

# Ferenc FARKAS

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME SIX  
THE SLY STUDENTS: SUITE  
PRELUDIO E FUGA  
SYMPHONY

MÁV Symphony Orchestra  
Gábor Takács-Nagy, conductor

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

# FERENC FARKAS: ORCHESTRAL WORKS, VOLUME SIX

by László Gombos

On 19 June 1949 the premiere of the ballet *The Sly Students* (*Furfangos diákok*) provided Ferenc Farkas with a ringing success, and from then on it was one of the pieces with which he was identified. The work captures the musical voice of Hungary (and, more broadly, eastern Europe) in the period following World War II, while also presenting the composer's distinctive style, compositional techniques and characteristic tones. This 'identification' is, of course, not unique to Farkas, but his situation is nevertheless exceptional. During his long and consistently active life, he created such a large and complex *œuvre* that, divided into parts, several significantly different composers could be proud of it at the same time.

Farkas' diverse audiences and performers have each selected their favourite, iconic works. They have attended performances of the ballet *The Sly Students* and the comic opera *The Magic Cupboard* at the opera houses; choirs and groups of friends have sung the *Rose-Madrigal* for decades across the country (those of a more earthy disposition prefer the *Students' Songs from Sárospatak*); and arrangements of the series *Antiche danze ungheresi del 17. secolo* ('Old Hungarian Dances from the 17th Century') for various instruments and ensembles<sup>1</sup> are still performed worldwide. Although enthusiasts of modern music consider the cantatas *Aspirationes principis* and *St John's Fountain* to be among the outstanding Hungarian works of the last century, lovers of Hungarian-romantic operetta hum the melodies of *Csinom Palkó*, and students and professional singers sing individual songs from the *Fruit Basket* song-cycle.<sup>2</sup> A popular programme in churches is the *Missa Secunda in honorem*

<sup>1</sup> Recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0019 (version for wind quintet), 0184 (version for string orchestra, reworked as *Choreae Hungaricae*), 0217 (version for oboe and strings), 0230 (version for flute and string orchestra) and 0349 (version for wind band).

<sup>2</sup> Recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0019.

*Sanctae Margaritae*,<sup>3</sup> and at Christmas I myself have participated in the performance of the choral work *Sancte Nuit* and the *Nativity Play of Kőröshegy*<sup>4</sup> on many occasions.

The diversity of Farkas' music was also noticeable to his contemporaries. When asked about it, he sometimes referred to one of his role models, the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who published his poems in four different styles under four names. Farkas did not use pseudonyms, only 'masks', behind which – he was most proud of it – one could always feel the composer's individuality.

*The Sly Students* was written for the Budapest Opera House and represents a remarkable moment in the history of Hungarian music for the theatre. Gyula Harangozó's choreography, the staging, the set-design and the quality of the performance were the product of the post-war golden age marked by Otto Klemperer's presence in Budapest (1947–50). The ballet was played nearly a hundred times during the next two decades, with two further series holding the stage in 1974–77 (around 25 performances) and in 1999–2002 (again, around 25 performances), both of them recycling the choreography, costumes and design from the original production. It was also seen in several other Hungarian cities and performed in Strasbourg, Wiesbaden, Bytom (Poland), Moscow and Helsinki and, in 1963, at the Edinburgh Festival as well. The composition is extraordinarily diverse, combining the traditional sounds of several centuries and elements of Hungarian popular and folk-music with the idiom of contemporary new music. At the request of the conductor György Lehel, Farkas made a suite for the Hungarian Radio Orchestra, using around half of the musical material. The premiere took place on the radio on 4 February 1951. Farkas said about the piece:

The story takes place in Debrecen: Professor Horváth, Director of the College, wanted his daughter Rózsika to marry Józsi, the son of the town treasurer. But the young girl is in love with Ádám, a poor student, who must outwit Józsi, the traitorous Judas, to finally win the hand of his love... I had only one month to write the score: so, when I had written a few pages, I immediately sent them to the copyist and, as I no longer had the parts

<sup>3</sup> Recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0296.

