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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart & Richard Strauss: Violin Concerto K 219 & Symphonia Domestica

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Fanfare (Arthur Lintgen - 01.11.2008)

This CD documents broadcast performances in 1996 (Mozart Violin Concerto) and 1998 (Symphonia domestica). The program notes make a big deal of the music of Mozart and Strauss being Ashkenazy's private passions. From the standpoint of previous recordings, private would seem to be the operative word with Strauss. He did do a fine Aus Italien presently available in the six-CD Decca album that features the critically important and excellent sounding Zubin Mehta Los Angeles Strauss recordings, including the Symphonia domestica. Many people view the Symphonia domestica as a prime example of Straussian egotism and bombast. Ashkenazy takes a more relaxed and subdued, even chamber-like approach that excels in the transparently orchestrated earlier parts of the score. The double fugue opening the final "movement" almost disintegrates into chaos in the negative sense (not as Strauss planned), and the "Joyous Conclusion" is totally anticlimactic. Ashkenazy's overall timing is almost identical to Mehta's, and slower than Fritz Reiner's, but his tempo distortions seriously fragment a work that in the wrong hands can tend to seriously ramble. More important, the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin can't really cope with Strauss's demands. There is no realistic comparison to Mehta, or especially, the classic Reiner version with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (now available on SACD). Given the extent to which Strauss idolized and was influenced by Mozart, it was reasonable to couple the Symphonia domestica with a Mozart Violin Concerto. Unfortunately, this somewhat leaden performance is adequate at best. I don't think anyone would seriously consider the Mozart Concerto as a reason to buy this CD when there are performances by Julia Fischer, Anne-Sophie Mutter, and many others out there not encumbered by a non-competitive Symphonia domestica. Endless and totally unnecessary applause is included after both works in what seems like an effort to convince us that the audience actually liked these performances. The sound possesses analytical clarity and an up-front aural perspective that puts the many wind soloists and a particularly irritating and blatty trumpet under glaring scrutiny that they cannot survive. Given the competition, avoid this at all costs.

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