimely, and of the music itself; no other conductor brings out so comprehensively the individuality and variety of the orchestral depictions of what lies concealed behind each door: blood, tears, weaponry, jewels and landscapes are so vividly glowingly and often hauntingly portrayed in sound. The climactic Fifth Door is simply thrilling, accompanied by Troyanos' sustained top C.

Her voice is ideal, in that she combines a slight tremulousness, suggestive of both fear and sensuality, with a vibrant, burnished warmth of tone that makes Judit a living, breathing woman of immense will and passion. I am aware that some listeners respond negatively to the comparative coolness of Boulez's later, more understated recording with Polgár and Jessye Norman; I like that different, thoughtful approach but those who don't may safely gravitate towards this grand and dramatic account.

Boulez's somewhat slower speeds create a hypnotic, mesmeric atmosphere and the warm, analogue sound from 1976 consistently proffers the aural suggestion of cavernous, Gothic spaces. Nimsgern's ominous Bluebeard effectively implies the violence and perhaps the fear and need which lurk beneath the appearance of control. Ideally, I prefer a "blacker" bass of the Hines, Howell, Nesterenko, Ramey and Polgár variety; he is more in the Walter Berry mode but the latter is, after all, one of the best Dukes on disc, so I can hardly demur.

Georg Solti (1979 Decca, studio, in Hungarian) [57:08]

London Philharmonic Orchestra; Kolos Kováts; Sylvia Sass
(Hungarian-English libretto) ADD stereo

Listening to this again causes me to reflect on the fact that there have been very few unsatisfactory recordings of this opera. It has been fortunate on disc; I acquired this one not only to hear the artists concerned but particularly because it features the spoken Prologue in Hungarian from the poem by Béla Balázs, chillingly recited in a mesmeric half-voice by Istvan Sztankay. I think this helps enormously in setting the right atmosphere for the tale to come; another version to do this is the BBC Music magazine live recording in English from 1992, in which again the Prologue is intoned in a whisper and gradually an English translation, movingly delivered by a woman actor and evidently from a later, different section of the poem, overlays the Hungarian - again, to telling, atmospheric effect. It surprises me that so many otherwise good recordings do not see the dramatic possibilities of the inclusion of at least the Prologue if not some of the original poem; it gives this one a distinct advantage - although it is not necessarily the best of all, musically speaking.

Still, this has much to offer, not least a comparatively rare chance to hear Sylvia Sass in a successful recording made before a brief ten years at the top and too committed and reckless a devotion to dramatic conviction took their toll and she retired. She does not hold the top C in the Fifth Door section with the same thrilling abandon that Ludwig for Kertész, or Marton for Fischer, manages, but otherwise she is a superb vocal actress who finds nuances in her native tongue of which others are unaware. Kolos Kováts has a big, rich bass in the Ramey mould and of course he, too, fully appreciates how to colour the words. Strangely, given his reputation, I did not find Solti as thrilling as Kertész in his control of dynamics and momentum, but his interpretation is still more energised than that of the more restrained Adam Fischer in his studio recording, even though the latter has the advantage of the Hungarian State Orchestra.

János Ferencsik (1981 Hungaroton, studio, in Hungarian) [57:02]

Hungarian State Opera; Evgeny Nesterenko; Elena Obraztsova
(Hungarian-English libretto) DDD

This is the third studio recording by Ferencsik and has received a bad press in some quarters but I can't hear why. I suppose the easiest accusation is that two large-voiced, Russian and very Slavic-sounding singers cannot be expected to do justice to the Hungarian. I don't speak the language but I have to say that to my ears, they sound pretty convincing and are under the direction here of János Ferencsik, a native Hungarian and the conductor of two previous and highly praised recordings in 1956 and 1970, which suggests that they would have been coached and corrected if necessary. In addition to the conductor, the performing forces here are wholly Hungarian, so authenticity and a familiarity with the idiom are assured.

It is true that Obraztsova has a somewhat harsh, strident tone but I like to hear Judit played as a nagging harriidan rather than a noble, wronged victim; she brings a hectoring, febrile quality to her nagging which complicates and mitigates my male response to Bluebeard's cruel treatment of her. It is another way to play her.

Nesterenko is in superb voice, able to soften and veil his imposing bass to suggest the hidden depths and mystery of his psyche and even suggest that he is somehow irresistibly and inexorably manipulated into giving in to Judit. He can also open up his sound to match the splendour of the opening of the Fifth Door, and the orchestra and organ keep up with him - or the other way around. I do not find, as one reviewer claims, that he simply sings through the text without expression; on the contrary, he is very careful to shade and his delivery and even Obraztsova, despite the limitations of her bronze mezzo, can be heard to do the same. She manages the one top C without hanging on to it for too long.

