



**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart & Richard Strauss: Violin Concerto K 219 & Symphonia Domestica**

aud 97.535

EAN: 4022143975355



www.musicweb-international.com (Mark Sebastian Jordan - 05.09.2008)



This disc provides a pleasant snapshot of the work of Vladimir Ashkenazy live in concert with the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester, Berlin, the ensemble originally formed as the RIAS-Berlin Symphony and led by the great Ferenc Fricsay in the 1950s. Before Fricsay's death, the ensemble changed its name to the Berlin Radio Symphony, a name it kept through several music directors. Ashkenazy was director of the orchestra for a decade, starting in 1989, and was presiding when the ensemble changed to its present name in 1993. Presented here are two snapshots of his work with the orchestra, featuring Ashkenazy's "private passions" for the orchestral works of Richard Strauss and the concerted pieces of Wolfgang Mozart.

Ashkenazy has shown a strong commitment to Strauss both in concert and in the recording studio, so his *Symphonia Domestica* is a welcome visitor. The live performance from 1998 captured here brings Ashkenazy's soulful warmth and a delight in Strauss's orchestral effects—yes, even the vulgar ones, such as the infamous crying baby sequence. This release serves well to represent this part of Strauss's body of works in Ashkenazy's career, as well as a nice souvenir of his work in Berlin. I have seen that Ondine also released a *Symphonia Domestica* from when Ashkenazy conducted the Czech Philharmonic, but I haven't been able to hear that for comparison.

The present performance is amply satisfying, even if doesn't unseat any of the great recordings of the past, especially considering that a couple of those are performed by formidable representatives of what was once known as "the American sound". It is ironic that the two conductors most responsible for creating that highly virtuosic orchestral sound with whip-crack precision and muscular power were middle-European conductors. Fritz Reiner and George Szell used their orchestras in Chicago and Cleveland, respectively, as laboratories for attaining the elusive perfection demanded by the complex scores of Strauss and Mahler, while honing their players on the bread-and-butter repertory of Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. Strauss figured prominently in both conductors' work, albeit more so in Reiner's, as Szell seemed to maintain a slightly skeptical view of Strauss's exuberance, while Reiner enjoyed transforming that boundless energy into purely abstract music. In the end, they both left us with great recordings of *Symphonia Domestica*.

But to buck received wisdom, there is an often underrated conductor whom I am inclined to think actually surpassed Szell and Reiner in this work, and that is Zubin Mehta. If there is one symphonic work Mehta was born to conduct, it is the *Symphonia Domestica*. His good-natured charm and delight buoy the orchestral

effects in a way that others don't. Szell, for all his clarity and vigor, seems a bit stiff in comparison. Reiner, for all his sonic splendor, seems unwilling to indulge in Strauss's affectionate teasing of married life, remaining just on this side of tasteful reserve. Mehta pushes it out a little further, taking the spirited pictures for what they are: slices of the life of a successful, untroubled artist. By not shying away from the blatantly programmatic elements of this score, Mehta unexpectedly reveals that there are true depths lurking beneath the surface sentiment. While Reiner is delicate in the "Cradle Song" of the "Scherzo" section, and Szell is gentle, Mehta is the one who captures the precious magic of a quiet moment between parents and child. Likewise, in the following "Adagio", Mehta finds the selfless devotion at the heart of the music, which the somewhat restless Szell recording misses, and the smoothly flowing Reiner smooths over.

In separate sections, one could say that others trump Mehta, but in terms of overall excellence and coherence of vision, he comes out on top with an unhurried, spacious performance clocking in at almost 46 minutes. Szell is arguably better in the opening of the work, energetically presenting the themes with plenty of personality. His tight control never relaxes, bringing the work under the wire at almost five minutes faster than Mehta's Berlin Philharmonic recording for CBS. Reiner, being a little more relaxed, captures more of the gentle side of the score than Szell, though without the simple sincerity of Mehta. One rare performance worth hearing is a live 1945 air check led by Bruno Walter which the New York Philharmonic released in a box set of historic broadcasts almost a decade ago; it's still available directly from the orchestra. Walter's tempos are as brisk as Szell's, but despite the limited mono sound, the live concert situation proves that with a little encouragement from an audience, the over-the-top finale can truly romp. Speaking of Mehta, I have not had the chance to hear his Los Angeles Philharmonic performance of the *Symphonia Domestica*, and have made my above comments based on his Berlin remake, couple with a fine *Burleske* with Daniel Barenboim as piano soloist. But considering that Mehta's L.A. *Zarathustra* and *Alpine Symphony* are both better than later remakes, I would love to hear his early *Domestica*, currently available in a Decca box set.

Ashkenazy's orchestra is no match for the plummy perfection of Cleveland or Chicago, but their slightly leaner tone helps in terms of clarity, though Ashkenazy doesn't do as much sonic sculpting as a Reiner or Szell. Ashkenazy's obvious affection for the work does however remind me of Mehta. The live one-off recording preserves a fine sense of occasion, though there is little bloom to the recorded sound. I have often heard Berlin's *Philharmonie* praised as a great place to hear a live concert in person, though live recordings from the venue rarely find a sweet spot for microphones, and this one is no different. Note that the total disc time listed above reflects the inclusion of about five minutes of applause which is, mercifully, separately tracked. I enjoy the sense of occasion in live recordings that keep the applause, but I can't imagine myself wanting to re-enact a full concert scenario with endless applause very often.

As for the Mozart, I would say that most performers would not make this work a comfortable disc-mate for *Symphonia Domestica*, but then most performers aren't Pinchas Zukerman. Ashkenazy very much follows his soloist's manner, provided a fairly leisurely, well-upholstered account of the "Turkish" Concerto. Zukerman is notorious for his reactionary stance against everything associated with historically-informed playing styles. There's probably no major violinist today who would give a more old-fashioned sounding performance of this work. Indeed, the most apt comparison would be to Zukerman's earlier recording of the work, done in the late 1960s for Columbia, with Daniel Barenboim conducting the English Chamber Orchestra. What is truly remarkable is that forty years on, Ashkenazy's concept remains pretty much the same. Those who like it can claim consistency, though

those who doubt it can level charges of both stubbornness and lack of imagination against the violinist.

What is amusing is that as much as Zukerman fulminates against period instrument scholarship and their fussy performance practices, at least a trace element of that spirit has crept in under the door, because this performance shaves a little over a minute of the earlier rendition, without demonstrating a different concept. Ashkenazy is arguably a little lighter in touch than Barenboim, but this remains Mozart for those looking for a throwback to older styles. On the other hand, listeners interested in those styles may instead opt for the EMI recording where Yehudi Menuhin brings a little more thoughtfulness to the work, even if he didn't have Zukerman's rich, dark tone by the time his rendition was recorded in the early 1960s.

Interesting finds from the vaults, then, and I hope they do well enough to encourage Audite to keep digging for more treasures. Collectors and fans will enjoy the Ashkenazy-centric booklet notes (in German and English) by Habakuk Traber, which enhance the fond sense of retrospective of a well-loved conductor's work.