



Giuseppe Verdi: Rigoletto

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Fanfare (Bart Verhaeghe - 2008.09.01)

When Ferenc Fricsay died of cancer in early 1963, the world had not yet realized what a magnificent musician it had lost. As one of the most successful conductors of his age, he had made a meteoric rise to the top in a very short time. Although his recording career was relatively short, most of his recordings are still highly appreciated by today's public. Was it his unstoppable perfectionism in the way he worked with his orchestra and soloists? Or was it rather his modernism and freshness that made his work so valuable?

Audite is now releasing a series of radio recordings made during his period as principle conductor of the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra (formerly known as the Radio in the American Sector Orchestra). This particular recording of Verdi's *Rigoletto* was made during the 1950 season—it's one of the rare occasions where we can hear Fricsay conduct Italian repertoire, or rather Italian music, for the entire opera is sung in German. In those days, opera houses were accustomed to stage their productions entirely in their own mother tongue. Since today we're not used to this kind of practice, it takes effort to set all modern conventions aside and to go back in time.

The first thing that struck me was the high level of singing. We know that Fricsay always took great care that his cast always gave him trust and professionalism. The singers he assembled for the occasion do an excellent job. In addition, the RIAS Chamber Choir sings with transparency and accuracy. The orchestral playing is strikingly precise, although the woodwinds suffer from intonation problems. The relatively poor sound quality is a bit of a setback here; it sounds dry and far away. Fricsay leads the orchestra and singers with fire; phrases are constructed in a logical way, without losing the attention for a second.

Maria Callas's recording on EMI remains my personal favorite for *Rigoletto*. She performed a great Gilda, and together with a superb Giuseppe di Stefano as the Duke and Tito Gobbi as *Rigoletto* a trio for the ages was formed. Tulio Serafin's fiery conducting was another reason why this remains a legendary recording.

Audite probably won't break selling records with this release, but if you don't mind hearing German when it's supposed to be Italian, give this one a listen.