The Cambridge Companion to

RICHAHD

STRAUSS

EDITED BY
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For my parents
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JAMES HEPOKOSKI

Things suddenly deprived of their supposed meaning, of the place assigned to them in the so-called order of things... made us laugh, In origin, laughter is thus of the devil's domain. It has something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (things are less weighty than they appeared to be, letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness). 1

For those connoisseurs in the mid and late 1890s who were tracking the latest developments of musical "progress" (Fortschritt) in Austro-Germanic art music, there was no doubt. The most innovative orchestral works of the decade were the tone poems of the young modernist, Richard Strauss. Debated everywhere in these circles were the four stunners that comprise his second cycle of tone poems, each of which outflanked its predecessor in extremity and provocation: Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche (1894-5), Also sprach Zarathustra (1896), Don Quixote (1897), and Ein Heldenleben (1897-8). (A later work, Symphonia domestica [1902-3], not considered in this essay, may be regarded as an extension to this cycle, as might Eine Alpensinfonie [1915], for which Strauss jotted down a few sketches as early as 1899, considerably before taking up the work in earnest over a decade later.) For listeners today, becoming acquainted with their narrative programs along with a basic history of their composition is a simple task. Such background information is well known and widely available. The more pressing issue is to orient ourselves to the larger artistic purposes that motivated these works in the first place.

While these compositions persist in the repertory as spectacularized historical landmarks, one cannot reduce them only to their initial shock-value or still-ringing sonic thrills. They are also multifaceted in their implications, approachable from several different angles. On the one hand, as pro-institutional works they were intended to attract notice within an elite symphonic tradition. On the other hand, as splashy manifestos they also struck a pose of overturning that tradition's sober pieties through iconoclastic lèse-majesté, raffish parody, and, at times, nose-thumbing ridicule. They both sustained and undermined the institution. In this respect they were resounding emblems of the high-strung Nervenkunst that was sweeping a new-generational wave of modernism through all of the European arts. From another perspective the second-cycle works could be grasped autobiographically: Strauss as impish Till, as world-smashing Zarathustra, as mad and illusion-ridden Quixote, as himself qua composer. Or one could assess them careeristically: the entrepreneurial Strauss manufacturing sensational artistic merchandise towards the goal of unabashed self-promotion. Or technically: Strauss as avant-garde wizard of huge-ensemble orchestration and polyphony; as brilliant pastiche-coordinator of multiple compositional styles in the service of wide-ranging ad hoc representations; as masterly conjurer of precise images and narratives; as harmonic and textural alchemist whose effects range from the calm or lush to the unbridled and chaotic; as composer-craftsman with an unparalleled sense of emancipation from the constraints of Classical symphonic form.

The conversion to Nietzscheanism

At the bottom of it lay Strauss's collapse of faith in the metaphysical view of music, with which he had probably never been entirely comfortable. Strauss's "full-blown personal crisis" emerged two or three years after the completion of the first cycle of tone poems and came to a head during the period that saw the completion and premiere of the opera Guntram (1892-3). By this time he had acquired a distaste for any naïve claim that music was a sacramental conveyor of altruistic, spiritual truths. This was the Schopenhauerian/Wagnerian view promoted not only at Bayreuth but also by his once-persuasive former mentor Alexander Ritter. Instead, breaking with Bayreuth's Cosima Wagner in an anti-Schopenhauerian letter from March 1, 1893, he began to embrace the antimetaphysical, anti-Christian, and self-affirming iconoclasm of Nietzsche and distance himself from the doctrine of Willensverneinung, the ascetic, self-renouncing denial of the Will so prized by Ritter.

With his reading of Human, All Too Human, Beyond Good and Evil, and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, a philosophical line was crossed. Strauss was on his way to constructing a new musical aesthetic, capable, he thought, of reinvigorating German composition. The second tone-poem cycle provided a series of endorsements of a Nietzsche-fueled conception of music. "Gott ist tot," Nietzsche had written in 1882 and 1883. In these tone poems from the later 1890s the god that Strauss declared dead was the overinflated musical duox of the age, the bowed-head faith in music as a bearer of a mystical, redemptive content. Those metaphysical beliefs—phantoms, self-deceptions—were now to be sloughed off, laughed away, replaced with an embrace of the joyous physicality of the earth and the creative assertion of the unbound self. Music was still important as a human statement, a grand personal and cultural achievement, but it was no longer to be believed in as a bearer of world-transcendence.
To those musical idealists who grasped what the composer was doing, this was nothing short of apostasy. While in Strauss's hands the grand pillars of the Austro-Germanic symphonic temple remained standing, that temple was now desacralized, no longer the home of a god. Strauss's reorientation projected a novel, often misunderstood style of modernism into art music. It participated in what Max Weber would later call the "disenchantment of the world" (Entzauberung der Welt), the falling-away of faith-based illusions. In the face of this matter-of-fact demythologizing, other modernist styles less eager to dispense with a hyper-elevated conception of music—even when more obviously dissonant—can seem outdated, clinging to an unsustainable aesthetics of self-absorption and inwardness, propped up with heavy-handed moral assessments. In that celebratory release from the encumbrances of austere seriousness lay the heart of the Strauss-tone-poem controversies that would dominate not only the 1890s but most of the next century as well.

The dismayed Ritter saw all this coming in January, 1893, almost two years before the composer started to work on Till, writing in a concerned letter to Strauss: "What alone of Wagner has survived in you? The mechanics of his art. But to use this art for the glorification of a worldview that directly contradicts the Wagnerian is not to build upon Wagner's achievement, but: to undermine it." The original listeners of Strauss's second cycle were presented with a sense of disorienting incongruity. Abundantly present were the splendor, orchestral power, and technical alliance with "musical progress" that they had associated with the redemptive claims of Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian metaphysics. And yet those associations were rendered inaccessible with these desacralized musical programs and displays, so eager to slap the face of that tradition.

It was not only a matter of flamboyant exhibits of pictorialism nor of the adoption of more detailed musical narratives, now outlined for audiences in instructive program notes by Strauss-authorized commentators (Wilhelm Mauke, Arthur Hahn, Wilhelm Klatte, Friedrich Rösch). The composer had also chosen the programs as anti-idealistic affronts. They could hardly have been more deflationary in implication. While the instantly popular Till Eulenspiegel could be viewed by the naïve as a harmlessly volkisch, gemütlich tale, its deeper, "esoteric" program, noted in 1896 by its pro-Nietzsche dedicatee (and friend of Strauss), Arthur Seidl, was anti-institutional, a mocking rebellion against established rigidities. Here in Till we should recognize that "a superior spirit interacts with the external world... Epater le bourgeois! War against all apostles of moderation, against the old guild of the merely virtuous and comfortable, against all good middle-class folk and secure 'schools of abstinence.'" Celebrating gleeful destruction for its own sake and culminating in Till's seizure, trial, and (unsuccessful) execution by scandalized social authorities, these anarchic romps were veiled metaphors for the new, antimetaphysical music that Strauss was inaugurating.

Also sprach Zarathustra, the hypertrophic companion-piece to Till, was more explicit. Here Strauss turned the tables on the prevailing conviction that both absolute and program music could harbor deep philosophical truths: if the musical public wished to believe in musical philosophizing, why, then, he would give it to them. In this act of purposefully hyperbolic overreaching, he wrote immensely conceived music "freely after Nietzsche" (frei nach Nietzsche), loosely conjuring up selected ideas from a literal book of philosophy, or at least from a literal philosopher, since one issue has always been the degree to which the tone poem adheres to the narrative specifics of Nietzsche's Zarathustra. From certain perspectives this was a reductio ad absurdum flung back at the tradition's face. Doubling the outrage, it was an atheistic philosophy that sought to ridicule and annihilate earlier, sentimentalized pieties—above all, Christianity and its morality of body-denying self-sacrifice. In its place was an Übermenschen titanism repeatedly ushered in by a recurring disgust (Ekel) with the past coupled with a hearty, profane laughter that flooded away that past's burdensome illusions. "I should believe only in a God who understood how to dance," wrote Nietzsche in Zarathustra. "My devil... was the Spirit of Gravity—through him all things are ruined. One does not kill by anger but by laughter. Come, let us kill the Spirit of Gravity."

