CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

Richard Strauss

Elektra

DERRICK PUFFETT

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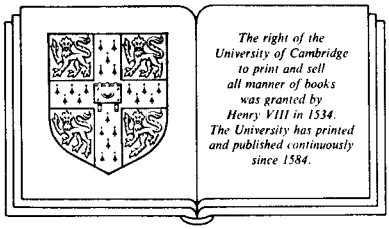
Edited by
DERRICK PUFFETT



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1989

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Richard Strauss: 'Elektra'. - (Cambridge opera handbooks)
1. Opera in German. Strauss, Richard, 1864-1949. Elektra
I. Puffett, Derrick
782.1'092'4

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Richard Strauss, Elektra / edited by Derrick Puffett.
p. cm. - (Cambridge opera handbooks)
Bibliography.
Discography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-521-35173-1. - ISBN 0-521-35971-6 (pbk.)
1. Strauss, Richard, 1864-1949. Elektra. I. Puffett, Derrick.
II. Title: Elektra. III. Series.
ML410.S93R485 1989
782.1'092'4 - dc19 89-499 CIP

ISBN 0 521 35173 1 hard covers
ISBN 0 521 35971 6 paperback

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Cambridge Opera Handbooks

Richard Strauss
Elektra

The contributors to this handbook bring together the first full-length study of *Elektra* in English. The volume examines the many facets of one of Richard Strauss's most complex operas. First, P. E. Easterling surveys the mythological background, while Karen Forsyth discusses Hofmannsthal's adaptation of his sources. The second part of the book brings the music to the fore. Derrick Puffett offers an introductory essay and synopsis; Arnold Whittall considers the tonal and dramatic structure of the composition; and Tethys Carpenter explores the musical language of the work in detail, with special focus given to part of the Klytämnestra scene. The third part of the volume offers two contrasting critical essays: Carolyn Abbate provides an interpretation of music and language in the work, and Robin Holloway analyses Strauss's orchestration.

The book also contains a discography, bibliography and illustrations.

CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

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Richard Strauss: *Salome* by Derrick Puffett

General preface

This is a series of studies of individual operas written for the opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns: historical, analytical and interpretative. There is a detailed description of the genesis of each work, and of the collaboration between librettist and composer. A full synopsis considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects, and there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score. The analysis, like the history, shades naturally into interpretation: by a careful combination of new essays and excerpts from classic statements the editors of the handbooks show how critical writing about the opera, like the production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. A final section of documents gives a select bibliography, a discography, and guides to other sources. Each book is published both in hard covers and as a paperback.

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Introduction

I

This book is intended as a companion to the *Salome* volume in the same series. They were written concurrently, call on some of the same contributors and share the same concerns – notably an emphasis on the music (as opposed to questions of historical background, performance tradition and so on, though all of these are covered to some extent). The emphasis on the music was a matter of deliberate choice. There are plenty of books on Strauss's operas – those by William Mann and Norman Del Mar will be most familiar to the English-speaking reader[1] – as well as studies of individual works.[2] Strauss's music, however, has never enjoyed the sustained analytical attention given to works by other composers of his generation, such as Mahler and Schoenberg. As a result, critical comment tends to remain rather general. There is simply no need for another 'introduction' to works such as *Salome* and *Elektra* (which in any case are part of the standard operatic repertory, not to mention the many fine recordings). What is needed is to raise the level of critical debate. The two handbooks are intended as a modest step in this direction.

Elektra has never of course been *neglected* critically, as *Salome* has. Its reputation is summed up in Stravinsky's remark: 'Since *Parsifal* there have been only two operas, *Elektra* and *Pelléas*.'[3] Though certainly not the last work – not even the last work of Strauss's – to enter the standard repertory, it is the only one of his to enjoy almost unqualified critical success in recent times, a startling change of fortune when the earliest reviews are taken into account. Stravinsky's praise is the more impressive coming from someone who detested Strauss and all he stood for. Anton Webern, a pupil of Schoenberg and therefore 'on the other side of the fence' so far as modern music was concerned, had to admit that 'there does exist in Strauss such an immense virtuosity in everything, which Pfitzner and

Reger, for instance, do not possess'[4] (admittedly he was not talking specifically about *Elektra* here). And Kurt Weill, who dismissed a number of Strauss operas as being derived from Wagner, nevertheless admired the musical innovations of *Elektra*.[5]

