

Salome, Op. 54
(1905)
by
Richard Strauss
(1864-1949)

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Richard Strauss: *Salome*, Op. 54 (1905)

German composer Richard Strauss' (1864-1949) tragedy, *Salome*, Op. 54, premiered at the Hofoper in Dresden on 9 December 1905 with Ernst von Schuch conducting. His third opera, it was his first indisputable success with 38 curtain calls at the premier and is the opera which most intrigued the *avant garde* of his day.¹

In spite of censorship forbidding its performance in many opera houses in Europe and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Strauss' income from the opera's success was so great that he was able to buy property in Garmisch, Germany. There he built a large villa in which he, his wife, Pauline, and their son, Franz, lived and in which the composer died 44 years later.

Compositional History

Following his opera *Feuersnot* (*The Need for Fire*), Strauss considered adapting a comedy based on a work by Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes. Instead, he took a great interest in Oscar Wilde's French play, *Salome*, after receiving a copy from a friend. At about the same time, in 1902, a year after the play's failure in Paris and its banning in England, impresario Max Reinhardt successfully staged *Salome* in Berlin in a German translation by Hedwig Lachmann. Strauss saw the play in early 1903 and almost immediately resolved to use the Lachmann translation with only slight changes and omissions as the libretto of a new one-act opera.

Strauss began work on *Salome* as he finished his orchestral symphony, *Symphonia Domestica*, Op. 53, and, within a year, had the entire opera sketched. In late 1904, while editing and updating Berlioz's *Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (A Treatise upon Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration), he began orchestrating the opera. Perhaps inspired by his work on the Berlioz treatise, he composed *Salome* for a giant orchestra of 105 players with elaborate instrumentation and an impressive array of percussion. He completed the work in June 1905.²

Synopsis of the Opera

Strauss' one-act opera, *Salome*, takes place in a single moonlit evening on the terrace of the palace of Herod Antipas, the Roman-appointed Tetrarch of Judea, in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, in about 30 A.D. It has no intermission and is about 1 hour and 50 minutes in length. The opera has no prelude but the entire first scene is the prelude to the action proper which begins with Salome's entrance at the beginning of Scene 2 and ends with her execution at the end of Scene 4.

Scene 1

Under bright moonlight, Narraboth, a young Syrian captain of the Tetrarch's bodyguard, sings of Princess Salome's beauty while standing guard on the terrace outside a banquet hall at

¹ Earl of Harewood and Antony Peattie, *The New Kobbé's Opera Book*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1997), 761.

² David Murray, "Salome," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. 4, ed. Stanley Sadie, (London: Macmillan Reference Limited, 1997), 146.

the palace. Narraboth lusts after Salome, the young daughter of Herod's wife, Herodias, who Herod took as his own queen in spite of her marriage to his brother. In the background, the royal couple and their guests are wild with orgiastic lust and Narraboth can see Salome inside. A young page warns him that his lust will be his undoing but he ignores him. The voice of Jochanaan (St. John the Baptist) suddenly rises out of a cistern in the garden off of the terrace. Jochanaan foretells of the coming of a Prophet even greater than himself. Herod has Jochanaan imprisoned in the cistern because of his repeated denunciations of Herodias and her bigamous marriages.

Scene 2

Suddenly, Salome, bored with the banquet and disgusted at Herod's constant staring at her, comes out onto the terrace and asks whose voice she hears. She learns that the prisoner is Jochanaan of whom she has heard but never seen. She is aware that her mother hates him and that he frightens her stepfather. Salome insists on seeing the prisoner and, at first refused, eventually talks Narraboth into letting Jochanaan ascend from the cistern.

Scene 3

Jochanaan comes up from the cistern and, although blinded by the moonlight because of the darkness in which he has been kept, immediately begins denouncing Herod and Herodias. Salome cannot believe his insolence but finds herself intrigued and eventually infatuated with him. Once Jochanaan knows that Salome is Herodias' daughter, he denounces her too. Salome tells him that she desires his body, his hair and his mouth.

Jochanaan tells her that she must repent and her continued attempts to seduce him drive Narraboth to kill himself with his own sword. Jochanaan tells her that her only redemption will come from the Man of Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, but, when she ignores his advice, he descends once more into the cistern.

Scene 4

Herod, his queen and their guests come out onto the terrace. Herod, who teeters between lucidity and madness, imagines a wind blowing around his head. Seeing Salome, though, brings him back to reality. Salome refuses his offer of a drink of his wine so that he can taste her lips on his goblet. She also turns down his offer of a bite of fruit so that he can finish what she does not. In spite of Herodias' objections, he offers to let her sit on her mother's throne which Salome also refuses.

Herod believes that Jochanaan is a Prophet who has seen God. The Jews at his banquet want Jochanaan turned over to them but Herod denies their request. The Nazarenes among the guests tell of their belief that the Messiah lives and that he has even raised the dead. Hearing this, Herod becomes even more neurotic and the voice of the Prophet from the cistern does not help.

