The idea of the symphonic poem was codified in the 1840s and ’50s by Franz Liszt through a dozen single-movement orchestral pieces that drew inspiration from, or were in some way linked to, literary sources. The repertoire quickly grew 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 descriptive symphony), and he continued through the series of tone poems that many feel represent the genre at its height: *Macbeth* (1886–88), *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* (Death and Transfiguration) both 1888–89, *Till Eulenspiegel’s 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; sometimes the title is given as *Sinfonia domestica*). *Eine Alpensymphonie* (*An Alpine Symphony*, 1911–15) would be a late pendant to that roster. He was drawn to the idea (as he recalled in a memoir) 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.

In his earlier symphonic poems Strauss had engaged subjects with distinguished literary or philosophical pedigrees. With *Ein Heldenleben* he finally got around to one of his favorite subjects — himself — and in the *Symphonia domestica* he expanded the idea of an autobiographical program to embrace the remainder of his household — his wife, Pauline, and his son, Franz, to whom the work is jointly dedicated. Pauline de Ahna, an accomplished and temperamental soprano, began in 1887 as Strauss’s voice pupil and starred in his first opera, *Guntram*, in 1894. They were married that same year; he proposed — and she accepted — while she was in mid-tantrum during a rehearsal of *Tannhäuser* that he was conducting. The composer often collaborated with her in performance, either as pianist in recital or as conductor, until she effectively retired from the stage in 1906, by which time her voice had grown unreliable and her stage deportment had become downright bizarre.

They remained married for 55 years, and she survived her husband by only eight years.

In Short

**Born:** June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria (Germany)

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

**Work composed:** April 1902–December 31, 1903; dedicated “To My Dear Wife and our Son”

**World premiere:** March 21, 1904, at Carnegie Hall in New York City, as part of a Strauss Festival, with the composer conducting the Wetzler Symphony Orchestra

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** December 1, 1907, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** May 7, 2005, Leonard Slatkin, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 43 minutes
months. They seem to have regarded each other with equal parts affection and contempt. Friends of the family reported that at social gatherings Pauline could be relied upon to behave dismissively toward her husband and to speak disdainfully of his compositions. Strauss returned his compliments through such works as his opera *Intermezzo*, a “family comedy” based on a passing *contretemps* he and Pauline had endured, a work (to his own libretto) in which he portrayed a scarcely veiled Pauline as a most disagreeable character. The Strausses were one of those couples that nobody today would mistake as having a genuinely healthy relationship; yet for all its eccentricity, it seems to have “worked for them.” As Strauss explained to Gustav and Alma Mahler after one of the Pauline’s more reprehensible displays, “My wife is a bit rough at times, but it’s what I need, you know.”

Richard and Pauline became parents in April 1897, naming their son Franz (after Richard’s father). About five years later, the composer set about documenting through music “a day in the life of the Strausses.” He completed the draft for the *Symphonia domestica* by June 1903, and he signed off on the finished score on the last day of that year. The work was greeted with considerable consternation; its subject seemed to many inexcusably plebeian after such of the composer’s effusions as *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and even listeners accustomed by then to the erotic dalliance of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* were squeamish about peeking into the bedroom of Richard and Pauline. The *Symphonia domestica* is a one-of-a-kind piece, and although some view it as over-sufficient it unquestionably erupts with page after page of quintessential Strauss — which is reason enough to revisit it now and again.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes and piccolo, two oboes plus oboe d’amore and English horn, four clarinets and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, eight horns, four trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, tambourine, two harps, and strings.

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**The Work at a Glance**

The *Symphonia domestica* unrolls as a single movement in seven sections, each of which depicts a personality or event in the Strauss household. The opening three sections introduce the protagonists: Richard, Pauline, and Baby Franz, in that order. The baby’s placid drowsiness suddenly turns into shrieks, punctuated by the jolly exclamations of aunts and uncles. This launches a Scherzo and then a Lullaby, at the end of which the clock strikes seven (orchestra bells) and Franz falls asleep. The Adagio is Richard and Pauline’s private time, which they employ in a way that makes the possibility of another Strauss child foreseeable. The Richard and Pauline themes wind about one another, sometimes underscored by *fortissimo* pulsations, and finally this section reaches an extended musical climax, followed by some magical nocturnal music in which recollections of the music of the preceding day are heard at a dream-like distance. The clock strikes seven again, and the new day begins. The Finale starts with an immense and bustling double fugue, in the course of which the Strauss family life regains its accustomed chaos and Richard makes sure that his personal theme gets the last word.