

"Thus Spake Zarathustra"

By Neville Cardus

THE backwardness of Australian music, until recently, may be understood from the fact that to-night Strauss's "Thus Spake Zarathustra" ("Also sprach Zarathustra") will be played in Australia for the first time.

The work is half a century old, and the present writer was an unshaven youth when Richter introduced it to a Halle audience, causing the more venerable of subscribers to cross themselves and invoke the name of Saint Joseph Haydn.

The rebel of yesterday is to-day's reactionary. Strauss is now regarded an outmoded bourgeois romantic by young folk who wear beards and listen to concertos for tabor, harpischord, and blowpipe. The fact remains that Strauss was the last of the great masters of the orchestra.

"Thus spake Zarathustra," though based on Nietzsche, does not attempt to say over again in tone what the most poetic of German philosophers has written once and for all in prose.

The music expresses the feelings, the imaginings, the reactions of the musical mind of Strauss after a reading of Nietzsche. This is not descriptive music in a narrowly picturesque or anecdotal sense; no action is objectively described—there is no public-handing (as in "Till Eulenspiegel"; no bleating sheep, as in "Don Quixote.") Nietzsche is changed to stuff that music greedily feeds on.

Main Divisions

The listener need only get into his head the titles of the various divisions of the symphonic-poem: "From the Abyss: Of Religious Ideas," "Of Supreme Aspiration," "Of Joys and Passions," "The Grave Song," "Of Knowledge," "The Convalescent—the soul freed from Earthly Desire," "The Dance Song," and finally, "Night Song."

Man—that is Zarathustra—contemplates creation and its riddle. He seeks solution in theology, revolts against asceticism and slave morality, leaps over the mountains in seven-leagued boots drunk with a pagan indulgence in sense and action; then comes revulsion from the flesh.

Science is looked into but found arid (in a fugue!). Zarathustra now momentarily obtains release by laughter and dance—"Lift up your hearts, my brothers . . . I have canonised laughter!" He dances himself into the upper ether, but still the solution is not found, and the music ends, though supposedly in the key of B major, with three questioning repetitions of the

with three questioning repetitions of the chord of C.

The beginning is superb. There are a high trumpet fanfare, a cockcrow, and the orchestra blazes to a mountain sunrise, with the organ plumbing the ground-swell of creation. The tone is suddenly cut off; one of the thrilling descendi of music. We hear the gropings in the void, and the work has now gripped us, so that even banalities seem of little account.

The "Hymn of Passion" achieves a climax by six or seven daring sequences—the same melodic phrase repeated on different and ascending levels. The effect, when it is played with absolute freedom and an elasticity that can be safely reckless, is exhilarating.

Some of the contemplative passages are frankly sentimental. Strauss climbed the wall of the Monastery Garden long before Mr. Ketelby ever heard of it.

And when our Superman puts on the seven-leagued boots he dances to what?—a

Viennese waltz suitable for Strauss's own "bourgeois gentilhomme" in his cups.

But by vast skill and ravishments of colour, opulent and bold, Strauss thrills and delights us, in spite of a suspicion here and there of stucco. In the "Wissenschaft" (the "Knowledge section"), Strauss strikes a note of tragic depth and irony. With all its faults, "Zarathustra" is the work of a genius.

An enormous orchestra is demanded, with as much of endurance as technical command. When the heights are scaled to-night, there are likely to be one or two casualties. But the gesture of presenting the work at all must be applauded.