These four disks mark the start of a larger project by the Naxos company involving the same core performers in recordings of late nineteenth- and 20th-century Italian music. According to the orchestra's website[1] there will be 27 CDs appearing over the next five years, recorded both in the studio and from live concerts. The favoured composers will be Casella, Malipiero, Busoni and Petrassi. If the standard of musicianship on the recordings is on the same high level as these Martucci disks, we will be in for a treat.

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Richard Strauss

An Alpine Symphony (*Eine Alpensinfonie*) Op. 64

Staatskapelle Weimar

Antoni Wit *cond*

Naxos 8.557811 (54 minutes: DDD)
Notes in English and German.

For musicologists, analysts and performers alike, Strauss's final tone poem *Eine Alpensinfonie* (1915) is a problematic work. Musicologists have to contend with the fact that over its 13-year gestation period the project reinvented itself several times, and ghosts of its earlier incarnations – as an expression of Nietzschean anti-religiosity or a memorial to the tragic suicide of the playwright Karl Stauffer – emerge to complicate the ostensible subject matter, the description of a mountain ascent and descent. Analysts are confronted with a work which openly makes symphonic claims in its title, but whose single-movement structure fractures into unsymphonic miniature segments in response to the moment-to-moment programmaticism. This same issue vexes interpreters too, who face the challenge of creating a sense of coherence across the sprawling vastness of Strauss's canvas in spite of the variegated surface events. The score itself poses formidable technical difficulties to players, and the enormous forces (around 125 players) and non-standard instruments required (including thunder and wind machines, organ, cow bells and an aerophone) render performances less frequent than its vivid pictorialness might otherwise warrant. This new recording by the Staatskapelle Weimar directed by Antoni Wit triumphantly surmounts these challenges and presents us with a compelling account of a work often dismissed by cognoscenti as little more than a pot-pourri of special effects.

The Staatskapelle Weimar is the successor to the orchestra that Strauss led as Kapellmeister between 1889 and 1894, and appropriately Strauss's music is well represented in its discography (most recently by a 2008 release of *Sinfonia Domestica*, also directed by Wit). This line of historical continuity between the current players and the group of musicians that first performed *Macbeth*, *Don*

[1] See www.orchestrasinfonicadiroma.it (accessed 14 December 2009).

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Juan and *Tod und Verklärung* does not amount to an 'authentic' performing tradition, or convey any particular authority on this interpretation, of course: if nothing else, the premiere of *Eine Alpensinfonie* was given by the Dresden Court Orchestra in Berlin nearly two decades after Strauss left Weimar. Nevertheless, the orchestra does display a decided affinity with music of this style and period, in keeping with the preponderance of music from the late nineteenth and (to a lesser extent) twentieth centuries in its recording catalogue, with some welcome coverage of non-mainstream repertoire (including disks devoted to music by Bruch, Joachim and Fürtwängler).[2]

Across the set of tone poems as whole there is a general durational inflation to be observed, and *Eine Alpensinfonie* is the longest of Strauss's orchestral works. The present performance clocks in at a whopping 54 minutes 14 seconds, which is at least 3 minutes more than the other four versions in my possession, and over 10 minutes longer than Solti's 1979 recording with the Bavarian Radio Symphony orchestra.[3] Some might feel that Strauss's already elephantine score is being stretched beyond acceptable limits here (is there any other single symphonic movement of such expansive dimensions?), especially as the thematic material is at times rather inferior. Wit has chosen to emphasize the monumentality of the Alps and the sublimity of the climber's experience, which gives his interpretation a tremendous sense of poise. The trade-off is that this approach sacrifices some of the drive that makes other accounts convincing. The tempi in Wit's performance throughout are a shade slower than average, but it is in the outer portions of the work where this is most obvious. His approach in the opening 'Nacht' section is particularly deliberate: it takes almost exactly 4 minutes, in contrast to a more typical duration of 3 minutes plus a few seconds. The static cluster harmonies are thereby rendered even more immobile than usual and the eventual accelerando leading into the 'Sonnenaufgang' is arguably more effective as a result. The ascent motif at the beginning of 'Der Anstieg' (bars 74ff.) is taken at around ♩ = 72, a far cry from Solti's impetuous ♩ = 90. Admittedly, Solti's approach might be justified by one of Strauss's remarks: he informed the conductor Wilhelm Mengelberg in a private communication that the slower note values at bars 81–83 represent the premature windedness of someone who had started the ascent too quickly.[4] Whether Solti knew this or not is undetermined, and the matter raises much larger questions, such as whether and to what extent an interpreter ought to take into consideration communications from the composer that are not transmitted as part of the official 'text of the work'. Without attempting any general pronouncement on these complex issues, my personal preference in this case is for Wit's more measured approach; Solti's 'Der Anstieg' sounds overly driven, particularly since this theme is the first utterance in E♭ major (a central tonality in the work), and thus needs to be marked like a first theme after a tonally malleable introduction.

