

# "Also Sprach Zarathustra"--Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1954)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Jonathan Horrocks



*Reiner, c. 1945*



*The 1960 re-release*



*Richard Strauss, composer*

“Also Sprach Zarathustra” was Reiner’s first recording with the Chicago Symphony. Reiner chose the work to demonstrate the quality of the orchestra. It was produced by John Pfeiffer and engineered by Leslie Chase. The quality of the recording led RCA to include Richard Mohr and Lewis Layton on future recordings with the orchestra.

Although recorded in stereo in 1954, “Also Sprach” was first released in mono that same year, and released as a “Living Stereo” in 1960. The recording was two-track, impressively capturing the expanse of the large orchestra.

While there was some critical acclaim for his recent recordings from Pittsburgh, Reiner was relatively underrepresented on records before Chicago. In the eyes of the record collecting public, he was an unknown quantity. “Also Sprach” branded the Reiner recordings from Chicago as recordings collectors could depend on for musical quality. That quality was the product of an exacting work ethic. Reiner required a high level of quality from his players, and would replace them if they did not meet his expectations. As with Toscanini and Szell, he supported musicians he thought were good.

By the time of his Chicago appointment, Reiner was at his musical peak. He had strong foundations conducting opera, the Viennese classics, and was equally at home in French, Russian, and Italian music. Reiner championed contemporary works by Hovhaness, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and his compatriot Bartok. While the Chicago Symphony could claim a German tradition with Theodore Thomas and Frederick Stock as their first directors, Reiner made the Chicago Symphony play with authority in a wide variety of orchestral music. Stravinsky would call Chicago under Reiner, “the most precise and flexible orchestra in the world.” When asked what his favorite recording was, Reiner would respond that it was the recording he was presently working on.

After his death, Reiner’s Chicago recordings have remained in the catalog. The high quality of the original masters have allowed for very successful reissues. Musically, they remain as relevant as the day they were recorded. Richard Mohr once wrote, “one seldom thinks of the music as a Reiner recording, but only as a re-creation of music itself.”

*Jonathan Horrocks is a Recorded Sound cataloger in the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress.*