

An Exploration of Socio-political Themes Represented in Richard Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*
Cloie Dobias



From Saint-Saen's *Carnival of the Animals* to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherezade* to Gershwin's *American in Paris*, tone poems often recall stories of specific people or events. One key figure in the the development of tone poems is Richard Strauss, who composed ten. His eighth tone poem, titled *Ein Heldenleben*, has drawn much controversy over the years as researchers have presented theories regarding to the identity of the hero. Strauss claimed that he chose to illustrate something abstract: when asked about the meaning of the piece, he insisted it was not about "a single poetical or historical figure, but rather a more general and free ideal of great and manly heroism" (Kennedy 1995). However, this interpretation did not please music analysts and fans across Europe; many suggested that it was an autobiographical composition about his life and success as a musician. Though there is evidence for this — especially in the Hero's Works of Peace section, in which Strauss directly quotes previous compositions more than 30 times — Strauss himself vehemently denied that it was a musical depiction of his life and continuously referred to the enigmatic heroism which he was aiming to portray (Jones 2006). Through his reflection on German heritage, musical depiction of the antagonists and clues regarding their identities, and vivid instrumental personification of a bold female character, Strauss provided evidence that he wholeheartedly disapproved of the evolution of Germany's cultural values and ultimately rejected the beliefs of what would eventually become the Nazi party; instead, *Ein Heldenleben* glorifies love and its authentic creativity as the protagonists, allowing them to transcend the chaos of a world without their presence.

Strauss incorporated many references to and quotes from prior German compositions, including his own, in *Ein Heldenleben* to draw attention to a traditional perception of heroism. The theme of the Hero, which starts off the piece and is repeated throughout (most predominantly in the battle scene), is in E flat Major. This, coupled with the title of the work —

which translates to “The Life of a Hero” or “A Heroic Life” — is considered by most scholars to be an obvious reference to Beethoven’s *Eroica*, the symphony initially composed for Napoleon Bonaparte following the liberation of France (Youmans, 2010). Even the notation depicting the Hero in both *Ein Heldenleben* and *Eroica* is analogous because both themes contain an ascending E flat Major chord (Beethoven, 1809; Strauss, 1898; Sipe, 1998):

theme from *Eroica*, played by horns in E-flat



theme from *Ein Heldenleben*, played by horns in F



Additionally, the instrumentation between the two orchestral works is strikingly similar in that the horns and brass play the main theme of the Hero. Though the strings often represent the Hero’s Companion and her love theme, they support the Hero’s theme with a cello line — just like *Eroica* — that parallels the horns and adds to the Romantic grandiosity of these sections (Sipe, 1998). The structural layout of the tone poem is also an allusion to the works of Beethoven: *Ein Heldenleben* is technically through-composed, but further assessment reveals macroscopic references to sonata form. The Hero’s anthem serves as an exposition of thematic material that returns throughout the rest of the piece, most obviously in the recapitulation right after the battle scene at rehearsal sigla 77. This means that the Hero’s Adversaries and Hero’s

Companion sections, conveniently placed between this introductory theme and its return, form the development section of the piece. The final two sections that follow this recapitulation, the Hero's Works of Piece and the Hero's Resignation from the World, can be best understood as a coda — also a very common way for Beethoven to end a piece (Holoman, 1997). With this large-scale sonata layout, Strauss may have been idolizing Beethoven's works and aiming to follow in his footsteps as a musician (Floros, 2008).

Another source of inspiration for Strauss was Hungarian composer Franz Liszt. Much like Beethoven, Liszt employed sonata form in many of his orchestral works and was world-famous for his sweeping and majestic compositions (Schmid, 2003). Strauss became a committed Lisztian after listening to *Les Preludes* and other symphonic poems (also called tone poems), which Liszt composed and formally introduced as a new genre (Johns, 1997). Strauss was extremely influenced by the cultural phenomenon that was Wagner, and he incorporated a lot of his stylistic and compositional ideas, “sonic gimmicks” and “historical style-allusions” (Gilliam, 1992). From Wagner, Strauss adopted the usage of leitmotifs, recurring musical themes that represent characters, ideas, or events (Warfield 1991). *Ein Heldenleben* has three main leitmotifs that occur throughout the tone poem: The Hero, The Hero's Adversaries, and The Hero's Companion. Although Strauss did not particularly like using a formal program (Jones, 2006), it is possible to find a significant moralistic message within Strauss' tone poem by examining how these three themes interact with one another.

