

Richard Strauss: *Tod und Verklärung*

A survey of the major recordings

by Ralph Moore

Strauss composed *Death and Transfiguration*, the fourth of his half a dozen tone poems, while he was still only in his mid-twenties. He had been a convinced atheist since his teens, actively rejecting Christianity while under the influence of Nietzsche; thus his depiction of the journey of a dying man's soul towards "transfiguration" must in this context be understood in terms of artistic and human aspiration rather than Christian salvation. In his own description of the work, he states that the dying man has "striven towards the highest idealistic aims" – presumably as a musician – and on his deathbed, he reportedly said, "Dying is exactly as I composed it sixty years ago in *Tod und Verklärung*." Despite his convictions as a "freethinker" it is hard not hear a profound spirituality in much of his music but it is equally evident that he rejected conventional religious belief. To accuse him of somehow being hypocritical for writing music of a transcendental character is, I think, jejune; besides, as I never tire of tiresomely intoning, it is not the job of a critic or reviewer to take the moral temperature of a composer but rather to consider the music *per se*.

It has elicited an intriguing range of reactions, from outright contempt for its supposed bombast, faux-profundity and calculated sentimentality, to unstinting admiration for its economical construction and emotional impact. Personally, I love it – but I am an unapologetic Strauss junkie.

Regarding the work's structure and content, I here quote this succinct paragraph from my colleague John France's review of Karajan's 1960 recording below, with acknowledgements:

"The work is divided into four sections: the sick man on his deathbed; the battle between life and death; the moment of death; and finally, Transfiguration. People will sympathise with at least part of the "programme" – certainly as they grow older – but it is possible to hear this as absolute music. It is a purely musical drama, without reference to any programme, whose strength lies in its thematic transformation, orchestral colour and long-spanned architecture."

Those four sections are roughly equal and consist of:

I. Largo: The dying man's physical suffering; restless breathing and heartbeat, pain and feverish agitation.

II. Allegro molto agitato: The struggle with death — memories and visions of childhood and youth emerge amid increasingly violent struggle.

III. Meno mosso: The transfiguration — memories of his life's aspirations and achievements appear; the music becomes increasingly calm, serene and visionary.

IV. Moderato: Death and transfiguration — earthly life falls away and the famous transfiguration theme appears in its final, fullest, radiant form.

There are at least hundred recordings; as in previous surveys, I am concentrating on those recordings in modern sound and am thus not concerned with historic accounts, including Strauss' own two – which are not, in fact, especially gripping – with the exception of Pristine's issue of Furtwängler's 1950 performance which has been given the "Ambient Stereo" treatment. Furthermore, to consider every one would be impracticable, so I am being selective and have confined myself to the twenty-seven below. As is my habit, I have also included a few reviews of less-than-ideal recordings as caveats – and because I had already posted reviews of them on this site, and hence they are linked. Runtimes range between 22 (Horenstein) and 30 (Celibidache) minutes and unsurprisingly the timing of a typical performance lies midway between those two extremes but, as ever, the success of a recording depends more on intensity of phrasing than crude timings.

I am always amused by cognoscenti taking a condescending attitude towards Strauss' supposedly vulgar and meretricious tone poems – yet they are beloved of the public, fill a concert hall and have been performed and recorded by every great conductor with no exceptions of which I am aware. Hence the

list below features a lot of big names and the options for a first-class recording are many. Doing this survey has merely cemented my absolute adoration of this work.

Furtwängler, 1950, Pristine Audio [24:35]

Wiener Philharmoniker

I referred to this performance briefly in my review of the whole disc: “Furtwängler’s Strauss is very stern, grand and grim; thus the opening to *Tod und Verklärung* is very slow, deliberate and monumental until Furtwängler unleashes the orchestra. Maybe he does not generate the elemental power of Karajan but it is still mightily impressive.”

