

CD REVIEW 46

RICHARD STRAUSS

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Don Quixote, op 35

Paul Tortelier (cello), Berlin PO, Rudolf Kempe

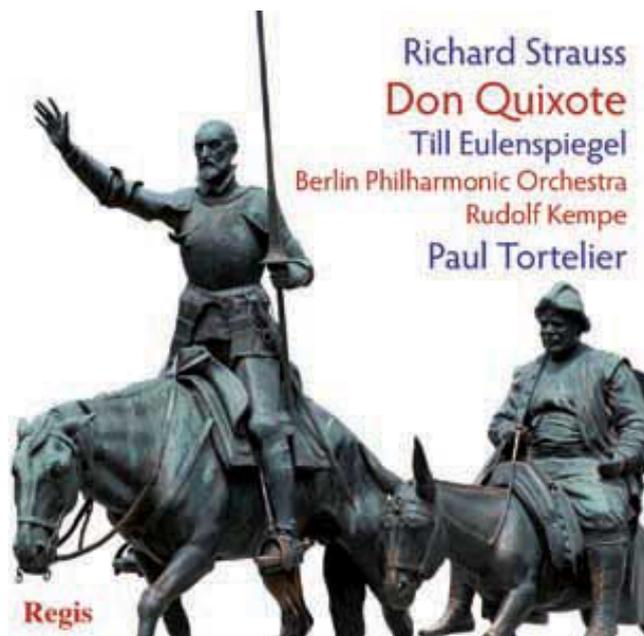
Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche, Op 28

Berlin PO, Rudolf Kempe

Don Juan, Op 20

Berlin PO, Fritz Lehmann

Rudolf Kempe was a brilliant German conductor. Who will ever forget his Proms performance of Dvorak's New World Symphony and Richard Strauss's Ein Hellenleben. Both performances were electrifying and caught fire. Dvorak has never been played better. The Richard Strauss was unbelievable and I fell in love with it because of this performance.



Members of his British orchestra, the RPO, have told me that 'Kempe never gave a bad or adequate performance. He cared for every detail, the correct balance of sound and he treated the orchestra well and with genuine respect.'

Other members have said, 'He had a unique personality. He was shy and unassuming. He was not a tyrant like Solti, or useless like Barbirolli who never put any drama in the music and feared aggression in music. It all had to be gentle and ultra refined. Kempe was fastidious and particular but very kind and generous with it.'

He was born in Dresden on 14 June 1910 and was originally an oboist and a competent pianist. During the war, he entertained the troops and from 1949-1952 conducted the Dresden Opera Company. From 1951, he conducted the Vienna Opera and succeeded Solti at the Bavarian State Opera from 1952 to 1954 and immediately raised the quality of this Company. His debut at Bayreuth was in 1960 with a Ring Cycle with such singers as Astrid Varnay and Brigit Nilsson. That same year, Beecham invited him to be the Associate Conductor with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Kempe immediately abolished the male-only rule of Beecham who would not let women in his orchestra. From 1960 to 1972, Kempe was the conductor of the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich and, from 1967, conducted the Munich PO. He was appointed conductor of the BBC SO but died before taking up the post. He was to conduct Beethoven's Missa Solemnis on the opening night of the 1976 BBC Proms season. Instead, it was performed in his memory. He died on 12 May 1976 in Zurich just before his 66th birthday.

Don Quixote is given a rousing and sensitive performance with every part of the orchestra crystal clear from the side drum and the xylophone to the woodwind, brass and strings. The humour is caught perfectly and the whole performance is magical. Of course, Tortelier brings a ravishing tone to the solo cello part and watch out for the tuba! The performance is alive, vital and the sound quality is so good that you think you are there in the hall. Consider the unstoppable drama from 20 minutes onwards and the chuckling woodwind. The brass snarl magnificently. Get caught up in the 'tornado' at 27 minutes.

While this is a set of variations, I am not interested in identifying what part of the music refers to which episode as it deters from the enjoyment of the piece. Does it really matter when Quixote mistakes windmills for giants and when the priests appear carrying a statute of the Virgin Mary and what is the outburst around 34 minutes. Is it vital to know? The cello in the final six minutes or so is very beautiful.

In Richard Strauss's Domestic Symphony there is apparently a passage representing he and his wife being intimate. People have taken more interest in where this passage is, rather than enjoying the music.

Members of the BPO have told me that they played better under Kempe than Karajan who was their chief conductor from 1954- 1989. ' Karajan was self-promoting and narcissistic; Kempe was a natural person and never rude or impertinent to the orchestra as was Karajan.'

Till Eulenspiegel is also given a super performance. The opening and recurring horn theme is famous. Again, without identifying where each merry prank occurs, the work is completely humorous and mischievous. Again, Kempe brings out every detail including some you may not have heard before in what is a fine performance in which the conductor captures all the varying aspects of this rogue.

Don Juan is a glorious symphonic poem and contains some of the finest orchestration you will ever hear.

Fritz Lehmann was born in Mannheim on 17 May 1904 and, as a conductor, had a wide range from the Baroque to the modern. He was an advocate of period instruments. He founded the Berlin Motet Choir. He died young at the age of 51 in the interval of a performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion on Good Friday, 30 May 1956 in Munich. Another conductor took over and news of Lehmann's death was not notified until the performance was completed.

His performance of Don Juan is good and included on this bargain-priced CD is all the more welcome. Although there is one strange moment when a bar seems to be repeated, but this would be an editing fault.

However, there is only one recording of this sumptuous score and that is by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago SO originally released as a LP by RCA Victor. I have worn my recording out!

Buy this CD!

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