If Till and Zarathustra could be construed "esoterically" as complementary works, opposite faces of the same coin—comic and serious, anti-hero and hero—so too could the next pair, Don Quixote and Heldenleben. In 1898 Strauss claimed to have conceived them as "direct pendants" to one another, with Heldenleben providing the context for an interpretation of Quixote. However we interpret this remark, it is clear that selecting Cervantes's character as a topic served as another parody of an entrenched tradition within program music. Representative masculine heroes—strivers, achievers—were common fare in symphonic poems and other illustrative music. Quixote alluded to and deflated this tradition. This hero was no Prometheus, no Tasso, Dante, Hamlet, or Faust—not even a Macbeth or a Don Juan. Rather, he was a deluded dreamer drawn off the track of sanity by too much reading of chivalric novels, foolishly believing in the pursuit of imagined ideals, and Strauss illustrated him to appear as preposterous as possible. Youmans has elaborated the suggestion that the implied "knight" (Ritter) in this set of variations for cello and orchestra on a theme "of knightly character" (ritterlichen Characters) was none other than Alexander Ritter, the young Strauss's pious mentor, alluded to here as a stand-in for all believers in the metaphysics of music, the position of which..."
Strauss had once, in vain, tried to convince himself. And yet for all of the musical hijinks and sensational mockery, the musical caricature is streaked with a wistful, "if only" flavor, as if Strauss were bidding a tender farewell to a once grand idea that never was and never could be true. As has been observed, such sentiments may be found more than once in the second-cycle works, at times surfacing as an aching nostalgia for the simplicity of the old illusions and their comforts. Even as he adopted Nietzscheanism as the leading edge of his tone-pojem manifests, it was neither absolute nor uncompromising. Mists of old-world sentiment continued to linger, and from time to time he appears to have questioned the thoroughness of his recent conversion and, disillusioned, to have wished only for withdrawal and peace.

Raising the deflationary stakes to their utmost, Strauss now, in *Heldenleben*, parodied another cherished aspect of the romantic-hero stereotype: not the elevated literary topic this time, as in *Don Quixote*, but rather the image of the masculine artist-creator. Here the broad target was the conception of the composer as a Promethean figure: the Broica-propelled, Beethoven-through-Wagner legacy. In a calculated act of staged egotism Strauss now lionized himself as the tone poem's subject. He thus isolated a linchpin doctrine of the tradition and pushed it across any normative line of self-restraint. More to the point, he situated himself not in any idealized metaphysical empyrean but in the flat, everyday world that fluctuated between the careerist production of musical goods within the strife-torn marketplace of carping critics and the bourgeois concerns and erotic pursuits of personal-domestic life. Such a maneuver challenged at its core an aesthetic culture that, at least since Schiller, had insisted upon the purified separateness of art from the affairs of this world—the aesthetic sphere conceived as an emancipatory realm of freedom. *Symphonia domestica*, composed about five years later, would be an even more outrageous successor to the *Heldenleben* assault, depicting the ordinary concerns of a typical day in the Strauss household.

Like the other second-cycle tone poems, *Heldenleben* offers multiple, sometimes contradictory implications co-existing in tension. Its aim was not entirely destructive. On the contrary, in this self-aggrandizing display one may perceive a performative act of personal affirmation, a quasi-Nietzschean heroic deed promulgated under the aegis of a new aesthetic regime. This is obvious in its demonstration of an undeniably formidable musical accomplishment, a sonic presence meant to astonish at every turn. At the same time this is tongue-in-cheek music writ large. Its very orchestral grandiosity plays into this contradiction. The more ostentatious the musical apparatus, the more disproportionate is the gap between the physical splendor of sound and the banal everydayness of what is claimed to be represented. It is not merely the piece's concept that launches a siege on cherished aesthetic convictions; it is also its performative enactment on the concert stage, the resonant physicality of its acoustic effect on audiences.

Music and historical progress

Particularly in its original 1890s context, the music conjured up in these second-cycle tone poems was astounding. Immense, hyper-rich worlds of sound were made to appear and disappear with a frictionless ease and magic that took one's breath away. Driven by audacity and nerves, the sheer exhibitionism of it all was an essential part of its claim to represent the *ne plus ultra* of modern practice. Central to the enterprise was a continu­ual display of a technological complexity that overrode past limits of taste and technique. Moreover, the coolness and calculating mastery of the hand that set all this into motion gave the impression that the works were being produced as if to show objectively (or, as some came to suspect, cynically) what could now be done with modern textural, harmonic, and orchestral resources. The result was analogous to a public demonstration of the latest wonders of newly manufactured industrial equipment capable of serving modern needs more productively.

The progress claimed by the supporters of such music was sometimes recast as a simple fact of reality, a corollary of the age's technological advances. Writing in 1896, Arthur Seidl asserted that *Blumenzweig* had displayed an "empirical progress in the analysis of the life of the soul, from the differentiation of the feelings to the laying-bare of the nerves." For Hans Merian (in a trenchant commentary on *Zarathustra* from 1899) the essence of Strauss's modernism lay in his unswerving embrace of program music and overt pictorial effects. The mere conveying of abstract feelings in music, so characteristic of early decades in the century, had now been overtaken by representations of clear images. Prior "architectonic fetters" and traditional compositional "rules" had yielded to the modern world of coloristic pictorialism. "These days," insisted Merian, "program music is a fact." As a result, "modern composers can express more complicated ideas than could the older masters." This new music was "poetry" [*Dichtung*] "in a higher sense ... [and yet] it still remained, in all cases, music above all."

"Music above all." Such remarks remind us that for all of the programmatic and philosophical interests driving these tone poems, Strauss was also pursuing musical issues of thematic construction, harmony, texture, orchestration, and form. This point plunges us into discipline-specific matters of craft that are difficult if not impossible to simplify. Not only did these works have to be composed, measure-by-measure, but each measure, each
phrase, each larger section was also to respond to the musical urgencies and debates of the day. Here we confront these works' specifically musical qualities, professionally wrought and situated at every moment within an ongoing symphonic tradition. Technical concerns of expertise and originality are features that no commentator should downplay. Strauss invited his keenest listeners to savor musical details at their most specialized, set forth at the far end of over a century-and-a-half of theoretical and formal development.

Other composers noticed these things at once. Strauss's local and long-range effects served as a sourcebook for contemporary and later composers to imitate and extend: daring compositional ideas, innovative instrumental effects, swashbuckling melodic arcs, sudden chromatic slippages and tonal jolts, exploratory or shocking dissonances, overt depictions of eroticism, nervously busy and stratified polyphony, radical and sophisticated structural deformations. One cannot overstate this point. It is the larger part of the Strauss legacy, a musical counterpart to the aesthetic revolution that he was introducing into the turgid institution of art music. This is one reason why thumbnail descriptions of these pieces fall so short of conveying the plenitude and complexity that burst forth from virtually every page. No brief essay—and certainly not this one—can do justice to the countless details of musical and historical significance here. At best one might provide a sampler of a few musical features to serve as a spur to a more adequate examination of this music.