Traditionally, most listeners have agreed that in the second section of *Ein Heldenleben*, called the Hero's Adversaries, Strauss depicts many music critics. Their personalities are demonstrated with aggravating themes that sharply contrast that of the Hero. However, since *Ein Heldenleben* was published in 1898, Strauss hadn't yet encountered major disapproval or

controversy as a composer. He was, in actuality, considered the heir to Wagner, who was preceded by the genius of Beethoven, as Germany's next musical icon (Kobbe, 1902). In statements he made about the identity of the critics, Strauss referred to them not as worldly enemies, but predominantly as personal enemies such as doubt and disgust (Youmans, 2005).

The Adversaries' themes prevent the return to the tonic after the exposition of the Hero's melody at the very start of the piece, which is cut off on a fortissimo dominant five-seven chord (B flat 7) right before it resolves (to E flat) nine measures after rehearsal sigla 13. These Adversaries manifest themselves as meticulous sixteenth notes in the upper register, beginning a highly imitative passage during which multiple voices impersonate the "finger-pointing disapprovals of sniping critics" (Youmans 85, 2005):



Strauss himself instructed in the score that the first theme, played by the flutes, be "very sharp and pointed" and the second theme, played by oboes, be "rasping" (just before rehearsal sigla 14). Though initially it is just one alternating flute and one oboe, the instrumentation grows, and more woodwind instruments play with each repeat of the Adversaries' themes (Knight, 2010). Tritones throughout the brass and woodwinds and the "sibilant" hiss of a cymbal also underlie the Adversaries' theme, adding to the biting disarray of sounds (see Appendix, pg.14). This builds an uneasy atmosphere of dissonance, insecurity, and uncomfort; in contrast, the Hero is embodied by the legato strength of the brass section — especially the horn (Mendl, 1932). Not only does the Hero's theme utilize more powerful instruments than the Adversaries, but the duration of the notes themselves are longer for the Hero (legato eighth notes as opposed to staccato sixteenth notes), both of which emphasize the Hero's perseverance and strength. These

two themes alternate as the Hero fully experiences and combats the encumbrance of the Adversaries, “gradually accelerating until firmly won” as instructed by Strauss in rehearsal sigla 20-21.

The thematic material of the Adversaries returns in several other passages of the piece once it interrupts the Hero’s introduction and combats it in the second section — but it is never allowed to fully dominate when countered with the Hero’s theme. This happens at the end of the third section and again at the end of the fifth section. In both of these cases, the Adversaries are not actively fighting with the Hero, but reminding him of their threatening presence. The most notable reappearance of the Adversaries’ theme is in the battle scene: here, the pitches are notated as eighth notes instead of sixteenth notes to draw out the dissonant melody. Additionally, the theme is played by a trumpet instead of the woodwinds, allowing it to identify with the militant feel of the music on the battlefield:



The percussion adds to this atmosphere by introducing a small military drum that is instructed to propel the music with “solid timekeeping” about 4 measures after rehearsal sigla 49. The dissonance of the battle comes to its peak in the following pages, culminating in a roar of percussive instruments that nearly prevent the brass, woodwinds, and strings from being fully heard.

The third section of the tone poem, referred to as The Hero’s Companion, is the introduction of the solo violin. It contains a theme of yearning and passion which first enters the

score two measures after rehearsal sigla 22:



In every section where this solo violin plays, incredibly detailed adjectives and instructions are provided by Strauss to ensure that the specific moods and characteristics of the Companion are accurately portrayed. These include “hypocritically languishing,” “tenderly sentimental,” “reassuring,” “flippantly,” and several other extremely contrasting descriptions from rehearsal sigla 22-41 (see Appendix, pg.14). When asked about the multitude of characters within the one instrument, Strauss provided an honest answer: “It’s my wife I wanted to show. She is very complex, very feminine, a little perverse, a little coquettish, never like herself, at every minute different from how she had been the moment before” (Kennedy, 1999). In fact, *Ein Heldenleben* is “the first major work in which a female figure not only appears, but she asserts herself with great forcefulness” in Strauss’s orchestral music (Schmid 309). Strauss was very open with his intent to develop his female character through the solo violin line as well as its impact on thematic material; he admired his wife greatly and often referred to her as the “spice” that kept him going (Kennedy, 1999). She herself was a renowned soprano, and the musical duo worked together in various ways, supporting each other tirelessly. This steadfast respect and love for one another helped keep their relationship stable for more than 50 years until he died in 1949, only to be followed by the devastated Pauline 8 months later (Renie 2015).

