

STRAUSS, Richard: Also sprach Zarathustra, op. 30; Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche, op. 28; Don Juan, op. 20; Tod und Verklärung, op. 24; excerpt of an orchestra rehearsal of Don Juan. Orchester des Reichsenders Berlin and Berliner Funkorchester (in Don Juan), Richard Strauss conducting. Bellaphon/Acanta DE 23 055, two-record set, not available separately, monaural only. Imported by Bremen House, 218 East 86th Street, New York 10028.

This set presents authentic recordings by Richard Strauss that have never before been published. The records are at present only available in Germany. All four works are now known in other versions conducted by Strauss. For this reason, one must consider their value in relation to the other records. The interested reader may wish to see my review of the five-record set of music conducted by Strauss in Vienna in 1944 (ARSC Journal, vol. VIII, no. 2-3, 1976, pp. 123-136) and the complete Strauss discography (ARSC Journal, vol. IX, no. 1, 1977, pp. 6-65).

First of all, I feel that any individual or library at all interested in Strauss should have these records. None of these recordings were known to me at the time the discography was compiled. The performances are first-rate, and the sound is of good quality. Tod und Verklärung sounds easily the best of Strauss's own versions.

There is no doubt in my mind that these performances are actually conducted by Strauss. They are very close in style and in musical detail to Strauss's Vienna recordings of 1944 and his commercial recordings for Polydor in the 1920s. As I tried to point out in my 1976 review, Strauss followed his own score with considerably greater fidelity than other conductors. He does so here also, and the results are most exciting.

As usual with this sort of release, the program notes say nothing whatever about the origin of these recordings. The front cover of the album says in small letters: Historical recordings from the years 1932 and 1939. The rear of the jacket and the record labels give only the year 1939. The jacket attributes the Don Juan to the Berlin Radio Orchestra and the other works to the National Broadcast Orchestra of Berlin. (The labels give them all to the latter orchestra.) It is the sort of sloppy documentation we have been forced to accept with many historical recordings. Close listening shows that the recorded quality of Don Juan is notably inferior to that of the other three works. The sound is more compressed, lacking highs and lows. There is also, I believe, a faint 78-rpm swish on Don Juan that I do not hear on the others. (I will not be annoyed, however, if someone tells me I am wrong.) In summary, therefore, I presume that Don Juan is a 1932 recording made on transcription discs and that the other three works are 1939 recordings on tape. The engineering and mastering is excellent -- keeping most of the musical values while eliminating most of the noise. These records should prove to be quite tolerable for everyday listening.

Don Juan may well be the performance listed in the published catalog of the Berlin Radio. (See p. 53 of my discography.) There is a listing for a performance on four discs, recorded May 1, 1932, by Strauss and the Berlin Radio Orchestra. The timing given in the catalog is sixteen minutes even, exactly the length of the present recording. In any event, we can now hear no less than five different performances by Strauss of Don Juan, done in 1917, 1922, 1929, 1932, and 1944. While it would be fascinating to make a bar-by-bar comparison, the most important conclusions would be that the five performances are remarkably similar to each other and that they all adhere to the score more closely than performances by any other conductor. If I were to choose one, I would still prefer the Vienna recording of 1944 for its better sound.

The three-and-a-half minute rehearsal excerpt is little more than a souvenir. Evidently, the engineer set his disc recorder going during a rehearsal period, just to see what happened. We hear Strauss's strong baritone voice speaking. (I apologize that my German is somewhat less than perfect.) He appears to be in the middle of a thought. I think he is saying something like: "Weiter vorstehende . . . alle die Basse." He seems to want the basses to project their sound better. Then he vocalizes a bar (it is the basses' line) and directs the orchestra to the "tempo giocoso," nine bars after letter P in the score. The music starts at this point and continues almost up to letter U. Strauss stops the orchestra and says, I think, "Zu früh die erste Trompete" - the first trumpet was too early. Then he picks up at the letter T and continues to just before V and says what sounds like: "Alle sehr scharf" - everybody very sharp (keen). He returns to letter T and the music fades out after a moment. This brief excerpt does seem to demonstrate what we already know about Strauss's conducting style. He was very brief and precise in his directions. He concentrated on technical points, not on expression. For him, if the music was played correctly, according to the score, the emotion would all be there in the music.

