



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky & Robert Schumann: Symphony No. 5 & Piano Concerto

aud 95.498

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Classic Record Collector (Christopher Breunig - 2007.10.01)

At the end of 1948 Ferenc Fricsay became chief conductor of the RIAS Orchestra (now the Deutsche SO); nine months later he made his first recording for DG – Tchaikovsky’s Symphony no.5 with the Berlin Philharmonic (459 011-2). The transfer from the orchestra’s tenth anniversary concert (Fricsay’s introductory speech is included as a bonus track) comes with an exceptionally informative booklet essay – I had been unaware that the Americans withdrew all financial support in 1953 – not stinting on Cortot’s political affiliations during the war.

Audite has provided material of true documentary value. ‘Whatever you think of them, the performances certainly make you listen’, remarked a friend. The Schumann is a frustrating amalgam of eloquence, wrong notes by the handful and quirky phrasing and timing, suggesting Cortot had lapsed into some kind of unthinking routine in the 17 years since his fine set of 78s with LPO/Ronald (Naxos 8.110612). Fricsay skilfully tailors the accompaniment to his fallible soloist’s interpretation. It’s a pity we never had an Anda/Fricsay Schumann Concerto.

His account of the Tchaikovsky is far less ‘safe’ than in that studio version. The introduction is so meticulous that one holds one’s breath – yet it lasts an eternity! Later on, some passages have a frenzied air. Surprisingly, the solo horn in (ii) is quite hurried, although after those pivotal pizzicato mf chords at 108 Tempo I (Fricsay gave them less weight than Karajan) the same theme is taken, full orchestra, far more slowly. Fricsay is generally seen as a romantic, yet for me (and for DG’s then artwork department, one must infer) he was a modernist, absolutely at home in music demanding analytical clarity. In the Fifth we are given a kind of distanced representation of the emotional impetus of the work, whilst texture and dynamic markings are explicitly dissected. The sound quality is, incidentally, far superior to the edgy digital mastering of the 1949 Jesus-Christus-Kirche production (no match for its analogue predecessors).