

## Vladimir Ashkenazy



### Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart & Richard Strauss: Violin Concerto K 219 & Symphonia Domestica

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart | Richard Strauss

CD aud 97.535

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#### Klassische Mozart-Interpretation

Die Wege des Musikmarktes sind manchmal ziemlich verschlungen – und so erscheint nun bei audite der Mitschnitt eines Live-Konzerts aus der Berliner Philharmonie, der bereits fast zehn Jahre alt ist: Er entstand im September 1998, beim Auftakt-Konzert der letzten Saison, mit der Vladimir Askenazy seine zehnjährige Ära als Chef-Dirigent des Deutschen Symphonie Orchesters Berlin beendete.

Sein langjähriger Freund Pinchas Zukerman ist hier als Solist im A-Dur Violinkonzert von Mozart zu erleben und beide gemeinsam liefern hier eine runde, eindringliche, aber nicht zergrübelte, im besten Sinne des Wortes "klassische" Mozart-Interpretation ab. Für Freunde von Richard Strauss-Orchesterwerken mag die hinzugefügte Symphonia domestica ein zusätzliches Argument sein.

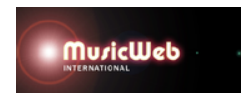
SWR Treffpunkt Klassik, 17. Juni 2008 (Lydia Jeschke - 2008.06.17)



Heute mit Lydia Jeschke am Mikrophon und mit neuen Produktionen klassischer und...

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www.musicweb-international.com September 2008 (Mark Sebastian Jordan - 2008.09.05)



This disc provides a pleasant snapshot of the work of Vladimir Ashkenazy live in concert with the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester, Berlin, the ensemble originally formed as the RIAS-Berlin Symphony and led by the great Ferenc Fricsay in the 1950s. Before Fricsay's death, the ensemble changed its name to the Berlin Radio Symphony, a name it kept through several music directors. Ashkenazy was director of the orchestra for a decade, starting in 1989, and was presiding when the ensemble changed to its present name in 1993. Presented here are two snapshots of his work with the orchestra, featuring Ashkenazy's "private passions" for the orchestral works of Richard Strauss and the concerted pieces of Wolfgang Mozart.

Ashkenazy has shown a strong commitment to Strauss both in concert and in the recording studio, so his

Symphonia Domestica is a welcome visitor. The live performance from 1998 captured here brings Ashkenazy's soulful warmth and a delight in Strauss's orchestral effects—yes, even the vulgar ones, such as the infamous crying baby sequence. This release serves well to represent this part of Strauss's body of works in Ashkenazy's career, as well as a nice souvenir of his work in Berlin. I have seen that Ondine also released a *Symphonia Domestica* from when Ashkenazy conducted the Czech Philharmonic, but I haven't been able to hear that for comparison.

The present performance is amply satisfying, even if doesn't unseat any of the great recordings of the past, especially considering that a couple of those are performed by formidable representatives of what was once known as "the American sound". It is ironic that the two conductors most responsible for creating that highly virtuosic orchestral sound with whip-crack precision and muscular power were middle-European conductors. Fritz Reiner and George Szell used their orchestras in Chicago and Cleveland, respectively, as laboratories for attaining the elusive perfection demanded by the complex scores of Strauss and Mahler, while honing their players on the bread-and-butter repertory of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. Strauss figured prominently in both conductors' work, albeit more so in Reiner's, as Szell seemed to maintain a slightly skeptical view of Strauss's exuberance, while Reiner enjoyed transforming that boundless energy into purely abstract music. In the end, they both left us with great recordings of *Symphonia Domestica*.

But to buck received wisdom, there is an often underrated conductor whom I am inclined to think actually surpassed Szell and Reiner in this work, and that is Zubin Mehta. If there is one symphonic work Mehta was born to conduct, it is the *Symphonia Domestica*. His good-natured charm and delight buoy the orchestral effects in a way that others don't. Szell, for all his clarity and vigor, seems a bit stiff in comparison. Reiner, for all his sonic splendor, seems unwilling to indulge in Strauss's affectionate teasing of married life, remaining just on this side of tasteful reserve. Mehta pushes it out a little further, taking the spirited pictures for what they are: slices of the life of a successful, untroubled artist. By not shying away from the blatantly programmatic elements of this score, Mehta unexpectedly reveals that there are true depths lurking beneath the surface sentiment. While Reiner is delicate in the "Cradle Song" of the "Scherzo" section, and Szell is gentle, Mehta is the one who captures the precious magic of a quiet moment between parents and child. Likewise, in the following "Adagio", Mehta finds the selfless devotion at the heart of the music, which the somewhat restless Szell recording misses, and the smoothly flowing Reiner smooths over.

