

Ein Heldenleben (A Hero's Life), Op. 40

Richard Strauss

One of the most enduring contributions of the “Music of the Future” camp of Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner was the orchestral genre known as the symphonic poem (or tone poem). One of the circle’s ancillary figures was Alexander Ritter, an Estonian-born violinist and composer who married a niece of Wagner’s, composed six symphonic poems of his own, and served as associate concertmaster of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, which was conducted by the eminent Hans von Bülow. In Meiningen he grew friendly with the young Richard Strauss, whom Von Bülow had brought in as an assistant music director in 1885. Strauss would later say that it was Ritter who revealed to him the greatness of the music of Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz and, by extension, opened his eyes to the possibilities of the symphonic poem.

In 1886 Strauss produced what might be considered his first symphonic poem, *Aus Italien* (it is more precisely a sort of descriptive symphony), and he continued with hardly a break through the series of tone poems that many feel represent the genre at its height: *Don Juan* (1888–89), *Macbeth* (1888 / 1891), *Tod und Verklärung* (*Death and Transfiguration*, 1888–89), *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (*Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks*, 1894–95), *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1896), *Don Quixote* (1897), *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero’s Life*, 1897–98), and *Symphonia Domestica* (1902–03). *Eine Alpen-symphonie* (*An Alpine Symphony*, 1911–15) would become a late pendant to the catalogue. Strauss was drawn to the idea (as he would recall in his memoirs) that

new ideas must search for new forms; this basic principle of Liszt’s symphonic works, in which the poetic idea was really the formative element, became henceforward

the guiding principle for my own symphonic work.

Ein Heldenleben is among several of the composer’s works that can be read as musical autobiography. By this point of his career — he was 34 years old when he conducted its premiere — Strauss’s sense of self-esteem was in no way underdeveloped. He had gotten his first leg up in the music business in 1885 with his Meiningen appointment, and he proceeded from there to positions at the Munich Court Opera, the Bayreuth opera house, and the Court of the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenstadt. He was routinely hailed at the premieres of his new compositions, was in demand throughout Germany as a guest conductor, was on the verge of signing a contract to become music director of the Berlin Court Opera, and was enjoying a deepening relationship with the soprano who would soon become his wife.

It seemed to Strauss a reasonable moment to produce a musical reflection on himself

In Short

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Work composed: 1897–98, completed in Berlin on December 27 of the latter year

World premiere: March 3, 1899, by the Frankfurt Museum Orchestra, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 7, 1900, Emil Paur, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 27, 2016, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 47 minutes

and on the struggles he had faced so far in achieving his considerable success while navigating the internecine politics of the musical establishment. The proper format would be a musical one, to be sure, and the genre of the symphonic poem provided a perfect framework for such an exercise. In the event, it would be a symphonic poem with strong Classical leanings in terms of its structure, a sort of expanded “Classical symphony.” It would be set in E-flat major, a

key resonant with memories of Beethoven’s *Sinfonia eroica*, which was initially supposed to be a tribute to Napoleon but ended up being re-inscribed “To celebrate the memory of a great man” — an idea not so very different from that conveyed by the title “A Hero’s Life.” And, like Beethoven’s *Eroica*, it would be a work of hefty proportions; *Ein Heldenleben* typically runs to three-quarters of an hour, and its orchestration, including eight horns and five trumpets in its imposing

Angels and Muses

While Strauss declined to assign a program to *Ein Heldenleben*, his wife, Pauline, served as the acknowledged inspiration for “The Hero’s Companion.” He wrote:

It’s my wife I wanted to portray. She is very complex, very much a woman, a little depraved, something of a flirt, never twice alike, every minute different to what she was the minute before.

Others were not always so charitable, noting that Pauline had a temper and could be difficult to deal with in her moods and stubborn outspokenness. Some may attribute her temperament, in part, to her own artistic career. Pauline Maria de Ahna (1863–1950) was a soprano who had studied with Strauss and performed in operas prior to their marriage in 1894. (They became engaged during rehearsals for his opera *Guntram* that year.) Strauss went on to write several works that were inspired by or written for her, including *Four Last Songs* and the opera *Intermezzo*, which was based on their reportedly happy marriage. Their friend soprano Lotte Lenya observed:



Pauline and Richard, ca. 1894

I often caught a glance or a smile passing between her and her husband, touching in its love and happiness, and I began to sense something of a profound affection between these two human beings, a tie so elemental in strength that none of Pauline’s shrewish truculence could ever trouble it seriously. In fact, I rather suspect that they were always putting on a kind of act for their own benefit as well as for that of outsiders.

The couple was together 55 years, with Strauss preceding Pauline in death by eight months.

18-member brass section, would leave the ears highly stimulated.

Asked to explain the program of this piece, Strauss declined, insisting: "There is no need of a program. It is enough to know that there is a hero, fighting his enemies." Of course there was a program of some sort, even if Strauss never tipped his hand about it, and commentators have spilled much ink speculating about the details of this huge score.

Instrumentation: three flutes and piccolo, four oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tenor and bass tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, small snare drum, large tenor drum, tam-tam, triangle, two harps, and strings (including solo violin, principally portraying "The Hero's Companion").

Views and Reviews



Richard Strauss conducting, ca. 1900

In 1924 the musicologist and early Strauss biographer Richard Specht penned an analytical foreword for a new edition of *Ein Heldenleben* published by the distinguished Eulenberg firm. At that time the work was resisting the popular acclaim that had been bestowed on the composer's other tone poems. "This defiant confession and portrait of himself in the form of a symphony," wrote Specht, "this satire on his opponents, this musical autobiography is even now, next to [his] *Don Quixote*, the least understood work of the composer." He continued:

It is not quite easy to understand why this should be so, for the themes in the *Heldenleben* are more impressive, the whole composition more concise in form, the fundamental "Eroica" idea easier to grasp than any of Strauss's earlier compositions for orchestra. ... Is it because it is so personal that this work has been so absurdly misunderstood? As if Strauss had not, just in this composition, got into closer touch with the traditional symphony than in those other works in which he has

symphonically characterized some romantic or mythical personality with all his singularities, and as if Strauss's own personality were less fascinating and important than that of *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Don Juan*, yes even of *Coriolanus* or *Egmont*. ... Of all Strauss's symphonies, there is none more classical in its glorious themes, none more closely knit together in the unity of its six movements welded into a single movement, none that is bolder in its heroic loftiness, or more touching in its final serene resignation, than this symphonic reflection of himself and his life's adventure, which in conscious pride he has called "A Hero's Life." ... The time when it is duly appreciated and loved will surely come. Be that as it may; as a musical document, as a symphonic autobiography, as a vindication of himself towards his fellow creatures, and as an expression of conscious pride and knowledge of his own worth which with the inner conviction of a noble man he impresses on the envious and indifferent, it will always retain its value. It is a free confession of a free man, and as a symphony a masterpiece.