



Edition Friedrich Gulda – The early RIAS recordings

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Historic Friedrich Gulda

Andrew McGregor, presenter of CD Review, reviews two sets which commemorate the eccentric pianist

These two sets illuminate the outer ends of Friedrich Gulda's career; the Berlin radio recordings he made throughout his 20s, then, following his jazz years in the 1970s, his return to Mozart.

The Early RIAS Recordings (Audite 21.404: 4 CDs) begin in 1959 with Beethoven Sonatas Op. 14 No. 2, and Op. 109 in whose finale Gulda lacks the singing intensity that he finds in his 1967 cycle. The Eroica Variations, though, are gripping, even blisteringly paced. Debussy's *Pour le piano* has a bold and brilliant opening. The gibbet in Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* lacks mesmerising menace, but 'Scarbo' has vital electricity. Chopin's Preludes swing from introverted intensity to explosive violence. Gulda was 19 when he recorded Prokofiev's Sonata No. 7, yet seems ill-at-ease with its modernism. But his Mozart C minor Concerto K491, with Igor Markevitch conducting in 1953, has a disciplined precision that's bracing, especially with Hummel's brilliant cadenzas.

Gulda returned to the classical concert platform in 1981 with three complete cycles of Mozart sonatas in Munich, Paris and Milan. Private recordings were made the following year in a lakeside hotel near Salzburg; only cassette copies survive as the masters disappeared. The Complete Gulda Mozart Tapes (DG 477 8466; 6 CDs) combines the two previously released volumes, with the distortion that marred two of the sonatas electronically tamed so that the cycle is now complete (Gulda's son Paul plays the missing 30 seconds from the recording of K457). The sound is clean and dry, intimate in the slow movements but unforgivingly brilliant elsewhere. The bass lines have a joyful drive, there's a keen sense of forward momentum but little sign of the improvisatory freedom Gulda sought in jazz – until you reach the concert performances on the bonus disc. From 1978 there's a Musikverein performance of the K397 Fantasia which emerges from Gulda's own Mozartian fantasy, and from 1997 a Mozart Adagio with synthesized strings; a dated sound, but lovingly achieved. Gulda said that when he was dead, he hoped to play piano duets with Mozart; perhaps in his mind they'd have sounded like this. He died three years later, on Mozart's birthday.