Richard Strauss: Macbeth, Don Juan, Tod und Verklärung & Festmarsch in C

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No one, including the conductor, orchestra, and record label, is setting out to rival the great recordings of these Strauss selections. Kirill Karabits, the new music director of the Staatskapelle Weimar since 2016, has steadily risen in a career marked by solid musicianship and some flair as an interpreter. Here he's a reliable Straussian, leading a good but not pre-eminent orchestra, recorded middling well by the engineers.

What interested me, besides the pleasure of meeting up with familiar masterpieces, is the historical perspective offered by a program that unfolds in chronological order. Macbeth (1886–88) would be considered a formed, successful work by the standards of the Lisztian tone poem, from which it gains loose organization and a good deal of bombast and rum-tum. But the miraculous breakthrough of Don Juan was in the offing, which makes Macbeth only a stepping stone. No one fully succeeds in turning the score into a silk purse, yet it isn't entirely a pig's ear, and Karabits, without revealing any new insights, negotiates the music nicely enough. As in the past, I don't recognize a hint of Shakespeare's characters in Strauss's musical portraiture—the title could just as well be Captain Hook and the Lost Boys.

The stakes are raised in the two masterpieces on the program, Don Juan and Death and Transfiguration (both 1888–89), considering the numerous great recordings each has received. Delivering the music with sumptuous virtuosity is something the Staatskapelle Weimar simply doesn't have to give. But Karabits knows how Don Juan should go, with brio and panache, and he leads an enjoyable reading. (Come to think of it, how many Slavic conductors have ever triumphed in Strauss, even the most distinguished?) By not aiming for thrills, Karabits may be acknowledging the limitations of his musicians, or perhaps he hears Don Juan with less swagger and more nostalgia.

By the time Strauss began Death and Transfiguration in the summer of 1888, he had completed his transition from abstract music, which held the highest prestige in the long shadow of Beethoven, to program music, which had been considered facile "Nature painting" aimed at unsophisticated listeners, although Bach and Handel stooped to it—the criticisms seem pointless to us today. Don Juan is so perfect that by comparison Death and Transfiguration seems more than a bit cloying and mawkish in tone. I don't know of many recorded performances that evoke true dignity in the presence of death and awe at the miracle of transfiguration, but perhaps I want what isn't there in the score. As with Don Juan, Karabits gives us a performance characterized by more reflection and calmness than usual. This renders his reading a little underplayed and inert emotionally.

Finally, there comes a bit of early incidental music, the Festmarsch in C (one of

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several pieces Strauss composed under the same title, including his op. 1). Being from 1884, this obscure work is out of chronological order. One hears hints of the Prelude to act I of Die Meistersinger; otherwise, Strauss composed a richly scored Prussian march of the kind usually reserved for brass band, adding a lyrical section in the middle. There's zero indication, to my ears, of the mature composer except in the grandiosity of the Festmarsch's conception. Pleasantly stirring while it lasts, the music leaves no lasting impression.

The market for this release is hard to fathom, but I doubt that seasoned collectors will take an interest. Karabits is doing better work in other repertoire, especially Russian music of the 20th century.

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