There is indeed a profundity to this, a visionary quality which emerges intact despite the inevitably compromised sound - but Pristine’s improvements to it certainly help enormously as the bass is trenchant and the horns sonorous and there is very little distortion in loud ensembles. His famous flexibility is not excessive just suggestive of spontaneity and fluidity and the tension he generates for the crowning apotheosis is gripping – much more so than Strauss’ own historical recordings as conductor.

Reiner, 1956, Decca [24:08]

Wiener Philharmoniker

The sound here is extraordinarily immediate for so old a recording and the playing is magnificent. This is a tense, tragic, very human account; Reiner’s grip is absolute and drama pervades every bar. The strings are superb and the woodwind especially plangent in that typically Viennese fashion – reedy, nasal and pungent. There is a drive about the whole performance which makes the climax feel inevitable and its serenity is remarkable.

(Reiner also recorded this with the RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra in 1950, obviously in mono sound, so I have not included it here. It’s a pity that is the one included in the RCA Red Seal Strauss/Reiner box set but obviously this under review was Decca’s.)

Szell, 1957, Sony Classical [23:54]

Cleveland Orchestra

This is a typical, classic Szell recording, rather similar to Reiner’s but with tauter, more transparent textures and a clean, only slightly dated-sounding recording. The woodwind and harp in the opening section are very forward but not aggressively so and Szell’s gift for bringing out instrumental strands is much in evidence. There is no lack of weight in the orchestra – what a virtuosic band it is – but of course Szell would stand for no less. He pushes on at the start of the second section so fiercely that the unanimity of the players is challenged but they triumph. Besides, Szell can relax and the ensuing gentle reminiscences flow smoothly and the peroration is broad and noble, with no sense of undue haste. One drawback: the tam-tam is somewhat subdued...

Karajan, 1960, Gramola [23:56]

Wiener Philharmoniker

Karajan recorded this four times, the first in 1953 with the Philharmonia being in mono and thus not considered here. This is a comparatively swift account, beautifully played and well recorded for its age, if a bit remote. The VPO invariably responded very positively to this work regardless of who was at the helm.

I quote from JF’s [review](#) above in my introduction with regard to the work’s structure; he goes onto make these brief comments: “Karajan’s account presents two sides of the piece. There is a “shattering intensity” inherent in the struggle between life and death, but also a gentler, more sensitive side in the childhood memories and the apotheosis. Surely the interpretation of the closing bars is heartbreakingly beautiful.”

I cannot argue with that; the only disadvantage is that Karajan recorded two more rather more sumptuously recorded versions in stereo and digital, reviewed below, and they are generally considered superior – unless you want Karajan in more driven, concentrated mode than he is in those more Romantic interpretations, in which case this is the one for you – and yes, JF is right; the ending is terrific – poised and powerful.

Monteux, 1960, RCA Victrola; Urania [24:37]

San Francisco Symphony

This is interesting: at first, it is a warmer, sadder, gentler, more reflective take on the first section of the score bringing out its humanity – almost like a meditation on the pathos of death. That doesn't mean that the whirlwind passion of the second section is in the least underplayed – the SFS orchestra plays like demons and Monteux takes wholly pardonable liberties with tempi and phrasing to accentuate the emotion – and I really, really like it. This is a thrilling performance – the brass blare raucously, the tam-tam is all-enveloping and the Monteux wrings every drop of excitement out of the struggle. Just occasionally ensemble is a tad ragged but that just adds tension. The finale is as mighty and overwhelming as any other recording here – including Karajan's. I had no idea Monteux had this kind of performance in him.

There is always a surprise when I undertake a survey – this is it.

(How the typo in “Tod **un** [sic] Verklärung” on the cover of the recent Urania CD issue got past anyone's eyes is another matter...)