Aspects of musical style

Strauss's arsenal of hypermodern techniques ranged freely in the second cycle, stirring up controversy in their wake. Foreshadowing many of the practical concerns of film-music composers of the subsequent century, his style is best characterized as a mixture of different historical styles. To be sure, all of these works are shot through with unmistakable Strauss signatures: incandescent, prolonged dominant-seventh chords, a arrival-chord epiphanies, orchestrationally resonant chord-spacing, and so on. But what was most new to the later 1890s was his willingness to dip his musical brush into any number of stylistic paint-pots to produce ("objectively") the image-impression or mood-effect for which each moment called. In Strauss one encounters a manipulation of different styles evoked from a cool distance, summoned up as if in quotation marks, apart from an aesthetic commitment to any of them. This was a departure from the historical metanarrative of internal consistency and organic development still being pursued as a virtually moral imperative by other composers of the
oboe-led, G major ("third mistress") episode from his own Don Juan (mm. 232–309). While Till and Zarathustra, occupied with other matters, do not feature extended passages along these lines, Quixote and Heldenleben do, replete with soaring melodies and provocative contrapuntal interiors. Quixote's F major Dulcinea-Idyll (mm. 332–c. 371, beginning six bars before rehearsal no. 36) and the Hero's prolonged G major, mässig langsam — marking the conquest of the Gefährtin, and beginning with one of Strauss's most luxuriantly surging as of arrival and the broadly spanned Thema der Siegesgewissheit ("Certainty-of-conquest theme," mm. 288–369) — provide touchstone illustrations. (Another, even more extravagant, occupies the vast center of Symphonia domestica: the potent erotics of creativity, the onset of Schaffen und Schauen — Adagio, m. 600 [rehearsal no. 55] — eventually proceeding into more graphically construed sexual activity.) Related to this sonorously gratifying topos is a mood of affectionate gentleness, especially in introductions and valedictory epilogues for his ironized heroes, notably Till, Quixote, and himself: winsome framings of their personalities and lovable quirks. Or his penchant for mock-pastoral episodes replete with ovine or ranz-des-vaches double-reed circularities: with chipper alertness in Zarathustra (mm. 435ff., rehearsal no. 26, shortly after the onset of the C major Tanzlied); with high parody in the sheep scene of Quixote (Variation II); and attaining a much-desired, personal island of rest near the end of Heldenleben (m. 828 [rehearsal no. 99]), soon tipping into the hero's concluding Vollendung, or withdrawal from the world.

Strauss's harmonic language is riddled with cavalier shifts of tonal implication — casual chromatic twists — within melodic contexts that might otherwise have led us to expect a more straightforward diatonicism. The insouciance of his short-range glides from one tonal world to another can give the impression of an arbitrary sense of local key, a weakened tonal force capable of being slid from anywhere to anywhere else with the wave of a compositional wand. The opening seventeen bars of Don Quixote, three successive D major images of the knight, provide a much-noted illustration (Example 5.1). Considered seriatim, the three melodic modules give us the succession: largely normative, odder, oddest. Measures 1–4 (the hero's "knightly character," Arthur Hahn tells us) are diatonic, leading a sprightly initial impulse into an expanded cadential progression (featuring a savory, sustained F in m. 3), concluding with a straightforward D major perfect authentic cadence at m. 4 (perfect authentic cadence [PAC]). The example's second module, mm. 5–12 ("the principal duty of the knight, to honor and protect his lady"), is more extravagant. Built on an exaggerated, grazioso bowing and swooping, it is a parody of a parallel period. Here the sentential antecedent swerves outlandishly (m. 7) to an imperfect authentic cadence a diminished fifth away, on A♭ (imperfect authentic cadence [IAC], m. 8), while the consequent reverses the tritonal deviation as though nothing unusual had happened, returning to the tonic D to conclude with a I PAC in m. 12. (As Youmans remarks, such a D–A♭–D tonal course "lets us know [at once] that the protagonist is at the very least a strange bird.") Even more eccentric is the codetta punctuation-tag in mm. 13–17 ("the dream-prone man, to whom even the simple appears i
something dreadfully complex"), whose effect, however, seems like the solemn equivalent of "This I vow," or perhaps a self-crossing before one rises at the end of a prayer. (Strauss will later use this heartfelt module to furnish a lovingly valedictory end to the tone poem.) Here the chromatic chords slip liquidly from a "Tristan" half-diminished seventh (m. 13) through a succession of "forbidden-parallel" major–minor sevenths, heedless of normative voice-leading, in which a single "V7" sonority (sometimes with augmented-sixth implications) is moved up and down by half-steps (with a melodically contoured upper voice) before settling on a deliciously gratifying I–I PAC at m. 16.

Those of Strauss's critics who were accusing the composer of going too far sometimes pointed to his cacophonous dissonances. In turn, Strauss went out of his way to guarantee that each work would have its own "outrageous" moments, as if goading his opponents into denouncing the scandal. While these passages were invariably produced for pictorial purposes (moments of extremity or uproarious chaos), they became important forerunners of the twentieth-century emancipation of the dissonance. In 1896 Seidl noted that the multiple fortissimo soundings of the Halt! dissonances in the midst of the fever-delirium of Tod und Verklärung (trombones, tuba, and timpani, mm. 270–1, 278–9, 282–3, 287–8) had shocked some and been denounced as an "empty boxing of the ears" (eitel Ohrgeschinder). Successors in the second cycle were forthcoming. Till's upsetting of the marketwives provides an obvious example (mm. 133ff.), as does the madly climactic illustration of his chase and capture by the authorities (mm. 500–73). In Zarathustra we have the celebrated bichordal fade-out conclusion, juxtaposing C (or perhaps an incomplete French sixth built above C) and B major—alluding to earlier C–B juxtapositions within the work and provoking an endless string of commentaries and explanations. Quixote is riddled with splashy dissonance-upsets, as the unhinged knight charges and routs one thing after another. Moreover, the work's introduction (Quixote's descent into delusion) drives to a climactic telos of bichordal madness, tritone-based dissociations representing a fractured consciousness (Example 5.2). Following Quixote's imagined transformation into a D minor knight-of-steel–resolve (trumpets and trombones; mm. 109–12, a determined, taut-muscled variant of the head-motive from m. 1), Strauss hurls the harmony, triple-fortissimo, first into a B ♯ sounded against an incomplete E ♯, mm. 112–16 (with inner "resolutions" to what amounts to an extended stack of thirds, or an B ♯ chord, mm. 115, 115), then into a repetitively jammed, incomplete A ♯ (V of the ensuing D minor) against B ♯, mm. 117–20. In Heldenleben there is the central battle-scene (Des Helden Walstatt, beginning with off-stage, call-to-arms fanfares at m. 369 [rehearsal no. 42]), that occupies most of the developmental space, unleashing a manic tableau goaded onwards by the militaristic prodding of snare drum and percussion (m. 434).

Apart from such Straussian fingerprints, the tone poems (especially the post-Till ones) are marked by a self-promoting grandiosity in orchestral size, length, and sonic splendor. In Zarathustra, Quixote, and Heldenleben Strauss pursued a sonorous and structural massiveness exceeding prior limitations. Within individual tableaux this often claimed by sheer fat a liberated monumentality uncontainable by mere convention—a declaration that the "new man" celebrated by Nietzsche has been forcefully emancipated beyond the norms. The famous, C major opening of Zarathustra—a blazing illuminated initial too well known to need citing here—provides an illustration in terms
of absolute Klang (sonority). One likely candidate for its immediate model would be the closing three or four bars of Liszt's Les Préludes: a similar, C major fanfare-paroxysm of orchestral sound. But what Liszt had placed at the end as the ecstatic, cadential telos of a heroic life, Strauss situated at the beginning, with an immensely augmented orchestra (including contrabassoon and low-rumbling organ) and a much-expanded time-span. It is as if Liszt's programmatic hopes (old romantic illusions) were only starting-points for the new antimetaphysical philosophy. From another perspective in its acoustic references to an emerging overtone-series from raw sound, Strauss's opening recalled the creatio ex nihilo openings of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Wagner's Das Rheingold - there, in both cases, an initial creative stirring; here, an ego-centered conquering of sonic territory. The underlying conception remained: starting from natural overtones, the acoustic emergence of sound, then of music. In Zarathustra Strauss recast the idea as a three-gesture event. Over a deep, resonant C pedal fundamental, one first hears two flaring sonic-convulsions: the major-to-minor one, an initiating surge not yet capable of sustaining its overtone-frame, is at once strengthened into a more stable minor-to-major complement. Each is responded to by elemental triplet-pounding in the timpani. These raw-acoustic phenomena are followed by the great moment of continuation: the thrilling leap into "music" with the subdominant chord, m. 15. This is a musical shock beyond mere acoustics, proceeding harmonically into the sonically unprecedented Klang-cadence at m. 19. Considered as a whole - in formal terms this famous opening is shaped as a colossal sentence: two briefer, complementary gestures (aa', mm. 5–8, 9–12), the sentence's presentation modules; followed by a more expansive continuation (b, mm. 13–21). At the same time, the opening measures are packed with a complex of programmatic references. In 1896 Arthur Hahn identified the opening 1–5–8 in the unison trumpets as an elemental Natur-Thema (a world as yet without humans) as well as "something mysterious, unfathomable, a great, unsolved riddle," while in 1899 Hans Merian agreed, referring to its "elemental Being" also as the "World-Riddle ... Nature the Sphinx that gazes upon us with empty, starless eyes." This "Nature theme" or "world-riddle," however, comes to us from a Nietzschean world. It is not too extravagant to propose that the three rising notes, here and especially later in the tone poem, may also be underlaid with Gott ist tot, the proclamation of a godless, purely physical nature eventually to be embraced as such by the liberated superman.

