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Deutschlandfunk Kultur

Ferenc Fricsay

Richard Strauss: Burleske | Oboe Concerto
Duet concertino | Till Eulenspiegel

L. Goossens | H. Geuser | W. Fugmann | M. Weber
RIAS-Symphonie-Orchester

RIAS

Berlin, 1949-1955



Heinrich Geuser

RICHARD STRAUSS

Burleske

for Piano and Orchestra in D minor, TrV 145

Allegro vivace 20:06

Concerto

for Oboe and Small Orchestra in D major, TrV 292

I. Allegro moderato 8:17

II. Andante 8:47

III. Vivace – 4:32

Allegro 2:44

Duet concertino

for Clarinet and Bassoon with String Orchestra
and Harp in F major, TrV 293

I. Allegro moderato 5:32

II. Andante 2:20

III. Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo 8:21

Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks, Op. 28, TrV 171 14:21

Léon Goossens, oboe

Heinrich Geuser, clarinet

Willi Fugmann, bassoon

Margrit Weber, piano

RIAS-Symphonie-Orchester*

Ferenc Fricsay, conductor

*today: Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin

Experiment and Elegy Ferenc Fricsay conducts Strauss

When it comes to Ferenc Fricsay, the legendary Hungarian conductor, aficionados mostly think of his fiery Mozart interpretations, his fundamental approach to Bartók or his commitment to modern music which earned the 33-year-old sudden international fame when he conducted the world premier of Gottfried von Einem's opera *Dantons Tod* at the Salzburger Festspiele in 1947. But Fricsay and Richard Strauss? Hadn't Fricsay, being the general music director of the Bayerische Staatsoper (Bavarian State Opera) in Munich from 1956 until 1958, just been accused of not providing enough support to the city's great son, of having only once performed his works in concert, and not even a single opera? A glance at the list of existing sound documents from that time calls to attention that the number of entries under the keyword "Strauß, Johann" exceeds by far the number of entries mentioning "Strauss, Richard". There are no more than five works listed for Richard Strauss, four of which are combined on this CD, the fifth, *Don Juan*, is available online as bonus track (audite.de/95604). Yet major symphonic poems such as *Ein Heldenleben*, *Eine Alpensinfonie*, *Also sprach Zarathustra* or *Tod und Verklärung*, are not represented.

Ferenc Fricsay seems to have steered clear of the "typical" Strauss with its Wilhelminian style pathos, its late-romantic thrill of sounds and vast orchestral climaxes. Instead, he pursued the rarities, the late opuses and the chamber orchestral works, the composer's burlesque and bucolic facets. This affinity is clearly mirrored in the aesthetics of his Strauss interpretations. Fricsay's version of the frequently played *Till Eulenspiegel* for example sounds very different than one is used to hearing it – just take the beginning: The introducing phrase, often conducted in an operetta-like sentiment, has a natural flow to it, as though Fricsay was opening the story with a simple "once upon a time". What follows, however, is all but a pleasant, picturesque album. This *Till* is as rebellious and subversive as his literary model must have been, the infamous rogue from the 16th-century folk tale who antagonized the bourgeois with his mischievousness. Fricsay illuminates the score in a free and rhapsodic way with much attention to detail, while also applying unconventional tempi and a wicked sense of humour, sometimes even turning sharp and aggressive.

Was this due to his origins? Ferenc Fricsay, born on August 9th, 1914 in Budapest, shortly after the beginning of World War I, was son to a military band leader who urged the young child to learn many different instruments: violin, piano, clarinet, trombone and percussion. In addition, as a high school student, he took composition lessons from some of the most famous composers of the country: Zoltán Kodály, Béla Bartók and Ernő von Dohnányi. After his graduation from the Franz Liszt academy in Budapest, for which he conducted excerpts from Wagner's *Meistersinger* as well as a work of his own composition, Fricsay was offered the opportunity to work as répétiteur at the Budapest opera and thus to enter on the tough career path of a conductor. He refused, however, and chose to move to the garrison town of Szeged, where he led the military band at first and soon proceeded to conduct opera performances at the local theatre as well as concerts with the Szeged Philharmonic Orchestra.

