

A photograph of conductor Hans Graf, an older man with grey hair, wearing a black suit jacket over a white shirt. He is captured in a dynamic pose, holding a baton in his right hand and gesturing with his left. The background is a warm, out-of-focus wooden stage floor.

Richard Strauss A Hero's Life

Don Juan • Ein Heldenleben

SINGAPORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

HANS GRAF

OUR Recordings

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Hans Graf (2023).



Richard Strauss

(1864 - 1949)

1 ***Don Juan***, Op. 20 17:36

Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40

2 *Der Held* (The Hero) 04:34

3 *Des Helden Widersacher* (The Hero's Adversaries) 03:22

4 *Des Helden Gefährtin* (The Hero's Companion) 12:57

5 *Des Helden Walstatt* (The Hero at Battle) 07:36

6 *Des Helden Friedenswerke* (The Hero's Works of Peace) 06:35

7 *Des Helden Weltflucht und Vollendung* 10:52

(The Hero's Retirement from the World and Completion)

Total playing time: **63:35**

Singapore Symphony Orchestra

Hans Graf *Quantedge Music Director*

Markus Tomasi *Guest Concertmaster (Don Juan)*

David Coucheron *Co-Principal Guest Concertmaster (Ein Heldenleben)*

The *tondichtung* (tone poem) was a genre that saw great popularity in Europe from the mid-19th century to the first quarter of the 20th century, and German composer Richard Strauss was perhaps its greatest exponent, producing no fewer than ten. What was a tone poem? A long-form instrumental work for orchestra, the tone poem was usually a single movement intended to evoke images based on moods, stories, or scenes, but without the intent to depict a narrative or specific flow of events.

Don Juan, Op. 20 (1888)

Originating from the 17th century, the legend of Don Juan tells of a Spanish libertine nobleman and his numerous seductions, along with his unwillingness to repent. Various writers throughout history have offered their own take on the tale, including Tirso de Molina, Lord Byron, and Lorenzo da Ponte who wrote the libretto for Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

Austrian philosopher and poet Nikolaus Lenau put forth a slightly different take on Don Juan, casting him not as a hot-blooded man eternally pursuing women, but as a man who sought to find the one woman, who to him, was a representation of the incarnate womanhood and to enjoy, in her, all the women on earth that he

cannot have. As such, he goes from one woman to another trying to find the one, and at last Disgust, which is the devil, takes hold of him.

Strauss was 24 when he first read Lenau's *Don Juan*. Inspired, he began to write a tone poem for large orchestral forces that he completed the next year. The music begins with an upward whirlwind as the strings introduce Don Juan's theme. Several other themes follow – Don Juan's trysts with women – including one with a tender oboe solo. Just when it seems that there will be a triumphant ending, all the action grinds to a halt, and dissonant interjections from the trumpets followed by three soft chords by the orchestra depict Lenau's ending: Don Juan, unable to find his ideal woman, allows himself to be killed in a duel.

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Hans Graf
performing *Ein Heldenleben*, 28 July 2023.



Ein Heldenleben, Op. 40

(“A Hero’s Life”, 1898)

In summer 1898, at the age of 34, Richard Strauss was on holiday in the Bavarian Alps before taking up a post as the principal conductor of the orchestra at the Berlin State Opera. He was a composer and conductor of international repute, much in demand, but for now, the cool mountain air was invigorating him and his creative juices were flowing. Using the model of Beethoven’s *Eroica Symphony* (a work he considered unjustly underperformed) he proposed to write a heroic work in the form of a tone poem, a genre of which he had already written six examples. “Thus to fulfill a pressing need I am composing a largish tone poem entitled *Ein Heldenleben* (“A Hero’s Life”),

admittedly without a funeral march, but nonetheless in E-flat major, with lots of horns—which is always a measure of heroism,” he wrote.

Ein Heldenleben is a work in six movements played without a break, and Strauss’s own programme notes written for its premiere by the Frankfurter Opern und Museumsorchester (Frankfurt Opera House and Museum’s Orchestra) on 3rd March 1899 revealed that the hero of the work was none other than the composer himself, making the tone poem an autobiographical work. Strauss initially gave brief descriptive working titles to the sections but later asked that they be removed, perhaps

thinking they gave too much away to the audience, but many places and writers have retained them as useful for understanding the work.

Der Held (The Hero) opens the work, brave and bold, fearless and charming. Trumpets evoke the romantic notion of a knight in shining armour as the range of dynamic and pitch indicate how far and wide our hero's deeds may be seen. Not everyone was thrilled—some critics were revolted by what they saw as his egotism. ***Des Helden Widersacher (The Hero's Adversaries)*** is where Strauss presents the hero's enemies—the music critics—represented by interjecting, heckling woodwinds that are finally banished by the brass.

