I went to A Hero’s Life, performed by the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra on November 14, 2014.

I’m writing this a few weeks after the original concert, but I remember it very vividly. This is because I took a great lady to the performance as a first date. We actually went to Chenery Auditorium first, but realized something with Kalamazoo Public Schools was going on there, and went to Miller auditorium, where this performance was actually going to occur.

We arrived about forty minutes early, and walked in while a man was playing a piano on stage. We thought he was just practicing in front of a bunch of people, but it turns out he was the pre-show entertainment. My date and I didn’t need this, and we had great conversation before the show.

We took the time to review the concert’s program. We would first hear Beethoven’s Symphony No. 8 in F Major, Op. 93. This would be followed by a presentation about Richard Strauss’s life and the story, themes, and tones involved in his symphony Ein Heldenleben. After the presentation, there would be a short intermission followed by the accrual performance of Ein Heldenleben.

About fifteen minutes before the concert was to begin, stage helpers came out and removed the piano, and set up the last chairs for the actual musicians, which then began to come out and warm up. At eight, the conductor, Raymond Harvey, came on stage. At this point, the musicians played their tuning notes to make sure they were all in tune. Then, the conductor gave the signal to begin playing.

I will admit I don’t like Beethoven at all. I prefer less classical more romantic-period music. But, Symphony No. 8 is a exception. I very much liked the first movement, Allegro vivace e con brio. It was very pleasing, and I enjoyed the small bassoon solo. I didn’t like the second movement, which felt much too rigid and repeating. During the intermission, I read the program detailing Beethoven’s 8th and my dislike made sense, as the second movement is meant as a joke towards the inventor of the first metronome by repeating cords often to resemble the ticking.

After Beethoven’s symphony, the auditorium rolled down a projector screen from the ceiling to show some slides. The conductor began talking about the history of Richard Strauss and the details of Ein Heldenleben. He made references to the individual characters within the symphony, and directed the orchestra to play some notes which represent those characters. When the conductor began talking about the hero’s adversaries, there was a picture of the older angry characters from The Muppet Show. The music representing the adversaries was also very interesting. It’s very difficult to describe in writing, but it sounded like the tuba’s played two or three notes very slowly, while the flutes and oboes played their notes. The flutes and oboes seemed to follow the same pattern of running down a scale, but they skipped a few notes, and oscillated up and down while slowly moving down the scale. Thinking about it now, it felt very much like people were complaining and being annoying while the flutes and oboes played this part. I talk about this maybe more that I should because the hero’s adversaries show up often during the symphony and their melody is the most memorable part of the symphony to me.

After about ten minutes, the conductor stopped talking, and the intermission began. At this point, my date and I began joking about the Muppets characters and the sound of the hero’s adversaries. The concert program describes them best: “very shill and biting and snarling”.

After the intermission, the conductor came back onto the stage, and the musician re-tuned their instruments. At this point, they were ready to begin. The symphony started with the heroic theme of the hero played by the French horns and some of the brass instruments. After a rather long pause, the second movement began. This is the movement of the hero’s adversaries, and my date and I could not stop chuckling through the movement because whenever we heard the shrill melody of the woodwinds we pictured the grumpy old Muppet characters.

Then, the third movement began. This is the movement about the hero’s companion. It’s very flirtatious, passionate, and pensive. It reminded me of the period during which this movement was made: the romantic period. The mood became very serene, as this movement is very pleasant, only to be broken up by the grumpy old Muppet characters’ shrill melody. My date and I couldn’t help but actually laugh out loud when we heard it. We very much enjoyed this movement.

The last three movements aren’t that memorable as they’re very symphonic, only broken up by the shrill melody of the hero’s adversaries every now and then.

At the end of the performance, the crowd clapped for at least five minutes. The conductor walked off and back on stage three times to signal the orchestra’s multiple sessions of bowing. The crowd wouldn’t stop clapping. It seemed everybody enjoyed the symphony as much as my date and I did. It will be one of the most memorably symphony-going nights of my life, I know that for sure.