Needless to say, the conducting and orchestral playing are masterly; everything is paced as it should be and the myriad colours of Bartók's orchestration emerge brightly. The sound is clean and natural but a little recessed, as if the whole thing has been recorded at slightly too low a volume, but there is a good balance between voices and instruments.

One or two peculiarities: the sighs when the doors swing open are oddly too electronic and synthesised, and thus a bit cheesy, although still effective enough. Annoyingly, there is only one track cue throughout, although a full Hungarian-English libretto is provided.

Adám Fischer (1987 CBS Masterworks, studio, in Hungarian) [60:21]

Hungarian State Orchestra; Samuel Ramey; Éva Marton
(Hungarian-English libretto) DDD

I have always admired enormously the voices of both Sam Ramey and Éva Marton and this is clearly a glorious account, but I do not think that it necessarily surpasses the Kertész version. Ramey is in his prime; his beautiful, keenly focused, inky-dark bass is perfect to encompass Bluebeard's sadness, tenderness and underlying menace. Marton, while not as varied and subtle as Ludwig, is able to refine her big sound to suggest Judit's youth and vulnerability as well as her impetuous, importunate (dare I say very feminine?) stubbornness. Some have criticised her vibrato as too broad but it is here very much under control and I love it when she unleashes her voice.

In addition to the excellence of the two soloists, I must praise both the sound engineering and the superb orchestral playing; every detail in score emerges and I simply cannot understand those few reviewers who express disappointment with the standard of conducting and the playing of the Hungarian orchestra. Fischer takes a more restrained approach to the score than the impassioned

Kertész but that gives it a dreaminess appropriate to this strange, haunting, Symbolist nightmare. Kertész is more dramatic - particularly in the justly celebrated opening of the fifth door onto Bluebeard's vast kingdom - but there is also room for Fischer's more grandiose and stately interpretation.

There should not be any objections to this recording on the grounds of authenticity: Marton might be American, but she was born in Budapest in 1943 and is thus ethnically echt Hungarian; Ramey has always had an excellent ear for languages and sounds pretty authentic to my untutored ears.

Adám Fischer (1988 Teldec, film, in Hungarian) [63:49]

London Philharmonic Orchestra; Robert Lloyd; Elizabeth Laurence
(English subtitles)

Both singers here have the perfect voice for their roles. Laurence's mezzo is smoky, slightly tremulous with a good top C; Lloyd has tremendous depth and resonance, a bass as dark and menacing as Bluebeard's castle - and in the film he looks perfect, too, saturnine, handsome, imposing, slightly greying. His transition from assurance to uncertainty in the face of his new bride's insistence is subtly and credibly traced.

Nor can you go wrong with the conductor - elder brother of Iván, whose recording is below - or the orchestra; Fischer is more released than in his recording the year before reviewed above but reproduces its haunted, nightmarish quality. This was originally released on VHS tape cassette then in the now defunct Laser Disc format, then on both Region 1 (2009) and all-Region (2010) DVDs, neither of which is any longer available. However, it can be viewed - or, if you prefer, just heard - free on YouTube; I hope that one day an audio version of the soundtrack will be released.

Mark Elder (1992 BBC Music Magazine, live broadcast, in English) [65:09]

BBC National Orchestra of Wales; Gwynne Howell; Sally Burgess
(No libretto) DDD

This is the second of two superb versions in English, featuring saturnine Welsh bass Gwynne Howell at the top of his game with an excellent, shrewish, slightly shrieky but compelling Judith in Sally Burgess. This is as chilling and menacing an account as any in the catalogue and starts wonderfully with the Béla Balázs' original text intoned in Hungarian by a male voice, gradually overlaid with an English translation spoken by a woman; it works beautifully, as does the excellent English translation of the libretto. There is no printed text but it's not necessary for English speakers.

The intimate, claustrophobic atmosphere of this opera is ideal for armchair listening but there is certainly no lack of power in the climactic moments such as the C major diapason accompanying the swinging open of the fifth door or the orchestral frenzy preceding the revelation of yet another horror buried deep in both the castle and Bluebeard's psyche and I could listen to Howell's sinister, purring bass all day.