In separate sections, one could say that others trump Mehta, but in terms of overall excellence and coherence of vision, he comes out on top with an unhurried, spacious performance clocking in at almost 46 minutes. Szell is arguably better in the opening of the work, energetically presenting the themes with plenty of personality. His tight control never relaxes, bringing the work under the wire at almost five minutes faster than Mehta's Berlin Philharmonic recording for CBS. Reiner, being a little more relaxed, captures more of the gentle side of the score than Szell, though without the simple sincerity of Mehta. One rare performance worth hearing is a live 1945 air check led by Bruno Walter which the New York Philharmonic released in a box set of historic broadcasts almost a decade ago; it's still available directly from the orchestra. Walter's tempos are as brisk as Szell's, but despite the limited mono sound, the live concert situation proves that with a little encouragement from an audience, the over-the-top finale can truly romp. Speaking of Mehta, I have not had the chance to hear his Los Angeles Philharmonic performance of the *Symphonia Domestica*, and have made my above comments based on his Berlin remake, couple with a fine Burleske with Daniel Barenboim as piano soloist. But considering that Mehta's L.A. *Zarathustra* and *Alpine Symphony* are both better than later remakes, I would love to hear his early *Domestica*, currently available in a Decca box set.

Ashkenazy's orchestra is no match for the plummy perfection of Cleveland or Chicago, but their slightly leaner tone helps in terms of clarity, though Ashkenazy doesn't do as much sonic sculpting as a Reiner or Szell. Ashkenazy's obvious affection for the work does however remind me of Mehta. The live one-off recording preserves a fine sense of occasion, though there is little bloom to the recorded sound. I have often heard Berlin's Philharmonie praised as a great place to hear a live concert in person, though live recordings from the venue rarely find a sweet spot for microphones, and this one is no different. Note that the total disc time listed above reflects the inclusion of about five minutes of applause which is, mercifully, separately tracked. I enjoy the sense of occasion in live recordings that keep the applause, but I can't imagine myself wanting to re-enact a full concert scenario with endless applause very often.

As for the Mozart, I would say that most performers would not make this work a comfortable disc-mate for Symphonia Domestica, but then most performers aren't Pinchas Zukerman. Ashkenazy very much follows his soloist's manner, provided a fairly leisurely, well-upholstered account of the "Turkish" Concerto. Zukerman is notorious for his reactionary stance against everything associated with historically-informed playing styles. There's probably no major violinist today who would give a more old-fashioned sounding performance of this work. Indeed, the most apt comparison would be to Zukerman's earlier recording of the work, done in the late 1960s for Columbia, with Daniel Barenboim conducting the English Chamber Orchestra. What is truly remarkable is that forty years on, Ashkenazy's concept remains pretty much the same. Those who like it can claim consistency, though those who doubt it can level charges of both stubbornness and lack of imagination against the violinist.

What is amusing is that as much as Zukerman fulminates against period instrument scholarship and their fussy performance practices, at least a trace element of that spirit has crept in under the door, because this performance shaves a little over a minute of the earlier rendition, without demonstrating a different concept. Ashkenazy is arguably a little lighter in touch than Barenboim, but this remains Mozart for those looking for a throwback to older styles. On the other hand, listeners interested in those styles may instead opt for the EMI recording where Yehudi Menuhin brings a little more thoughtfulness to the work, even if he didn't have Zukerman's rich, dark tone by the time his rendition was recorded in the early 1960s.

Interesting finds from the vaults, then, and I hope they do well enough to encourage Audite to keep digging for more treasures. Collectors and fans will enjoy the Ashkenazy-centric booklet notes (in German and English) by Habakuk Traber, which enhance the fond sense of retrospective of a well-loved conductor's work.

### Scherzo Septiembre 2008 (Juan García-Rico - 2008.09.01)

**sch***er***zo**

Protagonizado por dos viejos amigos y sensacionales músicos, el presente disco...

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### www.classicstodayfrance.com Novembre 2008 (Christophe Huss - 2008.11.01)



Ashkenazy fut, avant Nagano et Metzmacher, le chef du DSO Berlin. Ces...

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**Un camino propio**

*Ashkenazy dirige un espléndido monográfico Martinu con el pianista Robert Kolinsky y la Sinfonieorchester Basel*

La obra de Bohuslav Martinu es una caja de sorpresas para el aficionado. Los discos se suelen portar bien con el músico bohemio muerto en Suiza y de vez en cuando aparecen cosas nuevas, inéditos interesantes o versiones distintas que renuevan nuestra visión de obras ya conocidas. Además, el autor de Pasión griega ha tenido estupendos valedores discográficos, de Kubelik a Beloblávec entre los directores pero también grupos de cámara, solistas, checos casi todos, es verdad, con excepciones como la del grande y benemérito Mackerras – su disco con fragmentos de Julieta aparecido recientemente en Supraphon es impagable – o Neeme Järvi y Walter Weller con sus integrales sinfónicas. A ellos se suman ahora Vladimir Ashkenazy, como recogiendo el relevo de Christopher Hogwood, quien grabó para Arte Nova algunas piezas de Martinu con la Orquesta de Cámara de Basilea. Y se dice esto porque el ruso nacionalizado islandés se pone aquí al frente de la Orquesta Sinfónica de la misma ciudad suiza, aquella que en la Fundación Paul Sacher conserva el legado de Martinu, ese estudiado a fondo por Harry Halbreicht, quien lo ordenó definitivamente y ahora tiene el honor de ver asociada la H de su apellido a cada obra del compositor.

