



[Ligeti – Metamorphoses Nocturnes](#) [50:20]

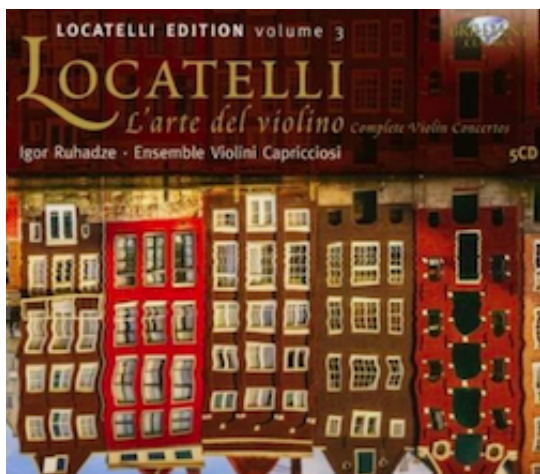
Quatuor Béla  
 Aeon AECD1332 (2013)

Now recognized as one of the pre-eminent composers of the late 20th Century, a young György Ligeti had endured the post-war Soviet occupation of his native Hungary, and his earliest works were required to satisfy the censorious regime. Hence, his wildest flights of fantasy remained private, and were not revealed until he escaped to the West in 1956 – among them the First String Quartet. Comprised of a continuous sequence of short, highly-contrasted movements, it is better known by the title Ligeti gave it; *Metamorphoses Nocturnes*.

Perhaps more a reflection on the theme of transformation than genuinely programmatic, it is a work that has fascinated me since hearing the Casals Quartet's recording (HMC902062). Despite the structural anarchy typical of modernist music, it was performed by the Casals with an accessibility that allowed its sheer imagination to triumph.

Named for the century's greatest Hungarian, Bela Bartok, Quatuor Béla was formed specifically to play this music and the bleak, spartan intensity of their reading is completely convincing. Where the Casals Quartet smooth off the rough edges and angularities, Quatuor Béla hone them to razor sharpness. These same qualities are ramped up another gear for the even darker Second (and final) String Quartet, from 1968. While not music that I personally could ever take to heart, it is constantly amazing to me (as a non-musician) that it is playable at all, such is its complexity and violent contrasts. The closing Cello Sonata is a very early and more traditionally melodic work, though it was still proscribed by the Hungarian authorities.

For those with a particular interest in this music, these carefully researched and heartfelt performances will have special appeal. A word of warning, though – the title work is recorded as a single 21-minute track, so there's no skipping straight to 'Tempo di Valse'! Recording quality is very good, with a dry studio acoustic providing the stark clarity that this interpretation requires. AF



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