Or consider the opening statement of Ein Heldenleben (Example 5.3), the initial presentation of Der Held ("the hero"), not surprisingly in Beethoven's Eroica key of B major. (The intended connection between the two works is obvious enough.) Once again, in terms of thematic format this is a large-scale sentence (aa'b, mm. 1–2, 3–4, 5–17) - or, more accurately, a sentence-chain, in which each successive continuation (b) is itself shaped as a sentence, beginning with another aa'-type presentationunit. (Strauss often favored the thematic shapes of sentences and sentence-chains in these works.) Typical also is the enormously wide range and registral disposition of the melody, leaping over and through multiple octaves with unconfined heroic strides and sharp-angled, whiplash twists, commanding broad expanses of musical space. Nor is the hero to be contained by the diatonic traditions of any single tonality. While the statement begins and ends in B, the theme momentarily breaks free of these shackles with the accented, quasi-whole-tone descent at m. 7, returns to B by mm.
8–10; stretches upward, sequentially, to a hyperintense E major sonority (B “arbitrarily” pulled up a half-step); then returns to a cadential I in B at m. 13 to pursue a florid and decisive cadence in that key. The ever-moralistic Adorno cited the seemingly “wrong notes” F and C in the melody at the end of m. 3 as an illustration of what he regarded as Strauss’s careless composition, marked by an “imprecision of details.” The perceived problem was that those two pitches do not belong within the implied B chord. “Their effect is to obscure: they are designed to blur the pedantry of the surrounding chords: in the élan of the theme, the individual notes become irrelevant as opposed to the irresistible whole.” As Adorno assessed it, like so many other effects in Strauss, they seemed to produce only irresponsible “jet flame” effects over banal and commonplace chords.29 To be sure, such free melodic dissonances are characteristic of Strauss as modernist. But there is no reason to suppose that they were casually written. Not only do the non-chordal tones reinforce the image of the hero’s irrepressible character, but this fleeting deviation away from normative pitches is also soon succeeded, as part of an intensifying pattern, by the two more telling escapes from B diatonicism mentioned above.

Illustrative program and musical form

Essential to the production of programmatic musical scenes is an assumed generic contract between composer and listener whereby musical ideas are agreed to be mappable onto aspects of specific characters or situations: let motives A, B, and C represent narrative-images X, Y, and Z. Without an initial agreement to accept this principle of musical metaphor, the tone-poem premise collapses. To suggest that it might be appropriate to listen to these works as absolute music or that they are adequately comprehensible in terms of pure music alone is to blind oneself to the historically controversial and witty aesthetic game that the tone poems are playing. Once the central musical signifiers for each work are grasped, it becomes a simple matter to follow their recurrences and transformative adventures. Hence the importance of the initially published, authorized guidebooks from the 1890s, which not only provided listeners with the broad outlines of the intended narratives (while still leaving much to the imagination) but also decoded the various motives. Still, the official explanations are only starting-points for more advanced inquiries. Are they truly reliable or only safe public statements? Do the explanations themselves need to be decoded? What might they have suppressed, ignored, glossed over, or sanitized? What are their larger “esoteric” implications? While composing the works did Strauss have these (or other) labels in mind?

From the perspective of the signifying motives, one aspect of the musical form may be construed as purely narrative: tracing the linear adventures of a single masculine identity (or, in Zarathustra, an inexorable ruling idea) marked by a cluster of recognizable attributes and put through a paratactic series of different environments or adventures. Under these lights the poetic form of the story, with its own climaxes and denouements, may be taken to be a sufficient guarantor of linear graspability apart from any allusion to more traditional formal prototypes. This may be the way that most of Strauss’s non-professional listeners have heard these pieces—anecdotally narrated, engaging tales. At the heart of this lies the familiar technique of thematic transformation: mood- and situation-reshapings of easily recognized pitch- and contour-shapes. While this (Berlioz-, Liszt-, and Wagner-influenced) technique is so obvious that it requires no extended commentary here, it is nonetheless central to our experience of these works: how many ways can Strauss refashion individual ideas?

Example 5.4 shows five instances (of many) from Till Eulenspiegel. The opening four bars of prologue (5.4a), Mauke tells us, sought to depict the onset of the telling of a narrative, Es war einmal ein Schalksnarr (“Once upon a time there was a knavish fool”).31 Recast into 6/8 meter and accelerated in tempo, the same initial pitches soon become one of Till’s central identifiers, the ager “Kobold” (“wicked goblin”) motive (5.4b), the lustig sign of the irrepressibly teasing prankster.32 The onset of the marketwives incident begins with a new transformation of the idea, m. 113, led off with carefully tentative, piano mutterings in the bass (5.4c), as if Till were tiptoeing unobserved into a social scene that he will soon disrupt (Wartet auf, ihr Duckmeister! [“Just wait, you fainthearts!”]). Examples 5.4d and 5.4e are taken from the “Pastor” scene, Till disguised as a sober minister entering with a dignified (Brahmsian) hymn (m. 179). In 5.4d (mm. 187–9) we are informed that we are to recognize Till by this mischievous bass-line figure, representing his “big toe” sticking out from under his robe, while in the immediately following 5.4e we are apparently to sense Till’s high-pitched, smug complacency (m. 195, solo violin) just before he begins to shiver with fears about his own mocking of religion (mm. 196–201). Similar examples could be multiplied throughout not only Till but also all of the other tone poems. (As suggested in Examples 5.1 and 5.2 above, the transformations of the opening bar of Don Quixote—the primary image of the knight—are also noteworthy.)

The task of uncovering the musical principles that govern the large-scale architecture of each of these compositions is more difficult. As is also common in Strauss’s earlier tone poems, each of the four works furnishes us with a narrative succession of individualized, contrasting tableaux, well stocked with reappearing, reshaped motives. To what degree are the
consecutive musical scenes, grouped together, dialogically relatable to any of the traditional Formenlehre patterns as handed down to the late nineteenth century? In no case does the paratactic succession outline a familiar pattern in familiar ways.

When the tableaux-contrasts include matters of tempo and character, as they customarily do, it is inviting to try to grasp the entire complex as alluding to the traditional four-movement plan: opening movement, slow movement, scherzo, and finale. As Steven Vande Moortele has recently noted, this much-noted “integration of elements of multi-movement patterns into single-movement designs was a constant concern of many composers of the nineteenth century.” Citing familiar examples ranging from Beethoven and Schubert through Liszt, Strauss (Don Juan, Heldenleben, and Domestica), Schoenberg, and others, Vande Moortele redubbed this format “two-dimensional sonata form: the combination of sections of a sonata cycle and movements of a sonata form at the same hierarchical level in a single-movement composition ... the projection of a sonata form onto an entire through-composed sonata cycle.”

