



**Richard STRAUSS (1846-1949)**

[\*Also sprach Zarathustra\*](#), Op. 30 (1896) [36.12]

*Ein Heldenleben*, Op. 40 (1898) [45.43]

Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra/Vasily Petrenko

rec. 2016, Oslo Konserthus, Norway

**LAWO CLASSICS LWC1166** [79.56]

For his latest release on Lawo Classics, Vasily Petrenko with the Oslo Symphony Orchestra have recorded an all-Richard Strauss album comprising of a pair of enduringly popular tone poems, *Also sprach Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben*. The opportunity to hear Petrenko conducting Richard Strauss is certainly a mouthwatering prospect. In particular I recall the Russian conductor presiding over a stunning performance of *An Alpine Symphony* at Preston in 2015, so I am keen to learn if the performances will live up to their promise.

The first work on the disc, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, was composed by Strauss in 1896 and was inspired by the poetic imagery and chapter headings of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is in nine sections. Strauss himself described the programme as depicting "the relationship of nature and human will." The score is revered mainly for its wonderful opening passage, a depiction of Sunrise which is undoubtedly one of the glories of classical music. Petrenko's Oslo Philharmonic gleams and shimmers beautifully in *Sunrise* with the organ pedal reverberating impressively around Oslo Konserthus. However, it doesn't produce the dramatic impact of the finest accounts such as Steinberg, Reiner, and Karajan. Under Petrenko, the Philharmonic provide excellently drilled playing with clarity and smooth polish and cope well with the varying character of the individual sections while avoiding extremes of dynamic.

*Ein Heldenleben*, such an irresistible orchestral showpiece, including love and battle scenes and requiring a massive orchestra, tells the story of a Romantic imaginary hero. It can be interpreted as a musical portrait of Strauss himself, who was thirty-four when he conducted the première in 1899. A challenging score for orchestral players, it is cast in six broad sections and played without a pause. Strauss left no written programme but did give a descriptive title to each section. Strauss requires a massive orchestra with extended wind and brass sections and Petrenko bonds everything together with unwavering assurance, accompanying the imaginary hero on his adventures very convincingly. In such a vibrantly colourful score, crammed with incident, Petrenko reveals a surprising amount of often indiscernible orchestral detail. Particularly impressive is the performance of the third section, *Des Helden Gefährtin* (*The Hero's Companion*), a love portrait of Strauss's wife, Pauline de Ahna, effectively depicted by the solo violin of leader Elise Båtnes. Another notable passage is *Des Helden Weltflucht und Vollendung* (*The Hero's Retirement from this World and Completion*), displaying Strauss at his most generous. Petrenko and his players play handsomely yet don't achieve the often spine-tingling level of dramatic expression achieved by the best recordings.

Petrenko is successfully recorded at Oslo Konserthus, where he is afforded impressive clarity and balance. There is plenty of space around the recording, with all the climaxes captured securely together. Andrew Mellor has written the helpful booklet essay. There are just two tracks on the whole album, and unlike many recordings, it's disappointing that it's not possible to access individual sections of each work - nine sections for *Also sprach Zarathustra* and six sections for *Ein Heldenleben*.

Although I was brought up mainly with modern digital recordings of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben*, in my view it's the established, now 'classic' versions that hold sway from renowned conductors such as Fritz Reiner, Rudolf Kempe, Karl Böhm, William Steinberg and Herbert von Karajan. These conductors were all steeped in the Austro/German tradition and every recording I mention is of

high quality and eminently recommendable. In *Also sprach Zarathustra* my primary recommendation, for the remarkable excitement it generates, is from the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Steinberg recorded in 1971 at Symphony Hall, Boston, USA on Deutsche Grammophon. Recorded back in 1954 at Orchestra Hall, Chicago, I also value the splendid account from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Reiner on RCA Red Seal Living Stereo series. Two more striking accounts are Böhm with Berliner Philharmoniker in 1958 at Jesus-Christus-Kirche on EMI and Kempe with the Staatskapelle Dresden in 1971 from Lukaskirche on EMI. Impressive, too, is Karajan in his two recordings with the Berliner Philharmoniker from 1973 at Jesus-Christus-Kirche and in 1983 at Philharmonie, both on Deutsche Grammophon. Equally well served is *Ein Heldenleben*, with several recommendable recordings, notably the remarkable 1957 Kreuzkirche account from the Staatskapelle Dresden under Böhm on Deutsche Grammophon. Other excellent accounts are the 1954 Chicago Symphony Orchestra version under Reiner on RCA Red Seal Living Stereo series and Kempe with the Staatskapelle Dresden from Lukaskirche in 1972 on EMI Classics. Of a remarkably high standard are the three spectacular accounts from Karajan that he made with the Berliner Philharmoniker recorded in 1959 at Jesus-Christus-Kirche (Deutsche Grammophon), 1974 at Philharmonie (EMI) and 1984 at Philharmonie (Deutsche Grammophon). Worthy, too, is the performance from Eugene Ormandy with the Philadelphia Orchestra that he recorded in 1960 at Manhattan Center, NYC on Columbia/Sony. Having revisited Ormandy's account recently, although I relish the performance, I have become less enamoured with the overall sound quality. There is a splendid live 2001 Semperoper radio recording with the Staatskapelle Dresden under Giuseppe Sinopoli, part of the Edition Staatskapelle Dresden vol 35 on Profil. Of the newer recordings of *Ein Heldenleben*, especially worthy of attention is Ingo Metzmacher's 2007 Philharmonie account with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. Metzmacher has chosen to use Strauss's original ending. This version takes out the final brass-dominated climax to allow the writing to decay away to nothing.

Certainly, the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra plays beautifully under Vasily Petrenko, but the competition in these two Richard Strauss masterworks is remarkably fierce.

**Michael Cookson**

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2019/Apr/Strauss\\_Zarathustra\\_LWC1166.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2019/Apr/Strauss_Zarathustra_LWC1166.htm)