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Saturday, **May 2nd, 2015**, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

1915: Richard Strauss, *An Alpine Symphony*

Richard Strauss (1864-1949). [*An Alpine Symphony*](#) (1915)



The Zugspitze, the Alps, near the home of Richard Strauss, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

It's a symphony from 100 years ago, from someone not known for writing symphonies. Or is it even a symphony? Richard Strauss calls his own 50-minute work *An Alpine Symphony*, and the composer ought to have some authority here, but he referred to his earlier *Domestic Symphony* as a tone poem. In 22 continuous movements, not four separate ones, *An Alpine Symphony* certainly sounds like a symphonic poem, and not a symphony.

He did write two symphonies, No. 1 when he was 16 and No. 2 when he was 20, but they hardly saw the light of day. When he was in a position to record his own music, he never bothered with them. As he got older and more adept at using larger and larger orchestral forces, Strauss looked for newer means of expression, often referring to "the symphony" as outmoded. The tone poem, with its literary and philosophical underpinnings, each one with a form unique to itself, became his signature. The sunny

From Italy led to *Don Juan* and *Death and Transfiguration*, then *Macbeth* and *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, then his monumental grapple with Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. They all poured out in less than 10 years. *Don Quixote* followed, then the autobiographical *A Hero's Life* and *Domestic Symphony*.

Strauss created operas and many, many other works during this time, but by 1915 he was able to work on this, the final version of the *Alpine Symphony*. He had begun sketching it in 1899 and seems to have wanted to make it into an actual symphony, but described the process to a friend as "torturing." Then he came up with the idea of making it a picture—with philosophical undertones—of a hike up and down a mountain. It depicts an 11-hour excursion, from night through sunrise, forests, meadows, pastures, a wrong turn, a glacier, the summit, a storm, a hurried descent, sunset, and night again.

Major themes work their way through it but what is most arresting about *An Alpine Symphony* is Strauss's mastery of the orchestra. He calls for a gigantic ensemble about twice the size needed for even large orchestral works. At one point, an offstage band mimics a hunting party going by—its music has nothing to do with the onstage music and it's never heard again—but that alone requires an extra 16 brass players. There's a wind machine, thunder machine, cowbells, and if that were not enough, an organ.

Strauss, recognized by all as the consummate orchestrator among his colleagues past, present, and future, joked that he finally learned how to orchestrate with this piece. He would live to 1949, but this would be the last purely symphonic work he ever composed.

So whether it's a symphony or not, *An Alpine Symphony*, from 100 years ago, is in many ways a summit in the career of Richard Strauss.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), former curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), program director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#). (215) 686-5313, fleisher@freelibrary.org.