Strauss' Salome as Social and Political Commentary and Critique

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Richard Strauss was appointed conductor of the Royal Court Opera in Berlin in 1898, and would keep his post there for the next twenty years. This productive period inspired Strauss' most famous operas: *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Premiered in Dresden in 1905, it was *Salome* that fostered Strauss' reputation as a modernist opera composer. *Salome* brought him considerable attention throughout the Western world, though not always favorable. The opera was received with a fifteen-year ban at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, a two-year ban in London, and a thirteen-year delay of production in Vienna.

It was clear that Strauss had expected and even hoped for this kind of reaction from the censors. *Feuersnot* was the opera he composed prior to *Salome*, which premiered at the Dresden Hofoper in 1901. It was laden with sexual and erotic subtexts both in the libretto, and in the *Tristan*-esque climaxes of the music. On July 11, 1901, Strauss wrote a letter to Gustav Mahler, who was currently serving in his fourth of what would be ten years as Music Director at the *Wiener Staatsoper* from 1897–1907. The letter shows Strauss's familiarity and sense of ease with the politics of censorship in German-speaking Europe: "The censor in Vienna I find extremely funny! I can't dare to hope for a ban. That advertising value of a ban by the censor would be the best thing that could happen to my little opera, since it wouldn't mean that the performance in Vienna was actually cancelled, but just postponed."[1]

When Strauss's "little opera" *Feuersnot* made its way to his own Berlin

[1] Chris Walton, "Beneath the Seventh Veil: Richard Strauss's 'Salome' and Kaiser Wilhelm II," *The Musical Times* 14 6, no. 1893 (2005): 22.

Staatsoper, it was cancelled after only seven performances by order of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Strauss did not hide his disdain for the Kaiser in his private correspondences, often using both the Kaiser and his court as subjects of sarcasm. As regards to *Salome*, Musicologist Chris Walton suggests:

"It cannot be denied that the Kaiser and Strauss's Herod share numerous character traits, just as the sexual goings-on at the Wilhemine court found a resonance in the various forms of 'abnormal' desire depicted in the opera. It is thus tempting to think that *Salome*... can be read on one level as a parody of Berlin, just as the earlier opera had parodied Munich (one could even postulate the later *Rosenkavalier* as a third city portrait in opera, with its stylized depiction of Vienna)."[2]

Kaiser Wilhelm II was known as a moody, temperamental, easily manipulated, and often unreasonable person whom tended to parallel the moods of his surrounding persons. Herod is not represented by any one leitmotif, but rather by a consistently shifting musical mood often strikingly similar to the characters surrounding his musical entrances.

Strauss did not advertise his disdain for religion, nor did he hide it. His choice of a biblical topic such as *Salome*, particularly the erotically charged and perverse characterization found in Oscar Wilde's play on which Strauss based the opera, represents more meaning than merely fulfilling the need to tell its story. Even the religious music within the opera, namely that of the characters Jochanaan and the Nazarenes, is so unlike the rest of the music throughout the opera, it can easily be understood as religious satire. Strauss wrote to Stefan Zweig, confessing, "[I am] passionately anti-Christian [...] I wanted [...] to compose the upright Jokanaan more or less as a buffoon. For me such a preacher in the wilderness [...] has something indescribably comic about him."[3]

The seemingly antisemitic musical treatment of the quintet of Jews,

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[2] Ibid., 25.
[3] Ibid.,17.

constantly quarrelling over religious matters and blatantly singing out of key four measures after **R**209, is another example of Strauss's sly business sense and socio-political manipulation of the Wilhemine court. Mocking Christianity would be unacceptable and surely result in the Kaiser's dismissal of not only *Salome*, but of Strauss as well. Mocking the Jews, however, accomplished Strauss's desire to abhor religion while at the same time gaining the acclaim of the Kaiser, the Wilhemine court, and other influential and wealthy people in Strauss's circles of antisemitic high society.

The most shocking aspect of Strauss's choice to operatize *Salome* is, of course, *Salome* herself. A manipulative, sexually-charged, strong-willed, outspoken, independent, violent and noble (i.e. superior) Jewish woman as the topic and focus of a one-act opera without either explicit or implicit moralistic messages at the beginning of the twentieth-century in Germany was an obviously risky decision. Her ethnic background does not seem to surface in her thematic material, but an intricate list of Salome's other attributes manifest in her ever-changing music, and that characteristic of musical instability is ultimately what makes her hysterical and histrionic character so successful.

