



R. Strauss: Don Juan, Eine Alpensinfonie & Walzerfolge from Der Rosenkavalier

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“I promised the master to look after this legacy faithfully for as long as I live and to maintain it according to his wishes”
- Karl Bohm

Karl Bohm (1894-1981) established from 1933 an active rapport – starting in Dresden – with the music of Richard Strauss, and the conductor and composer maintained a serious bond of friendship after their meeting in 1934. Bohm’s own lean economical conducting style took its cue from Richard Strauss on the podium: this master of orchestral discipline once boasted that he could elicit the best sound from the brass section by simply ignoring them! The colorful 1889 symphonic poem Don Juan (4 February 1954) receives a virile, pungently forward-moving rendition from Bohm, unsentimental and long of line. The shimmering strings and ecstatic blaze of sound at the music’s climax owe much of the textural accuracy and incandescence to Ferenc Fricsay’s masterly training of the RIAS ensemble.

The big work – in several respects – is the 1915 Alpine Symphony (rec. 28-29 March 1952) by Strauss, which eschews anything like “symphonic” form and opts for twenty-two sections in the course of an Alpine excursion over the span of eleven hours. The work reflects both the urge to pacifism and pantheism in the midst of the mad outbreak we know as WW I, and the tendency of artists – musicians and filmmakers alike – to Bergarbeiten, picturesque pieces set in the high places, the roofs of the world. We might speculate that, like Thus Spake Zarathustra, the most successful moment occurs first, with the transition of Night into Sunrise, a blaze of colors that clearly influenced Grofé and any number of visual thinkers.

The huge orchestral forces – some 125 players – invoke stirring images of the hunt in the Ascent, a metaphor for the aspirations of art and their search for a summit or pinnacle, to be relished at the end by hindsight. The bass part of Wandering along the Stream echoes parts of Don Quixote and Ein Heldenleben, with passing references to the Liszt model of his own Mountain-symphony, Symphonic Poem No. 1. The individual parts move quickly and seamlessly – some sections last barely half a minute – we hear a waterfall and passing cowbells – as the idyllic spectacle dominates our senses. The Thickets and Brushwood Along the Wrong Path reveals some of those critics’ catcalls from A Hero’s Life. At the Summit, an oboe expresses its wonder followed by suspended waves of elation, allowing the brass and organ to fill out the vista in epic colors. The rising of mist signifies the retreat and eventual descent down this mountain, given in sliding chromatic scales, and the reappearance of the oboe – at both the Elegy and the Calm before the Storm, this latter meant to rival Beethoven for torrential intensity – and the colors witnessed prior. Sunset casts its own luminous aura, even as the civilized world collapsed in total warfare. The

organ-led Epilogue places Strauss near Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann as depictees of pantheistic transcendence of our mortal coil, gradually fading into all-embracing night and the deliverance of the soul.

The airy waltz-sequence from Act III of Der Rosenkavalier (rec. 29 March 1952) invokes the gracious era of Mozart's Vienna, a seamlessly enticing world of immaculate charm and grace. Buoyant and elastic, the waltz rhythms enjoy a superb string and brass sound, the occasional snare roll and woodwind insinuation an erotic hint of waxed mustache and begowned thighs.

