To answer the proverbial question: If I were stranded on a desert island, Ein Heldenleben and my violin are all I would need to survive! It is simply THE greatest epic tone poem yet written for orchestra, inspiring individual heroism while maximizing the capacity of every instrument in the orchestra.

JEANINE WYNTON, NCS VIOLIN

Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night), Op. 4

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

BORN September 13, 1874, in Vienna; died July 13, 1951, in Los Angeles

PREMIERE Composed 1899, orchestrated 1917; first performance March 18, 1902, at the Vienna Musikverein; first performance of orchestral version December 24, 1924, in Newcastle upon Tyne, Edward Clark conducting

OVERVIEW

Arnold Schoenberg, one of the most influential composers of the early 20th century, was the son of a shoe salesman. Although he had violin lessons as a child, he was virtually self-taught as a composer. His early compositions from around the turn of the century were lush, Romantic, and tonal, as exemplified in his first string quartet, early songs, the symphonic poem Pelleas und Melisande, and the string sextet Verklärte Nacht, composed in 1899. He gradually developed a style that continually challenged the limits of tonality and triadic harmony, sharing his work and ideas with his more formally educated friends — but his appeal to the conservative Viennese audiences was always limited. Working in a bank to put bread on the table, he nevertheless was admired and encouraged by the intellectual and musical luminaries of his time, including Gustav Mahler, and gradually established a career as a composition teacher. As a Jew, he was forced to flee Germany under the Nazis, eventually settling in Los Angeles.

By 1906, Schoenberg had found the constraints of traditional tonality artificial and confining. He developed a compositional language, originally called “atonal,” that precludes tonal relationships, as well as traditional melodic and harmonic progressions that might even suggest a tonal center. He spent the next 15 years developing and codifying the new musical language. The result was the 12-tone system, or serialism — an extension of late-Romantic chromaticism — where for each composition all 12 semitones of the octave are used in a predetermined order. The order can be transposed, inverted, or written in retrograde or retrograde inversion, but has to be maintained. Encouraged by such composers as Mahler and Richard Strauss — who nevertheless refrained from incorporating his new ideas into their own works — Schoenberg pursued this path but generally remained unappreciated by the public.
**WHAT TO LISTEN FOR**

Composed in 1899, *Verklärte Nacht* is almost Wagnerian, recalling especially *Tristan und Isolde*, which stretched the limits of tonality and the sexual morality of the 1860s. The title *Verklärte Nacht* comes from an 1896 poem by Richard Dehmel (1863-1920) that celebrates new life, both literally and figuratively. Its form — and that of Schoenberg’s music — is an ABACA structure. Section A recurs as a refrain in which a narrator describes a couple walking outside at night. In section B, the woman informs her companion that she is pregnant by another man, and in section C, the man answers with exceptional understanding, compassion, and acceptance. The transfiguring warmth shared between the man and woman defies the taboos of society to create a unity for the unborn child.

Schoenberg did not consider the piece to be true “program music.” In 1950, he commented: “...it does not illustrate any action or drama, but was restricted to portray nature and express human feelings ... in other words, it offers the possibility to be appreciated as ‘pure’ music.” In 1917, Schoenberg transcribed the work for string orchestra.

**INSTRUMENTATION**

*Strings*

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*Ein Heldenleben (A Hero’s Life), Op. 40*

**RICHARD STRAUSS**

BORN June 11, 1864, in Munich; died September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

PREMIERE Composed 1898; first performance March 3, 1899, in Frankfurt, Frankfurter Opern- und Museumorchester, conducted by the composer

**OVERVIEW**

Franz Liszt had coined the term “symphonic poem” in 1854 for compositions accompanied by an extramusical “program” (usually a narrative) that the audience was supposed to read before listening to the music. Telling a story via an array of instrumental themes without text was a new iteration of the leitmotifs of Wagner’s music dramas — motives representing characters, objects, and ideas that provided a running instrumental commentary on the poetry. Although Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, and other 19th-century Romantics did not all use Liszt’s term, symphonic poems became a standard medium for them. But the form reached its apex with Richard Strauss; his attempts to render a specific text in pure music are far more detailed than Liszt’s. “I want to be able to describe a teaspoon musically,” Strauss is said to have commented. Oddly, he shied away from explaining his tone poems in
detail, preferring that the audience make up their own story. Starting in 1888, he produced a string of
tone poems that brought him international recognition.