This was recorded live at St. David's, Cardiff, 11 January 1992 and first broadcast on Radio 3 on 7 May later that same year. The sound and the sound effects are first rate and you will find this disc available very cheaply on eBay, having been released as a freebie with the BBC Music Magazine (just be careful - some of those CDs were prone to bronzing; my copy seems fine).

Pierre Boulez (1993 DG, studio, in Hungarian) [57:59]

Chicago Symphony Orchestra; László Polgár; Jessye Norman
(Hungarian-English libretto) DDD

I concede that other recordings are overtly more dramatic or even histrionic in their impact than this, but the combination of Boulez's cool control and the sheer vocal plushness of the two excellent singers here boosts its claims to being as worthy as other favourites.

Some reviewers have extolled the virtues of László Polgár's later recording with Ivan Fischer but the incipient unsteadiness in his Judit's voice bothers me, despite her intensity and ease with the idiom. No such problems here with Jessye Norman in what I believe to be one of the best recordings. I do not find that she is uninvolved - although she is certainly imperious when she orders Bluebeard to open the seventh door. She is in full command of the vocal demands of this difficult role, up to the high C of "shock and awe" when the fifth door swings open to reveal the extent of the Duke's kingdom. Her Hungarian sounds very idiomatic to my ears and an element of detachment quite suits a portrayal of Judit which suggests that she would have to suffer from a degree of alienation from reality to press her demands so foolishly.

Polgár is one of a long line of great basses or bass-baritones who have undertaken the fascinating role of Bluebeard: Hines, Ramey, Howell, Kovács, Berry - all are terrific but Polgár matches them with his sonorous tone and clear diction. The Chicago orchestra is as good as you might expect them to be and I have already mentioned Boulez' quiet mastery of the score. The sound - especially the special effects when the spectral sighing echoes along the corridors - is exemplary.

It is also a great bonus to have the poetry of Béla Balázs intoned by the gravelly-voiced Nicholas Simon in the Prologue as the music creeps in; I prefer a quieter, more menacing delivery of the kind we hear in the BBC Music Magazine issue conducted by Mark Elder to his very emotive style but it is still effective - even if it does not chime with Boulez's understatement.

Other versions are more overtly theatrical, but I love the beautiful vocalism and under-stated control of this recording; sometimes subtlety and beauty are preferable to a Grand Guignol approach in this music.

Iván Fischer (2002 Philips, studio, in Hungarian) [55:27]

Budapest Festival Orchestra; László Polgár; Ildikó Komlósi
(Hungarian-English libretto) DDD

I find this recording to be excellent without it necessarily displacing my favourites. I very much like having the verse by Béla Balázs intoned over the Prologue, here spoken by the conductor without quite achieving the haunting, mesmeric quality we hear in István Sztankay's delivery for Solti or that by the uncredited speaker on the live broadcast from Cardiff by Mark Elder in 1992; Fischer is rather matter-of-fact, without an actor's inflections.

The orchestral colouring from the Budapest Festival Orchestra here is remarkably spicy and somehow "ethnic" sounding, with hoarse clarinets, fluttery flutes and blaring brass. László Polgár certainly has one of the most beautiful and resonant basses to have undertaken the role of Bluebeard and he has excellent diction, as has his Judit, veteran Ildikó Komlósi. I am less happy about her rather pronounced vibrato which verges on a wobble and she definitely yields to Ludwig, Sass and even Marton, who could also wobble but has that well under control for Adám Fischer. I find no conductor as exciting and energised as Kertész and in truth I think Iván Fischer, like his brother Adám for CBS, is here too restrained at times but his is a subtle approach, exploiting the peculiarly individual timbres generated by his Hungarian musicians. However, the great C major blast for the opening of the Fifth Door onto Bluebeard's kingdom is fully effective - very grand.

János Kovács (2002, Parsifal, in Hungarian) [58]

Hungarian State Opera Orchestra; Mihály Kálmándi; Éva Balaltoni
(Hungarian-English/German libretto) DDD

I managed to find a used copy of this on eBay but it does not seem to be generally available or even listed in the major discographies, yet it is a legitimate, digital studio recording by major Hungarian artists with a libretto and English and German translations in the booklet.

