

No false modesty about Richard Strauss's 'Ein Heldenleben'

By Jessica Duchon

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I've been swotting up on Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* in advance of Friday night's Prom by the Hallé and conductor Sir Mark Elder, for which I'm a guest TV commentator. The title means "a hero's life". There was no false modesty about Strauss when, aged 34, he set about writing this, the last of his great tone poems. The hero was the composer himself, engaging in a Nietzsche-inspired quest for fulfilment, battling against and vanquishing his critics, plus finding true love.

"I don't see why I shouldn't write a symphony about myself," he once declared. "I find myself quite as interesting as Napoleon or Alexander." The comment did, of course, include a healthy dose of irony: Strauss is referring to Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, which was inspired partly by Napoleon, rather than presenting us with serious megalomania.

It's impossible not to be swept up in the glorious storytelling of *Ein Heldenleben*. Strauss represents his carping critics in dry, prickly chitter-chatter on the woodwind. But best of all is "the hero's companion", a musical depiction of Strauss's wife Pauline de Ahna, a singer, who is represented by the solo violin.

In real life Pauline Strauss had a reputation for being quite a battleaxe. Her tendency to ferocity is evident in a family story that my violinist husband, Tom, loves to tell. His great-grandfather was a German businessman who knew Strauss well. One evening the two families were dining together beside a beautiful Bavarian lake. Frau Strauss selected a fish from the menu. The waiter, apologising, explained that they had run out, and suggested brown trout. "Nein! I don't want that bloody fish!" the lady expostulated.

Strauss's 'Ein Heldenleben', Hallé Orchestra, Sir Mark Elder (conductor), BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, tonight, 7pm (0845 401 5040)