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Richard Strauss

Salome

DERRICK PUFFETT

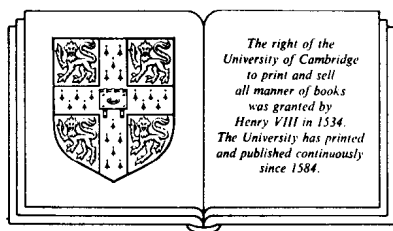
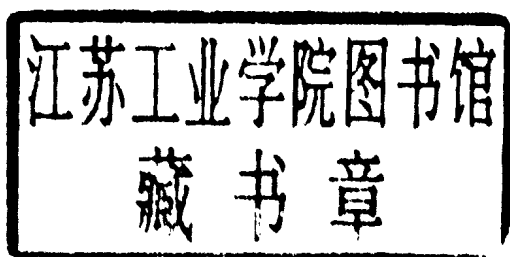


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Edited by
DERRICK PUFFETT



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Cambridge Opera Handbooks

Richard Strauss
Salome

This full-length study of *Salome* is the first in English since Lawrence Gilman's introductory guide of 1907. The book presents an informative collection of historical, analytical and critical studies of one of Strauss's most familiar operas. Classic essays by Mario Praz and Richard Ellmann cover the literary background. How Strauss adapted Wilde's play for his libretto is discussed by Roland Tenschert in a fascinating essay which has been updated by Derrick Puffett.

In three central analytical chapters, Derrick Puffett considers *Salome* in relation to Wagnerian music drama, Tethys Carpenter examines its tonal and dramatic structure, and Craig Ayrey analyses the final monologue. The last part of the book moves from analysis to criticism, with a review by John Williamson of the opera's critical reception and a new interpretative essay by Robin Holloway.

The book also contains a synopsis, bibliography and discography; Strauss's little-known scenario for the 'Dance of the Seven Veils' is reprinted as an appendix.

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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 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 in both hard covers and as a paperback.

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Introduction

I

This is the first full-length study of *Salome* in English (and perhaps in any language) since Lawrence Gilman's introductory guide of 1907.¹ How one of Strauss's most popular works could have escaped sustained critical attention for so long is a subject for a separate book, though it will be returned to briefly later in this Introduction. There have of course been distinguished shorter studies. Ernest Newman, one of the earliest champions of Strauss's music in Britain (though by no means uncritical), included a chapter on it in *More Opera Nights*.² This provided a prototype for later writers such as William Mann and Norman Del Mar, whose well-known books on Strauss³ are essential reading for any devotee of the work. The approach in all three studies is similar: the author begins with a short history of the composition, together with a certain amount of literary background; then comes an 'analysis' (in fact, a synopsis of the action interspersed with music examples and comments of a critical-analytical type, rather than what is now understood as analysis proper); finally a brief summing-up. Other distinguished contributions have appeared as chapters in books not exclusively devoted to Strauss. Gary Schmidgall's essay on *Salome*, despite its musical limitations, is valuable for the way in which it relates the work to the Symbolist and Decadent movements, a subject rarely tackled by musicologists.⁴ Peter Conrad's account is more contentious but still worth reading.⁵ And the work of Anna Amalie Abert, Alan Jefferson, Michael Kennedy, Romain Rolland, Willi Schuh, Richard Specht and Roland Tenschert⁶ should not be forgotten.

Not to mention the numerous remarks of Strauss himself. Though a reluctant writer, he left behind vivid comments on historical, technical and aesthetic aspects of the work (as well as a wealth of lively anecdotes), notably in his reminiscences of the first

performance.⁷ These have been plundered heavily by other writers, as they will be again in the course of the next two hundred pages. An account of the origins of *Salome* ought to begin not with Strauss, however, but with the author on whose play it was based: Oscar Wilde.

II

Wilde's play was first produced in 1896. But he had been fascinated by *Salome* ever since Walter Pater, one of his Oxford mentors,⁸ had lent him Flaubert's *Trois contes* (containing the story *Hérodiade*) in 1877.⁹ Wilde admired Flaubert enormously.¹⁰ He copied shamelessly from *Hérodiade* and affected not to understand when the older man failed to appreciate the compliment.¹¹ Curiously, however, it was another 'Herodias' that provided the immediate stimulus for the composition of Wilde's play. Mallarmé's poem was still unfinished after many years, in Richard Ellmann's words 'the best known unfinished poem since "Kubla Khan"':

Wilde determined to use the same subject, the beheading of John the Baptist at the instigation of Herodias. Whether or not he intended to compete directly, he did so, and Mallarmé, in his futile effort to complete 'Hérodiade', had to take note of Wilde's efforts, and said he would retain the name of Herodias to differentiate it from that other (*Salome*) 'which I shall call modern'.¹²

Wilde began the play in 1891, the year of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, his political essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' and four other major works. He was then living in Paris. As Ellmann has written, his knowledge of the iconography of *Salome* was immense:

He complained that Rubens's *Salome* appeared to him to be 'an apoplectic Maritornes'. On the other hand, Leonardo's *Salome* was excessively incorporeal. Others, by Dürer, Ghirlandaio, van Thulden, were unsatisfactory because incomplete. The celebrated *Salome* of Regnault he considered to be a mere 'gypsy'. Only Moreau satisfied him, and he liked to quote Huysmans's description of the Moreau paintings.¹³ He was eager to visit the Prado to see how Stanzioni had painted her, and Titian, about whom he quoted Tintoretto's comment, 'This man paints with quivering flesh [*carne molida*].'