As a diversion, Herod asks Salome to dance for him. She refuses to do so until he promises to give her whatever she asks. At first he refuses her request but he finally promises to grant her anything she wants. The slaves remove her sandals and adorn her body with seven veils to remove as she dances.

After the dance, which Herod enjoys very much, he asks Salome what she wants to which she answers, "Den Kopf des Jochanaan!" ("The head of John the Baptist!"). Herod recoils, horrified at the idea. He offers her everything of which he can think but Salome continues to demand the head of the Prophet. Finally, he gives in. Herodias removes a ring from his finger and hands it to a soldier who uses it to pay the executioner to go down into the cistern and behead Jochanaan.

Salome, with her ear down near the cistern's entrance, listens for the cries of mercy from Jochanaan but hears nothing. She believes that the executioner failed his mission but the executioner's arm soon presents her with the Prophet's head on a silver shield. In a fit of ecstasy, lust and insane infatuation, she talks to the severed head and finally presses her lips against those of the dead Jochanaan. Horrified, Herod orders his soldiers to kill her and they rush forth, crushing Salome under their shields.

General Overview

Strauss' virtuosity in using a giant orchestra to convey the feelings of his characters and heighten the dramatic impact never fails to fascinate.³ In fact, the orchestra plays such an important part in the opera that Norman Del Mar, in the first of his three-volume *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works*, gives the chapter he devotes to *Salome* the title "The Stage Tone Poems (I)."

In addition to the orchestral forces employed, the sensational biblical narrative, as enhanced by Oscar Wilde, further increases the dramatic impact. With its blend of oriental exoticism, sexual depravity (including lust, incest, and necrophilia), and the violence of decapitation provoked simultaneous fascination and revulsion.⁴ After playing some excerpts on the piano for his 83-year-old father, hornist Franz Strauss, his father gave a rather apt graphic depiction of this revulsion; the old man complained about the music's restlessness and likened it to "having an insect crawling about inside one's clothes."⁵

Strauss' opera disturbed even the professional musicians who premiered it. Marie Wittich, the lead dramatic soprano at the Hofoper in Dresden and the original Salome, would neither dance the *Dance of the Seven Veils* nor kiss the lips of the severed head of Jochanaan. She complained of the "perversity" expected from her on stage by the producer and even told Strauss, "I won't do it. I'm a decent woman."⁶ In the end, she did sing the role but, like many Salomes since, had a stand-in do the dance.

In spite of all of the complaints and scorn piled onto the work, the power and quality of Strauss' creation is undeniable. Ever since the work's premier, critics have tried unsuccessfully to separate the "unpleasantness" of the opera's subject from general agreement about Strauss' technical mastery.

Strauss even impressed many of his composer contemporaries. When he visited Gustav Mahler in Vienna to sing and play through much of the opera on the piano, Mahler's wife, Alma, later wrote, "Mahler was completely won over. A man may dare all if he has the genius to make

³ Harewood, 764.

⁴ Bryan Gilliam, "Richard Strauss," In *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane L. Root, *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/40117pg9> (accessed April 14, 2014).

⁵ Michael Kennedy, "Salome," Liner notes for CD of Strauss' *Salome*, (Decca 414 414-2, 1985), 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the incredible credible."⁷ Also, not long after powerful patrons suppressed the work's premier in New York, Sir Edward Elgar arrived to conduct some of his own oratorios. Asked to lead a public prayer service to save the city from the scourge of *Salome*, he refused and described Strauss as "the greatest genius of the age."⁸

Some believe that Strauss' *Salome* has some of the most advanced psycho-dramatic episodes in opera up to that time; the senses and nerves are emphasized. The best example is when Herod enters in Scene 4 and accidentally steps in Narraboth's blood. He is immediately overcome with anxiety and his sparse vocal declamation mixes with more melodic, although fragmentary utterances. The role of Herod requires a very good actor and, because the vocal part has more naturalism than many tenor roles, the singing part of the role needs less emphasis.⁹

The role of Salome is very vocally demanding. Her range is from G-flat below middle C to B, two octaves above middle C. Also, she does not leave the stage from the beginning of Scene 2 until the end of the opera. Although the opera is short by comparison, Salome must not only sing her very dramatic and vocally-demanding part but must dance the *Dance of the Seven Veils* and spend the final 17 minutes or so of the opera holding a silver platter with the head of Jochanaan upon it.

Opera companies and orchestras around the world often stage *Salome* or perform it in concert in spite of the late Joseph Kerman's prediction that both *Salome* and Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* would disappear from the repertory.¹⁰ More than a century after it was written and performed, *Salome* remains hypnotic in its vitality and original in its conception.