Klemperer, 1961, EMI [22:26]

Philharmonia Orchestra

This is the polar opposite to Monteux's account; it is grim, spare and “architectural”. Klemperer does not linger – hence the timing – and the listener is always conscious of his concern for structural cohesion so we are not allowed any indulgent pauses to smell the flowers but press on towards the inevitable conclusion. The Philharmonia generally plays very well – notwithstanding the flaw observed below – embracing Klemperer's stark, unsentimental approach and the sound is very good for its vintage, but this is not my preferred way with this music – surely a little more overt emotionalism is in order? However, it will suit those who want a more straightforward reading. Having said that, I am still swept along by the last three minutes.

Paul Corfield Godfrey's [review](#) in 2013 expressed some reservations about this recording, summing up its character neatly:

“...comparisons can be made between the Klemperer/Legge and Karajan/Culshaw approaches in *Tod und Verklärung*, where the death struggles of the protagonist here lack the urgent violence of Karajan's very forward trombones. Less satisfactory is the problematic end of the work, which can with the wrong approach sound so much like a Hollywood ‘heavenly conclusion’ to some epic film or other. In seeking to avoid this effect Klemperer goes too far in the other direction; the purposeful tread towards transfiguration is all too easily achieved, and is not helped by some decidedly queasy-sounding brass chording towards the end.”

Kempe, 1970, EMI [22:29]

Staatskapelle Dresden

Kempe is always a “safe” choice in Strauss – and I do not mean that condescendingly; furthermore, he is at the helm of one of the great Strauss orchestras with a long pedigree of having given premieres of his works. As a result, we hear an account which combines warmth and clarity and dramatic momentum; Kempe drives the music onward but knows when to apply rubato; the whole thing hangs together. The

Dresden brass and timpani in particular are resplendent. Is the performance perhaps just a shade too “tasteful” – missing the abandon we encounter in more released recordings? Maybe, but there is a real snarl to the brass at 15:29, for example, and the build-up to the final section is magisterial before the glowing conclusion.

Horenstein, 1970, Chandos; HDTT [21:52]

London Symphony Orchestra

My colleague briefly critiques this in his [review](#) of Horenstein’s recording of Mahler’s Third Symphony, to which this was appended as there was time to record it in the sessions. He writes of its “dramatic thrust” and how “the opening is beautifully paced and detailed, while the apotheosis of the Transfiguration theme (from 17:26) has genuine grandeur.” I concur; this is as arresting a performance as almost any other but does not perhaps possess quite the tonal splendour of Karajan and ensemble isn’t quite as tight. As such, it is excellent but not overwhelming.

I would, however, suggest that the HDTT transfer is superior by virtue of the fact it comes from separate four-channel session tapes made by Jerry Bruck, using only four microphones, and has substantially greater dynamic range, definition and naturalness than the Unicorn and Chandos issues.

Karajan, 1973, Deutsche Grammophon [26:59]

Berliner Philharmoniker

This has long been a prime recommendation for the sheer opulence of its sound and the breadth of Karajan’s vision. The generous runtime indicates how he gives the work space to breathe. It captures the partnership between him and the BPO at its peak. The contrast between the sweetness of concertmaster Leon Spierer’s first solo and the almighty timpani thwack for the transition to the turbulent second section is striking and the surge of the orchestral playing sweeps the listener along. As was his gift, Karajan combines luxuriant tone with huge intensity and the performance cannot be faulted. The build-up to the chorale beginning at 14:17 is overwhelming; the conclusion stupendous, transcendent. The only question is whether you prefer the leaner, more driven earlier performance or the compromise between the two of the final digital account (see below).