Dahlhaus had termed this a "multimovement form within a single movement"; for William S. Newman the structure had been a "double-function sonata." Some caveats are pertinent: the concept of a rapid scherzo is to be understood freely; and "movements" need not coincide with the standard zones of a sonata, though the "finale" impression sometimes begins with the onset of a recapitulatory space. The multimovement aspect of the two-dimensional idea is significant and introduces its own set of interrelated issues. Analysts, for example, have had differing views on its applicability and clarity of demarcation in each piece. Nevertheless, the concept is elementary, and that feature will not be pursued here.

More problematic is the other side of the double-function issue: the potential dialogical relationship of each tone poem’s entire tableau-sequence, programmatically inflected, to any of the institutionally sanctioned musical formats, even as they had been modified by the end of the century. To what extent might we justifiably perceive implied allusions, however transient or free, to the procedures of once-normal sonata form, sonata-rondo form, theme and variations, and so on? The challenge is to perceive the formal clues that Strauss gives us along the way and then flexibly to imagine how and for which purposes he might have wished us to regard the ongoing succession as potentially in dialogue (or not) with any of a number of these conventional structural formats. Now marketing himself as a brash modernist and Nietzschean “free spirit,” Strauss’s characteristic approach was to provide gestures towards one or more of these formats (thereby claiming himself as a participant within an honored tradition on whose accrued cultural distinction he was capitalizing) but simultaneously to stage such reassurances as generationally out of date through a transgressive emancipation from their normative constraints. What one encounters is an audacity of conception that explodes definitional aspects of the forms from within. The first two of the tone poems are perhaps the most formally innovative, and it is with these two that we shall spend the most time.

The title-page of Till Eulenspiegel famously declares that the work is disposed in Rondeauform (though nach alter Schelmenweise, “in the old roguish manner”). Heightened by the antique spelling of “rondo” (an insider’s wink of the eye), the reference to an institutionally orthodox form declares an intention to conform to formal behavior that the work delights in shattering. This is no ordinary rondo within which predictable recurrences of a generally stable refrain-theme are separated by contrasting episodes. Instead, once past the brief, initial introduction of Till, the remainder of the piece unspools a paratactic string of adventure-episodes,
within which the "rondo" elements, the Till-identifiers, are constantly present and threaded throughout. Thus the "rondo" themes and the episodes are simultaneously present: a strikingly modernist idea, appropriate for Strauss's narrative predilections. From this perspective one can also read the successive episodes as differing adventure-cycles of the same rondo-ideas. This circular or helical aspect – one rotation of the generative ideas cycling into the next – can be regarded as an instance of what I have elsewhere called rotational form: successive presentations of similarly ordered, often-transforming material, including the possibility of free variants, expansions, and modular omissions. At the same time, one can perceive droll gestures towards the "good behavior" of a sonata-rondo in the large-scale arrangement. Not long after the episode in which Till mocks the academic philistines, we re-encounter the familiar solo-horn motive (m. 429, twelve measures after rehearsal no. 28), an obvious reprise of the opening (m. 6) and a telling signal that invites us to understand the moment as the launch of a potentially well-mannered recapitulation. Not surprisingly, what follows is the most disruptive, unleashed music in the work, a "recapitulation" torn to shreds at every stage, even while several of the motives from earlier in the piece do manage to resurface, albeit transformed, in the expected order. In sum (and engaging with Strauss's "rondeau" paratext), the work's tableau-succession may also be grasped as an extreme sonata-rondo deformation. It maintains a transgressive dialogue with the norms of a sonata-rondo, whose typical, "textbook" procedures and options are to be kept in mind as a benchmark by the listener, even as the piece regularly and brazenly violates those norms – mocks them – as a manifesto of modernist liberation.

This liberation is more aggressively proclaimed in Also sprach Zarathustra, whose large-scale organization and programmatic implications are more puzzling than those of the other three works. The structure of Zarathustra superimposes a number of principles. One of them, the tonal conflict between the tonalities of C and B, suggesting the irreconcilability of nature and humankind, has been so frequently discussed that it need not be rehearsed again here. Instead, we can focus on another important structural procedure: that of the staging of a process of persistent overcoming, whereby each major section (or section-pair) begins forthrightly but is allowed to flourish only so far before encountering a field of dissolution or an outright rejection. The resulting disintegration leads to another rebirth-cycle of similar materials on a higher level of human emancipation from superstition and naïveté. Each cycle (or cycle-pair) presents reconceived transformations of the germinal motives of the piece. From this perspective the form is freely rotational, with each rotation-tableau replacing its predecessor and aspiring to a higher philosophical status. In addition, the successive cycles are connected in such a manner as to suggest here and there a tangential, free dialogue with aspects of sonata form, while never concretizing its realization of that traditional format.

The famous introduction, Rotation 1, lays out some of the most fundamental motives of the piece (Example 5.5a–c) and is the referential,
generative source for many of the variants and expansions found in the later rotations: the colossal material being of Nature, the C major 1–5–8, also posing a world-riddle to be faced by humanity (5.5a); the cowering human response in the muted low strings, a "reverent shudder" (ein andachtsvoller Schauer; 5.5b); and the embryo of humankind's B minor "Longing theme" (Sehnsuchts-Thema), the urge to inquire and understand (5.5c). A fearful and primitive response in the muted horns, representing blind religious faith (Strauss underlaid it with the words Credo in unum deum), leads to the first of four successive rotation-pairs (double rotations, or eight rotations in all). These may be designated as Rotations 2a–b, 3a–b, 4a–b, and 5a–b. In each pair the first half (a), the positive tableau, presents a temporary solution to the world-riddle, superseding prior stages but decaying or proving insufficient at its end. In the second half (b), the negative tableau, we find a distorted commentary on the wreckage or destruction of the insufficient solution proposed in the first, along with a reorientation and preparation for the next stage to come. The initial pair, Rotations 2a and b, is concerned with religious faith and its loss: Von der Hinterweltliern ("Of the afterworldsmen"), whose theme, Example 5.5d, smooths out the shudder of Example 5.5b; and Von der großen Sehnsucht ("Of the great longing"), expanding on the "Longing" motive, Example 5.5c, then proceeding to a sharp Nature critique (Gott is tot!, 1–5–8) of any attempt to continue the religious life.

We are soon thrown into Rotations 3a and b, Von der Freuden- und Leidenschaften ("Of joys and passions") and Das Grablied ("Song of the grave"). Of these, the stormy and feral "joys and passions," locking onto an earnest C minor (Example 5.5e) and representing a stirringly youthful, religion-free embrace of the "stream of life," is eventually blocked from further progress by the first statement of the important motive of "Disgust" (Ekel) sounded fortissimo in the trombones (Example 5.5f). The ensuing Grablied, a zone of stark dissolution (with some recurrences of the Nature motive) surveys the damage in spectral and mysterious, proto-expressionistic textures.

Rotations 4a and b comprise Von der Wissenschaft ("Of science") and Der Genesende ("The convalescent"), which itself subdivides into two parts separated by the emphatic, full-force return of the Nature motive on C (recalling the opening of the work) and a hyperdramatic grand pause. Von der Wissenschaft presents us with the slow Science fugue—an image of dry rationality, the academic scrutiny of the Nature motive—soon spinning into a more animated recurrence of B minor longing that immediately sprouts a new, clearly aspirational continuation, the B major "Ideal theme" (Weise des Ideals), as Hans Merian dubbed it in 1899 (Example 5.5g). In turn this triggers a first, anticipatory glimpse of the new man-to-come, Zarathustra, in the dotted-rhythm "Dance theme" (Thema des Tanzes; Example 5.5h), and this unexpected vision provokes dizzying recurrences of the Disgust motive. The vehement first part of "The convalescent" depicts the violent unspooling of belief in scientific rationality—the fugue—in the face of Being and Nature itself. It builds to a blindingly climactic, open-fifth return, on C, of the 1–5–8 Nature motive, the persistently unsolved riddle, triple-fortissimo, in the full orchestra. And then ... an astonishing silence. (This long pause responds to a parallel moment of physical collapse in Nietzsche's own Der Genesende section, from Part 3 of the book, in which Zarathustra, overwhelmed by an epiphany of the abyss of material Being, "fell down like a dead man and remained like a dead man for a long time," only to be granted, upon reawakening, the hidden secret of eternal recurrence: "Everything goes, everything returns; the wheel of existence rolls forever.")."
of peace and expansiveness released through the shrugging off of tradition. This new aura of liberation is confirmed several minutes later by an affirmationally exuberant re-sounding and peroration of the Dance theme. The remainder of the "Dance song" moves through further stages of thematic transformation that eventually coalesce around colossal intensifications of the Longing motive, driven through various tonal areas (often lurched onto as violent tonal shocks), seeking but never cadentially attaining its resolution into C major. This inability to close cadentially, an ecstatically immense "almost," is central to the tone poem's philosophical agenda of non-closure in a new world shorn of faith and definitive answers. It pushes the music into a vertiginous zone of mounting decay. At the moment of its Götterdämmerung-like collapse, a convulsive triple-fortissimo marked also with the first of the "midnight" bell-strokes, we merge into Rotation 5b. "The night-wanderer's song" concludes the work in two phases: a prolonged diminuendo from this negative crest; and a slow, B major fade-out epilogue grounded in a return of the Ideal theme, suggesting humanity's persistent dream of proceeding further, into an uncharted future. At the end it dissolves away with the famous C-B ambiguity.40

