The idea of the symphonic (or tone) poem was codified in the 1840s and '50s by Franz Liszt through a dozen single-movement orchestral pieces that drew inspiration from, or were otherwise linked to, literary sources. The repertoire grew quickly thanks to notable contributions by such composers as Smetana, Dvořák, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Franck, and — most impressively of all — Richard Strauss.

In 1886 Strauss produced what might be considered his first symphonic poem, Aus Italien (it is more precisely a sort of descriptive symphony). He continued with hardly a break through the series of tone poems that many feel represent the genre at its height: Macbeth (1886–88), Don Juan (1888–89), Tod und Verklärung (Death and Transfiguration, also 1888–89), Till Eulenspiegel lustige Streiche (‘Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks, 1894–95), Also sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spake Zarathustra, 1895–96), Don Quixote (1896–97), Ein Heldenleben (A Hero’s Life, 1897–98), and Symphonia domestica (1902–03). Eine Alpensinfonie (An Alpine Symphony, 1911–15) would become a late pendant to the catalogue.

In his earlier symphonic poems Strauss had engaged topics with distinguished literary or philosophical pedigrees. By the time he reached Ein Heldenleben and Symphonia domestica he expanded the programmatic possibilities to embrace autobiography. For Eine Alpensinfonie Strauss adopted a narrative that was neither drawn specifically from a preexisting literary source nor from autobiography, but rather one that embraced both in a general way. It is autobiographical to the extent that it represents man’s ardent celebration of nature — indeed, of nature at its most spectacular, as epitomized by a day of mountain climbing in the Alps. This landscape was ultra-familiar to Strauss, who was born in mountainous Bavaria and, buoyed with the earnings of his opera Salome, constructed a villa in the gorgeous high-altitude landscape of Garmisch (which in 1936 would merge with its sister-town Partenkirchen to host the Olympic Winter Games). He moved into his new villa at the beginning of 1908, and he lived there to the end of his days, composing in a room that afforded a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains.

But Eine Alpensinfonie also draws, if indirectly, on the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, another of whose texts had inspired the composer’s Also sprach Zarathustra some years earlier. This time it was Nietzsche’s 1888 essay Der Antichrist that had Strauss’s attention. Engrossed in soul-searching following the death of his friend Gustav Mahler, Strauss wrote in his diary in 1911:

In Short

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria
Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen
Work composed: 1911–1915, although related sketches extend as far back as 1902; dedicated to Graf von Seebach and the Dresden Hofkapelle
World premiere: October 28, 1915, at the Berlin Philharmonie, with the composer conducting the Dresden Hofkapelle
New York Philharmonic premiere: October 26, 1916, Josef Stransky, conductor; this marked the work’s New York Premiere
Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 26, 2018, Semyon Bychkov, conductor
Estimated duration: ca. 56 minutes
Listen for . . . the Rarities

Even by Strauss’s luxurious standards, *Eine Alpensinfonie* boasts a massive orchestra, including such rarely spotted items as the wind machine and thunder sheet (used in guess which section). Among the instruments is a true rarity: the heckelphone. It is a baritone member of the oboe family, pitched an octave below the standard oboe and notably robust of tone. The instrument, which takes its name from the Heckel firm that invented it in 1904, looks rather like an overgrown English horn. It shows up in a handful of scores by other composers, but basically the heckelphone is a Strauss instrument, used memorably in his operas *Salome* and *Elektra*, his ballet *Josefslegende*, and his orchestral *Festliches Präludium*, in addition to *Eine Alpensinfonie*.

*Eine Alpensinfonie* displays another curiosity in its wind writing: occasional notes held so long that players might be forced to interrupt them to take a breath. Strauss suggested a solution in his score: the Samuels Aerophon. The Aerophon (also known as Aerophor), introduced by the German flutist Bernhard Samuels in 1911, was basically a mouthpiece attached to a tube leading to a bellows operated by a foot treadle, allowing the wind player to pump away without using his own breath in such trying situations. It didn’t catch on. Today orchestral musicians are more likely to address the problem by using circular breathing, a nifty trick whereby they inhale through their nose while forcing air into their instrument with a little extra push from their cheek muscles.