Celibidache, 1979, BR Klassik [29:58]

Münchner Philharmoniker

I reproduce excerpts, first from my [review](#) of this issue, which was a Recording of the Month in 2018, then that of my colleague Dan Morgan; we were both very impressed by it:

“Celibidache’s speeds are similarly leisurely in the Strauss tone poem. Only Sinopoli, then Karajan, Nagano and Previn begin to approach him in expansiveness, whereas old-timers like Knappertsbusch, Szell and Horenstein blaze through the piece in twenty-one or two minutes, and even Jansons, in his recent, superb recording on the same label, takes only 24 minutes – but Celi’s grasp over structure is such that the tension never slackens over thirty minutes. He generates a dreamy but intense mood which is especially apparent during the two-minute passage from around 21 minutes into the piece onward. The sound is big, brash and slightly diffuse, with more audible tape hiss than in the Mahler, but very exciting, reflecting the renowned acoustic of the Herkulessaal. The slow introduction before the orchestral explosion beginning at 6’27” with a drum-thwack is magnificently dark and brooding, the brass chorale beginning at 15’ majestic and the finale overwhelming. I am captivated every time I listen to it; as is invariably the case with Celibidache, this is an unconventional reading but one to stand alongside the best, while the Mahler song cycle now assumes its place as my preferred version.”

Dan Morgan ([review](#)):

“For years my go-to version of *Tod und Verklärung* has been Karajan’s analogue BP one – his digital remake, immaculately done, just isn’t as movingly intense – but, as always, Celi has something new to say about this score. Not only does he shape and build the music with quiet, irresistible authority, he also creates a dark, velvety orchestral blend that suits the piece very well indeed. Yes, there’s a hint of hardness, and some congestion, in the tuttis, but then the 1979 sound isn’t as revealing or as refined as the later one. Again, that’s a minor caveat, given the surge and sweep of this performance, its deep, tugging undertow. No, Karajan is still my top choice, although Celi runs him very, very close.”

Karajan, 1982, Deutsche Grammophon [25:24]
 Berliner Philharmoniker

I deliberately played again this immediately after listening to the 1973 recording to check my response to their relative merits. There really isn’t much in it, as one might expect; the slight extra depth - especially in the bass - and transparency of textures of the digital sound, are welcome, but is there just a tad less intensity about the orchestral delivery? Maybe – and just occasionally the strings aren’t quite as steady and homogeneous – listen around 9:15 for a few seconds – as in the preceding recording? Nonetheless, outpouring of lush sound in the final ten minutes is simply glorious and no one will be disappointed by this.

Tennstedt, 1982, Warner Classics [25:51]
 London Philharmonic Orchestra

I briefly assessed this in my recent review of the big Tennstedt box issued by Warner:
 “*Tod und Verklärung* is given a performance both subtle and energised by turns; the opening is delicate and lyrical, the succeeding tempestuous passage notable for the contribution of the timpanist. Tennstedt is daring in his use of rubato and the music flows with organic freedom. This is expansive at twenty-six minutes but also driven and the chorale climax at 13:30 is magnificent, as is the mighty and mysterious concluding apotheosis. The playing by the LPO rivals Karajan’s BPO for breadth and splendour and the digital sound is especially well balanced and satisfying.”

...and on re-listening, I see no reason to change my opinion; the opening is gentle and lyrical, with simply lovely playing from the various soloists, and I was struck afresh by the sheer intensity of the LPO’s playing under Tennstedt’s direction.

Gielen, 1984, Regis [26:09]
 Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

Terry Barfoot reviewed this back in 2001, saying, “both the playing and the recording might have been more intense; the strings, in particular, do sound 'under-nourished' at times. Gielen has a strong sense of the music's shape and structure, with particularly well-chosen tempi.” I agree; in fact, I was more impressed by this than I expected to be. Ensemble is not as precise as the very best, sometimes textures sound a bit thin, tension can flag and occasionally the orchestral sound blares crudely. The American Record Guide praises Gielen’s “sense of structure and tone colour” and describes this and the companion items as having “solid performances” – not perhaps the most ringing endorsement but fair. I did not include the accompanying *Metamorphosen* in my survey but the same judgement applies. This was originally released by Vox along with the Oboe Concerto and all three works are now on a well-filled, bargain disc on the Regis label - however, much better is to be had.