But many of those who disapprove of *Salome* and/or Strauss in general make an exception of *Elektra*, a curious state of affairs given that *Salome* is arguably the more successful work. Perhaps it is simply because *Elektra* is based on a Greek tragedy, a far more respectable pedigree than the dubious Wilde. A more likely reason is found in the shifting value systems that characterise twentieth-century art. *Elektra*, at first criticised for its modernity, is now admired because it is 'progressive': this was certainly part of Adorno's thinking when he described the Klytämnestra scene as 'the climax of Strauss's work' (in the context of a bitter attack on the composer's music as a whole).[6] Max Deutsch, another Schoenberg pupil, gave a memorable series of classes on *Elektra* in Paris in the 1950s.[7] And Carl Dahlhaus, the *éminence grise* of modern German musicology and no admirer of Strauss, devotes three pages to the work in his history of nineteenth-century music.[8] If not exactly well liked, *Elektra* seems to have become a classic.

The work has also attracted the attention of distinguished Germanists, being, of course, the first in the remarkable series of collaborations between Strauss and the Austrian poet and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Writing on *Elektra*, then, is hardly meagre. And it is probably fair to say that, even in the relatively undistinguished field of Strauss studies, *Elektra* tends to bring out the best in its commentators. Among British authors, both Mann and Del Mar devote their finest chapters to the work: whatever their expressed reservations (Del Mar in particular seems to find it distasteful),[9] they write with vigour and perceptiveness. There is also a major study by the Austrian musicologist Kurt Overhoff.[10]

All this is a far cry from the reviews that greeted the first performances. *Salome* had caused a scandal in 1905.[11] Now Strauss was abused again (no doubt to his delight) as decadent and immoral, the 'Barnum of German music'. Thomas San-Galli, author of a biography of Brahms, wrote in the *Rheinische Musik- und Theaterzeitung* that *Elektra* was a work 'that one has to have heard, however unpleasant the experience may be. Then it will sink into oblivion quickly and for ever.'[12] Others could not believe that the work was meant seriously.[13] Cartoons appeared in the newspapers depicting Strauss as a musical sadist, with Hofmannsthal his accomplice.[14] There were

satirical references to libretti for 'opera composers of Straussian tendencies', with titles such as 'Incest', 'Lynch Justice' and 'The Bloodthirsty Gorilla'.[15] Naturally the Klytämnestra scene came in for special criticism, on account of its supposed 'atonality': 'It is complete anarchy', wrote Willy Pastor in the *Tägliche Rundschau*.[16]

A few critics were more perceptive. Writing in the *Münchner neuesten Nachrichten*, Alexander Dillmann praised the work as 'purer and more authentic than much of what is written according to the rule-book. . . . Of this there can be no doubt: *Elektra* represents a decisive milestone in music history.' At the end of his review Dillmann responded to criticisms of the Klytämnestra scene:

> Let the esteemed reader sit at the piano and [play] . . . two *Elektra*-chords: E flat in the bass, C–D–F sharp–A in the middle register left hand, E sharp–B–C sharp–G in the right hand. This 'resolves' to E flat–G–C–E–G–B flat in the left hand, F sharp–A sharp–C sharp–F sharp in the right! That is a small sample from the Klytämnestra scene [the four bars before Fig. 193: see also Chapter 6, Ex. 8]. On the piano it does indeed sound a little surprising. But in the orchestra the colours are mixed to such an extent that the dissonance is hardly perceptible as such, merely as an illustration of Klytämnestra's words. Also we get a quite different sense of the organic connection between these chords in the orchestra than we do from the vocal score, which is in many respects nothing short of a caricature of the real tonal image.[17]

And the first performances in London (1910, as part of the first Beecham season at Covent Garden) seem to have been an almost total success.[18]

II

The story of the events leading up to the première has been told many times, but it still retains its interest. After the première of *Salome*, on 9 December 1905, Strauss was at something of a loss. He was at the height of his career both as a composer and as a conductor (since 1898 he had held the much-coveted position of Kapellmeister of the Berlin Court Opera). He would have liked to write a comic opera, but no suitable subject suggested itself; and he was bored with writing symphonic poems.[19] With a certain sense of resignation – and a few misgivings about embarking upon a subject so outwardly similar to that of his last success – he asked Hofmannsthal for permission to adapt his *Elektra*.[20]

