



Richard Strauss: Don Juan, Eine Alpensinfonie & Walzerfolge from Der Rosenkavalier

aud 95.611

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[Fanfare](#) (Arthur Lintgen - 01.11.2010)

Karl Böhm's interpretations of Richard Strauss's music tend to be fast (compared to modern practice) and more in line with the composer's tempos. His DVD performance of Don Juan with the Vienna Philharmonic (Fanfare 32:2) clocks in at just under 16 and a half minutes. This one is 46 seconds longer, and the difference is telling. Böhm generates explosive energy, but is just a little more relaxed. For example, he broadens his tempo when the strings play the famous horn theme at the climax to great dramatic effect.

Böhm also realizes that An Alpine Symphony will not tolerate forcing or rushing the tempos without destroying the mood of the piece or degenerating into empty bombast. He has a clear grasp of the work's arch-like structure. Böhm unfailingly emphasizes clarity of instrumental textures without sacrificing dramatic impact. As the orchestra musically ambles "Along the Stream," "On the Mountain Pasture," and "Through the Thickets and Brushwood," Böhm has a remarkable sense of how to move things along with subtle and constantly changing tempos that sustain musical interest where others merely plod their way to the summit. When the climax finally arrives "At the Summit," Böhm delivers the goods with a broad and relaxed tempo. The "Thunderstorm" is graphically cinematic, dramatically effective, and entirely musical. "Sunset" and the "Epilog" are ideally judged as Böhm revels in Strauss's lush string and brass sonorities.

Böhm's interpretation would undoubtedly be even more stunning in modern stereo sound. This early 1950s recording (made just before the stereo era) is actually pretty good in terms of high-frequency presence and instrumental detail. This is not unlistenable historic sound, but there are major problems, especially for an orchestral showpiece like An Alpine Symphony. The upper registers of the organ are OK, but deep bass (organ pedal) is missing in action. The trumpets sound so strident and shrill that they seriously detract from the effect of the performance, especially at high listening levels. The recording also lacks the rich and warm low midrange (low strings) that is critical to Strauss's lush orchestral sound.

Böhm's An Alpine Symphony and Don Juan are required listening for serious Straussians, but they will also need to have alternative versions in modern sound. Zubin Mehta (Decca/London) and Mariss Jansons (RCO Live SACD) lead the field sonically in An Alpine Symphony, and there are numerous Don Juans with good sound out there conducted by the usual suspects.