The general optimistic atmosphere at the end of the 19th century created hubris that infected
artists and scientists alike. (Famed physicist Lord William Kelvin is said to have stated in a 1900 speech:
“There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise
measurement.”) Strauss was not immune; by 1898 he was at the height of fame and power, both as a
conductor and composer. He was about to start the prestigious job as conductor of the Berlin Opera,
and his tone poems were lauded throughout Europe and America.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Strauss expressed his self-confidence in *Ein Heldenleben*, the last of his tone poems before turning his
attention primarily to opera. The work consists of six parts, or titled chapters, played without pause,
describing the life of an unspecified hero. Certainly, there are autobiographical aspects of the tone
poem, but there are others that bear no relationship whatsoever to the composer’s life and must be
regarded in a more generalized or philosophical light. The six parts are:

1. *The Hero*: A lengthy theme extending nearly three octaves and lasting half a minute describes the
hero in grandiose ascending arpeggios.

2. *The Critics*: Strauss satirizes his critics with three nitpicking interlocking themes in the upper winds. It
is not clear whether he means specific critics or simply philistines who do not understand his music.

3. *The Courtship*: Strauss’ wife, Pauline de Ahna, was the model here. A notoriously strong-willed
woman, she is portrayed by the orchestra’s concertmaster in one of the most demanding orchestral
solas in the repertory. The string of cadenzas is a shameless seduction, but the hero isn’t snared so
easily. The first few notes of his theme lurks down in the lower winds, brass, and strings. His gradually
increasing interest is symbolized by adding more and more notes of the theme, but once she’s got him,
it’s all harps and strings. (When the French music critic Romaine Rolland asked Strauss about this rather
negative musical portrait, Strauss replied, “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
was a moment before.”) This, incidentally, is the longest section of the tone poem.

4. *The Hero’s Battlefield*: An ostinato of trumpet flourishes calls the hero to war. But is this a real war or
a war of musical polemics? Strauss himself was never in the military, and the hero is certainly not
battling those niggling woodwinds here. The section ends with the companion’s theme and a full repeat
of the hero theme, suggesting the hero achieves victory with his wife’s support. From here on, the hero
takes on the more generic quality of an idealized Everyman.

5. *The Hero’s Works for Peace*: In this section, Strauss runs through mini quotes from all of his previous
major works interspersed with motivic fragments from the hero theme. Scholars have been guessing for
decades what Strauss meant by the title of this section. One possibility is that it brings together all of the
subjects of his oeuvre to date as a single composite hero as flawed as Macbeth, lascivious as Don Juan,
or foolish as Don Quixote — in other words, human.
6. The Hero’s Retreat from the World and Inner Peace: The section begins with confusion and dissonance that resolves into a long English horn solo, riffing on one of the hero motives and sounding partly like a low-pitched birdcall and Swiss Alpenhorn. Everything seems settled in the broad melody that follows. But a sharply dissonant call from raucously muted trumpets and a brief reprise in the background of the critics signal an alarm, and the mood changes completely with a funereal timpani. This time, the solo violin (the companion) returns — exuding warmth and solace. Before the final cadence, the violin joins in a duet with the first horn. The ascending trumpet arpeggio that closes the piece, a truncated allusion to Also sprach Zarathustra, suggests that the hero has reached inner peace by subsuming his ego into philosophical contemplation.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, three flutes, four oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, five trumpets, three trombones, tuba, tenor tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, strings

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