The two artists had met in 1899, at the home of Richard Dehmel in Berlin-Pankow.[21] In March the following year they met again in Paris, to discuss the scenario for a possible ballet, *Der Triumph der*

Zeit. Hofmannsthal wrote it,[22] but Strauss was already involved with a ballet of his own (the never-completed *Kythere*) and did not want to commit himself to another so soon.[23] He was also busy on the opera *Feuersnot*. Then came *Salome*, which occupied him from 1902 – when he saw Max Reinhardt's production, with Gertrud Eysoldt, at Reinhardt's Kleines Theater in Berlin – to 1905. In 1903 or 1904[24] he saw Hofmannsthal's newly-completed *Elektra*, again with Eysoldt, at the Kleines Theater. It was *Salome* all over again: as he wrote in his 'Reminiscences of the First Performance of My Operas' (1942), 'I immediately recognised . . . what a magnificent operatic libretto it might be'.[25]

After the *Salome* première he communicated his enthusiasm about *Elektra* to its author (whether by letter or in person we do not know).[26] The first letter that pertains to *Elektra* in the surviving correspondence is dated 7 March 1906.[27] A certain amount of wooing was necessary before Strauss would finally commit himself: in particular he had to be reassured that the similarities to *Salome* were only superficial. Hofmannsthal, clearly excited about the prospect of working with Germany's leading composer, tried to put his mind at rest:

> (Both are one-act plays; each has a woman's name for a title; both take place in classical antiquity, and both parts were originally created in Berlin by Gertrud Eysoldt; that, I feel, is all the similarity adds up to.) The blend of colour in the two subjects strikes me as quite different in all essentials; in *Salome* much is so to speak purple and violet, the atmosphere is torrid; in *Elektra*, on the other hand, it is a mixture of night and light, or black and bright. What is more, the rapid rising sequence of events relating to Orestes and his deed which leads up to victory and purification – a sequence which I can imagine much more powerful in music than in the written word – is not matched by anything of a corresponding, or even faintly similar kind in *Salome*.[28]

The suggestion that music could capture 'the rapid rising sequence of events' much more powerfully than the written word was high praise indeed for Hofmannsthal.[29] Nevertheless it was only when the financial details were agreed that Strauss began work on the composition.

On 16 June 1906 he wrote to Hofmannsthal that he was 'already busy on the first scene'.[30] From then on things went fairly smoothly. (The details of the collaboration are discussed by Karen Forsyth below.)[31] There was a small hiccup in September, when the news that Strauss was working on *Elektra* – until then a closely guarded secret – leaked into the press (this was naturally a matter of worldwide

interest). Hofmannsthal hastened to assure the composer that he was not to blame. Strauss's next surviving letter is dated 22 December 1907 and makes no reference to the matter.

The actual composition of the work proceeded slowly, owing to Strauss's extensive conducting commitments. There were also compositional difficulties: it seems that either Elektra's monologue or the Klytämnestra scene was rewritten twice.[32] Nevertheless Strauss played the Klytämnestra scene to Mahler at one of their last meetings, possibly as early as December 1906.[33] This would appear to have been a painful occasion for Mahler, largely because Strauss omitted to ask him about his own music. He wrote to Alma:

> Strauss has already composed a number of scenes from *Elektra* (Hofmannsthal). He won't part with it for less than 10 per cent per evening and 100,000 marks. (That is just my guess, I admit.) As he did not inquire, I did not tell him anything about my antiquated existence this summer [setting the Latin hymn *Veni creator spiritus* as part of his Eighth Symphony]. I doubt whether he would be much impressed to hear with what quaint relics I occupy my summer. Oh, how blissful to be modern.[34]

His reaction to *Elektra* was straightforwardly negative.[35] Strauss received a much more cheering response from Hofmannsthal when he played him extracts in December 1906 and February 1908.[36]

The distractions were severe. In the winter of 1907–8 Strauss had to be in Paris (for six performances of *Salome*, which he himself conducted), Vienna (for concerts with the Vienna Philharmonic) and Rome. In May 1908 he took the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra on tour to France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland and southern Germany, conducting thirty-one concerts in as many days. In August he spent a week at a Strauss Festival in Wiesbaden.[37] Relief came at last in October, when he was promoted to Generalmusikdirektor and granted a year's leave of absence. This was too late to help with the composition of *Elektra*, which bears the finishing-date '22 September 1908'. But it did mean that his next opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, could proceed more swiftly.

