



Richard STRAUSS (1864-1949)

Also Sprach Zarathustra - tone poem Op.30 (1895) [32:36]

Aus Italien - symphonic fantasy Op.16 (1886) [45:11]

SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg/François-Xavier Roth
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Tone Poems - Volume 3

HÄNSSLER CLASSIC CD93.320 [77:37]

This is Volume 3 in François-Xavier Roth's traversal of the Richard Strauss tone-poems (Volume 2) but the first that I have heard. Since their composition these works have been a touchstone for orchestral virtuosity and by extension their conductor's brilliance. What is now undoubtedly true is that whereas once only a handful of ensembles worldwide could claim to have the collective skill to do justice - with seeming ease - to these terrifyingly hard pieces, now that level of execution is the norm not the exception.

This disc is a case in point, the playing of the SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg is uniformly excellent - full of poise and brilliance, power and precision as required. Just the same could be said of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra's discs with Andris Nelsons in their continuing cycle on Orfeo to name but one of the recent competition (review review review). So, if instrumental and sonic excellence is a given - the sound on this Hänssler Classics disc is very fine in a pleasingly unfussy way - the spotlight falls more onto the conductor to prove his worth. I must admit my impression of Roth's interpretations the first couple of listens-through was rather efficient and faceless. The more I listened the more I appreciated the subtlety of his music-making. Certainly there would seem to be a modern school of conducting that focuses on precision and excellence of execution rather than projecting a big musical personality. The benefits are clarity of intent, precision in both technical and aesthetic terms and an absence of ego which allows the music to speak for itself. The downside is that these big-boned Romantic — with a very capital 'R' — works become just a little faceless and not as compellingly involving as other interpretations.

As far as I am aware this is a unique and certainly very generous coupling. When I first collected LPs both these works would appear on a disc alone. I suppose the rarity of this combination is that they bring together one of the great flowerings of Strauss's orchestral art with one of his first - and probably weaker - efforts. There is an Italian link; the early work was inspired directly by a holiday in the country in 1886; nine years later he was in Italy again and noting in his diary that he was mulling over the possibility of a Nietzsche-inspired work. *Also Sprach* has the most universally recognised openings of any Strauss work. Here, Roth chooses a flowing fluent tempo with little give and take; it is accurate and impressive without scaling any great emotional heights. Compared to the famous Solti/Chicago recording on Decca this seems positively plain. Roth is playing a longer game. His overall timing is not exceptional in either direction, faster than Previn or Tennstedt, slower than Ormandy, Solti and Reiner — the latter only just — but his is a more fluent and coherent interpretation. While it might sacrifice the sheer drama of some versions in return the brilliance of the structure and the skill with which Strauss handles the musical material is made clear. The capital 'R' might not be as grand as elsewhere. What I *do* miss is the bigger personality willing to impose itself on the music. So while Roth makes the po-faced fugal *Of Science* [track 6] suitably academic with lines and textures beautifully teased out, he shies away from any chance of Viennese schmaltz in

the waltzing *Dance Song*. No surprise to read it's beautifully played - lovely bouncing articulation from the oboe in particular: the oboe is a consistent pleasure throughout the disc. To hear what more can be added try Karajan's stunning live version from the Salzburg Festival. Roth is brilliant but literal. This style would seem to be the modern fashion and if it appeals Roth and his orchestra are as good as any I have heard amongst newer recordings. That my personal preference is for an earlier interpretative style is more a reflection on me than anything lacking in Roth.

