



**Edition Ferenc Fricsay (IV) – P. I.
Tchaikovsky: Piano Concerto No. 2 & F.
Liszt: Piano Concerto No. 1**

aud 95.499

EAN: 4022143954992



www.musicweb-international.com (Rob Maynard - 20.11.2008)



There are a few things about this disc that might well strike you as a little strange.

Firstly, its positioning within this Edition Ferenc Fricsay seems bemusing, to say the least. After all, we're only at the fourth volume and yet already the conductor who's the supposed focus is taking not the central role but that of accompanist. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but you might well have assumed that the Audite marketing team would want to be establishing Fricsay's musical credentials with core orchestral repertoire in the earliest issues of a continuing series.

Secondly, the sound, though actually extremely clear and bright for its age, may strike some listeners as a little odd in the Tchaikovsky. If you're old enough to recall the ubiquitous domestic record players of the 1950s or 1960s, usually made by Bush or Fidelity, you'll remember that they had only two controls over the quality of the sound – a dial marked "bass" and another marked "treble". In this G major concerto recording the sound is very reminiscent of those old LPs you played with "treble" turned right up and "bass" turned right down, resulting in rather screechy violins. Personally, I quite like it that way – and, after playing this CD a few times, you'll certainly get used to it – but it will sound decidedly strange at first to anyone who's only familiar with high quality modern recordings with a wide and realistic tonal range.

The third thing that will seem odd to some listeners is the Tchaikovsky concerto's overall running time of only just over 35 minutes, compared to the 44 or 45 minutes that we might expect. That's because nowadays we usually hear the full uncut version of the andante non troppo slow movement that clocks in at about 15 or 16 minutes, while here [and also in his later recording with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Richard Kraus, now available in Deutsche Grammophon's The Originals series] Cherkassky opts for the version drastically edited by Tchaikovsky's pupil Alexander Siloti. Slashing the length of the slow movement by roughly half, Siloti's cuts create a completely different balance both within the movement itself and in the concerto as a whole.

So, parking those points to one side, what did I make of this CD? Well, especially in the case of the Tchaikovsky, I enjoyed it immensely. Looking at my notes, I see that the words I used most to describe the first movement were propulsive and powerful, with Cherkassky's very obvious disinclination to linger reflected in the overall timing of 19:53. That's sprightlier than any other account on my shelves - Gary Graffman (20:50), Emil Gilels (21:03), Igor Zhukov (21:08), Sylvia Kersenbaum (21:34) and Werner Haas (21:48), never mind the plodding "unabridged original version" recorded by Andrej Hoteev that comes in at a staggering 26:40. Even Cherkassky's own later recording with Kraus, at 20:00, is marginally slower than this one.

This opening movement fully lives up to its allegro brillante designation. The orchestral sound is very well balanced – both within the RIAS orchestra's own ranks, as we might expect from well-known orchestra trainer Fricssay, and vis-à-vis the soloist. Moreover, the dialogue between piano and orchestra is very well maintained, with musical phrases and their responses tossed between them most engagingly. Both Cherkassky and Fricssay employ a notably wide dynamic range, but even in the quieter, more reflective passages - where Cherkassky frequently plays with especial delicacy and sensitivity - the strong propulsive thrust is maintained, resulting in a near-ideal combination of ruminative introspection with rhythmic vitality and carefully controlled power.

Clever dynamic control and characteristic touches of rubato are well to the fore in the slow movement and make it clear that Cherkassky has considered the significance of each individual note within a musical phrase with some care. The violin and cello solos (neither player is named) are beautifully played and a real plus, even in Siloti's truncated version, but are a little more sonically recessed than we are used to in today's uncut recordings which naturally accord them a higher profile. In yet another instance of his great skill, Fricssay carefully controls the orchestra's contribution at the movement's conclusion rather than just rounding things off in a routine way: as a result, you really do listen to it.

The strong propulsive thrust is back with us at the opening of the finale and, while Cherkassky's delicacy and lightness of touch are still apparent in the piano's skittering opening phrases, the positivity of the partnership with Fricssay is again evident in some imaginative phrasing in the dialogue between piano and orchestra. By this time, in fact, one has come to appreciate the far stronger than usual contribution that the very skilled RIAS (Rundfunk im Amerikanischen Sektor or Broadcasting in the American Sector) Orchestra and its conductor have made to the overall success of this performance – so perhaps its high-profile placing in the Edition Ferenc Fricssay can be justified after all.

Unfortunately, the Liszt recording - with a live and occasionally chesty audience - did not grip my interest to the same extent. In part, that reflects a concert hall acoustic that is far less sharp and clear. That said, listeners who habitually preferred to turn up the "bass" control on those old Bush record players may enjoy it more than I did. The balance between soloist and orchestra is also less carefully managed than in the Tchaikovsky studio recording. Perfectly acceptable for long stretches, it deteriorates on occasion when Cherkassky at full power can drown out some important orchestral detail.

Cherkassky's approach to the Liszt concerto is notably less propulsive and even dreamier than in the Tchaikovsky. That is especially apparent at the opening of both the initial allegro maestoso and the succeeding quasi adagio where his finely controlled playing is exceptionally beautiful. There are some moments of genuine excitement where you would expect them - the conclusion of the allegro animato sees soloist and conductor upping both tempo and volume to good effect – but, for me, the overall combination of comparatively dull sound and a not so striking performance relegates this recording to the status of a filler ... and, given the CD's total timing of 53:53, a rather short one at that.

If, however, the Tchaikovsky is your main point of interest – and if you are prepared to accept the Siloti butchery – then I think that, like me, you'll enjoy this disc a great deal.