The issue of tempo becomes critically important in 'Auf dem Gipfel', the literal and figurative peak of the work. The climber's 'exhausted delight'[5] (*entzückter*

[2] Their discography may be found through the website of the Nationaltheater, Weimar (url: www.nationaltheater-weimar.de/frontend/index.php?page_id=94&ses_id=99b597270369bb9c8da7511d1ada1924, accessed 14 December 2009).

[3] Richard Strauss, *Eine Alpensinfonie*, Op. 64. Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Sir Georg Solti *cond*, Decca 4406182.

[4] Letter dated 9 November 1915; quoted in Walter Werbeck, *Die Tondichtungen von Richard Strauss* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1996): 278.

[5] Werbeck, *Tondichtungen*, 278.

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Erschöpfung) at bar 571 gives way to a fuller appreciation of his achievement and the magnificent panorama before him. At this point, Strauss's music verges perilously close to bombast, with the fortissimo dynamic persisting until well into the following 'Vision' section. The present recording brings out the sense of accomplishment that the climber feels on attaining the summit, but this very stateliness exposes the weaknesses of the music, in spite of the lush brass and string sonorites. Such doubts as to the quality of Strauss's inspiration in this passage are much less in evidence while listening to Solti's recording, lost in the intoxication of sound he creates by sweeping from climax to climax. In the penultimate 'Ausklang' section, too, matters are arguably a little overstretched in Wit's interpretation, as the effect of the slower pace is exacerbated by relatively inactive lines and subdued harmonic movement. Despite these caveats, the tempi chosen by the Staatskapelle are in the main convincing, and as a whole it hangs together well.

In his generally competent liner notes to the recording, Keith Anderson locates the 'original inspiration' for *Eine Alpensinfonie* in a 'schoolboy mountaineering expedition during which the participants had at one point lost their way, and on their descent had been drenched in a thunder storm' (p. 3). The incident he describes occurred in 1879, after which Strauss reported: 'The next day I described the whole hike on the piano. Naturally huge tone painting and smarminess à la Wagner.'[6] The cinematic quality to the tone painting in *Eine Alpensinfonie* has drawn much attention from the beginning, and is prismatically realized in the present recording where the fractionally slower tempi permit greater precision. The infamous waterfall has rarely been conveyed with such clarity and delicacy before: it has the effect of an IMAX experience with every drop visible rather than the usual mist-drenched approximation. When the waterfall becomes the background in the immediately following 'Erscheinung' (the apparition of an Alpine fairy), the orchestra exercises a welcome dynamic restraint, very different from the rumbustious playing in some previous accounts of this passage. The lengthy decrescendos in 'Eintritt in den Wald' were perfectly graded, and in bar 200 my attention was riveted by an exuberant birdcall figure in the E♭-clarinet part, a detail of the score that had escaped me previously. This section was so shaped that the eventual emergence of the transformed version of the climber's theme (bar 230) had a pleasing inevitability to it.

In sum, despite the length of the run-time, this is a performance of Strauss's final tone poem where one's attention is riveted from start to finish, such is the attention to detail and the unprecedented clarity. The weaknesses in the recording are basically those in the work itself, and the playing is distinguished throughout. Curiously, when I read the disk in Windows Media Player, it informed me that this was Ashkenazy's performance of *Eine Alpensinfonie*, an error that muddled up track names. At least iTunes recognized the recording, which laid to rest any suspicions that the spirit of Barrington-Coupe was still at work in the world, seeking what it might devour.

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[6] Letter from Strauss to Thuille, 26 August [1879?]; translated by Susan Gillespie in Bryan Gilliam, ed., *Richard Strauss and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 227.

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