In his compositions, Pauline inspired Strauss “to embark on a new career as an explorer of womanhood. The object of that quest was not womanhood in the abstract, successive portraits of essentially different women, but the essence of womanhood in the concrete and in all of its

diversity as incarnated in the remarkable Pauline” (Gregor 2015). Applying this perspective specifically to *Ein Heldenleben*, the Hero’s Companion begins to represent more than Pauline alone, but the influence and capabilities of all women. The relationship between the leitmotif of the Hero and the leitmotif of the Companion insinuates that femininity is necessary force behind masculinity. The scene following the Hero’s Companion provides evidence for this when the Adversaries’ theme is heard in the distance (rehearsal sigla 41) to interrupt the Hero and Companion, an ominous sign of the impending battle. During this fourth section, called the Hero’s Battlefield, the Companion is consistently present in the strings — though now more labored and melancholy — from rehearsal sigla 43-49. Throughout the battle itself (rehearsal sigla 53-75), she returns six other times to encourage the Hero during combat, pressing him not to give up and providing the motivation to continue fighting. This aid allows the Hero to prevail through the relentless attacks of the Adversaries until the victorious end to the dissonance four measures after rehearsal sigla 75. Here, Strauss did something fascinating: a rest notates the end of the battle and prepares for a celebration, but it is not the Hero’s theme that breaks this silence. Instead, the Companion’s theme — now played with the Hero’s instruments as well as her own — bursts forth in joyous victory. Essentially, this indicates that the Hero’s win would have been impossible if not for the help from his loyal and determined Companion.

Strauss investigated the portrayal of gender in music countless times over the course of his entire career with Pauline’s instrumental counterparts (Schmid 310). In each of these cases, Strauss provides various moods and platforms for his female characters to express dimensionality. In *Ein Heldenleben*, the inexplicable way the two genders complement each other is best illustrated near the end of the battle scene (four measures before rehearsal sigla 79)

right before the recapitulation of the Hero's theme. The Hero's instrument, the horn, moves in distinctly contrasting motion with the instrument of the Hero's Companion, the violin:

The image displays a musical score for a horn and violin. The top section consists of four staves, with the first two staves representing the horn part and the last two representing the violin part. The horn part features a melodic line with a prominent interval of a fourth, while the violin part provides a contrasting rhythmic and melodic accompaniment. The bottom section shows a single staff for the bass line, which includes a double bar line and a forte (ff) dynamic marking. The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature.

This juxtaposition emphasizes the role that gender plays in the tone poem: the Companion is as equally important to the beauty of the piece as the repeated leitmotif of the Hero and, in many ways, essential to fulfilling a musical climax — but the two are unique and irreplaceable to one another. The two remain closely intertwined through the last bars of the piece, in which the violin and horn converse one last time before finally providing the tonic resolution that was so palpably missing from the exposition's unfulfilling dominant extension.

Upon analyzing all three of these themes (the Hero, the Adversaries, and the Companion) and the ways they interact, it is possible to find political bearing in Strauss' tone poem (Hurwitz, 2014). Though World War II did not begin until nearly 40 years after *Ein Heldenleben* was published, the corruption within German government was very tangible in the music community well before Strauss had finished composing it. By the turn of the century, a plethora of laws were already in place as a way to regulate music composition, performance, and publication. Instigators of this movement became increasingly discriminatory to Jewish, female, non-Caucasian, and other "minority" musicians (Levi, 1994). Especially considering his admiration for Wagner, rumors began spreading that Strauss himself was teaming up with political officials who supported the purging of Jewish influence from the professional music sphere (Brenner, 2006). This idea catapulted into the spotlight when Strauss was unwillingly dubbed president of the Reich Music Chamber by Adolf Hitler's colleague Joseph Goebbels in 1933, a decision clearly made "in the belief and expectation that [his name and reputation] lent credibility to the organization" and to other forms of Nazi propaganda (Kennedy, 1999). Strauss and several of his fellow musicians begrudgingly agreed to comply with the Reich Music Chamber in hopes that the new regime might benefit the arts and boost audience rates.

However, Strauss was never afraid to use this platform to subtly manipulate critics or political leaders, especially when Jews began to be arrested in the 20th century (Walton, 2016). He was not very compliant with the demands of the group, which was intended to promote "good German music" that was free from the influence of weaker cultures or ethnicities (Applegate, 2002). The Reich Music Chamber enforced bans on many conductors as well as bans on the music of Mendelssohn, Debussy, and Mahler; to combat this, Strauss insisted that his orchestra play their work and continued to work with Jewish librettists, though he was "regarded with

enmity because of his association with the Jews (Youmans, 2016). Strauss was greatly frustrated by the limitations surrounding who could compose, who could perform, who could publish, and other facets of music production that were now regulated by the group of which he was president (Gregor, 2015). Nonetheless, he risked his professional reputation, his family's safety, and his very life to blatantly go against these absurd conservative regulations of art and musical expression. He also used his position to fight for better publishing rights: while Strauss called Goebbels, who had created the Reich Music Chamber, a "pipsqueak" behind his back, he dedicated an orchestral song to Goebbels in 1933. This was part of an agreement they had made in which Goebbels improved copyright laws for musicians in Germany after receiving Strauss' score (Kennedy, 1999). There were also several documents, most of which declared the Reich Music Chamber as an organization intended to glorify the Nazi Party, that Strauss deliberately omitted his signature from — he even bragged to fellow composers about the way he impeded the group's progress (Schmid, 2003).