Witnessing the stunning precision of his *Till Eulenspiegel*, its razor-sharp tutti lashes, the furious attacks of the wind instruments in particular, the accentuated rhythmic impulses, but also the folksy drive, the drawing power and of course the rapid culmination of events when the hero ends up at the scaffold,

all that inevitably brings to mind the military band leader Fricsay. But that is not all. Fricsay's interpretation also comes across as surprisingly modern, partly because he doesn't cast the whole symphonic poem from the same mold but instead carves out each episode and sharpens it individually – making the work feel uncomfortable and unruly, even spooky. This approach reveals the kaleidoscope-like character of Strauss's composing: it almost seems as though the passages consisted of many fragments joined together. The same essential feature of experimentalism is already manifested in the early *Burleske* for piano and orchestra, composed in 1885/86, nine years prior to *Till Eulenspiegel*: a work by the 21-year-old Strauss that reflects a bizarre sense of humour, exuberant creativity and productive restlessness.

To this day, the *Burleske* leads a shadowy existence in the concert repertoire which is largely due to its tricky piano part. Early on, Strauss's mentor Hans von Bülow, who had arranged for Strauss's first position as music director in Meiningen, complained: "A different hand position for each bar – do you expect me to spend four weeks practising such a knotty piece of music?" Therefore he passed the world premier on to Eugen d'Albert, to whom Strauss eventually dedicated the score as a symbol of appreciation. It was by chance that Ferenc Fricsay discovered his ideal performer for the *Burleske*: In January 1955, he attended a concert of the Musikkollegium Winterthur, an orchestra he wished to familiarize himself with because he was going to be conducting them on a different occasion. The soloist of the evening was the 30-year-old Swiss pianist Margrit Weber who, in addition to a Mozart concerto, performed the "knotty" piece by Strauss. Fricsay was so impressed that he promptly invited the pianist, who until then was completely unknown to the public, to play concerts in Berlin and Naples, and they went on to perform the *Burleske* many times. While there are some highly virtuosic passages that are not quite impeccable, Weber is very much in her element when it comes to the sensitively shaped rhapsodic episodes, the passages where the prevailing early style of composition is still inspired by Brahms – thus it hardly seems coincidental that Fricsay later hired the pianist to play Brahms's first piano concerto. "On the very first evening of my contact with Fricsay, I had the pleasure of getting to know one of the main character traits of this kind person," Margrit Weber recalls after his death. "He considered it his artistic and moral duty to help and support young musicians."

Needless to say, the "kind person" Fricsay was also downright feared by some of his mentees. Afterall, his meticulous working method was ruthless. Heinz Hoefs, former principle flutist with the RIAS Symphony Orchestra, remembers: "Fricsay usually began rehearsals with a run-through of a movement or a whole piece. Then, based on the impressions, he would begin the more detailed work. He was relentless and gnawingly persistent. He would work so intensively with the individual sections of the orchestra that – especially in the string sections – he sometimes even asked each desk to play by themselves, until he had achieved what his innermost idea was." Usually, these methods are not very popular among musicians: Which tutti player likes to be presented individually in front of his colleagues? But in Fricsay's case, due to the artistic results and especially due to the breathtaking development of the RIAS Symphony Orchestra, only just founded in 1946 by the US military administration, the doubts subsided and there was no protest. "I took over the orchestra in the season of '48/'49. It was in such a miserably state that it was only possible to play second- or third-rate concerts," the maestro claimed in 1960, only to make up the balance by stating, almost in the same breath, that it had meanwhile become "one of the most beautiful and skilled orchestras in Germany, alongside the Berlin Philharmonic."

