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

Richard Strauss

Among the most enduring contributions of the Music of the Future camp of Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner was the orchestral genre known as the symphonic (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 (1888/91), Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration, 1888–89), 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), with Eine Alpensymphonie (An Alpine Symphony, 1911–15) as a late pendant to this catalogue. In his memoirs Strauss recalled being drawn to the concept 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 (A Hero’s Life) is among several of the composer’s works that can be read as musical autobiography. By this point in 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; he was in demand throughout Germany as a guest conductor; he was on the verge of signing a contract to become music director of the Berlin Court Opera; and he 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 and on the struggles he had faced so far in achieving his considerable success while navigating the

IN SHORT

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria

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

Work composed: 1897–98, dedicated to Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam

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: September 26, 2015, Alan Gilbert, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 47 minutes
At the Time

During the years 1897 and 1898, as Richard Strauss is working on Ein Heldenleben, the following are taking place:

1897

In the United States, the word “computer” is used for the first time in the journal Engineering, to describe a mechanical calculation device; John McDermott wins the first Boston Marathon, besting a field of 15 men.

In England, Sir Henry Tate donates the Tate Gallery London to the British people; Queen Victoria celebrates her diamond jubilee.

In Mexico, Dos Equis beer is first brewed, with a name that anticipates the new century.

1898

In Germany, a pharmacist at Bayer pharmaceuticals synthesizes acetylsalicylic acid, which the company markets under the brand name Aspirin.

In Puerto Rico, the island gains autonomy from Spain.

In South Africa, the first officially designated wildlife refuge, the Sabi Game Reserve, is created.

In France, construction begins on the Paris Metro.

In the United States, New York becomes the world’s second largest city through consolidation with Brooklyn and land in surrounding counties, which is divided into five boroughs.

From top: An early advertisement for Bayer Aspirin, and other products; architect Hector Guimard’s original art nouveau entrance designs still grace the Paris Metro; pedestrians crossing the Brooklyn Bridge in 1898.
Internecine politics of the musical establishment; 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 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 an imposing 18-member brass section, would leave the ears ringing.

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 a solo violin, principally portraying “The Hero’s Companion”).

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**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:

> 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.

— The Editors

*Pauline and Richard, ca. 1894*