How are these rotations related, if at all, to any notion of sonata form? The sonata idea persists as a much-weakened shaping principle that is alluded to at various referential stations of the work but is never carried out in any easily explained way.41 Rotations 1 and 2a-b can be initially construed as an extended, multisectional introduction, particularly since Rotation 3a, "Of joys and passions," sounds much like the onset of a sonata exposition. On the other hand, central material is also set forth in Rotations 1 and 2a-b, which are in some important senses expository as well, and if Rotation 3a is to be construed as the primary-theme marker of a just-launched exposition, that exposition is soon aborted (with the arrival of the Disgust motive and entry into the Grabbled), failing to produce a secondary theme proper. Rotation 4a-b, "Science" and "Convalescent," may be interpreted as occupying an episodic developmental space—a procedure familiar from Strauss's earlier tone poems. "The dance song," Rotation 5a, suggests the onset of a freely transformed recapitulation (though it is at first based on materials from Rotations 1 and 2a-b), while Rotation 5b, "The night-wanderer's song," devolves into an epilogue-coda. Complicating the whole matter, though, are not only important tonal factors but also the seeming lack of a properly situated secondary theme. In the "recapitulatory" Rotation 5a, the Longing theme, associated earlier in the work with B minor, seeks a sonata-like apotheosis-transformation into C major (which it does not fully attain). This can suggest that at least here that theme is taking on aspects of one type of late-nineteenth-century secondary-theme behavior. It may be that Strauss invites us to imagine that the Longing theme, in its disparate and scattered placements earlier in the work, has been aspiring to become a secondary theme within a sonata form. (The Ideal theme, similarly, may be one of its most transformed mutations.) In Zarathustra the sonata idea, only dimly discernible at best, functions largely as a remembered vessel, an antique container demonstrated via occasional allusions as inadequate to hold these massive new contents.

The "fantastic variations on a theme" of Don Quixote present us with conflicting impressions. On the one hand, aspects of its paratactic structure are obviously similar to those of Till and Zarathustra: what we find is the familiar Straussian string of leitmotivically interrelated, illustrative tableaux through which the protagonist is made to advance. In this case, as with Till, the whole is framed by an extended introduction (Quixote falling into madness and deciding to set out on his quests) and an epilogue—"finale" (the knight's death) that recycles, as a concluding valediction, a portion of the music of the introduction. On the other hand, it is difficult not to conclude that the ordering of these tableaux is freer, more arbitrary, than those of its predecessors: could not some of the interior adventures be reordered without significant effect on the whole? More to the point, unequivocal allusions to the normative indicators of sonata form are now absent. Strauss was now asking his audiences to conceptualize the episodic whole under the looser category of theme and variations.42 Most significantly, there is no rappel à l'ordre provided by any sense of recapitulation-onset—a crucial moment of strong articulation in the preceding two tone poems and in those of the first tone-poem cycle. This purposeful lack makes any retrospective identification of a deformational exposition impossible. Or nearly so. The structural problem is that even while the successive-chapter architecture of the whole seems to preclude the relevance of the sonata concept, Strauss did stock the work with some characteristic thematic types that in a more logically ordered world might have been used for sonata or sonata-deformational purposes. Thus the Quixote theme (especially in the solo cello as it restarts the theme after the introduction, four measures before rehearsal no. 13, m. 122) — or, if one prefers, the Quixote/Sancho complex — strikes one as a potential "masculine-protagonist" primary theme, just as the ideal "Lady" or "Dulcinea" theme (for example, at rehearsal no. 17, m. 170) sounds as though it could have been deployed as a generically standard "feminine-redemptrix" secondary theme. But it may be the point that in this crazed Quixote-world recognizably sonata-like themes are discursively scrambled in ways that cannot be assimilated into cogent sonata-logic. The sonata-form background-concept is present only in its absence or unattainability. To the extent that one might wish to entertain this idea, we may conclude—once again—that even the arbitrary thematic
organization and sectional design in *Quixote* contribute via negation and disorientation to the larger programmatic idea governing the whole.43

While *Till*, *Zarathustra*, and *Quixote* show us a Strauss moving ever further away from allusive references to a historically enervated sonata concept, *Ein Heldenleben* surprises by turning once again, more explicitly, to that format. But this is no mere retrenchment. On the contrary, the return to a more clearly sonata—deformational practice can seem transgressive in a larger sense, as if it had been deployed to demonstrate the new-world hero's right to reconceive a venerable tradition as audaciously as possible. Invading and conquering the old "Classical" lands on modern terms; this seizure of old ground, replete with pitched battles for control against persistent militias of resistance, motivates the architectural design of *Heldenleben*. The familiar sonata stations are there not as passive nodes to tradition but rather as highlighted signposts that mark off, zone-by-zone, which conventional features of the form are being conceptually overpowered at any given moment as one self-enclosed tableau is succeeded by another.

This is not to say that all of the sonata aspects of this hypertrophic work are self-evident. The twenty-minute exposition, for instance (mm. 1–368), comprises four contrasting tableaux: the entry of the masculine hero (B, mm. 1–117), the hero's initial struggles with his opponents (*Des Helden Widersacher*: mm. 118–c. 191); the wooing of "The hero's feminine companion" (*Des Helden Gefährtin*: m. 192, three measures after rehearsal no. 22); and a subsequent love scene marked by the wide-spanning "Certainty-of-conquest theme" (*Thema der Siegesgewißheit*: m. 288 [rehearsal no. 32]–368, now settling into and concluding in a sustained G major). That we are to regard the *Gefährtin* and *Siegesgewißheit* music as occupying a "feminine" secondary-theme space seems likely,45 but what about the preceding *Widersacher* tableau? Is that the first part of a double secondary theme of differing contrasts, as some have suggested?46 Or is it a tableau standing in for a more traditional transition away from the primary theme? Or might it be better regarded, as I prefer to think, as an interruption in the sonata form—a distinctive parenthesis-episodethe that the heroic composer is obliged to bear and confront: the petty objections of nitpicking critics? The developmental space (m. 369, rehearsal no. 42; *Des Helden Walstatt*) is given over to distant calls to battle followed by the unrestrained furor of combat. While there can be no doubt that the recapitulatory space proper is launched only with the enormous structural downbeat and *fortissimo* reprise of the opening music at m. 631 (rehearsal no. 77), its tonic B♭ had been set in place several bars earlier (m. 616), as a non-normative, tonic preparation (proclaiming an ecstatic victory) for the recapitulatory re-entry of the all-vanquishing hero. And the recapitulatory space from this point onwards is totally reconceived as a celebration of achievement, marred only by recurring, interruptive spats with the not-yet-pacified remnants of old-guard criticism and moving inexorably towards the eroticized pastoral-vision of a satisfied (but surely temporary) withdrawal from the struggle.

