



Joseph Haydn: Symphony No. 44 & No. 98

aud 95.584

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[Fanfare](#) (James H. North - 2008.07.01)

Fricsay (1914–1963) struck me as the Dinu Lipatti of conductors: once you heard his performance of a work, there seemed no other possible way to play it. A student of Bartók at the Budapest Academy, he became an unmatched interpreter of his teacher's music; his championship of Bartók in the late 1940s and 1950s was a major force in bringing the composer international recognition as one of the masters. Most of Fricsay's Bartók recordings came just before the stereo era, yet they never pale beside newer ones. His Concerto for Orchestra remains the ideal version even today, matched only by Reiner's account from Chicago, and that only because of its spectacular stereo sound. Fricsay's other specialty was Mozart: his *Entführung* and *Zauberflöte*, both with Stader and Streich, are treasures. No one in Germany played much Haydn in the first half of the 20th century, yet Fricsay shows an understanding and taste rare for the day. Robbins Landon and Scherchen were bringing Haydn to Vienna, but only for recordings; local audiences paid little attention.

Despite some drawbacks—a mediocre orchestra and merely adequate monaural sound—these are fine Haydn performances. Fricsay was a superb orchestra builder, raising a new radio orchestra called RIAS (Radio in the American Sector, of divided Berlin) to the near equal of that city's great Philharmonic. Other postwar radio startups, such as this WDR Symphony Orchestra of Cologne, were less fortunate; as a guest conductor, Fricsay had to make do with what he found. His "Trauer" is dark and serious, as befits Haydn's minor keys. The opening *Allegro con brio* is less hectic than Scherchen's inspired performance, but no less impassioned. The *Menuet* is pure Fricsay, formal yet graceful, characteristics of most of his performances. The *Adagio* avoids excess sentiment and shortchanges repeats but seems just right anyway—the old Fricsay magic; and a rapid *Presto* finale works despite taxing the WDR strings. There are a few old-fashioned touches (this was 1953), notably the pulling back of tempo for final chords in most codas, but this remains one of the finest accounts of the "Trauer," Fricsay's dignity a complement to Scherchen's passion.

The B♭ Symphony has considerable sparkle and plenty of power but is short on humor; this was more a product of the time (1952) than of the conductor, whose Mozart and Bartók could smile beatifically. Also symptomatic of the era is a lack of repeats; Fricsay does not take those in either sonata-form movement. He varies the playing in the *Menuet* repeats, giving soloists more leeway the second and third times. He does give full value to Haydn's tenuto marks and rests at a time when conductors seemed embarrassed by delay and silence. Oddly, the tacet measure near the end of the finale (four bars before the *moderato*) is ignored; perhaps this is an editing error. The coda has the violin solo but no cembalo. Only the edition of the score and the orchestra's limitations—sloppy string articulation, a tinny (when audible) oboe, and ugly trumpets—keep this from being a competitive recording of

the B♭ Symphony.

Warts and all, I'm delighted to have this sample of Fricsay's Haydn.

