

FRITZ REINER
David C F Wright, DMus

I have no hesitation in saying that Fritz Reiner was one of the greatest conductors of all time, if not the greatest.

He had the ability to always provide the right tempi; he brought out the best in his orchestras although some of his players called him a martinet and a very rude man; his performances revealed detail that you will not find in any other performances; his performers were always vital and never commonplace; unlike some conductors, who are full of themselves, such as Barbirolli, Solti and Rattle, Reiner was a modest man and faithful to each score. He was a conductor in the highest league and, in the view of many, unsurpassed.



That Reiner could be rude and difficult with orchestral members must be offset with accounts of how members of the orchestras were rude to him. There is the famous story of a trumpeter who took out a telescope and focused on Reiner to see if he was beating time or doing anything. Reiner sacked him and rightly so.

Members of orchestras would complain that he was not really an American and they also complained that Toscanini was in New York and then it was Barbirolli who was positively hated and with just cause.

Famous soloists were proud to work with him. These include the violinist Jascha Heifetz, the pianist Vladimir Horowitz, although as a pianist he was often wayward, and countless singers such as Rise Stevens, Lily Pons and Wolfgang Windgassen. Other stars with whom he worked were Emil Gilels, Van Cliburn. William Kapell, Leonid Kogan. Menuhin. Rosalind Elias, Leontyne Price, Astrid Varnay, Kirsten Flagstad, Lisa della Casa, Ljuba Welitsch, Maureen Forrester, Richard Lewis, Guiseppe di Stefano and Gottlieb Frick.

There is no doubt that Reiner was the finest conductor of Bartok and Richard Strauss, to name but two composers. He excelled in opera from Wagner's masterpiece Tristan and Isolde to Richard Strauss lightweight but hugely enjoyable Der Rosenkavalier.

Sadly, he did occasionally work with and record with some inferior orchestras, particularly one in Vienna in some overtures by Rossini, and was persuaded to conduct some waltzes by Johann Strauss.

Because he was such a top flight musician, other musicians were jealous of him and spoke ill-advisedly of him. Solti was objectionable about Reiner, and when he took over the Chicago Symphony Orchestra he told the orchestra that Reiner was hopeless and that it was left to him (Solti) to make the orchestra great. This was in keeping with Solti's unpleasant character. Karajan was so envious of Reiner that he verbally abused him but, again, that was Karajan's objectionable character as well. He was an arrogant narcissistic man, a man who was never wrong, a supporter of Hitler and a Nazi. But, that aside, how Karajan treated his soloists was appalling and indefensible.

For all the negative things said about Reiner, he never promoted himself. He was disliked for his aggressive manner and his wanting absolute precision from his orchestras. He had an icy relationship with the Press who tried to sabotage his career and who wrote scandalously about his private life and his three marriages, his three daughters and that one who was born out of wedlock!

Frederick Martin Reiner was born on 19 December 1888 in Budapest to a Jewish family that was decidedly secular. He was a brilliant pianist and gave his first concert at the age of nine playing Mozart's Piano Concerto no 26 in D, known as the Coronation. His parents were not in favour of a music career and it was only after his father's death that Fritz took to serious study. His first subject was to be law but he entered the Franz Liszt Academy in 1904, although he had made visits earlier, where he studied the piano and

composition. One of his teachers was the young Bela Bartok. The Franz Liszt Academy was also known as the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music.

Reiner had engagements with the Budapest Opera (1911-1914) and the Dresden Opera (1914-1922) where he met and worked with Richard Strauss.

He moved to the USA at the age of 33 to become the conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra where he remained until 1931. In 1928 he became an American citizen and that same year began teaching at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. His pupils included Lukas Foss and Leonard Bernstein.

From 1938 to 1948 he was the conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and recorded with them for Columbia Records.

In 1947, he appeared in the film Carnegie Hall with Heifetz in Tschakovsky's Violin Concerto

His next position was with the Metropolitan Opera producing Salome in 1949 with Ljuba Welitsch, the American premiere of Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress in 1951 and Carmen with Rise Stevens in 1952.

He became the music director of the Chicago Symphony orchestra in 1953 and recorded with them for RCA Victor. The following year saw his legendary recording of Richard Strauss's Ein Heldenleben a performance that has never been equalled let alone surpassed. His recordings of Rachmaninov's works for piano and orchestra with the superb William Kapell are nothing short of sensational as is his performance of Bartok's Concerto for Orchestra. His performance of Don Juan by Richard Strauss has the most gorgeous sound and is thrilling! And if you are fed up with 'adequate' performances, listen and marvel at his performance of Dvorak's Carnival Overture. You will not hear it played better!

His last concert with the Chicago SO was in the Spring of 1963.

He visited Europe and gave a thrilling performance of Brahms's Symphony no. 4 in E minor with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London's Kingsway Hall.

He was a National Patron of Delta Omicron, a fraternity for musicians.



He was a perfectionist and a workaholic. He suffered a heart attack in October 1960 and his health went into further decline. He died in New York City on 15 November 1963.

As well as being a very great conductor, he was a modest and unassuming man. He did not act as if he was a celebrity or a star as Karajan did. He was a true servant of music. A stern disciplinarian he certainly was, but listen to the results and see that this was indeed worthwhile.

The conductor, Bryden Thomson said of Reiner, "He IS the greatest of us all!"

That is true!