Rickenbacher, 1986, EMI [23:56]
 London Philharmonic Orchestra

Bearing in mind that this is the same orchestra which gave Tennstedt such a searing performance only four years earlier, it would hardly be surprising if this were not very different – but of course a change of conductor can make a big difference. I was not familiar with Karl Anton Rickenbacher but he was a

Strauss specialist who studied with Karajan, so had the pedigree. However, this strikes me as a careful, controlled performance of no special distinction and without the tension Tennstedt generates. Some drive and crispness are decidedly lacking; the LPO don't sound especially sharp or involved and at first this comes as close to dull as any recording here. Matters pick up at around eleven minutes towards the end of the second section but it soon relapses into somnolence. Disappointing.

Previn, 1987, Telarc [26:43]

Wiener Philharmoniker

This is the fourth outing for the VPO in this survey, going back to the first with Furtwängler and we know that they, like the Dresdeners, have Strauss in their blood, especially as Strauss himself conducted them so often (if not always to best effect). This has become a classic recording: Previn creates an aura of brooding, potent mystery in the opening with grainy woodwind, then after the bass timpano thwack at bar 67 heralding the tumultuous, second Allegro molto agitato section, the silky, voluminous sound of the strings wells up and everything proceeds as it should, with power and delicacy a-plenty. The conclusion is without quite the clout or impact of Karajan but has enormous slow, stately grandeur.

This is a big, rich reading in excellent Telarc sound, coupled with a great *Also sprach Zarathustra* and one of Previn's best recordings.

Sinopoli, 1987, Deutsche Grammophon [28:22]

New York Philharmonic

I don't know if Strauss would have approved of this - he was surprisingly laconic and reserved as a conductor of his own works - but this is loud and proud and I love it. It is also very well recorded in the Manhattan Center. Some might find the brilliance almost vulgar compared with Kempe's refinement - but surely this music can take it. The daring of Sinopoli's expansiveness of phrasing over the last eight minutes, strings soaring above the heavy tread of the tam-tam, really pays off and no other recording - not even Karajan's - milks the transcendent conclusion so shamelessly. His execution of the work vindicates the veracity of the cliché that nothing succeeds like excess.

Blomstedt, 1989, Dal Segno; Denon [24:20]

Staatskapelle Dresden

For balance, I reproduce here two contrasting verdicts from colleagues' reviews:

The broadly-paced *Tod und Verklärung* does not quite measure up to Rudolf Kempe's achievement with the Staatskapelle Dresden a decade earlier, with its peerless combination of elegiac sorrow and dramatic tension. I particularly missed Kempe's gripping control over the introduction and final coda; nevertheless, this Blomstedt reading remains one of the greats, with harrowing climaxes aided by great timpani and brass playing (Brian Wilson, [review](#), 2010)

Death and Transfiguration receives the best performance on the two discs. However, for purely convulsing agonised wildness George Szell and his spectacularly virtuosic Clevelanders are still the best. But this is a terrifyingly driven performance in rather harsh early CBS/Sony stereo. Some of the playing on that disc is the musical equivalent of 'shock and awe'. The Dresden players give little if anything to Cleveland in pure technical terms and the extra warmth - musically and technically - of the transfiguration passage is marvellous. (Nick Barnard, [review](#), 2010)

As much as I admire Blomstedt in, for example, Bruckner, Mahler and Nilsson, I find his Strauss less compelling both here and in his later recording with the SFSO immediately below, so I endorse my colleagues' praise for Kempe's and Szell's recordings respectively over his, while still acknowledging its virtues - but it is not a top recommendation. Having said that, the Staatskapelle Dresden cannot fail to

excel in this music, so moments such as the climax at 13:07 are compelling, as with the later recording the finale is superb, and there is still a great deal to enjoy here.