Strauss seems to have decided at an early stage – perhaps as early as 1907 – that the première would be in Dresden. It had been Dresden, after all, that took a risk with *Salome* (as well as the earlier *Feuersnot*), and Hofmannsthal, too, wanted to avoid a possible failure in Vienna.[38] On 11 September (1908) he told the conductor, Ernst von Schuch, that the score was ready: 'The end is juicy! The principal role must now undoubtedly be given to the most highly dramatic soprano you have.' Then, on 6 January 1909: 'I am wildly

eager to hear the *Elektra* orchestra for the first time on the 18th.'[39] The actual première was on 25 January. As usual, Strauss had planned things like a military operation: *Elektra* would be the first event in a four-day festival, with *Salome* following on the 26th, *Feuersnot* on the 27th (together with the *Symphonia Domestica*) and a second performance of *Elektra* on the 28th (see the poster reproduced as Plate 1). The singers were some of the best he ever had: Annie Krull (a performer he later singled out for special praise) in the title role, Margarethe Siems as Chrysothemis, Carl Perron as Orestes and Ernestine Schumann-Heinck (a veteran Wagnerian and the only one of his performers about whom Strauss had reservations) as Klytämnestra. The conductor was conscientious almost to a fault.[40]

Despite all these preparations, *Elektra* was no more than a *succès d'estime*, as Strauss wrote rather nonchalantly in his reminiscences, adding that 'as usual, I did not learn this until later'.[41] Angelo Neumann even telegraphed to Prague that it had 'flopped'. Perhaps the critics had been more effective than they had been with *Salome*. Perhaps the public simply recognised that the work was flawed. At all events the performances that followed in Munich, Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna, Graz, Cologne, Hamburg and elsewhere saw a gradual revival in its fortunes. By 21 April 1909, after a successful performance in Milan, Strauss could write to his librettist: 'I think we've now definitely turned the corner with *Elektra*.'[42]

III

A book on *Elektra* is necessarily more heterogeneous than one on *Salome*. This is because of certain qualities in the work itself. Whereas in *Salome* Strauss seems to have been trying to achieve a kind of organicism,[43] he was attracted to *Elektra* by its contrasts: his claim that '*Elektra* became even more intense in the unity of structure'[44] shows his awareness of the possible problems. And *Elektra* does have problems, whatever its apologists may say: the discontinuity of style from one scene to another, the uneven quality of the musical ideas, the sheer bombast of the ending.[45] Moreover, there is a certain open-ended quality about it, an incompleteness, which has to do with the nature of the myth. As William Mann observes, 'the mythological Electra did not die',[46] just as Chrysothemis and Orestes lived on to see the rise of a new generation. Although nothing could seem more final than the hammering chords at the end

Königliches Opernhaus.

23. Vorstellung.

Montag, den 25. Januar 1909.

Richard Strauß-Woche.

1. Abend.

Uraufführung:

Elektra.

Tragödie in einem Aufzuge von Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Musik von Richard Strauß.

Regie: Georg Toller.

Musikalische Leitung: Ernst von Schuch.

Personen:

Klytämnestra	—	Ernestine Schumann-Heink.
Elektra,	ihre Töchter.	Annie Krull
Chrysothemis,		Margarethe Siems.
Aegisth	—	Johannes Sembach.
Orest	—	Karl Perron.
Der Pfleger des Orest	—	Julius Puttlitz.
Die Vertraute	—	Gertrud Sachse.
Die Schleppträgerin	—	Elisabeth Boehm-van Endert
Ein junger Diener	—	Fritz Soot.
Ein alter Diener	—	Franz Nebuschka.
Die Aufseherin	—	Riza Eibenschütz.
Fünf Mägde	—	Francisla Bender-Schaper. Magdalene Seebe. Irma Tervani. Anna Zoder Minnie Nast.

Dienerinnen und Diener. — Schauplatz der Handlung: Mykene.

Die Dekorationen sind vom Hoftheatermaler Rieck entworfen und angefertigt, die Kostüme nach Entwürfen des Professors Franko vom Garderobe-Oberinspektor Metzger ausgeführt. Dekorative Einrichtung vom Oberinspektor Hasait.

