

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born June 11, 1864 in Munich; died September 9, 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

Ein Heldenleben, Opus 40 (1898)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Frankfurt, March 3, 1899

Orchestra of the Musikgesellschaft

Richard Strauss, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 46 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, four oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tenor and bass tubas, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings

“No man is perhaps a hero to his valet; but Strauss is evidently a hero to himself.” The autobiographical nature of Strauss’ *Ein Heldenleben* did not slip past American musicologist Philip Hale, nor has it been less than obvious to anyone else. Literary autobiography and self-portraiture (à la Rembrandt) had been acceptable artistic genres for centuries. So why not music?

So why not Strauss? In 1898, the year of *Ein Heldenleben*, Strauss was the most talked-about composer in the world. This work was the seventh of his orchestral tone poems, each new arrival greeted with a flurry of international interest by press and public alike. They (*Don Juan*, *Death and Transfiguration*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, et al.) were sensational works that carried programmatic music and the art of orchestration to heights that no one else, except Berlioz, had conceived. Strauss was also one of the preeminent conductors of the day, and when he composed *Ein Heldenleben* he was principal conductor of the Berlin Court Opera and past music director of the Berlin Philharmonic. He parlayed all these activities into an immense income, and it is very likely that he was the wealthiest composer of concert music ever. With all this, he had a right to be proud.

Early in 1898, Strauss undertook to portray a general overview of the heroic spirit in a tone poem. He painted six aspects of this spirit in *Ein Heldenleben*. The first three sections portray the participating characters: “The Hero” (“his pride, emotional nature, iron will, richness of imagination, inflexible and well-directed determination supplant low-spirited and sullen obstinacy” noted the modest composer); “His Adversaries” (Strauss said nothing about them — the cackling, strident music speaks for itself); and “His Beloved” (“It’s my wife I wanted to show. She is very complex, very feminine, a little perverse, a little coquettish”). The fourth section, in which the hero girds his loins to do battle against his enemies, was considered the height of modernity when it was new. Section five is an ingenious review of at least thirty snippets selected by Strauss from nine of his earlier works. The finale tells of the hero’s withdrawal from the earthly struggles to reach “perfection in contemplative contentment,” in the obscure words of the composer.

For Strauss’ appearance as guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic in 1921, Lawrence Gilman prepared the following synopsis of *Ein Heldenleben*, to which the composer gave his approval:

“1. *The Hero*. We hear first the theme of the Hero, the valorous opening subject for the low strings and horns. Subsidiary themes picture different aspects of the Hero’s nature — his pride, depth of feeling, inflexibility, sensitiveness, imagination.

“2. *The Hero’s Adversaries*. Herein are pictured the Hero’s detractors — an envious and malicious crew, filled with all uncharitableness. The theme of the Hero appears in sad and meditative guise. But his dauntless courage soon reasserts itself, and the mocking hordes are put to rout.

“3. *The Hero’s Companion*. A solo violin introduces the Hero’s Beloved. She reveals herself as capricious, an inconsequent trifler, an elaborate coquette. After an earnest phrase heard again and again, the orchestra breaks into a love song of heroic sweep and passion. As the ecstasy subsides, the mocking voices of the foe are heard remotely.

“4. *The Hero’s Battlefield*. But suddenly the call to arms is heard. Distant fanfares (trumpets behind the scenes) summon the Hero to the conflict. The orchestra becomes a battlefield. Through the dust and uproar we are reminded of the inspiration of the Beloved, which sustains and heartens the champion. A triumphant orchestral outburst proclaims his victory.

“5. *The Hero’s Works of Peace*. Now begins a celebration of the Hero’s victories of peace, suggesting his spiritual evolution and achievements. We hear quotations of themes from Strauss’ earlier works: reminiscences of *Death and Transfiguration*, *Don Quixote*, *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Macbeth*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the music-drama *Guntram*, and the exquisite song *Traum durch die Dämmerung* (‘*Dream at Twilight*’).

"6. *The Hero's Retreat from the World, and Fulfillment.* The tubas mutter the uncouth and sinister phrase which voices the dull contempt of the benighted adversaries. Furiously, the Hero rebels, and the orchestra rages. But his anger subsides. Over a persistent tapping of the kettledrum, the English horn sings a pastoral version of his theme. An agitated memory of storm and strife again disturbs his mood. But the solo violin reminds him of the consoling presence of the Beloved One. Peace descends upon the spirit of the Hero. The finale, majestic and serene, recalls the words of the luminous Shankara: 'For the circling world is like a dream, crowded with desires and hates; in its own time it shines as real, but on awakening it becomes unreal.'"

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda