

STRAUSS Also sprach Zarathustra. Aus Italien

Author:

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- Also sprach Zarathustra, 'Thus spake Zarathustra'
- Aus Italien

Both pieces open on an auspicious pedal note but any notion that they were cut from the same cloth ends there. *Aus Italien* is more Romantic symphony than would-be tone-poem and the air of the accidental tourist weighs heavily on it. But much as François-Xavier Roth ladles on vitality and belief, shaping and phrasing with wholehearted spontaneity, even he cannot bring home the 'Funiculì, Funiculà' driven finale where the incongruity of it all is just too much to swallow.

I've always thought that the main problem with the piece (and there are many) was that nothing could possibly live up to the corker of a tune that Strauss offers up and then regretfully leaves behind partway through the country sojourn of his opening movement. So gorgeous is it that it lingers like wishful thinking in the subconscious as idea upon idea fails to live up to its promise. I've already referred to Roth's belief (or the illusion of belief) and how that in turn communicates to his players - the excellent SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg - and the pleasure here lies in the elegance and energy of the performance, and how that in part compensates for the shortcomings and longueurs of the piece.

But that energy is channelled to far greater purpose in a quite splendid account of what by comparison is an unqualified masterpiece - *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The Konzerthaus Freiburg opens to its suitably orgiastic sunrise, the satisfying thwack of those timpani solos driving home the mother of all proclamations. The real brilliance of this piece lies in the way in which Strauss exhausts that ubiquitous three-note motif without it ever becoming a mannerism or indeed an irritation. It feels totally, philosophically, organic. Roth for his part balances the 'man and superman' elements, savouring the richly harmonised intimacies but

going large with the cosmic 'joys and passions', an effusion of violins and tumbling horns. The great fugue does not sound too 'scientific' and the climactic restatement of the opening fanfare is as surely nailed as the 'Dance Song' – or cosmic beer garden, as I like to think of it – is euphoric. I'd still like more of the Midnight Bell but wasn't it ever thus.

This must be one of the most satisfying *Zarathustras* around – and even if you are allergic (as I am) to *Aus Italien* there is always that first-movement tune to revisit from time to time.