<sup>4</sup> Recorded under the title of *Christmas Cantata* on Toccata Classics TOCC 0296.

I had just composed, I had to re-orchestrate the repeated passages. [...] The same year I pulled from the ballet music a Suite for orchestra: the first movement, 'Fair in Debrecen' [1], depicts the picturesque and lively jostling of the crowd in the Debrecen marketplace. The second movement, 'Air de danse' [2], is followed by the 'Students' Dance' [3], a *verbunkos* [a traditional military-recruitment dance] and 'Gypsy Music' [4]. The 'Pas de deux' [5] is a sentimental dialogue between Ádám and his sweetheart. The last movement, the Finale [6], is composed of three parts: Józsi's drunken dance, then a humorous funeral march depicting his fictitious burial. The work ends with a horseherds' dance.<sup>5</sup>

By the early 1950s, Farkas had reached the peak of his career. He already had a wealth of professional experience: after studying in Budapest and Rome, he composed numerous film and stage scores in Budapest, Vienna and Copenhagen, and in the first half of the 1940s he worked in Kolozsvár (now Cluj, Romania) as the choir director of the Hungarian National Theatre and the director of the Conservatoire of Music. Then in 1946 he founded and directed the State Conservatoire of Music in Székesfehérvár (80 km from Budapest) for two years.

In January 1949, he became a composition teacher at the Budapest Academy of Music, succeeding Zoltán Kodály and Sándor Veress (his name became a true legend during the 25 years he spent there, with György Ligeti and György Kurtág among his most famous students). In 1950, he was awarded the Kossuth Prize, the highest artistic decoration in Hungary.

As a composer, he was popular in all genres, but the symphony had been absent from his works until then. It was only in 1952 that he attempted to compose a traditional four-movement symphony. In the early 1950s, under Soviet political pressure, Hungarian composers were obliged to write accessible, optimistic pieces for the working class, and to fill abstract musical forms with programmatic content. Perhaps this expectation prompted the subtitle of Farkas' symphony: '*In memoriam 4. IV. 1945*'. That was the day the Second World War ended in Hungary, with the Soviet Army liberating the country from German occupation. During the siege, the composer was in Budapest with his

<sup>5</sup> Typescript in the composer's estate.

family, and when the fighting was over, he set to work with his customary optimism. He later wrote about his work and the circumstances of the 1950s:

I was freed from the constraints of the Neo-Classical style, because there was always something about it that was ‘impassibilité’, something about ‘understatement’,<sup>6</sup> where one is modest and does not let one’s emotions run wild. The realism that was fashionable at the time had a beneficial effect on me in that it opened up my sense of drama. Whereas my earlier pieces tended to culminate in subtle lyrical points, my Symphony contained strong emotional outbursts. [...] It is a four-movement, three-quarters-hour work, and, in accordance with the demands of the times, I intended it to be performable not only for traditional concert audiences, but also for workers. At the Musicians’ Association, where we regularly discussed new works, the Symphony was also on the agenda. I still remember that everyone except Lajos Vass<sup>7</sup> spoke negatively about the piece, and that really took my mind off it.<sup>8</sup>

The premiere took place on 3 June 1952 at the Academy of Music, conducted by Viktor Vaszy. Although the audience was enthusiastic about the work, some critics complained that it did not capture the required ideological content sufficiently and thus did not encourage people to take social action (at that time, such phrases meant the building of socialism leading to communism). The criticism and discussions within the Composers’ Association also contributed to Farkas’ withdrawing the piece after a few performances and radio broadcasts, although he considered the first and second movements to still be performable as independent works under the titles *Symphonic Overture* and *Elegy*, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

For the Symphony he used musical material from the incidental music written in 1950 for the film *Felszabadult föld* (‘Liberated Land’). The first movement, *Moderato – Allegro agitato* [7], which after a slow introduction becomes increasingly vehement, was

<sup>6</sup> Farkas wrote ‘understatement’ in English.