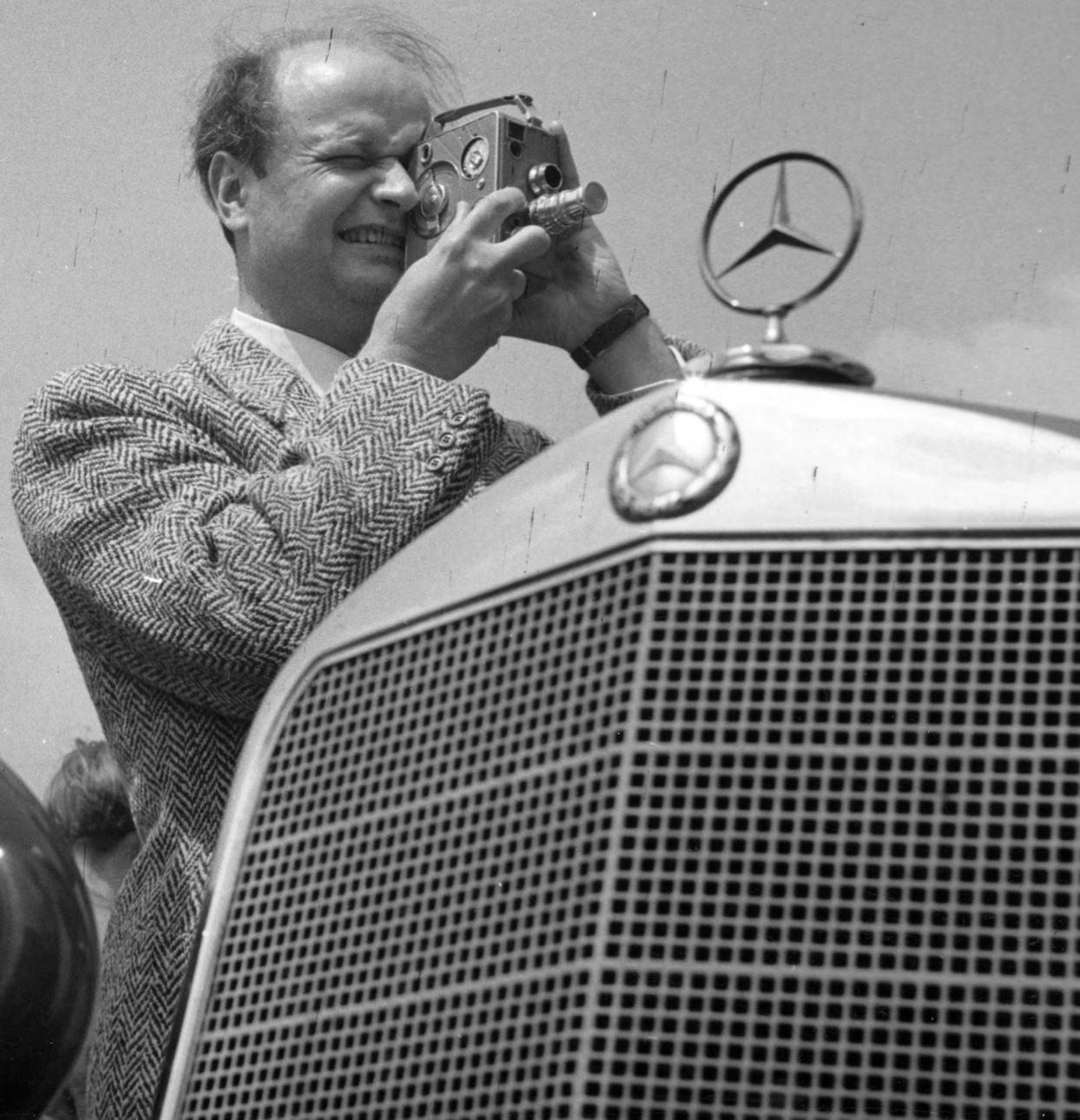
Fricsay must have performed this miracle in a very short time. On December 12th, 1948, he was standing in front of the RIAS Symphony Orchestra for the first time rehearsing Mendelssohn, when a violist who wasn't playing that project walked by and wanted to know which orchestra this was – it sounded so wonderful. The answer: his own, came as a great surprise to him: “It was as different as night and day.” The recording of Strauss's Oboe concerto that is featured on this CD, a studio recording from September 30th, 1949, marks the earliest document of the cooperation between Fricsay and the RIAS Symphony Orchestra, and is proof of the stunning level of playing culture the orchestra had meanwhile achieved: reaching from the enchanting melodiousness of the string tutti to subtly shaped wind soli and a wonderfully balanced mixture of tone colours. The individual voices are always able to be followed clearly and transparently, the sounds remains precise and distinct at all times and never becomes flat. Fricsay is especially skilled at bringing out the characteristic features of this late œuvre, brand new at the time, that Strauss had just recently composed in 1945: the bucolic atmosphere that calls to mind hot summer afternoons with meandering voices twisting like vines. Fricsay's unsentimental interpretation makes sense where some others seem like an over-elaborate tapestry: “Don't just play notes, sing!” he taught the musicians over and over again.

