



Edition Ferenc Fricsay (V) – J. Strauss: Die Fledermaus

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Fanfare (Christopher Williams - 2009.07.01)

This radio take from 1949 brings us a Fledermaus for the ages. It is easy to forget the large number of significant recordings left by the great Hungarian conductor Ferenc Fricsay, who has become one of the forgotten, underestimated figures of his generation. But this recording is something new and significant. Never released on vinyl, it is also a document of a troubled time, the third operatic project of the young, 35-year-old conductor's contract with the fledgling RIAS Symphony Orchestra, broadcast in Berlin during the blockade. Many of the numbers are cut or abridged for the purposes of the broadcast, but the essence of the work carries through with full resplendence.

The recording launches with a rhythmically crisp and briskly articulated overture, in which the slow sections are dramatically and dreamily set apart from the faster passages. Waltz melodies are consistently pointed with an anticipated second beat, marking fluent familiarity with Viennese performance practice. The first act bounces from strength to strength, beginning with Helmut Krebs, bell-toned, flexible, and vain tenor, a vocal match for Rita Streich's pert and often stratospheric Adele. Particularly striking are the mock tragedy and the giddy acceleration of the trio "So muss allein ich bleiben" and the grotesque distortions by the instrumental soloists to undercut the pomp of Eisenstein's march off to jail.

Act II opens at breakneck pace, chorus spitting out the text with staccato clarity. Anneliese Müller brings to Orlofsky a clear focus and purity of tone, with ringing chest voice, especially in "Chacun à son gout." This model of elocution is followed by one of the most finely modulated renditions of Adele's laughing song I have ever heard, Streich's tight, warbly, and flutelike vibrato and matinee-idol presence recalling a long-vanished golden age of operetta singing. She finds her foil, naturally, in the rich-voiced but equally pert Rosalinde of Anny Schlemm, whose flexible and richly colored "Csárdas" compares with the best on disc. The velvet toned Herbert Brauer as Falke and ringing baritone of Peter Anders's Eisenstein are also models of their kind. Incredibly, the "Brüderlein/Schwesterlein" ensemble that follows the string of famous act-II solo numbers seems to cap them all in a magically suspended animation, to which the lovingly shaped "gala" Blue Danube waltz that follows acts as a reviving antidote.

Throughout, the shaping power of Fricsay's baton can be sensed, building ensembles with surprising yet inevitable-seeming crescendos and subtle tempo gradations. Though it errs, when it errs, on the fast side, this is work that compares favorably and impressively with the classic recordings by Karajan and Carlos Kleiber.

Sound quality is remarkably crisp and clear for a 1949 monaural recording; equally

crisp is the diction of all the singers, preternaturally so. This is Strauss singing and playing at the highest, most idiomatic level. No libretto is included, but this should offer no obstacles for devotees of this warhorse. Urgently recommended for its obvious historical and performance values. Despite the plethora of classic recordings of the Waltz King's greatest warhorse, I will still turn to this document frequently for its ideal representations of the work's many memorable moments. In a way, I envy that 1949 radio audience who first heard the broadcast.