<sup>7</sup> Hungarian composer and conductor (1927–92), best known for his research into folk-music and contribution to Hungarian choral music, although his catalogue contains also orchestral music, songs and two children’s operas.

<sup>8</sup> Typescript in the composer’s estate.

<sup>9</sup> They are recorded as independent works on Volume Five of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0286.

naturally associated by the audience at the premiere with the battles of the siege, and the heroic mood of the end with victory. Among its later, independent performances, one by Lamberto Gardelli and the State Orchestra at the Erkel Theatre in Budapest in 1976 stands out.

After this classical sonata-form movement, the Elegia [8] is certainly not a lament for the Soviet heroes, as some contemporary critics believed. Indeed, this music is not a tragic funeral march, but contemplative in nature, looking towards a new beginning and revival. It can be no accident that the dactylic *pizzicato* bass line soon after the opening, present almost throughout the movement, is reminiscent of one of the striking themes in Zoltán Kodály's *Budavári Te Deum*. The pieces even share a similar apropos: Kodály's work, premiered in 1936, was written for the anniversary of the recapture of the Hungarian capital (from which in 1686 the Turks were expelled by the united Christian troops). There the choral fugue begins with the words *Pleni sunt coeli et terra maiestatis gloriae tuae* ('Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of thy glory'), and Farkas perhaps wanted to send a message by quoting that well-known theme. The listener has the feeling of coming out of the cellar after the battle, looking around in the light among the ruins, perhaps giving thanks to God for having survived – and Farkas could rest assured that the communist 'comrades' would not decipher the religious reference in his work. Hope in new life became tangible for Farkas when his son András was born, on 14 April 1945.

In the 1970s, the third movement, the Scherzo [9] was revived under the title *Scherzo sinfonico*. Written in rondo form, this optimistic, light music no longer reminded anyone of the theme of reconstruction after the 1945 siege. The premiere took place at the National Symphony Orchestra Festival held in Szolnok in July 1979, where non-professional Hungarian orchestras performed. The chairman of the jury of the friendly competition was, as so often, Ferenc Farkas. At a concert on the 25th, the Eger Symphony Orchestra was conducted by the composer's namesake, István Farkas.

The final movement [10] had not been performed since the last performance of the Symphony on 25 July 1964, and even that took place only outdoors, in a youth park in the capital, probably without the composer's knowledge. As Farkas told me in the 1990s, he considered the finale to be the weakest, least polished movement of the work, and he

therefore did not encourage its further performance. Perhaps even then, decades later, his critics' criticism that he had failed adequately to portray the 'liberating, glorious Soviet Army' was still ringing in his ears. They may have been right, since such a combination of music and politics was at odds with Farkas' humanist personality.

He simply composed 'sunshine music' for his Finale, where a single, easily recognisable, hymnic melody plays almost throughout in a varied, magnificent instrumentation; no matter how many times one hears it, one can never tire of it. There are certainly more significant works in the twentieth century that express serious social problems, but a sense of liberated joy and happiness can hardly be expressed more genuinely than in this big-hearted declaration of optimism, which is comprehensible to everyone.

Farkas was not one of those boldly experimental composers who reject their predecessors, but he tried everything that could provide him with new inspiration. He had already used some twelve-note themes in his stage and film music in the 1930s, and in 1943 – in parallel with his arrangements of early music – he also tried the dodecaphonic technique. His first surviving piece of this kind was the *Preludio e fuga* for large orchestra, begun in 1944 and completed in 1947 (the fugue [12] was written first, and the prelude [11] later). In the contemporary, Stalinist cultural-policy environment there was no question of its performance, so the premiere took place only on 19 June 1957 on Hungarian Radio, with a second hearing on 17 April 1958 at the Academy of Music. (That belated premiere means that the date of composition is sometimes mistakenly ascribed to 1957 in the literature.)