Strauss was explicit that ***Des Helden Gefährtin (The Hero's Companion)*** depicted his wife, represented by

a violin playing the most touching melody in the entire work. Enchanted by this vision of loveliness, our hero arrives in his full armour and heroic airs, proceeding to sweep her off her feet, and brings her voluptuously where family audiences may not enter.

Unfortunately, the bliss does not last as our hero is called away to ***Des Helden Walstatt (The Hero at Battle)***, where trumpets and percussion—those instruments of martial association par excellence—paint a furious scene. War is followed by peace, so comes ***Des Helden Friedenswerke (The Hero's Works of Peace)***, a languid elegiac movement where Strauss quotes extensively from his previous compositions, just in case it was not blatantly obvious the piece was about himself, yet the very work of managing to weave together disparate themes never originally intended to be played together was a heroic achievement.

***Des Helden Weltflucht und
Vollendung (The Hero's Retirement
from the World and Completion)***

crowns the work with an apotheosis: the hero finishes off his adversaries, relaxes a bit, exchanges words of assurance with his companion before riding off into the sunset, filled with hope and confidence.

Audience reception was sharply divided, a reaction that continues to this day. By casting himself as the hero of his own work, was Strauss being ironic? He was unbending in the face of criticism, but also had a keen sense of ironic humour. By referencing and caricaturing his critics, Strauss was, to use a modern term, “high-level trolling”, and the enraged critics proved they had taken his troll bait as expected. At any rate, Strauss here gives the listener enough space to see and imagine their own struggles and lives

in his music, and that may be why the work rapidly and firmly became a standard part of the orchestral concert repertoire.

**Edward C. Yong (*Ein Heldenleben*)
and Natalie Ng (*Don Juan*)**

Armed with a spirit of musical curiosity and discovery, creative programming and his commanding presence on stage, Austrian conductor Hans Graf has raised orchestras to new heights while winning audiences young and old alike. With Hans Graf, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) has achieved “a brave new world of music-making under inspired direction” (*The Straits Times*) since his appointment as Chief Conductor in the 2020/21 season and subsequently as Music Director. In 2025, Hans Graf was named the SSO’s first Quantedge Music Director.

Graf was formerly Music Director of the Houston Symphony, Calgary Philharmonic, Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine, Basque National Orchestra and Mozarteum Orchestra Salzburg. He is a frequent guest with major orchestras and opera houses worldwide, receiving the Österreichischer Musiktheaterpreis award at the famed Vienna Volksoper in 2014.

Hans Graf’s discography includes extensive surveys of Mozart, Schubert and Dutilleux, as well as a GRAMMY and ECHO Klassik award-winning recording of Berg’s *Wozzeck*. With the Singapore Symphony, Graf has recorded works by Paul von Klenau, Mozart, Stravinsky and his own edition of Koźłowski’s *Requiem*.

Hans Graf is Professor Emeritus at the Universität Mozarteum, Salzburg, and a recipient of the Chevalier de l’Ordre de la Légion d’Honneur (France) and the Grand Decoration of Honour (Austria).

Hans Graf

Quantedge Music Director
Singapore Symphony Orchestra



Singapore Symphony Orchestra



Since its founding in 1979, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) has been Singapore's flagship orchestra, touching lives through classical music and providing the heartbeat of the cultural scene with its 44-week calendar of events. The SSO is led by its Quantedge Music Director Hans Graf, the third in the orchestra's history after Lan Shui (1997-2019) and Choo Hoey (1979-1996).

The SSO has earned an international reputation for its orchestral virtuosity, having garnered sterling reviews for its overseas tours and over 50 recordings, culminating in its 3rd place win in the prestigious *Gramophone* Orchestra of the Year Award 2021. In 2022, *BBC Music Magazine* named the SSO as one of the 23 best orchestras in the world.

Recent critically acclaimed albums include Herrmann's *Wuthering Heights* (Chandos) and a complete Mozart Violin Concerto cycle with Singaporean violinist Chloe Chua conducted by Hans Graf (Pentatone). The SSO also leads the revival and recording of significant works such as Kozłowski's *Requiem*, Ogerman's *Symbiosis* (after Bill Evans) and violin concertos by Robert Russell Bennett and Vernon Duke.

The SSO is part of the Singapore Symphony Group, which also manages the Singapore Symphony Chorus, the Singapore National Youth Orchestra, the Singapore International Piano Festival and the biennial National Piano & Violin Competition.

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Hans Graf
performing *Ein Heldenleben*, 28 July 2023.



Acknowledgement

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*This album was recorded at the Esplanade Concert Hall, Singapore,
on 28 & 29 July 2022 (Don Juan) and 27 & 28 July 2023 (Ein Heldenleben).*

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