



Edition Ferenc Fricsay (XI) – G. Rossini: Stabat Mater

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 2010.01.01)

This is Volume 11 in Audite’s “Edition Ferenc Fricsay,” a superb, ongoing series dedicated to remastering and restoring to the catalog many of the coveted live and studio mono recordings made by this near legendary conductor, mainly in the early to mid 1950s. His overlapping stereo recordings for Deutsche Grammophon continued up to the time of his death in 1963 at the age of 48.

It’s been said, facetiously, that the Requiem is Verdi’s greatest opera, the implication being that the composer couldn’t tell the difference between a “Libiamo, libiamo ne’ calici” and a “Libera me.” I choose not to believe that of Verdi, but of Rossini, I’m not so sure. For if there is a musical setting of a sacred text that surpasses the incongruity of his Petite Messe solennelle, it would have to be this Stabat mater. And while the score, taken on its own, is not entirely frivolous, it is operatic through and through, and not really in keeping with this most deeply moving hymn to the suffering of the Virgin Mary.

For this performance, Fricsay assembled an all-star, world-class quartet of vocal soloists known for their outstanding work in many of the sacred choral masterpieces by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Cherubini, Bruckner, and Dvořák, as well as for their appearances on the operatic stage. One would expect this broad range of experience and diversity of singing styles to find a happy medium in a reading of Rossini’s Stabat mater, and to convey a modicum of balance between the stilo antico, which the seriousness of the text calls for, and the music—“A drinking song under the cross,” the title of the booklet essay calls it (a reference to the Cujus animan gementem)—which is largely at odds with it. And on balance, this is what we get, though without text in hand, one could be excused for mistaking a passage or two for an excerpt from William Tell. Fault lies not with the soloists, choirs, orchestra, or Fricsay who, as was his wont, moves things along at a quickened pace; the liability is entirely Rossini’s.

Peter Uehling’s essay, the crucial points of which seem to jibe with other accounts I’ve read, tells us that the composer began work on the Stabat mater in 1831, but then lost interest after having written six of its 10 movements—1 and 5 through 9. A Spanish cleric and friend, Giuseppe Tadolini, completed the score, which eventually wound up in the hands of a French publisher. Rossini was not pleased to discover this unauthorized publication and decided to offer his own newly completed version to another publisher. By this time Tadolini was dead, but his publisher sued. Eventually, Rossini won the case, and it’s in the composer’s final 1842 version that the work is heard today.

As archival material that documents the accomplishment of one of the great conductors of the 20th century, not to mention the artistry of some of its finest

singers, this release will be indispensable to Fricstay collectors. The sound on this disc, however, does not match the excellence of that achieved on Volume 10 of this series, a 1951 studio recording Fricstay made of the Brahms Violin Concerto with Gioconda de Vito, reviewed in 33:2. The current recording sounds a bit constricted, recessed, and muffled in the loudest passages.

It's hard for me to imagine anyone being truly desperate for a recording of Rossini's Stabat mater, but if it's the piece itself you're interested in, there are quite a few later ones available in far better sound and in performances at least equal to if not superior to this one—Kertész with Lorengar, Minton, Pavarotti, Sotin, and the LSO comes to mind—but again, this is for Fricstay fans and for those collecting the Audite series.

