



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

aud 97.755

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Here they are led by their current principal conductor Kirill Karabits. Karabits has been creating an admired discography of mainly Russian/Soviet music with the other orchestra he directs - the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. The disc gets off to an excellent start with a very fiery and highly dramatic reading of Macbeth. The liner makes clear that Strauss wrote this very much under the influence of Liszt's model of the symphonic poem right down to his choice of a literary/historical figure for the work. However the liner is also correct in noting that this is not a narrative story told through the medium of the orchestra but rather a character study of the principle protagonist himself. Strauss started working on this piece when he was just 22 completing the first version early in 1888. But criticism from his mentor Hans von Bülow meant that it was not premiered in Weimar in a revised form until 1890. Which is why it appears 'later' in the Strauss catalogue than the other more obviously mature works on this disc. Over the years this has proved to be the least popular of the Strauss tone poems either on disc or in the concert hall. The reason for this are fairly easy to discern; although it remains a remarkable apprentice work it displays little of the unique flair for the orchestra or indeed form or melody that is evident in Don Juan completed later the same year on September 30th 1888. This blossoming of Strauss' unique talent from potential to full-blown mastery in just a few months is one of the great musical miracles.

Karabits' strength here is to play the work for what it is not what it might become. The liner references Strauss describing the music as needing to be "harsh and gruesome" as the subject was "of a very wild nature". By the sensibilities of the 21st century the former description seems somewhat excessive but relatively speaking this is cruder and certainly harsher than most other Strauss works and Karabits it very good at bringing that out. Not that his superb Weimar players are in the slightest bit crude or harsh. The collective sound of this orchestra is an enduring joy. This is



built on a fantastically solid and rich bass line - Karabits uses the traditional seating plan with the orchestral string basses to his left behind the 1st violins, the cellos next to the first violins and the 2nd violins to his right. Additionally the brass are stretched across the back of the orchestra [YouTube videos of the orchestra in concert and a brief promotional video of the recording of this disc confirm the evidence of the ear from the CD alone]. The brass and wind choirs are beautifully balanced within themselves and the larger orchestral group. Additionally, the trumpets use rotary valve instruments and throughout there is a real sense of an ensemble continuing a performing tradition. Technically the playing is of a superb level - one imagines Strauss would have been thrilled if only his works had been played at this standard in the 1890's – but it is the sound of the orchestra that makes this one of my favourite ensembles in the world at the moment.

But do not think everything is subsumed into a bed of wallowing tonal allure. Karabits can get the orchestra to play with bite and brio as required as the very opening of Macbeth proves. On disc since the work's inclusion in Rudolf Kempe's renowned survey for EMI in Dresden of Strauss' orchestral works there have been many versions variously coupled some of which I know some I do not. Maazel's earlier VPO recording on DG has something of the thrust that Karabits achieves less so in his Bavarian RSO remake. Zinman in Zurich I rate lower than many in Strauss generally and Dorati in Detroit is just a bit lacking in drama and orchestral brilliance. Del Mar in Aarhus is disappointingly scrappy too. Returning to Jarvi with the SNO underlines the exciting impact the Chandos recording gave these performances but again lacking the last degree of orchestral cohesion. Hard not to hear in Kempe an intuitive understanding of how to pace and phrase this music but the EMI recording really does begin to sound its years and even the remarkable Dresden Staatskapelle of the 1970's cannot beat the sheer collective virtuosity of their Weimar colleagues today.

But the quality of the playing here would count for little if Karabits was not able to tie the whole work together in as convincing a manner as he does. For once this really does sound like the work of a budding genius not just a piece of great promise. Around the 5:00 minute mark I like the way Karabits finds both lyrical flow and dramatic tension that draws the section of the work together. Indeed, throughout this performance it is the sure handling of the pace of the score that impresses right through to the closing glowering pages marking Macbeth's death. So all in all an excellent performance that competes with the best in the current catalogue.

Don Juan that follows is equally technically fine - worth mentioning here that the Audite recording in the sympathetic acoustic of the Weimarahalle is very good indeed. Just in standard CD stereo but the engineers find detail and warmth with the orchestral soundstage clearly delineated whilst providing the collective tonal lustre which defines the orchestra. Don Juan is a staple of every half decent orchestra the world over and of course on disc the competition is ferocious. Karabits is less individual here; the playing is a joy, the music the enduring marvel and tuneful feast it always is but somehow without the headturning individuality I heard in Macbeth. The benefit is a more light-hearted capricious Don Juan than some versions which emphasise the muscular virtuosity of the work. The latter approach is embodied in the famous Solti/Chicago/Decca recording which is as dynamic as it is domineering. But take the melting love theme introduced on the oboe around 6:50 in this performance. This is beautifully played in Weimar - I like the way the recording picks up the muted horns and harp arpeggiations and the oboe itself is lovely. But for a more intimate and touching rendition it is hard to surpass Lothar Koch (I assume) for Karajan in Berlin. The genius here is the tenderness Karajan/Koch brings to a scandalous character, the fractional hesitations suggesting a humanity and