It is a swift, intense account and Kovács brings a transparent, chamber-like quality to the orchestral playing whereas other accounts enjoy a much lusher sound. The prologue is wearily intoned to create the requisite, menacing atmosphere and the dialogue throughout is authentically delivered (insofar as I can tell, but these are native speakers). The entry of baritone Mihály Kálmándi reveals a resonant biting voice with plenty of additional bass trenchancy. He is commanding throughout, especially good in the demented dénouement as he narrates his acquisition of each wife. Éva Balaltoni's mezzo-soprano, however, could be a shade steadier and there is an element of hooty matronliness in her tone which militates against her sounding suitably naïve; at times, too, she sounds marginally under the note (as per the treasure chamber, track 4). She is a definite weakness here, being rather plaintive and wavering, without the tonal power or lustre we hear from Ludwig, Norman, Sass, Marton et al. She just about manages the top C in the Fifth Door but in truth the orchestral climax, too, is a bit nondescript; other recordings get much more out of it, although both Kálmándi and Kovács generate more power and impact in the ensuing declamatory passage.

In brief, a good Bluebeard and competent conducting aren't enough to redeem this from mediocrity; perhaps that is why it has faded from sight.

Marin Alsop (2007 Naxos, studio, in Hungarian) [57:45]

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra; Gustáv Beláček; Andrea Meláth
(No libretto) DDD

Of all the recordings reviewed here, this is only one which in my estimation lacks any real quality. It is the blandest and the least well played, conducted and sung; even the sound quality lacks any immediacy and that matches the pusillanimous nature of the interpretation.

The two singers unfortunately possess voices of no distinction: the Judit is shallow and somewhat shrill of tone - vulnerable, yes, but in the wrong way and certainly not suggestive of a strong-willed woman who nags, begs and emotionally blackmails her newly-wed husband into surrendering his keys and his secrets along with them. The Bluebeard is certainly Hungarian-sounding in his delivery of the text - which is hardly surprising given that he has the advantage of birth - but his dry, throaty, effortful baritone is entirely inadequate to the demands of the music. Remember these are singers whose predecessors include some of the greatest singer-actors ever to tackle these roles: sopranos and dramatic mezzos Christa Ludwig, Sylvia Sass and Tatiana Troyanos, and basses/bass-baritones Berry, Ramey, Hines and Kovács. It might be unfair to make invidious comparisons but the prospective buyer needs to know that recordings of far greater quality are available.

The same holds for the conducting: Ferencsik, Kertész, Solti and Boulez offer so much more in the way of personality and drama than this careful play-through.

Valery Gergiev (2009 LSO Live, in Hungarian) [58:53]

London Symphony Orchestra; Willard White; Elena Zhidkova
(Hungarian-English libretto) DDD

An immediate bonus in the form of the Prologue sonorously intoned in English by Sir Willard White and the superb digital sound, indistinguishable from a studio recording. Even at 63, he has the right voice, similar to the true basses who have successfully undertaken this role, but his tone is grainy, some beat and unsteadiness intrude on sustained higher, louder notes and, insofar as I can judge, his Hungarian sounds rather syllabically learned rather than idiomatic. I am less comfortable with Elena Zhidkova's wobble; she was a last-minute substitute for an indisposed Katarina Dalayman and delivers a decent but generic performance which, like Gergiev's conducting, lacks detail.

There is indeed something a bit perfunctory in Gergiev's rushed direction; the LSO plays beautifully but events do not generate tension and create the right sense of foreboding; one is listening to a good performance, not living the drama. I realise, too, that it is prodigal to employ a chorus just to emit spooky sighing noises but its absence here further detracts from the requisite atmosphere. Ultimately this lacks the thrill and sparkle of the best recordings and the voices are not as pleasing.

Recommendations in summary

First choice must be a recording which is in Hungarian, well-engineered with effective sound effects, top-flight singers, orchestra and conductor, creating an intense, claustrophobic atmosphere punctuated by moments of high drama and providing both a libretto and the spoken Prologue. While I understand an attachment to recordings like Ferencsik's excellent first which are authentically and wholly Hungarian in personnel and origin, the Kertész recording remains my ideal in every respect apart from the absence of a Prologue; it is still my favourite and of course has a Hungarian conductor even if the other artists are not. However, I must supplement that with another recording which provides an introduction in addition to fulfilling all my criteria. Adam Fischer's superb film would do that, beginning as it does with an edited, truncated version of the Prologue narrated in English as the music creeps in, but it has not yet been released in an audio format. The only one left which ticks all those boxes is Boulez' second recording with Jessye Norman but some might find his approach too cool; I love it. Finally, I must have one in English and would opt for Mark Elder's Cardiff broadcast, even if Sally Burgess is not as secure as Rosalind Elias in the other highly recommendable English version conducted by Ormandy.

Devotees of this masterwork will, in any case, be happy to have more than one version.

Ralph Moore