For the solo part of the oboe concerto, he had invited the Englishman Léon Goossens, one of the foremost oboists of the time who had performed the concerto's British premier at the BBC Proms in 1946 and had made the first recording of it two years later with the London Philharmonia Orchestra. However, Fricsay's ambitious goal was for the orchestra members themselves to soon take over extensive solo parts. Since the RIAS Symphony Orchestra had gained a reputation of excellence during the era of his leadership, there were many fantastic players from the city's eastern sector who applied for vacant positions, among them the clarinetist Heinrich Geuser and the bassoon player Willi Fugmann, both previous members of the Berlin State Opera. In April 1953, Fricsay, together with these two principle wind players, presented Strauss's *Duet concertino* for clarinet, bassoon, string orchestra and harp, the composer's last purely instrumental work which he completed in December of 1947, at age 83, not even two years before his death. This work, too, shows the specific qualities of his late style, with the never-ending, indulgent melodies and his love for pure, beautiful sound, but also with a certain retrospect. In the Concertino, not only do the two soloists interact with the orchestra, but the strings are also subdivided into soli and tutti sections in a similar way as in a concerto grosso. For Fricsay, this was an opportunity to expose the finesse of his matured ensemble as if under a burning glass, and to substantiate his reputation as brilliant orchestra educator. Still, he was far more than a drilling disciplinarian: Ferenc Fricsay was continuously in search of the musical truth. And his Strauss recordings are proof of that.

Susanne Stähr

Translation: Rebecca Beyer

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recording date / location:

Till Eulenspiegel: February 11, 1952, Titania-Palast (live)

Burleske: May 31, 1955, Hochschule für Musik (live)

Oboe Concerto: September 30, 1949, Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin-Dahlem

Duet concertino: April 20, 1953, Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin-Dahlem

recording producer:

Wolfgang Lohse (Oboe Concerto / Till Eulenspiegel)

Martin Fouqué (Duet concertino / Burleske)

recording engineer:

Peter Burkowitz (Oboe Concerto / Till Eulenspiegel)

Heinz Opitz (Duet concertino / Burleske)

 Deutschlandfunk Kultur

Eine Aufnahme von RIAS Berlin (lizenziert durch Deutschlandradio)

recording: 1949 - 1955 Deutschlandradio

research: Rüdiger Albrecht

remastering: Ludger Böckenhoff, 2018

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art direction and design: AB-Design

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e-mail: info@audite.de

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Veranstaltende Abteilung Musik	Schallaufnahme	Datum 29.9.49	Auftrag Nr. 25-663
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Titel: Strauss: Oboenkonzert Rias-Sinf.Orch., Dir.: Friesay Solist: Goossens, London	Veränderung und Wiedergabe Dauer der Aufnahme
Mikro-Ort: Kirche Thielplatz	

Aufnahme

	Datum	Zeit	in Schallaufnahme	auf Band bzw. Platte	Ton. Ing. Name
Probe o. T.					
Probe m. T.					
Aufnahme	30.9.49	9.30-12.30	Kirche	Band	<i>[Handwritten Signature]</i>
Aufnahme					
Mitschnitt					

Wiedergabe

Aufnahme

Mitschnitt

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Wiedergabe

Datum	Zeit	in Schall- aufnahme	Zweck	von Band bzw. Platte Nr.	Erledigt Technik Name

Nicht sendefertig

Ton. Techn.:

Klatzky

Datum:

30.9.

Bandzahl:

2

Sendefertig

Ton. Techn.:

J. Penzel

Datum:

1.10.

Aufnahmeleiter:

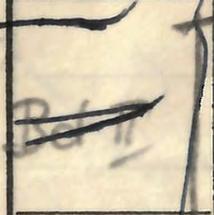
Lohr

Bandzahl:

2

Dauer der fertigen Sendung

23 Min. *22* Sek.

Lfd. Nr.	Inhaltsangabe	Dauer	bei Hz. Masch. l. r.
	Richard Strauß:		r. K8 50Hz
	Konzert für Oboe u. Kleines Orchester		
	(1945)		
Bsp 	Allegro moderato —		
Bsp 	Andante —		
	Vivace — Allegro	} 23'22	

Allegro

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Solist: Léon Boassens - Oboe

Bemerkungen:
(jede Änderung eintragen)

Ton. Techn.:

klb

Datum:

30.9.

Aufnahmeleiter:

Léon