

Richard Strauss - Eine Alpensinfonie (Mehta) [1987]

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Richard Strauss - Eine Alpensinfonie (Mehta) [1987]



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Strauss started the composition of his Alpine Symphony, the last of his tone-poems, in 1911, working on it intermittently until its completion in 1915. The work, even less of a symphony than the *Symphonia Domestica* of 1903, drew its original inspiration from 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. An equally important source for the work is to be found in Nietzsche. Strauss had wholeheartedly embraced the latter's philosophy and was notably influenced by his attack on Christianity, *Der Antichrist: Fluch auf das Christentum* (The Antichrist: Curse on Christianity). The Alpine Symphony follows the earlier Nietzschean work of 1896, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and had been under consideration for some years, at one time to be given the title *The Antichrist* and to follow a plan much more closely associated with its literary source. In 1902 he had begun to sketch a symphonic poem under the title *Künstler-Tragödie* (Artist's Tragedy), also set at first in the Alps. The idea was suggested by the sad fate of Karl Stauffer-Bern, an artist who had enjoyed some success, to be taken up by a wealthy Swiss couple. Stauffer's affair with the wife of his new patron led to the suicide of Stauffer and his mistress. The first part of this planned work was to be the source of the opening of the Alpine Symphony nine years later. In the new work Nietzsche's idea of freedom in Nature and liberation from the outdated chains of Christianity come together with earlier interests, the

Alpine adventure, and, with the unfortunate Stauffer, early happiness in the mountains.

For the new tone-poem very considerable resources were needed. It is scored for a very large orchestra with double woodwind and eight extra players, a brass section of fourteen players, including four tenor tubas, four harps, a large and varied percussion section including a thunder and a wind machine, twelve horns, two trumpets and two trombones off-stage, five dozen or so string players and, an element of particular importance in the storm scene, a concert organ. Strauss was now Kapellmeister to the Prussian Court and the first performance of the new work was given in October 1915 at the Berlin Philharmonie by the Dresden Court Orchestra, to which Strauss had a particular debt. His operas *Feuersnot*, *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier* had had their premières at the Dresden Court Opera under Ernst von Schuch, and Strauss would have dedicated the *Alpine Symphony* to him, prevented only by Schuch's sudden death in 1914. The dedication was made instead to the Dresden Intendant, Count Nicolaus Seebach.

An *Alpine Symphony* consists of 22 linked episodes, each identified with a stage in a climb in the Alps, an expedition starting with night, then sunrise, and finishing at nightfall. At the same time there are elements of symphonic structure. The first two sections, night and sunrise may be heard as a slow introduction, leading to the ascent, marked *Sehr lebhaft und energisch*, an *Allegro*.

[Track 1] Night opens with a sustained B flat and the descent of the strings, each section divided into four, and stopping on a sustained chord that will finally include all the notes of the scale, against which is heard a Straussian motif from the brass. [2] This section builds up to sunrise, with its similar descending scale figure, soon followed by a new theme. [3] The ascent is introduced by a lively theme, the opening figure entrusted to the harps and lower strings. An emphatic motif from horns and trombones is followed by the sound of distant hunting-horns from the off-stage players, and the brass motif leads to [4] the entry into the wood, with a theme that may be heard as the counterpart of the second subject. The woodland brings other melodic elements, including bird-calls, one suggesting, as sometimes happens here, the world of Mahler, so recently dead. The ascent theme returns, to start what might be heard as a development section, with contrasts of texture as the strings give way to a solo string quartet. [5] The mountain stream is aptly evoked, with reminiscences of earlier thematic material, with the violin climbing motif leading to [6] a waterfall, graphically depicted in brilliant orchestral colours, descending harp and violin glissandos, through which [7] an apparition, the spirit of the Alps, is seen. [8] A new melody for horn and then violin takes the climbers to flowering meadows, with the ascent theme heard again. [9] In the alpine pastures cow-bells are heard, with the transformation of the earlier Mahlerian bird-call, the calm of the scene pierced by a descending figure from the woodwind, leading to a new theme from the first horn. [10] This theme mingles with earlier material as the party loses its way amid thickets and undergrowth of contrapuntal complexity, before bursting through onto [11] the glacier. [12] An earlier motif, now

heard from the first bassoon, suggests a dangerous moment, in a fragmented texture.

[13] A bright F major chord marks the achievement of the summit, the trombones followed by an oboe melody heard against tremolo violin accompaniment, before full realisation of the scene is given more brilliant orchestral colour, as various earlier thematic elements are heard in a section that marks the central climax of the whole work, in which the theme that led to the flowering meadows assumes particular prominence. [14] The vision continues, with trill after trill, until trumpets proclaim the sun theme of the second section, while the violins, tremolo in double stopped octaves, ascend. At this point the organ enters at last, with an E pedal-point, joined by two bass tubas and the double bassoon. The violins ascend to the heights, and the brass suggest a recapitulation with the phrase first heard from them in the opening section of the work, but now marked *fff*. [15] The mood suddenly changes, as mists descend on the climbers, the *divisi* strings now muted. [16] The sun shines bleakly through, [17] and in the elegy is heard once more, with a new theme, entrusted first to the strings, and then, [18] in the calm before the storm, to a clarinet, after a distant clap of thunder. There are isolated bird-calls before the descending theme of the opening appears once more, as the storm rises, with thunder and the howling wind. [19] It is in the storm, with its raging and momentary lulls, that the climbers make their descent, passing through the stages of their ascent. The storm dies down, with isolated raindrops falling one by one, and the brass play their theme from the first section, a symbol of the mountain itself. [20] The sun sets, its theme augmented, while the strings recall other elements and trumpets and trombones introduce a hymn-like theme. [21] The organ, which has had a vital part to play in the second half of the symphony, introduces the final sounds, with the apparition of the spirit of the mountain recalled thematically, and the climbing motif and other elements, remembered now in a final coda. [22] Night returns and with it the music of the opening and, in the last bars, a concluding reminiscence of the climb itself. --- Keith Anderson, naxos.com

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