The work was later performed on many occasions, including at the 1960 Prague Spring and 1964 Warsaw Autumn Festivals. Its success was helped by the fact that Farkas did not strictly apply dodecaphony, but, like Frank Martin and Luigi Dallapiccola, he followed a Latin, freer version of it. For him, the technique was more a kind of game, and he did not give up the traditional beauty of melodies and harmonies for the sake of rules. He said of the piece:

The themes of both the prelude and the fugue are twelve-tone, so-called dodecaphonic themes, but the method of elaboration does not adhere to the strict rules of the serial

technique (Zwölftontechnik). The twelve-tone nature of the themes naturally loosens the tonal framework but does not completely dissolve it.<sup>10</sup>

Farkas called the prelude a three-part invention built on three themes, following the model of Bach. The ensuing double fugue follows a gradually ascending and then descending arc. At its climax, the entire orchestra plays the original and inverted forms of the theme simultaneously, and at the end of the descent, a clarinet solo closes the composition.

*László Gombos, born in 1967, is a Hungarian musicologist. He graduated from the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest in 1990 (as a choral conductor) and in 1995 (in musicology), and in 1995–98 he took part in the musicological PhD programme of the Liszt Academy. He taught music history at the University of Debrecen from 1998 to 2002, and since 1995 he has been a professor at the Béla Bartók Conservatory in Budapest. Since 1994 he has been a member of the research staff at the Institute for Musicology in Budapest. His main area of interest is Hungarian music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

Born in Budapest, **Gábor Takács-Nagy** is considered one of today's most authentic exponents of Hungarian music and was awarded the Liszt Prize in 1982 and in 2017 the prestigious Béla Bartók-Ditta Pásztor Prize. In March 2021 he received the Érdemes Művész award for an Artist of Merit, presented by the Hungarian government to artists of long service in Hungarian national culture, and in December 2021 the Prima Primissima Prize, reserved for artists, athletes, and representatives of scientific life, culture and education for their performances and exemplary human qualities and values.

From 1975 to 1992 he was a founding member and the leader of the acclaimed Takács Quartet.



<sup>10</sup> Typescript in the composer's estate.

In 1996 he founded the Takács Piano Trio and in 1998 established the Mikrokosmos Quartet, receiving the Excellencia Award of the magazine *Pizzicato* for its 2008 recording of Bartók's quartets.

In 2002 Gábor Takács-Nagy turned to conducting and in 2007 became Music Director of the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra. Since September 2011, he has been Music Director of the Manchester Camerata, one of the leading British chamber orchestras, and has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Budapest Festival Orchestra since September 2012. He was Professor of String Quartet at the Haute École de Musique in Geneva until August 2021 and was awarded honorary membership of the Royal Academy of Music in June 2012.

In May 2023 Deutsche Grammophon released all nine Beethoven Symphonies (live recordings from 2009–22) with the Verbier Festival Chamber Orchestra conducted by Gábor Takács-Nagy. His discography as a conductor further includes recordings for BIS, Chandos, Claves, Epona, Hungaroton, Nimbus and Pan Classics, of music by Bartók, Bloch, Debussy, Doráti, Hayashi, Haydn, Hindemith, Martin, Prokofiev, Schoenberg and Seiber. For Toccata Classics he recorded the fifth volume of this series of orchestral works by Ferenc Farkas (TOCC 0286) and, with the Irish Chamber Orchestra, the Tenth Symphony of the Irish composer John Kinsella (TOCC 0242).

The **MÁV Symphony Orchestra**, based in Budapest, is considered one of the leading orchestras in Hungary. It was founded during the final days of World War II in 1945 by the president of the Hungarian State Railway (Magyar Államvasutak: MÁV), who believed that music was also an important element in rebuilding the country. Its repertoire ranges from Baroque to contemporary works. Its concerts are attended by more than 50,000 people annually, but they reach many more through frequent radio and television broadcasts as well as online streaming.

The recordings of the MÁV SO (one of them distinguished by an award from the *American Record Guide*) are available all around the world, released by a number of leading labels, among them Hungaroton, Naxos, Sony and Toccata Classics.