He seemed torn between two opposing conceptions of her character. On the one hand she must be the embodiment of sensuality:

If he passed the rue de la Paix, he would examine the jewelry shops for proper adornment of her. One afternoon he asked, 'Don't you think she

would be better naked? Yes, totally naked, but draped with heavy and ringing necklaces made of jewels of every colour, warm with the fervour of her amber flesh. I don't conceive of her as unconscious, serving as a mute instrument [that is, for Herodias' hatred of John]. No, her lips in Leonardo's painting disclose the cruelty of her soul. Her lust must needs be infinite, and her perversity without limits. Her pearls must expire on her flesh.' He began to imagine Sarah Bernhardt dancing naked before the Tetrarch . . .

On the other hand she must be chaste:

She would dance before Herod out of divine inspiration . . . 'Her body, tall and pale, undulates like a lily. There is nothing sensual in her beauty. The richest lilacs cover her svelte flesh . . . In her pupils gleam the flames of faith.' The image was suggested to him by a painting of Bernardo Luini.¹⁴

All sorts of other images contributed to the character: the bust of a decapitated woman, a Rumanian acrobat dancing on her hands, the playing of a gypsy orchestra, even phrases from the Song of Songs.¹⁵

The play was finished in January 1892 (Wilde had now returned to England). Rehearsals began in June. But after two weeks the Lord Chamberlain's office banned the work, on the grounds that representations of biblical scenes were not allowed. (Massenet's *Hérodiade* (1881), based on Flaubert, and Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* were also prohibited.) Despite protests from Shaw and William Archer, the only established critics to defend the play, it became clear that it would not be staged publicly in Britain (there were some private performances).¹⁶ Wilde threatened to emigrate to France, simultaneously advancing his plans to have the play published in English. It had, of course, been written in French, and the translation was entrusted to Lord Alfred Douglas, the notorious 'Bosie'. The ensuing row was almost the cause of a rift between them: Wilde later wrote of the 'schoolboy faults of your attempted translation of *Salome*',¹⁷ and revised it heavily before it was published.¹⁸ At all events, it was only in 1896, while the author was in prison, that *Salomé* was given its first public hearing, at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris.

'The rest is history.' Mario Praz has written eloquently about its subsequent fortunes. It had a massive success in Germany,¹⁹ where Strauss soon heard about it. Let him take up the story:

Once, in Berlin [Strauss was conductor at the Royal Court Opera there], I went to Max Reinhardt's 'Little Theatre' in order to see Gertrud Eysoldt in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. After the performance I met Heinrich Grünfeld, who said to me: 'My dear Strauss, surely you could make an opera of this!'

I replied: 'I am already busy composing it.' The Viennese poet Anton Lindtner [*sic*] had sent me this exquisite play and had offered to turn it into a libretto for me. When I agreed, he sent me a few cleverly versified opening scenes, but I could not make up my mind to start composing until one day it occurred to me to set to music *Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Nacht* straight away. From then on it was not difficult to purge the piece of purple passages to such an extent that it became quite a good libretto.²⁰

The performance Strauss describes was a private one given on 11 November 1902 (not in 1903, as is sometimes stated);²¹ in any case he had been familiar with the play since 1901. Reinhardt, who was then at the beginning of his directorial career, was later to collaborate with Strauss on numerous projects, notably *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Gertrud Eysoldt (who was to be the first Elektra in Hofmannsthal's play) has been described as 'boyish, rather plain, though with fascinating eyes and an extremely expressive face'.²² Anton Lindner was known personally to Strauss, having provided the text for his 'Hochzeitlich Lied', Op. 37, No. 6 (1889). Strauss, however, preferred the translation by Hedwig Lachmann,²³ the one used by Reinhardt. (Still another translation, by one Dr Kiefer, had been performed in Breslau in 1901.)²⁴

Composition began in earnest in August 1903. As Walter Panofsky has pointed out, most of the sketching was done not in Berlin but in a house in Marquartstein, Upper Bavaria. The house belonged to Strauss's in-laws, and Strauss himself was banished to an ironing room, with nothing more than an upright piano, a writing-desk and the jingle of cow-bells from the Alpine pastures outside. *Salome*, like *The Rite of Spring*, another of the noisiest scores of the twentieth century, was composed in a room the size of a broom-cupboard.²⁵

This is as good a point as any to mention an idea first put forward by Ernest Newman and repeated by countless writers since, namely that Strauss 'began by composing the Dance of the Seven Veils and the long closing scene'. Newman supports this idea by referring to 'a remark made by Strauss towards the end of his life'.²⁶ What this remark was (like the five words that Elgar is supposed to have whispered to Newman on his death-bed) will never be known. It is plain from the catalogue of sketches published by Franz Trenner, however, that the 'Dance' was composed *after* the rest of the score, indeed after the finishing date of '20 June 1905' which Strauss wrote on his manuscript.²⁷ The position with the closing scene (actually

Salome's final monologue, since the 'closing scene' proper begins with Herod's entry) is less clear. Trenner lists individual sketches for the monologue, in their correct 'chronological' placing,²⁸ but it is uncertain at what point the monologue was sketched as a whole. Newman's hypothesis, though interesting, remains unproven.