Textbücher sind an der Kasse das Exemplar für **1** Mark zu haben.

Beurlaubt: Herr **Rüdiger.**

Der freie Eintritt ist ohne jede Ausnahme aufgehoben.

Gelöste Billetts werden nur bei Abänderung der Vorstellung zurückgenommen.

Spielplan.

Königliches Opernhaus.

Dienstag, 26. Januar. Richard Strauß-Woche. 2. Abend: **Salome.** Drama in einem Aufzuge. Musik von Strauß. Anfang **8** Uhr.

Mittwoch, 27. Januar. Richard Strauß-Woche. 3. Abend: **Feuersnot.** Singgedicht in einem Akt. Musik von R. Strauß. **Symphonia domestica** von Strauß. Anfang **8** Uhr.

Königliches Schauspielhaus.

Dienstag, 26. Januar: **Die Rabensteinerin.** Schauspiel in vier Akten von E. v. Wildenbruch. Anfang ½8 Uhr.

Mittwoch, den 27. Januar: **Die glücklichste Zeit.** Lustspiel in drei Akten von Auernheimer. Anfang ½8 Uhr.

Einlaß 7 Uhr. Kassenöffnung ½8 Uhr. Anfang 8 Uhr.

Ende ¾10 Uhr.

1: The poster for the première of *Elektra*: Königliches Opernhaus, Dresden, 25 January 1909

of Strauss's opera, there is something deeply disturbing about the image of Chrysothemis beating at the door. The last word in Hofmannsthal's libretto, before '*Curtain*', is '*Silence*' (*Stille*): the lack of response to Chrysothemis' beating means that the story is not yet over.

This 'open-ended quality' was bound to impose itself on the book whether I wanted it to or not. In fact I deliberately chose contributors who would reflect the different aspects of the work through their differing styles and approaches. (With such a many-sided work, in any case, it seemed important to find writers who were *specialists* in each of the different fields – a classicist, a Germanist and so on – rather than to try to achieve a collective view.) And though I hope that the essays complement one another, at least to the extent of providing the sort of comprehensive survey that is customary in the Cambridge Opera Handbooks series, I take pleasure in the fact that the *style* of Robin Holloway, for example, is as different as possible from that of Karen Forsyth (as is his attitude to Hofmannsthal), just as the analytical style of Arnold Whittall is very different from my own. Still less than in the case of *Salome* was there any possibility of coming to a 'conclusion'.

The general layout of the book, nevertheless, follows the usual pattern for the series. First P. E. Easterling surveys the mythological background, while Karen Forsyth discusses Hofmannsthal's adaptation of his sources (her emphasis on Sophocles is particularly original and interesting). The second part of the book brings the music to the fore. I offer some preliminary thoughts and a synopsis; then Arnold Whittall considers the tonal and dramatic structure; finally Tethys Carpenter explores the musical language of the work in greater detail (she also analyses part of the Klytämnestra scene). The third part of the book offers two contrasting critical essays: by Carolyn Abbate, whose interpretation is informed by her recent work on narrative, and by Robin Holloway, who seems to have founded a new genre – a critical study of a work through its orchestration. The only aspect of the work that I thought it necessary to omit was its stage history: until very recent times a realistic staging was evidently considered *de rigueur*,[47] and a description of so many similar productions would have been tedious and unilluminating. As usual in the series, the discography is by Malcolm Walker.

Certain linguistic inconsistencies have proved unavoidable. I have tried to distinguish between Electra and Elektra, and between Clytemnestra and Klytämnestra, where the former refers to the

character in a general, mythological sense and the latter to the character in Strauss/Hofmannsthal. Aegisthus and Orestes, on the other hand, are used in preference to Aegisth and Orest (except where the context makes it impossible) because of their greater familiarity to the English-speaking reader. The other characters present no problem.

Note: The orchestral and vocal scores of *Elektra* are published by Boosey & Hawkes (1943) © copyright 1908 by Adolph Fürstner. Copyright assigned 1943 to Boosey & Hawkes Ltd., for all countries excluding Germany, Danzig, Italy, Portugal and the U.S.S.R. Reprinted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. References to specific passages are given in the form 'four bars after Fig. 101', often abbreviated to 'Fig. 101/4'. In such references the bar headed by the rehearsal number is always included.