



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

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 2009.11.01)

In a ranking of the 20th century's great violinists, Gioconda de Vito (1907–1994) would probably not be among the top 10, possibly not even among the top 20. Yet record collectors, being the odd lot we are, sometimes manage to create feeding frenzies over this or that artist's recorded performances, not necessarily for their musical value, but because of their relative rarity. The reason I say this with regard to de Vito is that many, if not most of her recordings—even those that originally appeared on 78s—have been transferred to CD and are readily available at rational retail prices. Yet the irrational craze for de Vito's recordings in their original LP pressings is such, especially in Japan, that one can pay hundreds of dollars for one of her albums in mint condition on eBay—in spite of the fact that she had a very limited repertoire, never appeared in the U.S., retired at the age of 54, never to pick up a violin again, and was not critically acclaimed as one of the great virtuosos of her day, unless one gives special credence to the commendation accorded her by Mussolini. Perhaps the novelty, which is hardly a novelty nowadays, is that like her exact contemporary, Erica Morini (1904–1995), de Vito was a woman on a stage dominated by men. With players today like Julia Fischer and Hillary Hahn, to name just two, that scene has greatly changed.

De Vito never aspired to be a great international star. She was born in a small southern Italian town to a wine-making family, and for much of her life preferred home to the touring circuit. Her break came in 1948, when she made her London debut under Victor de Sabata playing the Brahms Concerto, which led to appearances with Menuhin and Stern at the Edinburgh Festival and to a number of concerts under Furtwängler. Though invited to the U.S. by Toscanini and Charles Munch, she declined. The Brahms Concerto became a de Vito specialty and her signature piece. Reportedly, she studied it for 11 years before playing it in public, and then proceeded to record it numerous times. Her first go at it on a recording was a live performance in 1941 on 78s with Paul van Kempen and the Berlin State Opera Orchestra. In another live performance from 1952, she recorded the Concerto with Furtwängler and the Turin Radio Orchestra, and again a year later with Rudolf Schwarz and London's Philharmonia. All of these recordings can be had on CD, or, if you prefer, you can shell out ridiculous sums of money to purchase them on LPs that are still circulating on Internet auction and collector sites.

De Vito's Brahms may not make a believer out of an atheist as, rumor had it, her Mendelssohn did of one listener, but this studio recording from 1951 under Ferenc Fricsay leading the RIAS Symphony Orchestra—better known today as the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin—may afford us perhaps the best portrait there is on record of the violinist's vision of this work. I say this because the recording itself is exceptionally good, with balanced, detailed sound, excellent dynamic range, and a luminescent halo that seems to surround the soloist. De Vito draws from her

instrument a pure and extremely sweet tone, and her playing remains unforced and unperturbed even in the Concerto's most technically taxing passages. Not even a heart of stone could fail to be moved by her performance or fail to acknowledge her artistry.

That said, I am not prepared to accord this top honors among Brahms Violin Concerto recordings, and here is why. Fricsay and de Vito are not of similar minds and hearts as to how this score should go. He wants to press forward; she wants to hold back. He runs a tight ship, steering a straight and steady course; she takes shore leave to sightsee at every port. His is a classically structured reading; hers is as romanticized as they come. Fricsay, of course, is too much the professional to allow the performance to become a catfight or a contest of wills. He accommodates de Vito at every turn, but one hears in the tutti passages where Fricsay would take things if he didn't have to defer to his soloist. Though I haven't heard the violinist's recording with Furtwängler, my suspicion is that he was probably a better fit for her temperamentally than was the more business-like, more closely adherent to the score Fricsay. Clearly, de Vito's many warmly received appearances with Furtwängler speak to a more closely shared musical bond.

Nothing could reinforce this observation more than Fricsay's reading of Brahms's D-Major Symphony on this disc. Also a studio recording, dating from 1953, this is one of the more forward-pressing performances I've heard. There is no rubbernecking to ogle the roadside scenery, not even the slight slowdown that many conductors take at the appearance of the first movement's second theme. But, while Fricsay may be highly disciplined, he's not matter-of-fact. One does not sense for a single moment that this is a routine run-through or that either conductor or orchestra is disengaged. Not surprising for a recording of this vintage, the first movement exposition repeat is bypassed, but in every other way, this is as modern a performance of Brahms's Second Symphony as you are likely to hear. And if the recorded sound on the Concerto was exceptionally good, the recorded sound in the Symphony is nothing short of fantastic.

In past reviews, I've held up Bruno Walter's mono studio recordings of the Brahms symphonies with the New York Philharmonic as a benchmark. Walter's Second was recorded the same year, 1953, as Fricsay's. Walter, who is by no means a slowpoke, delivers the score in 38:36. Fricsay, at 37:47, is faster still by almost a minute. But beyond tempo variances, if I had to describe a difference in interpretive approach, it would be to say that Fricsay is Walter, but without the Gemütlichkeit.

Whatever place Gioconda de Vito occupies in the history of violin playing, hers was a unique voice, and I can't imagine it being heard in better form or captured in better sound than it is here. Fricsay was also one of the 20th century's great podium masters, and it should be incumbent on every serious collector to hear him at the top of his game. Audite is to be commended for the superb job they've done in remastering and transferring this material. This release gets my strongest recommendation.