



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky & Robert Schumann: Symphony No. 5 & Piano Concerto

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Fanfare (Tom Godell - 2008.03.01)

A talented Hungarian conductor who died young and a legendary French pianist who lived long past his prime combine, in concert, for one of the least satisfying recordings I have ever encountered.

Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony begins in promising fashion with an exceptionally slow and dark-hued introduction. The Allegro begins at a reasonable clip, but Fricstay soon slams the pedal to the metal. His breakneck pace leaves little, if any room for subtlety or expression. When he does finally slow down a bit at the beginning of the recapitulation, the result sounds hopelessly stiff and stodgy. The second movement is treated in similar fashion. Once past the glacially paced opening bars, Fricstay breezes through the remainder of the movement as if he can't wait to get it over with. The Scherzo is icy, and the finale lacks any discernable Russian flavor or passion. Tempos here are so fast that the orchestra simply can't stay together. The sound of the broadcast tape is harsh and gritty with metallic strings, boxy tuttis, and a dynamic range that runs the gamut from mezzo forte to forte and back.

In the 1920s, Alfred Cortot made some of the finest trio recordings ever with his erstwhile friends Pablo Casals and Jacques Thibaud. With orchestra he made spirited recordings of the Saint-Saëns Fourth Concerto and Franck's Symphonic Variations. He was also one of the most penetrating and sensitive interpreters of the solo music of Robert Schumann. Nonetheless, Cortot was hardly the greatest keyboard technician. In his early years, though, his miscues rarely disrupted the flow of the music or the power of his expression. Alas, that is not the case here.

By the time this concert took place, Cortot's technique was almost completely gone. There are fleeting moments when he effectively expresses the poetry inherent in the music, but whenever bravura showmanship and heroism are required, Cortot simply cannot muster the necessary energy or power. His interpretation lacks any sense of purpose or direction, and wrong notes are as common as ants at a Memorial Day picnic. More than once I was reminded of the spectacle of David Helfgott's embarrassing concerts. Fricstay, to his credit, desperately tries to hold up his end of the bargain, but even his best efforts cannot save this misbegotten travesty. The microphone seems to have been placed directly under the piano, ensuring that we don't miss a single flaw in Cortot's miserable performance.