Este disco reúne dos conciertos para piano y orquesta. El Segundo se estrenó en Praga en 1935 – por Rudolf Firkušny y la Filarmónica Checa dirigida por Vaclav Talich. El mismo pianista lo reestrenaría igualmente en 1944 en Nueva York tras la revisión a que lo sometiera el autor, quien ya pensó en ella nada más escuchar por la radio, desde París, la première. El Cuarto se subtítulo Incantation y es una obra espléndida. Es cierto que el Segundo es el más conocido de los suyos pero este postrero, con la originalidad de los dos movimientos, la lírica exultante de alguno de sus episodios – ese estallido orquestal en el primer movimiento, por ejemplo – que recuerdan a Janáček, que hacen pensar en la dialéctica entre la plenitud inferior y la imposibilidad de volver a la patria, es ciertamente único en su género. Y, por otra parte, muy siglo XX, para entendernos, muy de esa onda estética que fundiendo neoclasicismo y eso que llamamos modernidad elude la vanguardia – no podía ser de otro modo – para autoafirmarse en una suerte de discurso propio bien seguro de sí a pesar de todo. Lo estrenarían, en Nueva York, Firkušny y Stokowski en 1956. Junto a los dos conciertos hallamos además una preciosa Obertura de 1953, de raigambre neoclásica – neobarroca más bien pues el pretexto son, con aplastante evidencia, los conciertos de Brandenburgo de Bach – pero con un lenguaje que no puede ser más del autor y de esa su época final. Y como obra más conocida del programa, quizá una de las cumbres de toda la producción de Martinu, Los frescos de Piero della Francesca, de 1955, dedicada a Rafael Kubelik y estrenada bajo su dirección por la Filarmónica de Viena en el Festival de Salzburgo de 1956.

Las versiones de los dos conciertos están protagonizadas por un pianista nuevo para quien esto escribe, el suizo Robert Kolinsky, quien negocia las obras con la soltura propia – en lo técnico y estilístico – de alguien que ha estudiado con Jan Panenka y, a lo que se ve, asimilado a la perfección sus enseñanzas. Ashkenazy, por su parte, acompaña con excelencia en las obras concertantes y firma grandísimas versiones de la Obertura y Los frescos, haciendo sonar estupendamente a la orquesta suiza – se ha convertido en un trotamundos, de Praga a Tokio, de Sidney a Helsinki, de Londres a Basilea – , demostrando de nuevo tras su Asrael qué bien le va con este interés suyo por repertorios poco habituales y sumándose, en definitiva, a los grandes directores que se comprometieron con esta música tan hermosa y tan ilustradora de lo que han sido los avatares de la cultura europea del pasado siglo. Un gran disco.

This CD documents broadcast performances in 1996 (Mozart Violin Concerto) and 1998 (Symphonia domestica). The program notes make a big deal of the music of Mozart and Strauss being Ashkenazy's private passions. From the standpoint of previous recordings, private would seem to be the operative word with Strauss. He did do a fine *Aus Italien* presently available in the six-CD Decca album that features the critically important and excellent sounding Zubin Mehta Los Angeles Strauss recordings, including the *Symphonia domestica*. Many people view the *Symphonia domestica* as a prime example of Straussian egotism and bombast. Ashkenazy takes a more relaxed and subdued, even chamber-like approach that excels in the transparently orchestrated earlier parts of the score. The double fugue opening the final "movement" almost disintegrates into chaos in the negative sense (not as Strauss planned), and the "Joyous Conclusion" is totally anticlimactic. Ashkenazy's overall timing is almost identical to Mehta's, and slower than Fritz Reiner's, but his tempo distortions seriously fragment a work that in the wrong hands can tend to seriously ramble. More important, the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin can't really cope with Strauss's demands. There is no realistic comparison to Mehta, or especially, the classic Reiner version with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (now available on SACD). Given the extent to which Strauss idolized and was influenced by Mozart, it was reasonable to couple the *Symphonia domestica* with a Mozart Violin Concerto. Unfortunately, this somewhat leaden performance is adequate at best. I don't think anyone would seriously consider the Mozart Concerto as a reason to buy this CD when there are performances by Julia Fischer, Anne-Sophie Mutter, and many others out there not encumbered by a non-competitive *Symphonia domestica*. Endless and totally unnecessary applause is included after both works in what seems like an effort to convince us that the audience actually liked these performances. The sound possesses analytical clarity and an up-front aural perspective that puts the many wind soloists and a particularly irritating and blatty trumpet under glaring scrutiny that they cannot survive. Given the competition, avoid this at all costs.