If Roth's approach might be termed accurate objectivity, he brings this to the early Symphony-in-all-but-name *Aus Italien* too. Even quite ardent admirers of Strauss tend to be rather dismissive of this work but I love it. For sure it lacks the sheer compositional skill and polish of *Also sprach* but even at just twenty-two Strauss had an assured ear for orchestration and the great gift of being able to write a memorable tune - qualities both in evidence here. Where Roth's accurate objectivity points up the structural strengths of the later work it shows the weaknesses of the earlier. This is a piece that benefits from a direct and dynamic approach. Interesting how many of the great Strauss interpreters have avoided this work on disc. Aside from Clemens Krauss's 1953 Vienna version there is a gap of twenty one years until another notable Straussian - Kempe - would record it. This version, originally on EMI with the Dresden Staatskapelle, is the performance by which I first heard the piece. Interpretatively, it is still as fine if not better than any; Kempe had a particular gift for finding a vocal quality in many of Strauss's melodic lines, imbuing them with a so-subtle ebb and flow that few can match. Take the great melody early in the work's opening movement [track 10 3:15 on Roth's disc] - Roth plays it with restrained dignified simplicity. Kempe, at a significantly more flowing tempo shapes the melody in a much more interventionist way with numerous little pushes and pulls in his basic tempo. It's an approach which I love, underlining the Romantic nature of the music.

Worth remembering this is the only tone-poem to which Strauss supplied a detailed narrative - elsewhere his movement/section titles could be wilfully vague or oblique. Järvi, in the work's first digital recording in 1988 (Chandos CHAN10218X), reaches this tune a full minute quicker than Roth. In many ways this is the work in the Strauss canon that suits Järvi's preference for forward-moving, emotionally urgent performance best. As an interpretation it lacks the subtlety of Kempe but it has all the energy and exuberance that such a youthful work demands. Conversely, Roth is excellent here and in the languorous third movement at bringing out the sheer beauty of much of the writing - indeed the actual technical playing is often superior to Kempe's Dresden orchestra. The second movement *In the Roman Ruins* - feels rather held. Timing-wise, it is very close to another Dresden performance; this time from Fabio Luisi (Sony 88697435542). Luisi again brings a theatrical/operatic quality which is the opposite of Roth's more direct approach. Luisi is good at following Strauss's directions urging the tempo forward in the closing pages of the movement. From rehearsal letter 'U' Strauss writes *un poco piu vivo* then *un poco stringendo* just eight bars later, then another eight bars further on *a tempo ma sempre vivo* closely followed by *molto appassionato* and *molto vivo*. For Luisi this becomes an adrenalin-filled dash to the end. Roth lacks this impetuosity - the observations of the markings are there, but in letter not the spirit of them.

Given Roth's preference for micro-management of textures it is no real surprise that the third movement - *On the Beach at Sorrento* - is in many ways the most successful. The quality of the playing and engineering allow the wealth of near impressionistic detail in the scoring to register. Again if he does not achieve the catch-in-the-throat beauty of Kempe and his Dresden clarinets I suspect that is because he does not seek to. Of other more recent recordings I have not heard Ashkenazy in Cleveland or Muti in Berlin (Philips 422 399) or Bertrand de Billy with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (Oehms Classics OC631). Roth is substantially better than Zinman in Zurich (Arte Nova) which again is well played but rather too detached for my taste.

For many commentators - and conductors too I suspect - it is the Finale which takes "Funiculi Funicula" as its main theme that is the major stumbling block in admiring this work. Roth succeeds by simply playing what is a deeply trite tune at face value - his objective approach paying dividends handsomely. Not just because of the melodic source material, this is the weakest section of the work because Strauss tries too hard to reintegrate music from all the other movements too. Given that he was an undoubted genius he makes it work - just - but there is a definite sense of material being forced together. Again, the clarity of textures Roth achieves allows one to appreciate the nuts and bolts of the construction although perhaps this is not wholly a good thing. One slight quirk - Strauss does mark a pause right at the end before the closing 3 *prestissimo* chords. Roth highlights this with a much longer wait than any other version I have heard. Then again, there is no absolute to how long a pause should be — except that it should be longer than the value of that rest if the pause were not there.

Overall, a good example of the modern style of Strauss conducting. Very well played indeed with pleasing engineering. An adequate liner written in German and English only and excellent playing time completes an attractive package. Tellingly, I lined up the various versions I know on my computer to allow quick artistic comparisons between passages. Suddenly, one passage jumped out of the speakers - it was Kempe again. I am very wary about falling back on easy 'classic' recommendations but here was a case in point; a truly great conductor such as Kempe was able to make this apprentice work glow with a profundity that perhaps even Strauss did not know was there. Roth, for all his undoubted skill and precise control is not in that league.

Nick Barnard