

STRAUSS *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Heldenleben* • Vasily Petrenko, cond; Oslo PO • LAWO 1166 (Streaming audio: 79:57)
<https://app.napster.com/artist/vasily-petrenko/album/richard-strauss-also-sprach-zarathustra-op-30-ein-helden>

Collectors of Richard Strauss's tone poems can afford to be finicky, or even to turn their backs on upstart new recordings when we have Fritz Reiner, Rudolf Kempe, and Herbert von Karajan as enduring pillars of the Strauss discography—anytime I return to Reiner's 1961 *Don Juan* with the Chicago Symphony, I feel that no greater recording is imaginable. But the call of these orchestral thrill rides never ceases, and in recent years desirable recordings have emerged from Christian Thielemann, Vladimir Jurowski, Manfred Honeck, and François-Xavier Roth. To them can now be added this superb new release from Vasily Petrenko and the Oslo Philharmonic.



It's something of a cheeky release, too, because the pairing of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben* mimics the very first recording, from 1954, that Reiner made in Chicago after assuming leadership of the CSO. The two Living Stereo LPs became a landmark in the postwar hi-fi era, achieving tremendous sales. Although Reiner's remake of *Zarathustra* in 1962 is considered superior among collectors, no one would be without the 1954 version. You don't have to feel guilty about betraying old allegiances, however, to appreciate the vibrancy and imagination that Petrenko brings to these two scores. It's good news that this CD is the initial installment in a Strauss series from him and the Oslo orchestra.

Without Reiner's Chicago or Karajan's Berlin forces to overwhelm us with virtuosity, Petrenko's success depends very much on his conducting. Instead of brute power, which was the hallmark of Georg Solti's Strauss, or demonstration-quality sound, which was the hallmark of Reiner's Strauss in its day, Petrenko gives us beautiful phrasing and a light touch, where tempos aren't distended for maximum wow. The same qualities marked Roth's acclaimed Strauss cycle on Hänssler; even jaded ears perked up. Petrenko goes him one better. A podium star before he turned 30, at 43 he has attained mastery over color, instrumental balances, transitions, tension and release, sweeping momentum, and visceral excitement, in short, the entire working skill set of a superb conductor.

The famous opening of *Zarathustra* is done in tempo, without milking the timpani or the trumpet fanfare, leading immediately into the essence of this performance, which consists of detailed phrase-shaping that brings out the musical values in an overly familiar score. In the past I wasn't entirely convinced by LAWO's recorded sound, but here it is vivid and expansive, with an emphasis on woodwinds to achieve textural depth beyond Strauss's soaring string lines. One never feels the heavy hand of an engineer at the mixing board highlighting the brass or double basses. This is a very natural aural perspective, which suits Petrenko's focus on musicality over sonic impact. In *Fanfare* 41:3 I praised Jurowski's *Zarathustra* with the Berlin Radio Symphony along the same lines; it would be hard to choose between them.

Petrenko's reading should especially win over listeners who know the score well, because he is so imaginative in the intricacies of Strauss's scoring in between the big moments. The sparkling interplay in "Das Tanzlied" is quite lovely, for example. Going back to Reiner's 1962 recording, the power and heft of the Chicago Symphony are always in the forefront, while Petrenko's lower-key reading makes room for delicacy and charm. *Zarathustra*'s reputation for blockbuster moments needs to be leavened with the rhythmic buoyancy shown here.

The same qualities continue into *Ein Heldenleben*, a score that benefits from lightness when you don't have an orchestra like Karajan's Berlin Philharmonic to crush the music. From Petrenko you also feel the jubilation that runs throughout Strauss's tone poems, no matter how weighty his intended subject is. He had a background in philosophy, and we can debate how seriously to take the ideas he wanted to convey. Critics have been derisive of Strauss's self-serving depiction of himself as a hero of inflated musical proportions, but listeners love *Ein Heldenleben* for its bravura. In 2017 Valery Gergiev (another Russian who is attuned to Strauss) gave us a *Heldenleben* with the Munich Philharmonic that achieved depth through broad tempos and an air of gravity. Petrenko takes almost the opposite tack, laying on unrelenting excitement in the big orchestral tutti, at speed.

But I was just as impressed by how seamlessly he manages to interject the quasi-improvisational violin solos in "Des Helden Gefährtin" (The Hero's Companion) without interrupting the flow of the music; these tricky transitions are handled without a hint of herky-jerky. "Des Helden Walstatt" (The Hero at Battle) can occasion eye-rolling; it hovers close to the parody combats in *Don Quixote*. Petrenko does right by this section, pitching us into a raw, brazen conflict, never mind that Strauss was getting back at critics armed with quill pens. *Heldenleben* has a long peroration highlighted by quotations from Strauss's other tone poems, which is handled so beautifully here that any suggestion of vainglory vanishes.

I should make clear that the Oslo Philharmonic, which traces its international standing in modern times to the arrival of Mariss Jansons in 1979, plays with intensity bespeaking a proud ensemble putting its best foot forward. Petrenko has been Music Director since 2013, but he will soon leave both Oslo and his other orchestra in Liverpool. London and the Royal Philharmonic await, and so do I. Petrenko has hit a peak of excellence few can match right now. This thrilling Strauss album demonstrates what a gifted conductor can do to transcend familiarity and make old music new again.

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