Both Strauss and his wife Pauline were quite noticeably against the Nazi movement, and the beloved wife of his only son was Jewish, therefore causing Strauss's two grandchildren to be classified as Jews as well. Strauss did everything he possibly could to use his connections as a composer in Berlin to ensure their protection (Kater, 2000). His frustrations with the attitudes of his overseers and peers were unsafe to publicly discuss, but in a letter to a friend he confirmed his feelings: "if I had learned any other trade," he wrote, "God knows I would switch horses to get away from this bunch" (Kennedy, 1999). Another letter was intercepted by Hitler's secret police in 1935, and Strauss was immediately removed from his presidency after they read his words: "Do you believe I am ever, in any of my actions, guided by the thought that I am 'German'? Do you suppose Mozart was consciously 'Aryan' when he composed? I recognise only

two types of people: those who have talent and those who have none.” This letter was intended for Austrian author Stefan Zweig, expressing Strauss’ disappointment with the rapidly developing German creed of ethnic elitism and insulting the Germans leading Nazi-run organizations — such as the Reich Music Chamber — for feeling threatened by Jewish or minority musicians (Kennedy, 1999).

In a unique way, *Ein Heldenleben* foreshadows Strauss’ feelings of opposition to the early 20th century expansion of government control, intensifying apartheid, and military caliber glorified in German culture (Meyer, 1991). Strauss’ theme of the Hero references Beethoven and praises the traditional German views of a hero, juxtaposing that to the current (early- and mid-20th century) German ideals. The theme of the Adversaries is perhaps the most glaring reference to Germany’s growing political unrest, obsession with control, and the ever-tightening grip of the military’s power over German government. Though they are relentless, these characters are depicted as weak, and Strauss contrasts them throughout the piece with stronger and less hateful themes. Lastly, Strauss’ incorporation of an overtly female character, the Companion with her unprecedented determination and independence, can be viewed as his way of advocating for the ability and value of women and their involvement in society — a stark contrast to the assessment of pre-Nazi affiliates. A convoluted paradox, Strauss stood firmly against the racist and sexist beliefs that the Third Reich embodied while working closely with and for some of the primary leaders of the Nazi party (Holden, 2011).

As a musician, Strauss did not believe in the rules prescribed by political Germany about composing, performing, and even publishing; they did not cultivate an environment where the arts could flourish (Kennedy 1999). Strauss did not support the fundamental Nazi ideology that any race was superior to another; for this reason, he used his position of power -- though it was

still extremely limited -- as a musician in political Germany to integrate other ethnic and religious influences (Goldsmith, 2000). Ultimately, “*Ein Heldenleben* dramatizes the psychological struggle of a hero...[and] comments on the German cultural and political catastrophe” of the early 1900s (Youmans, 2010). Strauss included graphic sections of uncertainty and turmoil to emphasize the dangers of living in pre-Nazi Germany. This suggests that heroic life is one of perseverance; a true hero is not defined by gender or religion or political affiliation, but by determination, diligence, passion, and love.

Appendix: *Strauss's In-Score Directions for each Character*

The Hero	<p><u>uninterrupted:</u> -lively -emotional -protruding -expressive</p> <p><u>with the Adversaries:</u> -gradually something flowing -accelerating until firmly won -withstand!! -without diminishing -strong and bright</p> <p><u>with the Companion:</u> -delicately protruding -ever-calmer</p>
The Hero's Adversaries	<p><u>uninterrupted:</u> -very sharp and pointed -rasping -sibilant -secretive</p> <p><u>with the Hero:</u> -very far away</p>
The Hero's Companion	<p><u>uninterrupted:</u> -much calmer -lively -falling a bit -hypocritically languishing -almost twice as fast -flippantly -very quiet again -full -tenderly sentimental -courageous -graciously -reassuring -strong and more violent -tender and more loving -very passionate</p> <p><u>with the Adversaries:</u> -a little wider -with increase -very expressive</p>