

STRAUSS *Capriccio* & • Karl Böhm, cond; Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (*Countess*); Cristel Goltz (*Clairon*); Anton Dermota (*Flamand*); Walter Berry (*Olivier*); Paul Schöffler (*Director*); Hermann Uhde (*Count*); Vienna State Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1170-2, mono (2 CDs: 148:58) Live: Vienna State Opera 5/15/1960

& STRAUSS *Four Last Songs* • Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (sop); John Barbirolli, cond; London SO. Live: 9/25/1969

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Elisabeth Schwarzkopf starred in a classic 1958 recording of Richard Strauss's final opera, *Capriccio*, for EMI. Two years later she made her stage debut in the role of the Countess in the Vienna State Opera production under review. I would not be without that EMI set, but neither would I be without this performance. Studio recordings produced by Walter Legge tended to be concerned with perfection rather than spontaneity. What we have here is real theater, flaws and all. There are a few cuts, and the occasional moment of imprecise ensemble, but there is also an energy that brings the opera to life. The long ovation after Paul Schöffler's monologue, "Holà! Ihe Streiter in Apoll," gives you the audience's understandable reaction to a vivid bit of vocal acting. (Producer Richard Caniell wisely took about a minute out of the ovation).

Capriccio is not an easy opera to love. After all, the plot is a discussion about the relative importance of music or words in opera. Even Caniell, in his recording notes, indicates which aspects of Strauss's most talky opera drive him to distraction. It is precisely the untheatrical nature of the work that requires the spark of a live performance. With some of Strauss's most glorious music coming in the Countess's final scene, we need vivid articulation of the text to keep us interested until then. We get that from Schöffler's Director, which unites fine vocalism with pointed inflection. The same can be said about Hermann Uhde's Count and Anton Dermota's Flamand; both singers fully inhabit their characters and make you care about them and what they are saying. (It helps to listen with a libretto, which is not supplied by Immortal Performances but can be sourced from other recordings.) As it happens, the libretto is by Clemens Krauss, who was the younger Karl Böhm's rival for Strauss's attention and favor.

The difference between Schwarzkopf here and on EMI's studio recording is considerable. In his booklet notes *Fanfare's* Ken Meltzer does an excellent job in describing the abandon with which she sings at the climax of the opera's final scene, a very telling moment. But throughout, even in some of the most conversational passages, Schwarzkopf sounds natural, in no way studied.

Karl Böhm is also at the top of his game. He too was frequently more spontaneous in live performances than in the studio, and the result here is a *Capriccio* with more momentum and drive than on Sawallisch's EMI set or the other studio recordings I am familiar with. The monaural sound is well balanced and far superior to the one earlier release I heard. Immortal Performances includes the final German radio announcement and curtain calls, the ovation validating what we feel we heard: a truly sensational performance.

The bonus is a performance from 1969 of Strauss's *Four Last Songs* with Schwarzkopf and John Barbirolli conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. Schwarzkopf made two classic recordings for EMI, an early one in mono led by Otto Ackermann and the second in stereo with George Szell, who is in a remarkably gentle and lyrical mode leading the Berlin Radio Symphony. It is great to have this example of Schwarzkopf singing these luminous songs in a live performance, and Barbirolli is a very sensitive conductor for her. However, for me that reading with Szell is irreplaceable. There is something magical about that recording.

The usual high-quality booklet accompanies this release. I've already referred to Ken Meltzer's perceptive comments and Caniell's quite personal recording notes, but also included are some lovely photos.