The composition sketch was finished in September 1904. Strauss then embarked upon the orchestration, putting his signature to the score, as we have seen, on 20 June the following year (the 'Dance' would be completed during August). Meanwhile he began his machinations for the première. These have been described in detail by Mann and others,²⁹ and it is scarcely worth going over the same ground again. Clearly Strauss had decided that a première at the Vienna Court Opera (where the censors were notoriously severe) was unlikely and that his best chance lay with Dresden, which had mounted *Feuersnot* in 1901. The conductor there, Ernst von Schuch, was an artist whom he admired.³⁰ Nevertheless Strauss threatened to take the première to Vienna (under Mahler) or to Leipzig (under Nikisch) if Schuch did not meet his deadline of 9 December 1905. The problems caused by this timetable were amusingly described by Strauss himself:

. . . during the first reading rehearsal at the piano, the assembled soloists returned their parts to the conductor with the single exception of Mr [Carl] Burian, a Czech, who, when asked for his opinion last of all, replied: 'I know it off by heart already.' Good for him. After this the others could not help feeling a little ashamed and rehearsals actually started. During the casting rehearsals Frau [Marie] Wittich, entrusted the part of the sixteen-year-old Princess with the voice of Isolde (one just does not write a thing like that, Herr Strauss: either one or the other), because of the strenuous nature of the part and the strength of the orchestra, went on strike with the indignant protest to be expected from the wife of a Saxon Burgomaster: 'I won't do it, I'm a decent woman', thereby reducing the producer [Willi] Wirk, who was all for 'perversity and outrage'[,] to desperation.³¹

Nevertheless the première was a triumph (more than one review called it a 'sensation').³² The artists took thirty-eight curtain calls. By the end of 1907 the opera had been heard in more than fifty German and foreign cities, and fifty times in Berlin alone by 9 November of that year.³³ The income resulting from this success enabled Strauss to terminate his contract with the Berlin Opera and devote himself full-time to composition.³⁴

But all this lay in the future. At the time of the première it must have seemed as if *Salome's* troubles were only just beginning:



Plate 1: Salome pleads for the head of Jochanaan: from the first Dresden production, with Marie Wittich (Salome) and Carl Burian (Herod), Dresden, December 1905

Three weeks later it had, I think, been accepted by ten theatres and had been a sensational success in Breslau with an orchestra of seventy players. Thereupon there was a hullabaloo in the papers, the churches objected – the first performance in the Vienna State Opera took place in October 1918, after an embarrassing exchange of letters with Archbishop Piffl – and so did the Puritans in New York, where the opera had to be taken off the repertoire at the instigation of a certain Mr [J. Pierpont] Morgan. The German Kaiser only permitted the performance of the opera after Hülsen [Georg Hülsen-Haeseler, the Intendant] had had the bright idea of signifying the advent of the Magi at the end by the appearance of the morning star!³⁵

The Vienna debacle is of particular interest because of the involvement of Mahler. Although initially ambivalent about the work, Mahler soon came to regard it as Strauss's masterpiece. In 1905 he hoped to conduct it in Vienna. But he was told that the Censorship Board had refused permission 'on religious and moral grounds'. Despite some wheeling and dealing Mahler was unable to get the decision reversed. The letter he eventually received from the Censor (31 October 1905) is worth quoting at length:

The first objection arises . . . from the repeated explicit or implicit references to Christ in the text [examples are cited]. All these passages would need to be cut or radically altered.

A further difficulty is the presentation of John the Baptist on the stage. The poet admittedly gives him the Hebrew name Jochanaan, but just as this change of name is unable to create the illusion that it is not the person honoured as Christ's forerunner, so equally would the choice of any other name fail to have this effect.

But also, quite apart from these textual reservations I cannot overcome the objectionable nature of the whole story, and can only repeat that the representation of events which belong to the realm of sexual pathology is not suitable for our Court stage.³⁶

This verdict led Mahler to revise his views on morality in art.³⁷

III

Could it be that some lingering *moral disapproval* is at the root of *Salome's* critical neglect (there are more books on *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier* and even *Ariadne*)? Certainly British critics seem to feel guilty about enjoying it: Ernest Newman wrote quaintly in 1910: 'In *Salome* the subject is a trifle unpleasant, but Strauss has given us a marvellous study of the diseased woman's mind.'³⁸ William Mann, who must have led a sheltered life, calls it 'the nastiest opera in existence'.³⁹ And Norman Del Mar, a superb