



Richard Strauss: Macbeth, Don Juan, Tod und Verklärung & Festmarsch in C

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GRAMOPHONE

Though one of Germany's oldest orchestras, the Staatskapelle Weimar has never been a major presence on disc. Just over a decade ago, though, Naxos released the first of a trio of well-received discs of them playing Strauss, an Alpensinfonie (9/06) that was followed by a Four Last Songs (5/08) and Sinfonia domestica (1/10). This orchestra, where Strauss himself had laid the foundations of his conducting career in the 1890s, revealed itself to be a force to be reckoned with in the composer's works.

This fact is underlined in this fine new recording under Kirill Karabits, who has been juggling his job as music director in Weimar with his post at the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra since 2016. It's an interesting programme, too, offering the early (though subsequently revised) Macbeth, plus two scores that brought breakthroughs in their different ways: Don Juan and Tod und Verklärung. The occasional Festmarsch makes a welcome filler.

The virtues familiar from those earlier discs are apparent here in an orchestral sound that is rich and vibrant, with lively strings, rounded, warm brass and characterful woodwind – and Audite captures the sound most satisfyingly at the Weimarahalle. Karabits shows himself to be a very respectable Straussian, too, offering a beautifully paced, brawny and broody reading of Macbeth. It's a performance that's powerfully driven and characterised by impressive sweep and biting conviction; though it's certainly not rushed, and the conductor takes plenty of time for that yearning climax that marks the score's halfway point (at around 10'10" here).

Don Juan is hugely enjoyable, with plenty of sensuality (listen to that first romantic episode around three minutes in, with the harp nicely audible) and bristling élan – the strings really dig in to their tremolandos accompanying the final return of the big horn theme (at 14'27"), for example. Karabits turns in a rousing account of Tod und Verklärung, too, although for me it doesn't quite match the warmth and lyricism of Sebastian Weigle's terrific recent Frankfurt account (Oehms, 2/18). The Festmarsch is not a piece to return to often, perhaps, but it's rousing presented here in a rare outing on disc.

So what are the drawbacks? For all the disc's enjoyability, one notices that that Weimar orchestra doesn't always command the same sharpness and clarity of some of its more glamorous German competitors, with some details occasionally getting lost. But there's still an enormous amount to like in these vivid, committed performances.