



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

aud 95.587

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A remarkable offering on several counts. First, there's the sound, which is unbelievably good for a 1954 concert performance. Yes, the brasses can be brittle in fortissimo passages, but there's plenty of orchestral detail and even some surges of warmth now and again. Even more impressive are the four solo voices, which come across with startling immediacy. So should this wind up being of interest, don't let the sonics deter you in the least.

What will affect you the most, I suspect, is Fricsay's conception of the piece and the artistry he brought to it. A devout Catholic, he loved this Stabat Mater, programming it numerous times in an era when no other conductor active in Germany would go near it. He approached Rossini's handiwork with reverence, refusing to simply ladle on the marinara and let the operatic games begin. His soloists do not have big, juicy voices, though the bass is plenty dark and deep when the occasion calls for it. Indeed, there's an intimacy to the singing that seems more suited to an oratorio than to opera. The voices are beautiful as well – bel canto. So while Haefliger may not leap tall phrases at a single bound, his 'Cujus animam' is warm, humane, and more prayerful than most. (With a pretty convincing high D-flat tacked on for good measure, I might add.) Maria Stader's 'Inflammatum' is less a fiery anticipation of Judgement Day than an inner cry for the soul to be cleansed. And never has the 'Qui est homo' duet sounded more compassionate, with the alto and soprano knowingly contemplating the mother's anguish as her son undergoes the agony of the cross.

In some of the most powerful conducting I've heard in a long time, Fricsay builds it all up interlude by interlude, aspiration by aspiration, and prayer by prayer into a true journey of faith. It's a revelatory performance that hangs together tautly, yet every word of text is savored and no rose is left unsmelled. Our perceptions of Rossini, I suspect, have been colored by the familiar idea that his Stabat Mater is a superficial affair where hot tunes trump any and all yearnings of the spirit. Think again. Under the baton of a great conductor, yet another bit of "conventional wisdom" bites the dust.