



STRAUSS *Ein Heldenleben*

- Willem Mengelberg, cond;
Concertgebouw O; New York PO¹
- ST. LAURENT STUDIO 78-1018
mono (68:35)

GRIEG *Two Elegiac Melodies.*

CHERUBINI *Anacreon Overture.*

SAINT-SAËNS *1Le Rouet d'Omphale*

The big news here is a superb transfer of Willem Mengelberg's classic 1941 Concertgebouw recording of Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*. Devotees of the Dutch conductor have long debated whether this or his 1928 New York version is to be preferred. I, for one, am thrilled to have both. Earlier EMI transfers of the Concertgebouw recording were quite poor, restricted in both dynamic range and orchestral color. A transfer by Hubert Wendel on his own label some years ago was excellent but very difficult to find. A Naxos transfer by Mark Obert-Thorn in 2001 was better than EMI's effort and not quite as brilliant as Wendel's. There was also a fine transfer on Teldec by Seth Winner, but Yves Saint-Laurent's is a significant improvement over any of them. I directly compared this new one with each of those earlier ones, and was surprised at the degree of improvement that Saint-Laurent Studio has achieved. Working from Capitol-Telefunken 78s, Saint-Laurent has given us what I believe is the most vivid picture yet of the range of orchestral color that Mengelberg drew from the score. One can say that the New York Philharmonic of 1928 was a superior orchestra to the 1941 Concertgebouw, which had suffered personnel losses due to the Nazi takeover of the Netherlands in 1940. But what remained was still a fine orchestra, which plays *Ein Heldenleben* with passion, in a work that Strauss dedicated by Strauss to this conductor and orchestra.

For those who think of Mengelberg as a significantly interventionist conductor, this performance might surprise. The conducting is flexible, employing more *rubato* than others might have, but it is in no way excessive. The same can be said for Mengelberg's use of *portamento* in the strings. It is tastefully applied and is responsible for the sense of warmth that pervades the entire performance. The overall shape of the score is never distended, and the warmth and sheer beauty of the love music as well as the force of The Hero's battles are all present in the right proportions. If I try to compare the two Mengelberg recordings, I would say that there is a bit more energy and even animal excitement in New York but richer strings and firmer shaping of the slow music in Amsterdam. Anyone who loves this music should not be without the Concertgebouw recording, and St. Laurent Studio's version is the one to have.

For filler St. Laurent has added the kind of bon-bons that used to be an integral part of the symphonic repertoire but have, sadly, fallen out of fashion. The original recording of Cherubini's *Anacreon Overture* was overly reverberant, and no transfer has ever solved that problem. YSL has managed to tame the boominess a bit, but removing reverberation is simply not something that can be done. Mengelberg's reading is firmly shaped and affectionate, but it still sounds like

it is being played in an empty oil drum. Better are the two Grieg *Elegiac Melodies*, with a more focused recorded sound and the richness of string playing that was a hallmark of the Mengelberg Concertgebouw in its prime (the Grieg pieces were recorded in 1931). Whether playing at full throttle or with the most delicate *pianissimi*, the strings never lose the core of their tone. As for Saint-Saëns's colorful depiction of Omphale's spinning wheel, a listener predisposed to think of Mengelberg as a heavy-handed conductor of the German school will likely be surprised at the lightness of touch and the delicate transparency of color he draws from the orchestra. For all of these miniatures, the new transfer is cleaner and fuller than any prior one I've encountered.

As is the norm for this label, there are no program notes but complete documentation of the original recording dates. St. Laurent Studio recordings are available at Norbeck, Peters, & Ford (norpete.com).

Henry Fogel

