



Ein Heldenleben is one of the most inspiring pieces ever composed for orchestra. It is also one of the most challenging for the orchestra itself with substantial technical demands for every instrument.

Strauss is said to have written this piece about himself. To me however, it not just his musical autobiography: it is more a musical expression of his relationships with those he writes about in the music. He talks about the horns and their heroic quality. His father was one of the best horn players in the world, and I believe it was no accident that he chose the horn to talk about the hero. His father Franz was a hero to him. When he uses the music to talk about his wife, he is describing their relationship. Despite sometimes thorny moments he lets us know in some of the most beautiful moments of the piece how passionately he feels about her.

By presenting this epic masterpiece to our audience we are showing that the orchestra has come of age. We are thrilled to share the progress we have made - progress which allows us to express more clearly the grand intent of this piece and many others.

-Brian Groner, Musical Director
Fox Valley Symphony Orchestra

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Program Notes Courtesy of Mark Rohr

Richard Strauss

Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40

Richard Strauss was born in Munich in 1864 and died in Garmisch, Germany in 1948. He composed this work in 1898, and he led the first performance in Frankfurt the following year. Ein Heldenleben is scored for 4 flutes, piccolo, 4 oboes, English horn, 4 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 4 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 5 trumpets, 3 trombones tuba, tenor tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, and strings.

No small furor arose when it was learned upon its premiere in 1899 that Richard Strauss had written *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero's Life*) about *himself*. Those who were appalled at the notion shouldn't have been surprised; after all, Richard Strauss may have had many faults, but excessive modesty wasn't one of them. They might also have thought differently had they realized that Strauss did not take himself or his heroes all that seriously; in explaining *Ein Heldenleben* he said: "Since Beethoven's *Eroica* is so extremely unpopular with our conductors and hence rarely performed, I am filling a desperate need by composing a tone poem of substantial length entitled *A Hero's Life*, which has no funeral march to be sure, but is yet in E-flat major with lots of horn sound, since horns are, after all, the thing for heroism."

Ein Heldenleben has been described as a symphony in one movement in which definite sections can be discerned. Actually, as gargantuan as it is, it is possible to explain it as a severely distended but still recognizable sonata form: an exposition of themes, development of those themes, a recapitulation and a coda. Either way, the work may be divided into six sections:

I. The Hero. An epic theme for an epic work, this melody spans three and a half octaves and describes the many attributes of the Hero—that is, Strauss himself.

II. The Hero's Adversaries. Strauss took particular delight in painting musical portraits of various music critics who had berated him in the past. The angular, spiky noises are the clucking and harping of those who complained of the composer's modernistic melodies. Strauss used special care in depicting a certain Doktor Dehring, a pedantic critic who could not abide the breaking of the rules of harmony: the good *doktor's* name is lugubriously announced by the tenor and bass tubas in parallel fifths—a deliberate harmonic “mistake.”

III. The Hero's Helpmate. It seems unlikely that Strauss could have been a feminist in 1899, so we may forgive the insensitive title for this, a musical portrait of his wife. She is depicted by the solo violin as she courses among many moods; the composer indicates in the score such markings as “hypocritically longing,” “frivolously,” “furiously,” “in a rage,” and “tenderly and lovingly.” Despite these not-always flattering mood swings, Strauss removes all doubt as to his feelings for his beloved as the music swells in a love duet of impressive proportions.

IV. The Hero's Battlefield. The trumpets and drums announce that the Hero, together with his Helpmate, will do battle with his adversaries. The Hero and Helpmate themes gather along with the adversaries' themes in an immense contrapuntal development. The momentous struggle is fought, and it should come as no surprise that the Hero and his companion emerge the victors.

V. The Hero's Works for Peace. As the Hero contemplates his achievements, Strauss freely quotes from his own works: themes are heard from *Don Juan*, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, *Tod und Verklärung*, *Don Quixote*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, and others.

VI. The Hero's Retreat From the World; Fulfillment. In the end the Hero—and Strauss—have vanquished the last of their enemies. A brief return of the adversaries' themes reminds the Hero that his victories have come at the cost of derision and envy. Finally he finds inner peace, and all doubts, musical or otherwise, are removed.

It seems sensible not to take the story of *Ein Heldenleben* too terribly seriously, for it can only hint at the incredible musical experience behind it. Strauss gives us an orchestral tour-de-force with an enormous range of sound, from chamber music combinations to the glorious racket of a romantic orchestra in full cry. *Ein Heldenleben* is big, bold, exciting, devilishly hard to play—and rollicking good fun, too.