



P. I. Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5 & R. Schumann: Piano Concerto

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2007.12.04)

To mark the 10th anniversary of the RIAS Symphony Orchestra, conductor Ferenc Fricsay (1914-1963) gave a short speech (included on this CD) followed by a rousing, taut performance of the Tchaikovsky E Minor Symphony (24 January 1957). The rest of the program included Egk's French Suite and Bartok's Divertimento for String Orchestra. Fricsay acknowledges that "we have much to thank each other for, though the debt of gratitude is mainly on my side." We can express our appreciation for "the orchestra that refused to die" by auditing this virile performance that captures so much of the balletic-dramatic flair ubiquitous in the composer's musical repertory, especially in the Valse, with its skittish violins and broad cellos. The towering march in the strings and horns and the deep-hued grumbles of the tympani and bass fiddles are but a few of the sonic delights that mark this haunted rendition of this familiar score. While in mono sound, the ripe interplay of orchestral choirs in the Andante prove quite glorious, if only for the reverential sincerity of the phrasings. Typically flexible metrics in the last movement--rubato galore--as Fricsay stretches and gathers in the march line of the Andante maestoso up to the fanfare leading to the Allegro vivace. Fricsay on several occasions expressed his admiration for Wilhelm Furtwaengler, who never achieved the abandon in this work that Fricsay unleashes in this furious account whose concluding fate-motif moves a captive audience to frenzy.

The Schumann Concerto with Alfred Cortot (15 May 1951) likely represents an olive branch extended to the aging pianist, whose politics with Vichy undermined an otherwise humanistic career. The tempo adjustments here literally gape, with rests and ritards enough for a pod of whales to occupy, poetic license personified. A free fantasia on several levels, what fascinates us is Fricsay's ability to accommodate such a wayward vision. If the latter two movements reveal a somewhat tighter leash on the rhythmic pulse, they are no less subject to Cortot's inefficient fingers, though purveyors of the Romantic ethos will overlook the digital inaccuracies. Listening to a collaboration between two such mighty musical minds is still a rare privilege.