The 1939 recordings have notably better sound. Till Eulenspiegel is a pleasure from beginning to end. This performance adheres very closely to the specifications given in my 1976 review, where Till was analyzed in considerable detail. Most notably, Strauss begins a tempo on page 65 and continues it "strictly in tempo" for the next 138 bars. This rhythmic steadiness, more than anything else, gives Strauss's performances their unique drive and excitement. His Epilog, again, is just right, as the score directs.

Also sprach Zarathustra shares the fine qualities of the Vienna performance. He improves on it in one respect: he holds the opening low C for the full four measures. Throughout, he takes the same linear approach to the work, and it proves as successful as in the later versions. Although the sound is only marginally less good in this 1939 recording, the difference is of greater importance in this work. There are so many extreme highs and extreme lows in Zarathustra that even a small suppression can have a large effect. The first 24 measures of "Von der Wissenschaft" (Eulenberg, p. 61), for instance, are very hard to hear clearly. The instruments are all low in pitch, and the counterpoint

becomes submerged in overall rumble. It is not an important point, but it does show the sonic improvement in the Vienna recording of five years later.

Tod und Verklärung is, by a considerable amount, the best-sounding Strauss performance of this work. The Vienna version of 1944 has, unaccountably, much the worst sound of any of the performances in that group. Strauss's only commercial recording of it dates back to 1926 and was probably made with the Brunswick "Light-Ray" electric recording system that produced poor recordings even for those early days. This 1939 Berlin recording, therefore, gives us much the best picture so far of Strauss's way with Tod und Verklärung. The orchestral playing is very clean -- "transparent" is the word I used earlier. Strauss achieves this effect in large part by setting a very steady tempo and insisting that every instrument adhere to it precisely. In this way, he creates a constant pulse that propels the music forward at all times. He also keeps the various instruments from running over each other with expressive phrasing -- a prime source of orchestral thickness and obscurity in other conductors' performances. The Berlin recordist has served Strauss well in capturing and distinguishing among the various instrumental sounds. I must also add that the pre-war Berlin orchestra showed a higher standard of orchestral playing than the wartime Vienna Philharmonic. Audible mistakes are very rare in any of the works in this set. This has now become my personal favorite of all the recordings of Tod und Verklärung.

In summary, we have here excellent performances by Richard Strauss of his four most popular tone-poems. All but Don Juan are in recordings of good quality -- good enough for regular listening. Strauss followed his scores more closely than did any other conductor. He also gave the most exciting performances -- because he wrote the excitement right in the scores. There is also here a brief glimpse of Strauss the conductor in rehearsal. Despite its lack of documentation, this is a set of both historical and musical importance. Now -- is there anything else in those archives?

Peter Morse

Post Scriptum: In my 1976 review of the Strauss-Vienna Philharmonic recordings, I specifically regretted that I had not heard Georg Solti's performance of Till Eulenspiegel, which I suspected would be of high quality, I have since listened to this recording, London CS 6978, with Solti and the Chicago Symphony, and it is even better than I had hoped. In some respects, it is better than any performance but the composer's. At the beginning, in fact, Solti follows the score more closely than Strauss. The introductory measures are taken slowly and "gemächlich." The first horn call is at the correct slow tempo, and the second horn call is very much livelier -- an important contrast that is almost universally ignored. Throughout, Solti follows Strauss's dynamic marking with great faithfulness. Even more significantly, he follows the tempo

markings accurately, He is the only conductor I have heard, other than Strauss, who takes pages 65-90 at an absolutely steady beat. This relentless pace, I feel, is what gives Till much of its excitement. Solti, in brief, has given us the best modern performance of Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks. The work is also coupled with superior performances of Don Juan and Also sprach Zarathustra. The latter work seems to be unique in being complete on one record side. The work is best heard, certainly, without interruption. There is over an hour of music on the record -- generous under any circumstances, but especially when the performances are all so splendid. The sound quality is excellent throughout.

Peter Morse