



YSL 607 T
Fritz Reiner Vol. 1

“The two major works on this disc are new additions to the Reiner discography, and the third (the IRMELIN prelude) was issued previously only by the Chicago Symphony, available for fund-raising purposes. Clearly the addition of works as important as FRANCESCA DA RIMINI and Schubert’s ‘Great’ C Major Symphony to the available recordings by one of the most important conductors of the 20th century is an event of significance, and we should be grateful to St. Laurent Studio, and to Norbeck, Peters & Ford, the label’s sales outlet (www.norpete.com) for this release.

Importance is one thing, but the more important issue for most of us, is whether the disc provides musical satisfaction. It does. If you are a collector who only look for ‘the best’ recording of any work, this release is probably not for you. But if you recognize that there can be no single ‘best’ interpretation of any piece of music, and you want to hear the very personal take on these works by a conductor of unquestioned eminence, then this disc is virtually self-recommending.

The Delius prelude will surprise many, because Fritz Reiner was not known as a conductor whose strongest attributes included gentle lyricism. In fact, he could always produce such an effect (listen to the slow sections of his Strauss tone poems), and he was also respected for the great care he took with issues of instrumental balance and color. The result in this IRMELIN excerpt is a performance that flows beautifully, with just a hint more rhythmic spine than many.

At 20:58, Reiner’s FRANCESCA DA RIMINI is the third fastest among the 15 in my collection. Only Albert Coates and John Barbirolli, recorded in 1924 and 1938 respectively, are faster. The remaining recordings begin at 23:04 (Igor Markevitch’s Philips effort) and extend to 27:42 (Bernstein’s 1989 DG recording). Reiner’s vast

operatic experience shows in the flexibility and theatricality of this performance, and despite the fast tempos, nothing sounds rushed. The crisp playing of the orchestra (somewhat reduced in size because of space the limitations of the WGN-TV studio) is almost jaw-dropping. The lyrical interludes are supple and lovely. The dry TV sound, too closely miked, is a drawback, although for a first choice I recommend Markevitch's hair-raising DG recording with the Lamoureux Concerts Orchestra, one of that conductor's finest recorded performances. Still, Reiner's reading is very dramatic and sufficiently different to be of interest.

Most importantly, there is Schubert's Ninth Symphony, a staple of the repertoire that Reiner never recorded for RCA. This performance had languished in the CSO Archives since 1957, when it was broadcast live on WBAI radio in New York. The CSO trustees permitted live broadcasts of the 1957–58 season on that station but refused to permit them in Chicago for fear it would hurt attendance. A special phone line was set up from city to city to enable these transmissions. Subsequently, much of the material was issued by the CSO either in their centennial box set of 12 CDs, their turn-of-the-millennium set of 10 CDs, or as individual releases in conjunction with a fund-raising radio marathon produced on WFMT.

Full acknowledgement: during those years I was President of the CSO and oversaw those releases. I put together a committee that included Norman Pellegrini and Don Tait from WFMT, Gerald Stein (a very knowledgeable music lover in Chicago), Martha Gilmer the CSO's Artistic Administrator, and Gary Stucka (a CSO cellist with a passion for historic recordings), and we went through the recorded archives each year to determine which performances we would release. This Schubert Ninth was never chosen for one very specific technical reason: a complete drop-out to silence from 9:01 to 9:04 in the second movement. We felt that it was jarring, and we always had something else we preferred. There is also a second problem in the original, a drop in volume at 7:08 in the third movement, after which the volume slowly fades back up until it reaches the correct level again at about

7:50. It is worth noting that Norbeck, Peters & Ford makes a point of mentioning these flaws in their listing.

But now that virtually every note of Reiner's CSO career has been released in one form or another, one is grateful to St. Laurent for making this Schubert Ninth available, warts and all. The orchestral playing is glorious, proving that the CSO was performing at the highest international level during the middle of Reiner's tenure. First oboe Ray Still is uniquely beautiful in the slow movement, and the orchestra's overall energy and precision are qualities that provoke admiration still. Reiner was famous for rarely smiling (the photo on the back of the insert makes that clear), and one can imagine a Schubert 'Great' with more geniality and warmth. This is Schubert given with the strength and gravitas that one would apply to Beethoven. There is, however, nothing wrong-headed about such an approach, especially when the performance offers this remarkable degree of concentration and commitment. One interpretive oddity is the extremely slow tempo Reiner takes for the Trio section of the third movement, but he makes it work as dramatic contrast. The finale is rendered with unusual thrust and intensity.

St. Laurent Studio's usual high level of sound restoration is in evidence here. The rich, warm sound of the old Orchestra Hall, extremely well captured by the original engineer's mike placement, is faithfully reproduced in the Schubert. The dry WGN-TV studio sound is given as much warmth as possible. For the many fans of Fritz Reiner, this release is of enormous importance."

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE