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LAURE Reflective Essay

Understanding Political Symphonies and the Power of Musicians Through Analysis

Music has been at the core of my identity since I had my first piano lesson at five years old. It seemed obvious to me that I should continue playing in college and I was thrilled when Miami's music department accepted me; however, before undergraduate classes, I had only been aware of music as a performance art. Music history courses acquainted me with a new dimension of music: research and analysis. This revolutionized the way I interpreted the pieces I perform as a solo pianist, the works I accompany for vocalists and instrumentalists, and the various genres of music that I enjoy listening to.

Last spring, my History of Western Music class (MUS 212) required that each student support an original thesis in an analytical research paper on any post-Renaissance composition. I selected *Ein Heldenleben*, one of my favorite tone poems by Richard Strauss. The piece, which translates to "a heroic life," vividly portrays a hero's journey to fight against an undefined enemy, and its use of dissonance hinted at deeper turmoil that immediately intrigued me. Preliminary research in the Amos Music Library revealed that Strauss was quite a controversial figure as a politically-involved musician during the rise of the Nazi Regime. It was no secret to me that Germanic composers had overtly discriminated against Jewish musicians for decades before Strauss, but every source I encountered revealed that he remains surrounded by ambiguity regarding his own opinion of, as his predecessor Wagner would say, *Das Judentum in der Musik* (*Judaism in music*). I was interested in discovering the truth about Strauss' political and moral beliefs and how they influenced his compositions as European tensions increased at the start of the 20th century. From the beginning, my thesis sought to determine whether or not Strauss actually supported Nazism with his music.

Aiming to understand Strauss' compositional style, I examined several of his other tone poems and the musical tendencies of composers who influenced him such as Beethoven, Wagner, Mendelssohn, Mahler, Schumann, and Liszt. All of these artists had physical scores available at the Amos Music Library, which allowed me to investigate individual nuances within

compositions. The library's listening center provided videos and excerpts of multiple performances so I could compare various interpretations, which was pivotal in the development of my thesis.

I began a thorough musical analysis of *Ein Heldenleben*, which calls for more than 60 instruments. Understanding such a massive symphonic work was intimidating to say the least, especially because, as a pianist, I had never logistically studied an orchestral work of this magnitude before. I spent hours in the Amos Music Library comparing multiple editions of the score, most of which are at least 140 pages long, and making several copies so I could fully examine details within the piece. I quickly learned that Strauss uses leitmotifs, recurring thematic ideas, in his music to represent characters or abstract concepts. *Ein Heldenleben* contains four leitmotifs, and I color coded these by hand throughout the piece using green, yellow, orange, and pink to visually demonstrate how they interact with one another. This required detailed attention to intervallic patterns and instrumental timbre that would have been impossible without the Amos Music Library's extensive list of recordings in the listening center.

To correctly reference the score and specific areas within it, I met with conductors of Miami's choral and instrumental ensembles to ask them how they would suggest citing certain measures and instruments in my research paper. Since not all instruments have the same relative pitch, I also asked these professors to confirm a few of my questions regarding transposition. This allowed me to double check that I had accurately determined the sounding pitches, which was essential for properly analyzing the tonality of each measure.

Parallel to my analysis of the music score itself, I reviewed the historical context of the piece. I checked out every Strauss-related book I could find, frequently carrying multiple full backpacks to and from school. Every score, manuscript, or publication that I requested could either be located on the library shelves or specially ordered by one of the three music librarians, who were always attentive and eager to go out of their way to secure what I needed. In addition, online databases gave me access to a plethora of peer-reviewed articles. The OhioLINK Music Center, Naxos Music Library, IMSLP, Musical Index Online, Music Periodicals Database, Oxford Music Online, and RILM Abstracts of Music Literature all brought me closer to supporting my thesis with reliable scholarly material. Once again, our music librarians ensured that I felt confident in navigating the overwhelming amount of information on these sites with very specific keywords.

I truly enjoyed collecting information on *Ein Heldenleben* and Strauss' political involvement, and I finally pieced together its subliminal messages. Upon completion, my thesis proposed that through his reflection on German heritage, musical depiction of antagonists and clues regarding their identities, and vivid instrumental personification of a bold female character, Strauss provided evidence that he disapproved of Germany's evolving cultural values and ultimately rejected Third Reich ideologies; instead, *Ein Heldenleben* glorifies love and authentic creativity as its protagonists, allowing them to transcend the chaos of a world without their presence.

This experience opened my eyes to the extremely active role that music has in society. It is crucial for musicians to fully understand and embrace our uniquely subtle power to promote social change; too often we forget the value of music as a catalyst for this, and it can be easy to downplay our worth as musicians. We are not solely here for entertainment, nor are we one-dimensional performers. We refuse to shy away from boundaries, point out injustices, and inspire others to consider new perspectives on social issues. Ultimately, this project has redefined my perception of music and my role as a musician, and this discovery would not have been possible without the resources that the Amos Music Library provided for me on my first venture into research.