

Also Sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spoke Zarathustra), Tone Poem (freely after Friedrich Nietzsche) for Large Orchestra, Op. 30

Richard Strauss

The idea of the symphonic poem, or tone poem, traces its ancestry to the dramatic or depictive overtures of the early 19th century, such as Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave Overture* or Berlioz's *Waverley Overture*, but it was left for Franz Liszt to mold it into a clearly defined genre. This he did through a dozen single-movement orchestral pieces composed in the 1840s and '50s that drew inspiration from literary sources. As time went by, composers also derived depictive influence for their symphonic poems from paintings or other visual artworks, or from some other non-musical germ. The idea proved popular and the repertoire grew thanks to impressive contributions by such composers as Smetana, Dvořák, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Franck, and — most devotedly of all — Richard Strauss.

Strauss's direct link to the Liszt-Wagner circle was Alexander Ritter, an Estonian-born violinist and composer who married a niece of Wagner's, composed six symphonic poems of his own, and eventually acceded to the position of associate concertmaster of the Meiningen Court Orchestra. There he grew friendly with the young Richard Strauss, brought in by conductor Hans von Bülow as an assistant music director in 1885. Strauss would later say that it was Ritter who 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 descriptive symphony), and he continued with hardly a break for two decades through the series of tone poems that many feel represent the genre at its height: *Macbeth*, *Don Juan*, *Tod und Verklärung*, *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, *Ein Heldenleben*, and *Symphonia domestica*,

with *Eine Alpensymphonie* (1911–15) arriving as a late pendant. He 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.

Strauss immersed himself in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) in the early 1890s and was impressed by the philosopher's attacks on formalized religion, which mirrored the composer's own stance. Nietzsche's philosophy had just then reached its mature formulation, and it was articulated most completely in his four-part treatise *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883–85). In this work the philosopher speaks in a prose narrative (as opposed to the formalized style of traditional philosophical treatises) through the voice of Zarathustra, a fanciful adaptation of

In Short

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch

Work composed: 1895–96; the score is dated August 24, 1896, Munich

World premiere: November 27, 1896, in Frankfurt am Main, by the Frankfurt City Orchestra, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 13, 1908, Wassily Safonoff, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: September 15, 2018, as part of an Art of the Score screening of 2001: A Space Odyssey, André de Ridder, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 34 minutes

the Persian prophet Zoroaster, who spends years meditating on a mountaintop and then descends to share his insights with the world. Most of the catchphrases popularly associated with Nietzsche — “God is Dead,” the “Will to Power,” the “Übermensch” (or “Superman”) — appear in these volumes. Nietzsche’s ideas went to the heart of human existence and aspiration, which he viewed (quite pessimistically) as an endless process of self-aggrandizement and self-perpetuation, over which the much-heralded achievements of civilization — morality, religion, the arts — stand merely as pleasant distractions from the underlying banality of humanity.

Nietzsche’s text, Strauss wrote to his friend Romain Rolland, was “the starting point, providing a form for the expression and the purely musical development of emotion.” Indeed, it would be difficult for a listener not armed

with a score to follow anything but a musical narrative in this symphonic poem. Nonetheless, a sort of narrative does exist, and following the stentorian fanfares of the work’s famous introduction, Strauss inscribed textual indications in the score to punctuate the sections of the piece’s program: “Of Those of the Unseen World,” “Of the Great Longing,” “Of Joy and Passions,” “The Dirge,” “Of Science,” “The Convalescent,” “Dance Song,” “Night Wanderer’s Song.”

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo) and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, orchestra bells, deep bell in E-flat, two harps, organ, and strings.

Views and Reviews

The French author and critic Romain Rolland (1866–1944) attended the premiere of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and remarked of its composer,

The whole of him is to be found in this work, his highly poetic aspirations, and that harmonic and orchestral audacity which, in 1897 [sic], was shocking to those neo-classical circles beyond the Rhine whose gods were Brahms and the famous violinist Joachim.

In an 1899 essay on Strauss, he summarized the “narrative” of this tone poem:

In it man is seen, at first crushed by the enigma of nature, searching for a refuge in faith; then, rebelling against ascetic ideas, plunging madly into the passions; soon sated, nauseated, tired to death, he tries learning, then rejects it, and succeeds in freeing himself from the anxiety of knowledge; finally he finds his release in laughter, master of the world, the blissful dance, the dance of the universe, into which all human sentiments enter: religious beliefs, unsatisfied desires, passions, disgust, and joy. “Lift up your hearts, brothers, high, higher! And don’t forget your legs, either! I have canonized laughter; supermen, learn to laugh!” [Rolland is quoting Nietzsche.] Then the dance moves away, and is lost in the ethereal regions. Zarathustra disappears dancing beyond the worlds. But he has not solved the enigma of the world for other men: therefore, in contrast to the harmony of light which characterizes him, is set the sad note of interrogation, with which the poem closes.



Richard Strauss in 1904