But withdrawal is hardly the lasting impression provided by these four aggressive tone poems considered as a group. All four were locked in joyous battles with the symphonic traditions and expectations of the 1890s, particularly as institutionalized in the agendas of Austro-Germanic conservatories and universities, along with those of the partisan press. To remind ourselves of those contextual battles is the first step in reawakening the often-disturbing implications harbored in this music. Naively to enjoy these works is profoundly to misconstrue them. Far better to grasp how riddled they are with provocation and challenge: in Strauss's renunciation of the ideology of absolute music (orthodox "musical logic") in favor of a modernist embrace of an intensely detailed program music ("poetic logic"); in his irreverent deflations of the elevated topics that had nourished art music's metaphysical fantasies for decades; in his attraction to the atheistic, "free-spirit" laughter of Nietzscheanism; in his disquieting intermixture of symphonic high purpose and boisterous sonic sprees; in his easy acceptance of the concept of symphonic music both as an esteemed craft that sustained his conception of high culture and as a frankly commodified product to be introduced into the urban-modern marketplace of art. Most unsettling of all, perhaps, is the impression of total control and *Übemensch*-ease with which young Strauss, striding into the arena as pure ego, had set this scandalous gigantism into motion.

Strauss's tone poems were the most significant and influential orchestral works of their decade. The controversies that they aroused continued to unfold throughout most of the twentieth century, even as the art-music project was falling into a decline in social relevance, challenged by more commercially viable musical sectors in rapidly changing times. Throughout it all these pieces remained formidable staples of the concert and recorded repertory. Not only were they championed as personal vehicles by influential star conductors, but they also served as exhibition-pieces for virtuoso orchestras competing with each other in increasingly meticulous, razor-sharp performances. Their continued attraction among the broad musical public surely had little to do with any prolonged reflection on the quasi-nilhism that they had once been advancing, nor with any adequate grasp of the complexities of their musical contents. They appealed, more superficially, as repertory objects offering a seductive immediacy of rich instrumentation along with massively grand, climactic deliveries. Here one could experience orchestral glamour. And orchestral glamour sold
tickets. By the second half of the century this led seamlessly into the “living stereo” market (discs of the tone poems as demonstrations of proudly owned, high-tech woofers and tweeters), followed not long after by such appropriations as the popular-culture ubiquity of that Kubrickian extract. In not a few scholarly quarters the tone poems were regarded as unsuitable material for serious treatment and research. It has only been in the past two decades that these tone poems – the first and second cycles along with Symphonia domestica and Eine Alpensinfonie – have been reopened for significant discussion and a much-needed rethinking. One senses that new debates about them have just begun.

6 Strauss’s road to operatic success: Guntram, Feuersnot, and Salome

MORTEN KRISTIANSEN

The years from the completion of his first opera Guntram in 1893 to that of Salome in 1905 were pivotal to the career and aesthetic development of Richard Strauss: his operatic fortunes changed from failure to success, his creative focus from tone poem to opera, his philosophical allegiance from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, and his aesthetic orientation from relative epigonism to assertive independence. The thread that connects these three dissimilar works is their implicit or explicit critique of Wagner. During the final decades of the nineteenth century Wagner’s musical style and dramatic themes became the baseline against which all new works were measured, and critics typically referred to Wagner’s successors as “epigones” because of their uninspired imitation of the older master. The idealistic, quasi-Schopenhauerian themes of Wagner’s works – especially redemption through love, Christian compassion, renunciation, and physical versus ideal love – appeared with limited variations and in diluted or superficial form in the serious operas of Strauss’s most prominent colleagues, such as Wilhelm Kienzl (1857-1941), Felix Weingartner (1863-1942), Eugen d’Albert (1864-1932), Max von Schillings (1868-1933), and Hans Pfitzner (1869-1949). In this feebly obedient context Strauss’s early operas stand out as radical documents. Although Strauss identified himself as a Wagnerian, this adherence became limited to musical style and principles: a huge, colorful, polyphonic, and dominant orchestra; an intricate web of leitmotifs; chromaticism; and placing drama above purely musical concerns. Aesthetically, however, Strauss progressed from pseudo-Wagnerian to anti-Wagnerian during the 1890s, and achieving independence of Bayreuth helped him become the only German opera composer of his time to emerge successfully from Wagner’s shadow.

Guntram (1893)

Given his awe of Wagner’s music dramas, Strauss had no desire to enter into competition with them, but Alexander Ritter (1833–96), his mentor from the mid 1880s until 1893, who had brought him into the fold of the programmatic composers and introduced him to the writings of Schopenhauer

7 An extreme but telling variant of this conservative, old-world change may be found in the ever-irregular Adorno’s distibutes against Strauss for morally defiling the truth—context features of music (as posited a priori by the Frankfurt School writers) in favor of commercial success and bourgeois compromise. Among the reiterative fascist-individualist attacks backed by Adorno (and cf. n. 6 above, the Heideggerian image of the abandoned temple): "His work has the atmosphere of the Grand Hotel of childhood, a palace accessible only to money, yet not really a palace any more." Or: "[Strauss’s music] thumb its nose at invariance ... [abandons itself to] uninhibited exteriority." Theodor W. Adorno, "Richard Strauss: Born June 11, 1864," trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber, Perspectives of New Music 3 (1964), 25–26, 16–17. Cf. n. 16 below.

8 Alexander Ritter to Strauss, January 17, 1893, in Youmans, Strauss’s Orchestral Music, p. 64.


11 Arthur Seidl remarked in 1896 ("Richard Strauss", p. 62) that although Strauss's forthcoming title for Till would bear the title Also sprach Zarathustra, its actual subject (Gengenstand) would be Human, All Too Human (Youmans, Strauss’s Orchestral Music, p. 90).

12 Also sprach Zarathustra: Eine Studie über die modernen Programmssymphonie (Leipzig: Carl Meyer, 1899). Merian’s reading of Zarathustra...
is more persuasive, more detailed, than the authorized (and somewhat cautious) version by Arthur Hahn.

19 Ibid., pp. 5-9. In the Foreword, Merian noted that the two central questions still being debated among critics were "will and can program music express specific thoughts? and in what ways can this happen?" (p. 4) and devoted his monograph to laying out the case for the presence of philosophical, Nietzschean thought — "specific ideas" — in Zarathustra.


Kristiansen noted that he adopted the term Stillkunst from the literary history by Richard Hamann and Josef Herrmann, Deutsche Kunst und Kultur von der Gründerei bis zum Expressionismus, 5 vols., Vol. IV: Stillkunst um 1900 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1967).


22 Herwarth Walden (based on Arthur Hahn), "Drei Quoten," in Walden, Richard Strauss: Die Moderne, and the Concept of Stillkunst, p. 130. 23 Youmans, Strauss's Orchestral Music, p. 205. The D—A—D scheme was noted and analyzed by Graham Phipps, "The Logic of Tonality in Strauss's Two-Dimensional Sonata," A Schoenbergian Evaluation, 19th-Century Music 9 (1986): 189-205 (pp. 192-4). As Phipps observed (p. 190), the initial slippage from D to A in the antecedent was attacked by Heinrich Schenker in his "Streicher;" "the Wagnerian Rhetoric of the Sentence in Wagner's Post-Lohengrin Opera," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2003).

24 A delicious detail: at the beginning of the recapitulation (mm. 631, rehearsal no. 77), the moment celebrating triumph over adversaries, the chromatic deformation from m. 7 is now straightened out into a confident distanciation (m. 637).

