



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

aud 95.499

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[Fanfare](#) (Lynn René Bayley - 2009.05.01)

Pairing Romantic pianist Cherkassky and post-modern conductor Fricsay doesn't even seem, on paper, like a good idea, let alone a recipe for success. As a pupil of Josef Hoffman and a representative of an older school that believed in impromptu changes to one's performance approach, Cherkassky rode for 70 years on a wing and a prayer, while Fricsay came from the school of rehearse-exactly-as-you-play. Moreover, Cherkassky's rhythmic and emotional freedom also seemed at odds with Fricsay's insistence on written tempos and rhythms.

The reason Deutsche Grammophon didn't release the 1951 recording of the Tchaikovsky appears to be that someone at the label was disappointed by the sound of the orchestra. Although Fricsay was given carte blanche by DG to build his own orchestra, most of the best musicians were already employed by established orchestras of his time. Thus the RIAS forces had tonal weaknesses, though not technical ones, most evident in the harsh, strident, and somewhat thin string and wind tone (though the concertmaster, probably Fritz Görlach, sounds very sweet in an old Viennese way in the second movement), whereas the brass and percussion sections were powerful and superb. But the label had Cherkassky re-record the concerto a few months later with the Berlin Philharmonic under the solid but pedestrian Leopold Ludwig, and this was the version released. Cherkassky's most famous and widely distributed recording, however, is the 1979 stereo one with Walter Susskind and the Cincinnati Symphony (Vox 7210). I attended one of the actual concerts that Cherkassky gave with Susskind of this concerto, almost unbearably exciting and kinetic, but the studio recording made a week later is a limp dishrag. None of it was played or conducted badly, but it had no coherence or frisson. Yet, despite the stylistic clashes noted above, this previously unreleased performance with Fricsay has everything right.

The Tchaikovsky Second is not as tightly structured as the more famous First Concerto, but more in the form of a rhapsody. Despite a certain amount of thematic development, the score consists of taut dramatic passages for orchestra, or soloist and orchestra, interspersed with a plethora of cadenzas. Fricsay and Cherkassky obviously respected each other well enough to compromise, the pianist reining in his rhythmic impulses in tutti passages and the conductor allowing Cherkassky complete rhythmic and coloristic freedom in the cadenzas. And it works. The only other performance of this somewhat odd concerto I've heard that comes close to making as much sense is the almost equally rare recording by Noel Mewton-Wood with Walter Goehr and the "Winterthur" Symphony (actually a pick-up band of Concertgebouw musicians) made a year after this one (Pristine Classical). This performance is even finer, largely because of Fricsay. Though, like most Hungarian conductors, he usually insisted on strict tempos, even stricter and less imbued with rubato than conductors such as Erich Kleiber or Toscanini, Fricsay was nothing if not

a passionate musician, thus the majority of his recordings and performances hold more interest than the average (but not the only) recordings of Reiner, Szell, or Solti.

The sound quality of the Tchaikovsky is stunning for its time. Despite the technical limitations of the RIAS orchestra noted above, the performance is so good that I nearly expected to hear an audience erupt in frenzied applause at the end. Like Furtwängler, Toscanini, Munch, and a few others, Fricsay was one of those conductors who could create the excitement of a live performance in the studio. Listen to the climaxes even in the first movement of the Tchaikovsky: the performance fairly jumps out at you with the energy of a tiger.

Both the orchestra and the tempos sound more relaxed and less strident in the Liszt concerto. We have become so used to thinking of Franz Liszt as a keyboard demon that we tend to forget that he himself favored genial, relaxed tempos for much of his music, being one of those Hungarians who was probably more Romantic than Classical in approach. (We should also recall that he promoted the music of Berlioz and Wagner.) I was even more impressed with the sound quality of this live broadcast than with the studio recording that preceded it. Even the triangle in the soft passages is clearly reproduced, and the warmer acoustic of the Titania-Palast, Berlin, does wonders in minimizing the harshness of the RIAS strings and winds. I agree wholeheartedly with engineer Ludger Böckenhoff's remark in the booklet that "The remastering—professionally competent and sensitively applied—also uncovers previously hidden details of the interpretations." For aficionados of Fricsay, Cherkassky, and/or these works, then, this new release is very highly recommended.