



Richard Strauss: Ein Heldenleben & Tod und Verklärung

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Ein Heldenleben is something of a problematic piece. Apart from its – let's be charitable – slightly tongue-in-cheek biographical programme, it comes from a time when Strauss's descriptive works were becoming ever longer and more prolix. That process culminated in the *Symphonia Domestica* of 1903, though he later tightened things up considerably in the *Alpine Symphony* of 1915, his last work in this genre.

Thus *Ein Heldenleben* puts mammoth strain on conductor and orchestra. The former has to steer a convincing path through the jungle of contrapuntal detail, while the latter simply have to manage to play their excessively demanding parts while maintaining a convincing ensemble. Given all of that, one has to say that Karl Böhm and his RIAS Symphony Orchestra, in this studio recording from 1951, turn in an impressive and idiomatic performance. Böhm was a great Straussian, having been a close friend and collaborator of the composer, especially during the 1930s. From the very start, with its striding theme in horns and strings opening out into a magnificent paragraph, he drives the music along with controlled impetuosity - if there is such a thing! - an approach of which Strauss would surely have approved. From there, we move on via an encounter with the Hero's critics (tubas and consecutive fifths to the fore), and his wife (represented by solo violin); through a stirring battle and a review of 'The Hero's Works of Peace' (a loose medley along the lines of 'Your 100 Favourite Moments from My Greatest Hits'); to a restful, sunset-like finale. All of these passages are realised with imagination and presented with passion by Böhm and his forces.

For such an ancient recording, the sound is I suppose fairly good. But it doesn't do justice to the players, because the engineers have gone for clarity, which has been delivered at the expense of beauty of tone, so that string sound is scratchy, woodwind tone often scrawny, and trumpets shrill. And, despite the essential quality of the playing, it has to be said that ensemble is often ragged and intonation dubious. Sadly the final wind chord is a real shocker.

The earlier tone-poem, *Tod und Verklärung* of 1891, is more successful, in large part because it is a more convincing piece. The thematic material is typically glorious, and Strauss finds ways of repeating his tunes with sufficient variation so that they accumulate expressive power throughout. The composer retained a life-long affection for this youthful work, which graphically describes the final hours of a man on his deathbed, as, in between the agonies of his illness, he recalls his past life and looks forward to what may be to come. The booklet notes - brief but serviceable - tell us how Strauss on his own deathbed in 1949 told his son "I can now tell you that everything I composed in *Tod und Verklärung* is perfectly correct: I lived through it exactly in the last few hours."

Though similar problems exist here to those that affect *Ein Heldenleben*, the earlier work is simpler and more dramatic, and the performers give an intense and committed account of it. Karl Böhm does take some liberties – holding back for possibly unnecessary emphasis here, pushing forward too hectically there – but his overall reading is true to the spirit of the man he knew so well.

If these were truly great performances, the shortcomings of the recordings might have been of relatively little significance. But they don't quite aspire to that highest level, and those who want a 'historic' version of *Ein Heldenleben* might be better advised to go for Barbirolli and the LSO on EMI Gemini, or Kempe and the Dresden Staatskapelle on EMI Classics or Brilliant Classics; the latter also include *Tod und Verklärung*. A fascinating document that Strauss lovers will undoubtedly want to hear.