25 On the format of a sentence, see n. 27 below.

26 Arthur Hahn, "Also sprach Zarathustra," reprinted in The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music, pp. 113-115. Merian, Richard Strauss' Tondichtung: Also sprach Zarathustra, p. 17. 27 A sentence is a forward-driving melodic shape based on (26) a short-short-long (ab′) in which the two short impulses may be perceived as either identical or closely related as variants. (How far-ranging the ab′ variant can be and still be considered a matter of individual judgment.) The two a′s are called the presentation (or presentation modules, b) in the continuation. The transition is often (but not always) based on material from the presentation, and it typically drives towards an eventual cadence. When the continuation begins with its own complementary presentation modules, here at the opening of Ein Heldenleben, that continuation is itself sequential (a "sentential continuation"), beginning another a′s pattern. In turn its succeeding b can once again be initiated sequentially and so on. The result is a sentence chain (Satzketten). Its effect is to produce in a succession of tonal modules, paired short impulses, until cadence is finally driven towards and attained. In Heldenleben, then, m. 5, nominally a continuation, begins with complementary a′ style modules: m. 5-7, 8-9, m. 9, nominally a new continuation, again begins presentationally with new complementary modules: m. 9-10, 11-12. A non-sentential continuation (with its characteristic fragmentation and compression) and drive to cadence is reached only at m. 13.


28 A delicious detail: at the beginning of the recapitulation (mm. 631, rehearsal no. 77), the moment celebrating triumph over adversaries, the chromatic deformation from m. 7 is now straightened out into a confident distanciation (m. 637).

29 Ibid., p. 19, 30-1. 30 The most thorough guide through the evidence bearing on these programmatic questions in all of Strauss's tone poems remains Werbeck, Tondichtung, pp. 103-300.


32 As well known, the initial pitch-contour (a variant can be and still be considered a matter of individual judgment.) The two a′s are called the presentation (or presentation modules, b) in the continuation. The transition in often (but not always) based on material from the presentation, and it typically drives towards an eventual cadence. When the continuation begins with its own complementary presentation modules, here at the opening of Ein Heldenleben, that continuation is itself sequential (a "sentential continuation"), beginning another a′s pattern. In turn its succeeding b can once again be initiated sequentially and so on. The result is a sentence chain (Satzketten). Its effect is to produce in a succession of tonal modules, paired short impulses, until cadence is finally driven towards and attained. In Heldenleben, then, m. 5, nominally a continuation, begins with complementary a′ style modules: m. 5-7, 8-9, m. 9, nominally a new continuation, again begins presentationally with new complementary modules: m. 9-10, 11-12. A non-sentential continuation (with its characteristic fragmentation and compression) and drive to cadence is reached only at m. 13.


33 Steven Vande Moorte, "Beyond Sonata Deformation: Liszt's Symphonic Poem Tasso and the Concept of Two-Dimensional Sonata Form," Current Musicology 86 (2004): 49. A more extensive treatment, including studies of Don Juan and Ein Heldenleben, may be found in Vande Moorte, Two-Dimensional Sonata Form: Form and Cycle in Single-Movement Instrumental Works by Liszt, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Zemlinsky (Leaven: University of Leuven Press, 2009).

34 Cf. Carl Dahlhaus, Nineteenth-Century Music, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 236-44, 360-8; and William S. Newman, The Sonata since Beethoven (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 154-5, 373-7. The issue of potential multimovement-cycle implications (Mehrstigkeit) in the second cycle (particularly in Zarathustra and Heldenleben) has also been treated by David Lackin, "Rehearsing the Liszt—Wagner Legacy: Intertextual Dynamics in Strauss's Tonal Poems" (Ph.D. diss. University of Cambridge, 2006), pp. 289-90, 296-9. More generally, the dual-function possibility has long been a commonplace within the analysis of several commonplaces within the analysis of several forms. See, for example, Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, pp. 235-4. Following remarks originally stated in the authorized guide by Arthur Hahn as well as evidence from Strauss's own marked copies of Nietzsche, Ewald Youmann (Strauss's Orchestral Music, pp. 93, 101-8, 194-5) has discussed the significance of this important movement to Strauss himself and has also elucidated its implicit intertextual link to Faust's staggering confrontation with the Earth Spirit.

35 Having begun in an unambiguous C major (Nature), the piece's final section is grounded in B major (humanity, the spirit of question and questioning). The key of B remains unreconciled to C. The "C" implication at the end involves an upper-Harmonic minor, incomplete French-sixth chord with C in the bass (eight bars from the end), resolving back to B major. As the music evaporates, one is left only with the residue ("C") of the upper-neigher, nearly not to be heard at the end as a convincing tonic.

41 I borrow the concept of referential sonata stations — touched upon at location-marks or "orientation-points" but then
abandoned—from Werbeck, Tondichtungen, e.g., pp. 427, 447, 476.
42. The relevance of the sonata-form concept to the Quixote variations has been a matter of dispute. Arguments on behalf of three embedded sonata structures traversing the whole of Quixote have been made by Phipps, "The Logic of Tonality," pp. 189–205, esp. pp. 203–5. My own view is that these sonata interpretations are unconvincing. This is also the conclusion of Werbeck, Tondichtungen, pp. 383, 477. Similarly, Youmans, Strauss's Orchestral Music, p. 203, considers Quixote to be the composition in which "Strauss for the first time completely and consistently utilizes a sonata-form structure." On the other hand, Larkin, "Reshaping the Liszt–Wagner Legacy," pp. 239–45, considers Phipps to have "established" the sonata-form basis of the introduction (with two secondary keys in the "exposition," F minor and F major) but proceeds to offer an alternative, single-sonata (deformation) proposal for the whole, in which mm. 1–166 (through the "Theme") constitute the exposition, Variations 1–10 form a huge and sprawling "set of variations (taking the place of the Development)," and the finale is a reversed recapitulation. Notwithstanding Larkin's own reservations, I find this interpretation too, if strained.
43. This conclusion is both similar to and different from that of Larkin, "Reshaping the Liszt–Wagner Legacy." Larkin does propose a sonata-framing of the interior variations (see the note directly above), but after noting the difficulties with this assertion remarks (p. 242): "My alternative reading might be best described as an imagined reconstruction of an imaginary entity, the sonata structure which "would have existed but for Quixote's madness.""
44. Werbeck (Tondichtungen, p. 448) and others have suggested that the entire primary thematic zone of mm. 1–117 itself constitutes a miniature sonata form: (small-scale) F m. 1; secondary theme (G) m. 21; development, m. 45; reversed recapitulation starting with F in the tonic, mm. 84 (and G following, mm. 54. From the sonata point of view, it might be preferable to begin the small-scale recapitulatory space with F starting on mm. 76 (rehearsal no. 9), with a cadenza (perhaps dissolving into a transition). A stronger reading would construct mm. 1–117 as rotationally based and perhaps only secondarily in dialogue with the sonata concept: Rotation 1, mm. 1–16; expanded Rotation 2, mm. 17–45; Rotation 3, mm. 45; Rotation 5, mm. 76 (rehearsal no. 9)–94; Rotation 5, mm. 94–117.
45. My own view is that the secondary theme proper does not begin until mm. 205, six measures after rehearsal no. 23, with the onset of the Wooling motive in the bass instruments. See the brief accounts, for example, in Werbeck, Tondichtungen, pp. 446–7; and Larkin, "Reshaping the Liszt–Wagner Legacy," p. 292.
9. Max Silzer (1806–56) advocated egalism and anarchism in The Ego and His Own (1845), which Strauss had read.
10. See Youmans, Strauss's Orchestral Music, pp. 99–99, for a thorough discussion of Strauss's interest in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and their relevance to Guntram.
23. For reviews of the premiere see Messmer, Kritiken zu den Uraufführungen, pp. 20–9.
24. Even when Strauss clearly uses parody, such as the Mittelmorgenacht love duet between Konrad and Dienst for which he directs the performers to sing "with exaggerated pathos throughout," the music itself does not signal parody (and in this case performers usually ignore Strauss's directions).
32. For details on Strauss's cuts and alterations see Roland Tenschert, "Strauss als Librettist," in Derrick Puffett, ed., Richard Strauss: Salome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 36–50. This volume is a fine introduction to the background, analysis, and reception of the opera. Although it has often been claimed that Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande (1902) and Strauss's Salome were the first to set a play directly, Russian composers Dargomizhsky and Mussorgsky had done this decades earlier in Boris Godunov and Khovanshchina.