



Richard Strauss: Ein Heldenleben & Tod und Verklärung

aud 95.586

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[Fanfare](#) (Arthur Lintgen - 2009.05.01)

Even if you feel, as I do, that Karl Böhm's authority in the music of Richard Strauss extends first and foremost to the operas, this recording is an important document of his approach to the composer's orchestral music. Strauss died six months earlier (in 1949), so it was appropriate to record *Ein Heldenleben* and *Death and Transfiguration* at this time. Böhm's memoirs actually allude to a comment Strauss made to his son that the death struggle is exactly as he set down in *Death and Transfiguration*. As expected, Böhm's approach in both works is highly dramatic and assertive. He doesn't linger, but his tempos are not relentlessly fast and he is not slavish to the scores. There are moments of extreme calm, as at the end of "The Hero's Companion" before the offstage trumpets herald the battlefield section, and in the finale. Böhm pays meticulous attention to detail. His *Ein Heldenleben* is lean, firm, and propulsive. In *Death and Transfiguration*, he plays the three central statements of the main theme surprisingly slowly, but then the death cataclysm is taken very swiftly and he dissipates the energy (of the staccato chords) too quickly, thus mitigating their dramatic impact. As telegraphed earlier, the *Transfiguration* section is played very slowly, and Böhm doesn't hesitate to squeeze every ounce of emotion out of it by judiciously broadening his basic tempo at the climax.

The mono sound is dry and cutting to the point of being thin and abrasive, but there is a good bit of presence and fine inner detail, almost in a Mercury-like sense. Unfortunately, the sonic spectrum is dramatically tilted toward the high frequencies. The lack of bass and low midrange (especially the low strings) seriously detracts from Strauss's lush orchestral sonority. Surfaces are quiet. This is a valuable document of Böhm's conducting style in the music of Strauss, but it obviously won't do as your only recording of these two tone poems. For *Ein Heldenleben*, Fritz Reiner (RCA) and/or Zubin Mehta (Decca/London), depending on your interpretive tastes, are the recordings to have. For *Death and Transfiguration*, go with André Previn (Telarc) or Giuseppe Sinopoli (Deutsche Grammophon).