Final Scene

The most powerful part of the opera is the final scene during which Salome obsesses over the severed head of Jochanaan. It is also the most controversial. The late Joseph Kerman described the conclusion of *Salome* as "masterly" in musical technique but, "in sentiment, the most banal sound in the whole opera."¹¹

It is probably because of the final scene that William Mann called *Salome* "the nastiest opera in existence."¹² The late conductor and Strauss biographer, Norman Del Mar, was unable to write of its ending without distaste, describing it as "a horrible display of hysterical triumph...after a performance of *Salome* one is left with a very nasty taste in the mouth."¹³

The Earl of Harewood, employing the word often used to refer to the final scene of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, described Salome's final scene as a sort of psychopathic *Liebestod* (Love Death). He also said that Salome's scene with Jochanaan's severed head "transcends the dramatic implications of the words; it is Strauss first grandiose operatic statement for female voice." The eminent musicologist Ernest Newman studied the manuscript and

⁷ Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works*, Vol. 1, (London: Barrie Books Ltd., 1962), 245.

⁸ Kennedy, 9.

⁹ Walter Frisch, *German Modernism: Music and the Arts*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), 85.

¹⁰ Vivien Schweitzer, "Joseph Kerman, Colorful Critic of Musicology, Dies at 89," (New York Times, March 25, 2014), 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Derrick Puffett, "The 'Tawdriness' of *Salome*," Liner notes for CD of Strauss' *Salome*, (Decca 444 178-2, 1995), 11.

¹³ Ibid.

deduced that Strauss wrote the final scene first and, like Tatyana's Letter Scene from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, it became the source for much of the opera's music.¹⁴

The scene begins with Salome putting her ear down near the entrance to the cistern after the executioner descends into it. Over a low roll on the bass drum, a solo double bass plays several detached and pinched Db eighth notes that seem to come from the cistern. Anxiously awaiting the cries of Jochanaan being executed, Salome says, in a whispered spoken dialogue, "Es ist kein Laut zu vernehmen. Ich höre nichts." ("There is no sound. I hear nothing."). The next 66 bars are terrifying and fill even the audience with anxiety as Salome goes from one extreme of fear and anger thinking the executioner failed in his duty and dropped his sword and the other of elation thinking she hears his sword descend. Strauss' music brilliantly evokes Salome's temper tantrum.

Finally, in a huge *crescendo* and orchestral outburst, and as detailed by Strauss in the score, "Ein riesengroßer, schwarzer Arm, der Arm des Henkers, streckt sich aus der Cisterne heraus, auf einem silbernen Schild den Kopf des Jochanaan haltend, Salome ergreift ihn." ("The executioner's muscular black arm stretches out from the cistern holding the head of Jochanaan on a silver plate. Salome seizes it.")¹⁵

Holding the severed head before her, Salome sings in ecstasy, beginning on a high Ab and having to rise above the entire orchestra playing a theme from the opera's opening bars in *fortissimo*, "Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund küssen lassen, Jochanaan. Wohl, ich werde ihn jetzt küssen!" ("Ah! You would not let me kiss your mouth, Jochanaan. Well, now I will kiss it!")¹⁶

So begins nearly 17 minutes of music that moves, paradoxically, from that which is very lyrical at times to wild atonality and powerful, heavily rhythmic disjunct melodies, the wide difference emphasizing Salome's extremely manic behavior. Several times until the end of the scene her mood moves from a tenderness towards Jochanaan -- who is present only through the form of his severed head -- to a mood of lust and anger at his insolence. It is clear at this point that she has crossed into madness.

Watching Salome toy with Jochanaan's head are Herod, Herodias, soldiers and their guests. Salome delays her much-desired kiss, though, and, at one point, Herod says, "Sie ist ein Ungeheuer!" ("She is a monster!"). Herodias replies, "Meine Tochter hat recht getan. Ich möchte jetzt hier bleiben." ("My daughter has done the right thing. I now want to stay here.") At this point, Strauss' stage direction states, "Der Mond verschwindet"¹⁷ ("The moon disappears") as the moon goes behind a cloud. Herod, wanting to hide the proceedings from everyone and perhaps even God, orders several soldiers to extinguish the torches. As soon as it is completely dark on stage, Herod cries, "Es wird Schreckliches geschehn."¹⁸ ("Something terrible will happen.")

Finally, Salome kisses the lips of the severed head and glories in her conquest. As soon as Salome sings her final statement, "Ich habe ihn geküßt deinen Mund." ("I have kissed your mouth."), Strauss' stage directions order a beam of bright moonlight to illuminate her. Herod, absolutely horrified at this, commands the soldiers to kill his stepdaughter. The soldiers rush

¹⁴ Harewood, 762.

¹⁵ Richard Strauss, *Salome*, Op. 54, (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), 301.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 303-304.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 345.

forth crushing Salome beneath their shields. The orchestra ends the work with two eighth notes with each instrument of the orchestra playing not a chord but rather a stark *fortissimo* C.

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