

Strauss: Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40. New York Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Willem Mengelberg. RCA Victrola AVMI-2019. [Recorded December 11-13, 1928.]

Were I the attorney for the estate of Willem Mengelberg, or for anyone involved with the making of RCA M-44 (the original ten-sided set of 78s from which this performance derives), I would file suit immediately to have this re-release taken off the market. RCA, which has recently shown us such tremendous quality with its computerized revamping of acoustical recordings, has here come up with one of the shoddiest products in its history.

In one sense, Irving Kolodin's notes for this Victrola re-issue are very informative, for they tell us who the principal players of the New York Philharmonic were when this recording was made. A number of them are important names in music. But Kolodin either indulges in nothing less than fraud himself, or was defrauded by RCA. He implies that the computer restoration process that RCA used in its recent and highly successful Caruso and Gershwin re-issues was used here too: "...the fact is," he says, "that through the then-new techniques of electronic recording ...and the now-new methods of computerized recovery of [its] latent values, the veritable sound of the Philharmonic has been re-created as it did not exist in this recording's first issue: Victor album M-44."

First of all, there is quite clearly no computer method involved in this release. (Indeed, the computer method was devised for acoustical recordings--those made before 1925 with a horn; this is an electrical recording, made with microphones.) In fact, as far as I can tell this is precisely the same dubbing from the 78s that RCA used to prepare its 1957 release on Camden CAL 337. That dubbing was woefully inadequate then, and obviously the technology of restoring the best sound possible from 78s has improved a great deal since 1957, thereby making what was woefully inadequate then an aesthetic outrage now.

What is so terribly sad is that one is going to have to recommend this set, because the performance has such sweep and beauty that any Straussian simply must have it, short of purchasing the 78s, this is the only way to get it. All of RCA's efforts to muck up the sound have not been successful in totally wiping out the merits of this performance. Strauss dedicated the work to Mengelberg, and the piece obviously meant a lot to him. (He recorded it once with each of his orchestras--the Concertgebouw being the other.) From the opening massive statement of the Hero's theme to the beautiful final page, Mengelberg delivers the music with the utmost sensitivity, tonal beauty, brilliance, and astounding shape and coherence. Concertmaster Scipione Guidi plays the

violin solos with ripeness and conviction, and the orchestra plays magnificently—as if possessed.

I had the opportunity to compare this re-issue with a set of the 78s. When played with no equalization (alteration or improvement of the sound) at all, the 78s have a richness of tone quality that is amazing; tell anyone that they were made in 1928 and they will probably doubt you. The bass is very strong (you can hear a faint rumble that might very well be the New York Subway System—the recording was made in Carnegie Hall), and the richness of the cello and bass sections is one of the glories of this recording. On the other end, the highs have a great deal of brilliance. None of this is apparent from RCA's butcher job. The bass is cut off (the slight rumble is gone—so is the quality of the lower string sound), and so are the highs. (I suspect this was done to get rid of surface noise, but the original was an extraordinarily quiet set, and the minor surface noise was indeed a small price to pay for a Battle Scene of such brilliance.) I am not, by the way, talking of minor differences. When compared to the originals, the re-issue sounds like it was dubbed over a telephone!

The original recording did have one problem—the engineers of 1928 kept turning up the volume any time the music got soft, and turning it down whenever the music got loud; they were afraid of the dynamic range inherent in the music. RCA has done nothing at all to alleviate this condition. In addition, their side-jobs are mediocre. And worst of all, rather than making the LP side-break in the same spot (at the beginning of the Battle) that has been chosen by every other company who has released the work on LP (including even RCA for its Leinsdorf and Reiner recordings), they have kept the turnover at the point necessitated by the 78 format, where side 5 ended and 6 began, right in the middle of the most exciting part of the Battle—at a spot where the loss of momentum created by this totally unnecessary turnover is almost enough to kill even Mengelberg's performance.

In sum, I am afraid that I have to recommend this recording on the basis of its uniqueness as a document, and its value as one of the major musical statements by one of the most important conductors to ever make records. But someone, somehow, should serve notice on RCA that this kind of shoddiness reflects very badly on them as a company; this record seriously misrepresents the original recording and performance—and in a particularly important way: the tonal lushness found in the original, and missing from this re-issue, is a crucial part of Strauss's conception. If there was a shred of responsibility at RCA headquarters someone would order the withdrawal of this release and have it done properly. Of course

it won't happen, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't.

Henry Fogel