



WEBER Oberon Overture. MENDELSSOHN Violin Concerto in e¹. STRAUSS Also sprach Zarathustra •
 Klaus Tennstedt, cond; ¹Edith Peinemann (vn); Chicago SO • ST. LAURENT STUDIO 1062 (70:02) Live:
 Chicago 6/7 & 8/1984

In his lifetime Klaus Tennstedt was closely associated with the masterpieces of the Austro-German repertoire, making the biggest impression with his Beethoven, Bruckner, and Mahler. Insofar as Richard Strauss carried that tradition forward, Tennstedt wasn't really identified with his music. Any live performance of a major Strauss work is all the more valuable, and here we get *Also sprach Zarathustra* from 1984 in Chicago displaying Tennstedt's gifts in his prime.

The context of this event is important, first because we are hearing Georg Solti's Chicago Symphony, which was famous for its Strauss, done in blockbuster fashion under a galvanizing conductor. Sometimes reviewers say that an orchestra has been trained to perform repertoire in a certain way by the conductor. I have only faint belief in this, but it would be undeniable that the CSO and Solti were a brand name in Strauss. As for Tennstedt himself, he had enjoyed a meteoric rise after making his first U.S. appearance in Boston in December, 1974. Every major orchestra wanted him to guest conduct, and he was capable of greatness leading concerts in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.

Those cities have been the main American sources for the invaluable Tennstedt Edition issued by St. Laurent Studios, of which this is Vol. 35. There's always a question of sound quality from live broadcasts, and happily, except for some negligible background hiss, this Chicago concert comes in very good FM-quality stereo. The perspective and balances are natural, including the placement of Edith Peinemann's violin in the Mendelssohn concerto. Only a few details, such as the over-reverberant timpani at the outset of *Zarathustra*, might give pause, and they are a matter of taste. I've heard more obtrusive timpani in commercial recordings of the piece.

It's no surprise to discover that Tennstedt's *Zarathustra* is very different from Solti's. The emphasis is on musicality rather than showiness, with beautiful phrase-shaping and the shirking of bombast and overblown climaxes. The opening prelude isn't spectacular by hi-fi standards, but in the next two sections— "Von den Hinterweltlern" (Of the Backworldsmen) and "Von der großen Sehnsucht" (Of the Great Longing)— Strauss's long buildup, which takes six minutes, is done with great control. Other conductors, most recently Gustavo Dudamel with the Vienna Philharmonic (DG), have slowed down these movements, reaching for the same suspenseful accumulation of harmonic tension, but Tennstedt does it masterfully, without sounding the least idiosyncratic.

I don't want to imply that the Chicago Symphony tamps down their virtuosity. The playing is never less than spectacular and thrilling. When the music reaches one of those ecstatic plateaus so characteristic of Strauss, as in the next section. "Von den

Freuden und Leidenschaften" (Of Joys and Passions), the CSO soars to great heights. Tennstedt always had the ability to liberate his players as well as to guide and control the performance. Both aspects are beautifully on display here, and one mustn't overlook the individuality of the first-desk solos, one of the hallmarks of a world-class orchestra.

The other highlight here is Weber's *Oberon Overture*, which is more than a curtain-raiser. The beauty of Weber's major overtures remains fresh today, which Tennstedt underscores in a reading that feels at once natural and joyful. Less prominent for the conductor's role perhaps but still admirable is the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. Born in Mainz, Germany, in 1937 (and still very much alive), Edith Peinemann had a major career, and the reputation that went with it. But her recorded legacy is slim.

I don't have a real image of Peinemann's playing in my mind, but in the Mendelssohn her poise, purity of tone, and aristocratic manner (to use a long-outmoded term) remind me of Nathan Milstein. This is altogether a beautiful reading, not only for Peinemann's immaculate solo performance but also for Tennstedt's accompaniment, which bends naturally to every gesture of the violinist. It's rare to hear a performance so seamlessly sympathetic. As in the Weber, one feels how fresh and sparkling such familiar music can be.

As for potential overlaps in Tennstedt's discography, I find no indication of a previous Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, so this account is even more valuable. The *Oberon Overture* can be found on a deleted BBC Legends recording, also live and very fine, with the London Philharmonic. *Also sprach Zarathustra* was recorded commercially with the LPO for EMI in 1990. It has had many reissues and is currently available either on the used market or as a download from online sources. A poor-sounding version of this Chicago *Zarathustra* from 1984 can be found on YouTube. The CSO has released none of these performances. Obscurely, the Strauss appeared on a Japanese pirate label called Navikiese.

Lacking a complete Tennstedt discography, I can't claim that my remarks are anywhere close to definitive, however. But I can confidently recommend everything on this new release as a prime example of Tennstedt at his best, and for collectors it is a must-listen. Brief final applause has been included after each piece.

St. Laurent Studio recordings are available through Norbeck, Peters & Ford (www.norpete.com).

Huntley Dent

Five stars: Tennstedt at his best in a fine remastering