During its eight-decade activity, the MÁV Symphony Orchestra has worked with countless world stars at national and international concerts, including Roberto Alagna, Andrea Bocelli, José Carreras, György Cziffra, Plácido Domingo, Helen Donath, Péter Frankl, Endre Gertler, Augustin Hadelich, Nobuko Imai, Zoltán Kocsis, Kiri Te Kanawa, Cyprien Katsaris, Elisabeth Leonskaja, Alexander Markov, Erika Miklósa, Luciano Pavarotti, Miklós Perényi, Menahem Pressler, Dezső Ránki, Ruggiero Ricci, Andrea Rost, Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, Tamás Vásáry, Maxim Vengerov, Pinchas Zukerman – the list goes on.



Photograph: Máté Steiner

Over the years, many internationally celebrated conductors have worked with the Orchestra, among them Roberto Benzi, Herbert Blomstedt, Charles Dutoit, Angelo Ephrikian, János Ferencsik, Franco Ferrara, Lamberto Gardelli, Arvid Jansons, Zoltán Kodály, Franz Konwitschny, James Levine, Jesús López Cobos, Kurt Masur, Jorma Panula, Miklós Rózsa, Hans Swarowsky, Thomas Sanderling, Leonard Slatkin, Gábor Takács-Nagy and Carlo Zecchi.

The Orchestra has also made numerous guest appearances abroad, performing in most of the major concert-halls of Europe as well as touring in the Far East, the Middle East and South-America.

Róbert Farkas has been Chief Conductor of the MÁV Symphony Orchestra since September 2021, with Gergely Kesselyák and Gábor Takács-Nagy as Permanent Guest Conductors. Since 1974 the Orchestra has enjoyed a long-established friendship with the Japanese conductor Ken-Ichiro Kobayashi, who has been Honorary Guest Conductor since the 2014–15 season – a sign of mutual appreciation.



Recorded on 15–17 June and 20–25 June 2016, 24–26 April 2017 and 13 and 14 January 2020 in Studio 22, Hungarian Radio, Budapest, and on 21 February 2025 in the MÁV Symphony Orchestra Studio, Budapest

Engineers: Zoltán Pecze (1–8) and Dénes Rédly (9–12)

Producer and editor: Péter Aczél

*Publisher*

Editio Musica Budapest

Booklet text: László Gombos

Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)

Typesetting and layout: ALN Design, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

© Toccata Classics, London, 2025

© Toccata Classics, London, 2025

Toccata Classics CDs are available from online retailers and can also be ordered from our distributors around the world, a list of whom can be found at [www.toccataclassics.com](http://www.toccataclassics.com).

If we have no representation in your country, please contact:

Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK

Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: [info@toccataclassics.com](mailto:info@toccataclassics.com)

---

## FERENC FARKAS Orchestral Music, Volume Six

---

### ***The Sly Students: Suite* (1949)\*\***

**20:25**

- |                       |      |
|-----------------------|------|
| 1 I Fair in Debrecen  | 4:10 |
| 2 II Air de danse     | 2:27 |
| 3 III Students' Dance | 4:22 |
| 4 IV Gypsy Music      | 1:30 |
| 5 V Pas de deux       | 3:15 |
| 6 VI Finale           | 4:41 |

### ***Symphony* (1952)\***

**35:04**

- |                                       |       |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 7 I <i>Moderato – Allegro agitato</i> | 10:34 |
| 8 II Elegia                           | 10:04 |
| 9 III Scherzo                         | 6:06  |
| 10 IV Finale                          | 8:20  |

### ***Preludio e fuga* (1944–47)\*\***

**9:11**

- |             |      |
|-------------|------|
| 11 Preludio | 3:25 |
| 12 Fuga     | 5:46 |

**TT 64:42**

### **MÁV Symphony Orchestra**

István Trejer, violin 4

**Gábor Takács-Nagy, conductor**

\*FIRST RECORDING

\*\*FIRST DIGITAL RECORDING