vulnerability that is disarming. Perhaps I am over interpreting that but in direct comparison this new version is 'just' beautifully played. Even the famed heroic horn call that follows is played with rock solid power and bravura but just a tad too little flashing-eyed heroism. No-one hearing this performance in isolation will be anything but impressed by the sheer quality of its execution but conversely it lacks the stand-out individuality that made Macbeth such a compelling listening experience.

The third main work is *Tod und Verklärung* which shows further the developing composer not just in terms of compositional technique but branching out into the realm of the philosophical tone-poem. For a man not yet thirty it seems unlikely that he would embrace the concept about the end of life yet that is what he did. Also, unlike the preceding two works there is a detailed narrative referring to the fevered recollections of a man on his deathbed, his death and subsequent 'transfiguration'. By now on the disc Karabits' interpretational choices as far as Strauss are concerned are becoming clearer. Again this is a sensitive and superbly played performance but it strikes me that Karabits seeks to eschew any sense of sentimentality. A case in point is the beautiful unfolding flute melody that occurs between the two main 'fever attacks' [track 3 9:20] – Karabits allows the flute freedom to phrase but clearly prefers a simpler direct approach. Again worth drawing attention to the quality of the Audite recording which allows all the inner string accompanying detail and those harps again to register. The control of tempo through the following *etwas breiter* with a well managed *poco stringendo* shows Karabits' intelligent handling of the structure but come the following *appassionato* reliving the dying man's former loves and again it is just a fraction too 'placed' for me. The famous Szell/Cleveland recording on CBS/Sony was my introduction to this work. Listening to this same passage there for sure the recording is boxy and constrained in a way the new one patently is not but goodness me Szell finds the sense of delirium and unrestrained passion that is surely what Strauss sought to represent - heresy to say, Reiner in Chicago just seems fast here. Of the more recent recordings I have enjoyed Manfred Honeck in Pittsburgh on Reference but he is generally more interventionist than Karabits so it will be down to the individual listener's tastes as to what they prefer from the podium.

But returning to this new version, whatever passing thoughts one may have about interpretational corners the quality of the orchestra, the marvellously apt collective sound they make and how well this has been caught by the engineering is an ongoing pleasure. As at the last climax of the 'love' music is reached around 15:25 listen to the way the Weimar brass expands to fill the soundstage. But the engineering is equally good at catching the uneven heartbeats on the timps and then through the final spasm of life into death at 17:30 the deep-toned gong is beautifully rendered. No surprise either that this orchestra is perfectly equipped to play the closing 'transfiguration' music with effortless grandeur. Karabits' pacing here is very good indeed; steady but with an inexorable sense of being pulled forward towards the light. Those harps again are allowed to decorate the melodic lines with a gorgeous filigree texture and Karabits' uncomplicated approach pays substantial dividends with the simple dignity of the statement of the love theme now considered in calm recollection at 20:00. Unmannered apt tempi allow the music to unfurl and open out with a visionary radiance that is very impressive. As the vision fades over the closing two minutes of the work the qualities of playing recording and indeed interpretation bring the piece to a very satisfying conclusion.

The addition of the *Festmarsch* in C that Strauss wrote for the amateur orchestra he used to conduct is indeed a rarity but by being placed straight after the pained ecstasy of *Tod und Verklärung* the phrase "down to earth with a bump" comes to mind. Of course its well played and of course it is interesting to hear but even the liner describes it as "a mixture of fairground and emperor's birthday" - a brilliant

description I cannot improve upon or elaborate. Clearly, the vast majority of collectors will base their decision to buy this disc or not on the main three works and the march will be a bonus, or not.

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**Richard STRAUSS (1864 - 1949)**

Macbeth, Op.23 TrV163 (1888 rev. 1890) [21:09]  
 Don Juan, Op.20 TrV156 (1888) [17:21]  
 Tod und Verklärung, Op.24 TrV158 (1889) [25:17]  
 Festmarsch in C major TrV158 (1889) [6:45]  
 Staatskapelle Weimar/Kirill Karabits  
 rec. Weimarerhalle, Weimar, 2017  
**AUDITE 97.755** [70:35]



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