Blomstedt, 1994, Decca [23:30]
San Francisco Symphony Orchestra

I reproduce here my own [review](#) from 2021, having no cause to change it:

“Having read some enthusiastic reviews of this slack reading, I admit to experiencing real disappointment – and, in truth, surprise - at my first encounter with it; moving on to the supporting works I hoped for better. For comparison, I turn to the Mariss Jansons recording of *Tod und Verklärung* which was a Record of the Month in 2017 (see below) and again, I find little here in the Blomstedt to set my pulse racing. In fact, I found it ... boring, with little of the bite and snap I demand. This is some of my favourite music on earth and that is a capital offence in my eyes/to my ears. Nonetheless, there is, again, some lovely orchestral playing in the final few minutes of apotheosis: sweetly soaring strings, sonorous woodwind and dignified brass; finally, the work comes alive for the climax twenty-one minutes in, and the coda is suitably transcendent.”

Masur, live 1998, Teldec [22:28]
New York Philharmonic Orchestra

For me, Kurt Masur was always a very hit-and-miss conductor but certain things he did, such as Strauss' *Vier letzte Lieder* with Jessye Norman and his Beethoven overtures, are desert island discs. This recording of *Tod und Verklärung* in fact partners another highly recommendable version of the *Four Last Songs*, this time with Deborah Voigt, and *Don Juan*; it finds the NYPO on top form and Masur more animated in the tone poems than in his accompaniment to Voigt. This is a fast, energised, driven account which propels the listener along gratifyingly and both sound and performance are first class, especially considering this is live – but Masur was of course closely associated with performing Strauss, having revived his complete tone-poem cycle in 1988-89 while in Leipzig, and his familiarity with the music comes through clearly in its thrust and the warm, Romantic sonority with which he infuses the sometimes cool NYP. There is absolutely no shortage of weight in the climax and the postlude is serene.

Levine, 1999, Deutsche Grammophon [26:56]
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

In truth, at virtually the same runtime and similarly extravert in manner, Levine's recording is like a twin of Sinopoli's; it is an equally indulgent, extreme, luxurious – and contemporaneous - performance by a “big gesture” conductor with a “brash” New York orchestra, recorded in the same location on the same label and sporting the same brilliant sound engineering. The orchestras would even still have had some players in common so the kinship is hardly surprising – and what a fine orchestra the Met had and has; whatever his crimes and misdemeanours, Levine has to be credited with making superb music and this is no exception. Every soloist sounds virtuosic and his control over the dreamy, stuttering opening is really impressive. This is a big, expansive performance of extremes: slow sections are very slow and fast passages very quick – unsurprisingly, “operatic”; timpano thwacks are massive, the tam-tam is nicely audible. The expansiveness of the concluding section is something to drink in – absolutely mesmerising. I wish we didn't now have to think of Levine's unfortunate reputation when we listen to his work but there it is – this is superb.

Sinopoli, live 2001, Profil Hänssler* [26:57]
Staatskapelle Dresden
*coupled with Mahler's Ninth Symphony

This was Sinopoli's last commercial recording before his untimely death and was live, as opposed to his earlier New York recording. It is similarly broad and sumptuous with a wide dynamic range and featuring some really tight ensemble. The brass is exceptionally virtuosic. As before, Sinopoli boldly spins out the

slow passages to hypnotic effect, just courting droop without losing his grip and the love music in the second section of reminiscence is pure schmalz. He generates real drama in the start of the brass chorale at 13:10 and the sheer amplitude of that brass section is a joy. The long slow conclusion is simply glorious; weight, tone, tension and momentum are sustained over a long arc of nine minutes after the pronged tam-tam roll culminating in otherworldly resolution. (The above timing includes applause, so the actual length of the performance is 26:13, so somewhat more propulsive than the even more prolonged New York studio recording.)

A little light, occasional coughing is inevitable in a live performance, I guess – it is not obtrusive.

