



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

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Might this be the first in a series of Richard Strauss's tone poems by Kirill Karabits and the Staatskapelle Weimar, the orchestra he has led as chief conductor since 2016? There's nothing in the accompanying album notes to indicate whether that might be the case, but there is a reason Karabits chose these three tone poems in particular for this program, and that reason is Weimar.

The album identifies Macbeth (1886–88/1891), Don Juan (1888–89), and Death and Transfiguration (1888–89) as the composer's "early" tone poems, which they are. Only Aus Italien (1886) is earlier. But in a larger conspectus of Strauss's output, all but two of his tone poems—Symphonia Domestica and An Alpine Symphony—predate 1900 and could therefore be said to be "early" Strauss. Another way to look at it, though, is through the iceberg analogy. In sheer numbers, Strauss composed most of his works before the turn of the century, yet except for the tone poems and some of his songs, a large portion of his pre-1900 music is not as widely performed or as well-known as are his later works—namely the operas, An Alpine Symphony, the Four Last Songs, and a handful of other pieces.

The connection between the works on this album and the city of Weimar is that Strauss, following in Liszt's footsteps, served as Kapellmeister there from 1889 to 1894. All three of these tone poems, Death and Transfiguration, Don Juan, and Macbeth, the latter in its revised form (1891) were all premiered by Strauss at the helm of the Weimar court orchestra. Strauss's Festmarsch, TrV 157—I give the Trenner number here because Strauss wrote half a dozen works with Festmarsch in the title—is not a tone poem, nor does it have anything to do with Weimar. It's included here simply because it was composed in 1888, just prior to the composer's Weimar Kapellmeister appointment.

The so-called Wilde Gungl was a "waltz" orchestra founded in Munich by Josef Gungl in 1864. I imagine it was something like the Lawrence Welk band that flourished in a variety TV show from 1951 to 1971. Strauss played violin in the Gungl orchestra from 1882 to 1885, which was then led by Strauss's father, Franz. To celebrate the orchestra's 25th anniversary, which was to take place in 1889, Richard Strauss composed the Festmarsch in 1888, and the piece was presented in Munich for the orchestra's 60th concert. Only 60 concerts in 25 years suggests that the Wilde Gungl was an occasional ensemble whose musicians were otherwise employed.

Of the three tone poems given here, Macbeth is the only one with fewer than 100 recordings—way fewer—which says something about how unpopular it is compared to the others. Comparing versions of Don Juan and Death and Transfiguration would be an exercise in futility. So I will just say this: These are works that demand the highest level of virtuosity from an orchestra's musicians. The players of the

Staatskapelle Weimar make a valiant effort, but they are not quite up to the standards of ensembles such as the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra under Mariss Jansons or the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under Manfred Honeck, both of which have recently given us some stunning Strauss releases. You can hear the Weimar's violins scrambling a bit to hit all of the notes in some of the rapid, high-lying passages, and coordination between the orchestra's sections is not all it could be. I haven't heard it, but if, for some reason, having all three of these "Weimar" tone poems together on a single disc appeals to you, you might want to check out Johannes Fritzsche's Naxos recording with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. It doesn't contain the Festmarsch, which isn't related anyway, but it does look to be a fairly recent release.

I expect that most fans of Strauss's tone poems will not find the conjoining of these three particular works a strong incentive to purchase this release, and will be just as happy with recordings that pair the tone poems in different combinations, especially if the performances are preferable.