



Edition Ferenc Fricsay (X) – J. Brahms: Violin Concerto & Symphony No. 2

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 2010.02.01)

GRAMOPHONE

With golden strings attached

Fritz Kreisler's radiant playing – and a handful of Brahms Violin Concertos

It is surely no exaggeration to claim that, aside from the human voice, the violin, as recorded, offers the most vivid indicator of how performing styles have changed over the last hundred or so years. Sir Roger Norrington has frequently maintained that near the turn of the last century the popularity of Fritz Kreisler was pivotal, meaning Kreisler's expressive vibrato and its all-pervading influence. Whether or not you go along with Sir Roger's view, Kreisler's art is handsomely celebrated on disc, and since the advent of CD two collections have proved especially desirable, the first from RCA, the second and most recent in EMI's "Icon" series. Now Naxos, who have already treated us to numerous Kreisler CDs, are launching a "complete recordings" edition with a first volume that takes us from 1904 (78s from the Gramophone & Typewriter Company, when Kreisler was still only in his late twenties) to 1910. Aside from excerpted Bach, all the fare programmed is of the "morceau" variety, and although the piano accompaniments sound tonally miniaturised the violin itself is remarkably vibrant. Indeed, the only other violinist I know of whose tone responded so generously to the recording horn was Mischa Elman.

In 1904 the youthful Kreisler was already very much the gentleman of virtuosos and his playing as captured here is both witty and radiant, aided significantly by Ward Marston's superb transfers. Another Naxos arrival features the Italian violinist Giaconda De Vito whose 1941 Berlin recording of the Brahms Concerto under Paul van Kempen displays a keen temperament with plenty of controlled flexibility in the phrasing. The equally well transferred coupling (Mark Obert-Thom was at the desk here) is Mozart's Third Violin Concerto recorded in London in 1949 with the Royal Philharmonic under Sir Thomas Beecham, another performance notable for its strong personality though the most memorable moments come at the tranquil close of the slow movement where De Vito's quiet restatement of the opening theme has to be heard to be believed. An alternative De Vito account of the Brahms, again recorded in Berlin but in the early Fifties under Ferenc Fricsay, features superior sound and a broader take on the first movement, while the coupling is a lean, energetic and often poised account of Brahms's Second Symphony, again under Fricsay, both recordings taken from German Radio. A third recent historic Brahms Violin Concerto (1950) couldn't be more different. The violinist is Nathan Milstein whose fiery playing fits the white-hot context of Victor de Sabata's conducting. The New York Phil is pushed to its very limits: I wouldn't call it exactly the subtlest account around, nor the best recorded (an understatement, sadly), but as for visceral excitement, few other vintage versions match up. The coupling is a somewhat more reposeful

Mendelssohn Concerto under Igor Markevitch (Lucerne, 1953).

Andromeda have put together a number of recordings by Furtwängler's one-time concertmaster at the Berlin Philharmonic, Gerhard Taschner, principally concertos by Hindemith (Kammermusik No 4), Khachaturian, Fortner, Bruch (No 1), Mendelssohn and Pfitzner, and various chamber works by Schubert (Trio No 1 with Hoelscher and Giesecking, Sonatina, D384), Brahms (Trio No 1 with Hoelscher and Giesecking again), and so on. Some of the finest playing is in solo Bach, especially the great D minor Chaconne from 1943. I'd call Taschner distinguished rather than "great" in the sense that, say, David Oistrakh's playing was great. Indeed the palm recordings – especially in the finale of Schubert's Second Piano Trio (both Trios are included) where the disturbing restatement of the second movement's principle theme is like a powerful but troubling memory. And I doubt that there's a more voluptuous account in existence of Brahms's great Trio in B major (Op 8), the Oistrakh ensemble more than ever suggesting premonitions of the great Double Concerto. Both Mendelssohn Trios are included (the D minor is especially memorable) and Czech music is represented by lovingly cultivated performances of three Romantic masterpieces, Dvorak's F minor and Dumky Trios and the Smetana G minor. Repeats are plentiful and time and again one realizes anew what a gem the trio had in pianist Lev Oborin, in Schumann's D minor for example, and the Russian repertoire in particular which has rarely sounded so grandly communicative. Issues of recording quality notwithstanding – and none of the tapes fall too far below par, nor Brilliant's transfers – these versions of Tchaikovsky's Trio, Rachmaninov's Trio elegiaque, Glinka's Trio pathétique, Taneyev's Op 22 (a masterpiece still too little known) and Rimsky-Korsakov's C minor Trio (completed by Maximilian Steinberg) are uniquely idiomatic. As to classical fare, there are two Haydn trios included (Nos 43 and 44), two by Beethoven (the Ghost and Op 1 No 3) as well as a fine Triple Concerto under Alexander Orlov and, additionally, trios by Chopin, Ravel and Shebalin.

As so often with these collections, Ateş Orga provides excellent notes. Thinking of possible future Brilliant boxes, the conductor Nikolai Golovanov has to be a priority (a Rozhdestvensky collection is, I understand, imminent), and what about singers, people like Andrei Ivanov or Zara Dolukhanova? Still, one mustn't be greedy. This is a fabulous collection.