

Ferenc Fricsay

Jon Tolansky profiles a Conductor Whose Vividly Characterful Interpretations of Sparkling Detail Led to a Prolific Recording Career That Was Tragically Cut Short at the Age of Just 48

"Fricsay was probably the greatest conductor I ever played with. He made a tremendous impression on all of us in just two concerts."

Peter Poole played in the violin section of the London Philharmonic Orchestra when the Hungarian conductor Ferenc Fricsay was a guest in the first week of December 1961. He had been especially thrilled to take part in performances with conductors of the stature of Pierre Monteux, Charles Munch and Paul Kletzki, but, as he told me for this article, 'Fricsay stood out from all of them. The rehearsals and concerts I played with him were mesmerizing, and I don't ever recall hearing playing of such intensity, color and perfectly balanced precision.'

Those concerts were in fact to be Ferenc Fricsay's final appearances. He had already been afflicted with cancer for many years, and that week, in great pain, he had superhumanly willed himself to energize and inspire the LPO. 'He could only speak in a whisper, but he magnetized everyone and they hung on every word he said,' remembers Poole. 'HI never forget the hushed sound he obtained in the slow movement of Bartok's Second Piano Concerto, which we were performing with Géza Anda. It was astonishing, and actually terrifying to play. I don't recall anyone before or since who created such a spell-bindingly intense pianissimo from an orchestra.'

Fourteen months later Fricsay was dead at just 48 years old--a terrible loss when he had unquestionably already attained high stature as a relatively young man in his profession--a profession that, in those days, was dominated much more by veterans than it is nowadays. The substantial demand for his music-making, personified by performances of vivid characterization with sparkling detail, striking contrasts of color, vital rhythmic energy and richly expressive phrasing, had made him a prolific recording artist. Collectors of the day particularly highly prized their luxuriously packaged DG discs of him in a very wide range of music--Bartok, Beethoven, Blacher, Brahms, Falla, Franck, Hartmann, Honegger, Liebermann, Mahler, Martin, Mozart, Orff, Ravel, Smetana, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Verdi: just some of the composers on the list. The majority of the recordings were with the ensemble that he had worked meticulously hard to mold into an ensemble of outstanding response, homogeneity and tone color, the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra (formerly the Berlin RIAS Orchestra). But, being a passionate opera lover, there were also important and highly theatrical opera recordings: complete (*Don Giovanni* and *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, for instance) and excerpts (such as *Fidelio*). In Germany he had become a stellar figure in the opera house, with music directorships in Berlin and Munich, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau told me that Fricsay was both a mentor and an inspiration to him at the outset of his operatic career.

But--I wonder how many people reading this are familiar with Fricsay's art? DG has reissued a large number of his recordings over the years, yet the conductor is a figure from the distant past now, even to people of my generation who eagerly used to buy his recordings when they first appeared. Perhaps this was because his appearances outside Europe were not too frequent; even among older people his name does not seem to have survived well outside the realms of connoisseurs. But hopefully this perception will be redressed in this 100th anniversary year of his birth. DG is proud of its Fricsay catalogue and the label is enterprisingly releasing in two instalments the entire DG heritage, including some rarely available material. ...