



Ferenc Fricsay conducts Richard Strauss

aud 95.604

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Lauded for his taut and lean Mozart and pioneering recordings of Bartók and Kodály, Ferenc Fricsay is not a name one associates with Richard Strauss. Like his even rarer excursions into Mahler, Fricsay's sporadic Straussian ventures follow no particular performing tradition like Fritz Reiner, Karl Böhm, or Herbert von Karajan and consequently feel very fresh and new for their vintage. Recorded between 1949 and 1955, most of these works are included in Deutsche Grammophon's complete boxes devoted to Fricsay. Indeed, I assumed (wrongly) that Audite had simply packaged up the same performances. The soloists are identical confusingly but these live performances were made some time apart from DG's accounts. Aside from these repertory duplications Audite's well-filled album also includes Strauss's Oboe Concerto, which does expand Fricsay's recorded legacy.

Fricsay mentored the young Swiss pianist Margrit Weber, and their 1951 performance (on DG) of Strauss's busy, thorny "piano concerto," *Burleske* is endearingly warm-hearted if sober and unvirtuosic. Audite's account from four years later with the same team is a very different animal. Brisker, brighter, and keener toned, Weber still lacks the fingerwork for Strauss's climatic moments but she is otherwise splashy and reflective. Fricsay's accompaniment is lean, gleaming, and transparent, and in those intervening years recording quality could finally do justice to the RIAS strings. DG's *Burleske* is a dusty relic by comparison.

Leon Goossens, who gave the UK premiere of the oboe concerto, makes a rare appearance with this Berlin ensemble. Closely recorded, Goossens and Fricsay don't overplay the chamber aspects of this overtly light and classical-sounding oboe concerto. Despite the interconnected movements and melodic echoes of Strauss's operatic writing, Fricsay's expertise in Mozart comes to the fore here.

Recorded on April 20, 1953, Strauss's little known Duet concertino is the identical performance on both DG and Audite, although the latter's remastering is brighter and more forward. Charmingly played by Heinrich Geuser and Willi Fugmann, Fricsay's fights a good case for this slight, late period work. On grander, better-known territory, Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche dates from roughly a month after his studio recording for DG, clearly benefiting from all that time spent in the studio. Timing and phrasing are virtually identical, so there are no revelations other than both performances being punchy, playful with shattering climaxes. Fricsay is never afraid to accentuate the theatricality of these tone poems, obtaining colorful, strongly contoured playing from all sections. It's a terrific end to this collection.

The sound is mono, of course, and in-your-face-close and spotlight. I personally love that sort of "pop record" sound quality, but hi-fi fetishists won't have read this far anyway. Expect some tape hiss and chalky decay on headphones; otherwise these

performances leap out of the speaker. Generously filled as it is, Audite also point you to Fricsay's spirited version of Don Juan online, which I think is identical to that in the DG box. We Fricsay fans are being spoilt with what is commercially a historical and niche product. Like so much of his work, this disc is so bracingly modern and fresh sounding that my plea is for younger record buyers to sample this and understand that modern performance practice didn't begin with John Eliot Gardiner. There's no affected Munich tradition or sentiment: This is Richard Strauss scrubbed clean and placed under the spotlight, with only the recording technology belying the age of these radio tapes. A thrilling album.