Maazel, live 2005, Deutsche Grammophon [24:47]

New York Philharmonic Orchestra

I quote here Stephen Francis Vasta's 2008 [review](#):

"Death and Transfiguration...begins promisingly. In the atmospheric introduction, Maazel places and weights details precisely, to calm, steady effect. Nor is there any shortage of timbral variety: the flute and clarinet with their clear, "open" float, the plaintive oboe, the serene, consoling solo violin all shine brightly. The arrival of the turbulent music at 5:16 brings an immediate, concentrated surge of energy, but the conductor gets caught short in the broad middle section of the score, which, as usual, seems to run one episode too long. The liquid woodwinds at 9:42 are gorgeous, but in the subsequent string-dominated passage, the textures are transparent, but not translucent; they don't shimmer. Superfluous tenutos intrude at 14:56 and, clumsily, at 21:55, where the strings have to shoehorn a steady rhythmic accompaniment around it. The long closing section, like the introduction, has a nice feel for the weight and expression inherent in the harmonies, here formed by the counterpoint among various motifs. Maazel can't solve the score's structural problems, but his performance improves markedly on his Vienna account."

I cannot agree that the middle section has longueurs or that the piece has "structural problems"; to me the architecture of the four largely coextensive sections is well balanced and results in a consistently engaging sequence culminating in one of the great perorations in the orchestra canon but my colleague's observations prompt thoughtful consideration. I do not hear the problems with texture or propulsion he adumbrates and agree that the woodwind in particular are seductive. The "tenutos" strike me as permissibly expressive and like the tam-tam's audibility. The final couple of minutes are powerfully sustained with neat dynamic differentiation and gradation. As a whole I find this to be another fine account if not necessarily the most striking or characterful.

This is live - apparently an edited, "live composite" recording so there is some mild audience noise, but the sound is clear and vivid. As some appreciative applause is included, the actual timing is 24:33.

Honeck, live 2010, Reference Recordings [26:17]

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

Brian Reinhardt very enthusiastically [reviewed](#) this in 2014 and it was a Recording of the Month; I refer you to his review for some very useful pointers. I, too, have been almost invariably positive about Honeck's recordings for his label and honestly believe him and the Pittsburgh SO to be the best partnership in the USA today. This conforms to my experience so far and I can echo Brian's enthusiasm for both the sound and the performance – it positively leaps out of the speakers – or from the headphones direct into your brain! The bass depth is astounding and Honeck does what conductors are supposed to do: not just deliver a literal reproduction of the score but bring it alive with the interpretative nuance that cannot be annotated. There is a kind of controlled hysteria about his direction, if you will excuse the oxymoron, which is so infectious. Features such as the growling bass beginning at 17:44 are something else – unprecedented.

(Unfortunately, as I write, physical copies of this are available only at exorbitant prices.)

Jansons, live 2014, BR Klassik [24:10]

Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

This was my “Recording of the Month” in 2017 ([review](#)):

“*Tod und Verklärung* is likewise executed in masterly fashion, perfectly paced and magnificently played. The score might contain typically bombastic moments, but the opening pages narrating death and dissolution, and the central section depicting enlightenment, are sweetly and delicately realised. In the triumphant conclusion, the strings soar ecstatically and the brass blazes grandly above the celestial harp. Again, there are of course other splendid recordings by such as Ormandy, Kempe, Blomstedt, Sinopoli and of course Karajan, who can never be discounted in Strauss, but this makes an ideal coupling for the devotee of Big Band Strauss.”

The live sound is no quite as vivid and present as the best studio recordings such as Levine’s DG recording but it is still remarkably atmospheric and well-balanced. The BRSO is a remarkable orchestra, as good as any in the world today and they play flawlessly both real venom and tenderness, as and when required, making a huge sound. Jansons has a masterly overview, melding the disparate sections together in one great sweep. This is surely one of the best things he ever did.

