

# Eine Alpensinfonie (An Alpine Symphony), Op. 64

Richard Strauss

The idea of the symphonic poem was codified in the 1840s and '50s by Franz Liszt through a dozen single-movement orchestral pieces that drew inspiration from, or were otherwise linked to, literary sources. The repertoire quickly grew thanks to notable contributions by such composers as Smetana, Dvořák, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, Franck, and — most impressively of all — Richard Strauss. In his memoirs Strauss recalled being drawn to the concept that

new ideas must search for new forms; this basic principle of Liszt's symphonic works, in which the poetic idea was really the formative element, became henceforward the guiding principle for my own symphonic work.

In 1886 Strauss produced what might be considered his first symphonic poem, *Aus Italien* (it is more precisely a sort of descriptive symphony), and he continued with hardly a break through the series of tone poems that many feel represent the genre at its height: *Macbeth* (1886–68), *Don Juan* (1888–89), *Tod und Verklärung* (*Death and Transfiguration*, also 1888–89), *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (*Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, 1894–95), *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1895–96), *Don Quixote* (1896–97), *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero's Life*, 1897–98), and *Symphonia domestica* (1902–03; sometimes the title is given as *Sinfonia Domestica*). *Eine Alpensinfonie* (*An Alpine Symphony*) would become a late pendant to this catalogue.

In his earlier symphonic poems Strauss had engaged topics with distinguished literary or philosophical pedigrees. By the time he reached *Ein Heldenleben* and *Symphonia domestica* he had gotten around to the subject of himself, and expanded the programmatic

possibilities to embrace autobiography. For *Eine Alpensinfonie* he adopted a narrative that was neither drawn specifically from a pre-existing literary source nor from autobiography, but rather one that embraced both in a general way. It is autobiographical to the extent that it represents the ardent celebration of nature — indeed, of nature at its most spectacular, as epitomized by a day of mountain climbing in the Alps.

But *Eine Alpensinfonie* also draws, if indirectly, on the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose texts had inspired the composer's *Also sprach Zarathustra* some years earlier. This time it was Nietzsche's 1888 essay *Der Antichrist* that had Strauss's attention. Engrossed in soul-searching following the death of his friend Gustav Mahler, Strauss wrote in his diary in 1911:

It is clear to me that the German nation will achieve new creative energy only by liberating itself from Christianity. ... I shall

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** June 11, 1864, in Munich, Bavaria

**Died:** September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

**Work composed:** 1911–15, with related sketches extending back to 1902

**World premiere:** October 28, 1915, at the Berlin Philharmonie, with the composer conducting the Dresden Hofkapelle

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** October 26, 1916, Josef Stransky, conductor, which marked the New York Premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** October 22, 2011, Lorin Maazel, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 56 minutes

call my alpine symphony: *Der Antichrist*, since it represents: moral purification through one's own strength, liberation through work, worship of eternal, magnificent nature.

The *Antichrist* scenario soon fell by the wayside, left to hover in the background as a shadow of inspiration. Instead, *Eine Alpensinfonie* emerged as a detailed piece of landscape tone-painting that the listener can enjoy without getting wrapped up in philosophical implications. The action unrolls in the space of 24 hours, from the pre-dawn of a

newborn day through the late night of the next, and in the course of 22 discrete episodes (one is bipartite, so one may identify 23 events), the listener goes up the mountain and down again, encountering along the way a catalogue of natural features expected on such a journey — forests, streams, meadows, and so on — as well as a hunting party (in the “Sunrise”), some close calls (a slippery “dangerous moment” and a violent storm), a spectacular view from the summit, and a post-sunset return home where a mountaineer must surely sit back and contemplate what has been a most excellent excursion.

## Listen for ... the Rarities

Even by Strauss's luxurious standards, *Eine Alpensinfonie* boasts a massive orchestra, including such rarely spotted orchestral items as the wind machine and thunder sheet (used in guess which section). Among the instruments is a true rarity: the heckelphone. It is a baritone member of the oboe family, pitched an octave below the standard oboe and notably robust of tone.

The instrument, which takes its name from the Heckel firm that invented it in 1904, looks rather like an overgrown English horn. It shows up in a handful of scores by other composers, but basically the heckelphone is a Strauss instrument, used memorably in his operas *Salome* and *Elektra*, his ballet *Josefslegende*, and his orchestral *Festliches Präludium*, in addition to *Eine Alpensinfonie*.

*Eine Alpensinfonie* displays another curiosity in its wind writing: occasional notes held so long that players might be forced to interrupt them to take a breath. Strauss suggested a solution in his score:

the Samuels Aerophon. The Aerophon (also known as Aerophor), introduced by the German flutist Bernhard Samuels in 1911, was basically a mouthpiece attached to a tube leading to a bellows operated by a foot treadle, allowing the wind player to pump away without using his own breath in such trying situations. It didn't catch on. Today orchestral musicians are more likely to address the problem by using circular breathing, a nifty trick whereby they inhale through their nose while forcing air into their instrument with a little extra push from their cheek muscles.

Bernhard Samuels (noted as Bernard) demonstrating his Aerophon invention for playing the heckelphone

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The foot bellows attachment of "aerophon" for holding the long notes for wind instruments.

MOUTHPIECE OF THE AEROPHON ATTACHED TO THE ENGLISH HORN

**ARTIFICIAL BREATH FOR WIND INSTRUMENTS**

**BERNHARD SAMUELS**, conductor of the Royal Opera at Schwerin, Germany, is the inventor of a device known as the "aerophon", which indefinitely sustains the tone of any wind instrument to which it may be attached. Dr. Richard Strauss, composer of the opera *Salome*, provided

time in Chicago, New York, and Boston, the past season.

The aerophon consists of a foot bellows, containing a water chamber and electric-light bulb, from which the air moistened and warmed to the degree of the human breath, is forced through a length of rubber tubing, equipped with stop valve, to a mouthpiece fitted into the corner of the mouth. As the soft palate of the player is automatically closed while he plays, he receives the artificial current of air which circles around the mouth and over through the lips to the mouth-piece of the instrument. Not only may he sustain the tone of the instrument, but he may perform the most ornate cadenza, while he breathes through his nostrils independently.

Human wind power is capable of continued sound emission over no more than three or four bars of music.

**Instrumentation:** four flutes (two doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn) and heckelphone, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, C clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), four bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), eight horns (four doubling Wagner tuba), four

trumpets, four trombones, two tubas, timpani (two players), wind machine, thunder sheet, orchestra bells, cymbals, bass drum, snare drum, triangle, cowbell, tam-tam, organ, celeste, and strings; also an offstage ensemble of nine horns, two trumpets, and two trombones.

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## The Composer in His Residence

The landscape chronicled musically in *An Alpine Symphony* was ultra-familiar to Richard Strauss, who was born in mountainous Bavaria. Buoyed with the earnings from his opera *Salome*, he constructed a villa in the gorgeous, high-altitude landscape of Garmisch (which in 1936 would merge with its sister-town Partenkirchen to host the Olympic Winter Games). He moved into his new home at the beginning of 1908 and lived there to the end of his days, composing in a room that afforded a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains, including Germany's highest peak, Zugspitze (9,718 feet above sea level).

The villa remains in the Strauss family to this day, and some descendants continue to use it as occasional residence, although limited tours are sometimes arranged through the Richard Strauss Institute, located in the town.



The Strauss villa in its picturesque Bavarian setting