Nagano, 2016, Farao Classics [25:48]

Göteborgs Symfoniker

My [review](#) of this in 2018 was lukewarm:

“...these are fine performances, but I could not in all conscience rank them as the equal of the very best. A good deal here is decidedly better executed than in the Weigle recording there is greater precision, cleaner articulation, more dynamic variety, more generous phrasing and even a clearer, fuller sound picture, too. This work needs some swagger and Nagano provides it; the concluding apotheosis in track 15 builds gloriously with an appropriately audible tam-tam but the brass chorale outburst half way through is too restrained.”

Petrenko, 2017, Lawo Classics [24:06]

Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra

My [review](#) of 2020 was positive: “...a really splendid account of the showpiece *Tod und Verklärung*. Again, there is no lack of options when it comes to choosing a recording, but this one is a contender. Petrenko successfully captures the brooding anticipation of the slow opening section and when the thwacking drumbeat five exactly minutes in ushers in a new urgency, he first provides all the grim intensity the score demands, then caresses the melting lyricism of the middle section before cranking up the tension once more for the gripping apotheosis.

Not, then, an absolute first choice recording but one which will hardly disappoint and offers the audiophile the advantage of finest sound.”

Weigle, 2017, Oehms Classics [26:30]

Frankfurter Opern-und Museums-Orchester

In my 2018 [review](#), I was less than enthused by this recording:

“... there are some disappointments in this *Tod und Verklärung*. I find Kempe a tad cool but consistent and absorbing; By contrast, Weigle’s account here lacks tension: the brooding introduction is missing the requisite sense of expectation; the first drum-thwack is rather tame; great brass fanfare half way through lacks impact and the swirling upward spiral of strings twenty minutes in goes for nothing. I

returned to the above-mentioned Celibidache live performance and to Szell in his spectacular 1957 recording – in extraordinary sound, despite a bit of hiss - to remind myself of how thrilling this music can be. Things pick up towards the end but that's too little too late for this recording to be truly competitive and although the sound is generally good, to my ears it is just a little muddy and the tam-tam gets lost.

I shall stick with my established favourites rather than endorse these decent but essentially uninspiring recordings."

Recommendations

As I briefly discuss in my introduction, this is another of those surveys in which we are spoilt for choice; this is music which often brings out the best in its interpreters and there are very few mediocre versions. In truth, I postponed then almost abandoned it on the grounds that there are simply so many great recordings that trying to establish a hierarchy among them seemed pointless; I don't think I have ever done a survey resulting in there being so many wholly recommendable recordings, hence the numerous suggestions below. However, favourites still emerged, so I persevered, even while acknowledging that my preferences would be unprecedentedly subjective. I had a real problem in that so many recordings I visited for the first time or revisited screamed for supremacy.

Two great, coeval, Hungarian-born, American conductors, Reiner and Szell, dominated their era and nation with the Chicago and Cleveland orchestras respectively and I cannot choose between their recordings in the older stereo category. Both are celebrated for their precision and dynamism and both are supremely satisfying.

For a lush, grander, more leisurely and Romantic reading turn to Karajan – and my preference remains with the second of his three stereo recordings – but I also have a weakness for both Sinopoli's and Levine's rather similar Technicolor showpieces.

In the wild card category Monteux and Celibidache are for me both indispensable to illustrate how very different interpretative stances can be equally rewarding – but for classical proportionality, Kempe just delivers the piece perfectly without eccentricity.

Among modern digital readings, the most recent three last reviewed above are good but not absolutely first rank. For live recordings, I favour Jansons and Sinopoli, but among studio accounts I could just as readily pick Sinopoli again, Tennstedt with his beloved LPO, Levine, Previn, Masur or Honeck - there are just so many of merit. If you love Strauss as I do, you will greedily want them all, and if you must select just the one, you can hardly go wrong with any of these:

Historical reprocessed; Furtwängler 1950

Early stereo: Szell 1957

Stereo: **Karajan 1973***

Digital studio: Tennstedt 1982; **Sinopoli 1987***; Levine 1999

Digital live: **Honeck 2010***; Jansons 2014;

Wild cards: Monteux 1960; Celibidache 1979

First choices*