As Wagner would signify characters by leitmotif, Strauss assigned individual key centers to both Salome and Jochanaan. Throughout the opera Salome's character is associated with C sharp major, as Lawrence Kramer points out "a tonal level she chooses for herself in response to the sound of Jochanaan's voice,"[5] at **R**85. Jochanaan is associated with the key of C major, entering and departing the opera in that key. Kramer theorizes:

"The polarisation of these two keys is dramatically effective... and its meaning is unmistakable. As 'music in [Salome's] ear', the key of Jochanaan's voice is raised by a

[5] Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 157.

semitone: turned the wrong way, the Latin for which is *perversus*. Strauss interprets Salome not as a character but as something more tractable: a trope for accursed Beauty. His Salome is not merely perverted; she is Perversion."[5]

C-sharp major overpowers C major throughout the characters' interaction. C-sharp major lies directly on top of C major, and therefore on top of Jochanaan. Salome's dominance is at once introduced simultaneously with her own introduction. Her intentions and her character are inseparable, made clear by Strauss from the beginning.

Unlike Wagner's use of leitmotif in which merely a mention of a character or force would trigger the statement of a motif, Strauss composes Salome's leitmotif to occur not in conjunction with her first appearance, but after Jochanaan has been brought to the cistern. Her motif appears as she reacts to his incessant prophesying, and more importantly, his eyes: *Er ist schrecklich* (He is terrible). The leitmotif is a descending arpeggiated second inversion triad, more often major than minor, and creates a sort of unfinished restlessness, ending on the fifth of the chord. "Distilling melodic motion to the most expectant and abbreviated of half cadences, the motive makes a strong impression of incompleteness and immediate demand."[6] This motif appears throughout the rest of the opera defining specific emotional turns and progressions in Salome's character development. The most striking and obvious is during the Dance of the Seven Veils, when in the eighth measure after **R** her leitmotif shifts the frantic, densely orchestrated *fortissimo* climax (albeit feigned climax), from E minor to the calm and *pianissimo* C major. It is in C major, the realm below and

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[5] Lawrence Kramer, "Culture and Musical Hermeneutics: The Salome Complex," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2, no. 3 (1990): 284.
[6] Ibid., 285.

dominated by Salome, that we hear a glimpse of joy, of resolve and stability; the willingness to stay comfortably in one key and revel in a lyrical, song-like idyll. The same key and lyrical melody are used when Salome sings at the end of the opera, to the disembodied head of Jochanaan: *Nichts in die Welt war so weiss wie dein Leib* (Nothing in the world was as white as your body).

Salome's assuredness of her possession of Jochanaan is derailed by a move to A minor. Similar harmonic progressions appear later in the opera while Salome is serenading Jochanaan's severed head: "And the secret of love is greater than the secret of death." One polar progression, F major to C minor, underlies "is greater than the secret"; a second, framing progression, G major to E minor, sets the parallel texts "of love... of death." Richard Cohn's term "polar progression" comes from the observation that a median harmonic relationship with two different qualities (a major triad directly moving to a minor triad a major third away, or vice-versa) was used throughout the end of the nineteenth, and beginning of the twentieth-century, to express uncanny and often opposing concepts, not limited to the supernatural, the enigmatic, something paradoxical, light and dark, or life and death.

This principle of multiple meaning in music "refers to the fact that a chord can be heard as existing in more than one key, with different functions. A subset common to two different sets is termed an invariant. This invariant may exist in a different ordering or fulfill different functions in each set in which it occurs."[7] In Salome Strauss found fertile ground to explore this principle of multiple meanings, simultaneously crossing into psychological, social, and political realms, while pushing the already rapidly expanding boundaries of musical vocabulary and subject matter in major theaters and concert halls.

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[7] Ian Bent. *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 214.

"In his *Handbuch zur Harmonielehre* of 1802, Georg Vogler defined the term *Mehergeutigkeit* (Multiple Meaning) in the following manner:

'In the language of music just as in rhetoric, cases present themselves in which one can attribute several meanings to one idea. The doctrine of Multiple Meaning determines once and for all, all possible cases in which either the same harmonies strike the ear as different, or different harmonies strike it as the same.'"[8]

Cohn also associates this harmonic "polar progression" with compositions written particularly in the Freudian Age. This brings an additional level of significance to Strauss's use of this particular progression not only for the enigmatic and opposing concepts of which Salome sings ("greater than the secret", "of love... of death"), but also because it functions as a revealing glimpse into Salome's character. "At the time of Salome's composition, Freud held that hysteria... resulted in split consciousness."[9] Obviously Salome is not of sound mind, and Strauss's use of the polar progression is a reinforcing musical trope functioning as a psychoanalytical observation of Salome herself.

At **R**322, the moment when Salome tells the head of Jochanaan "I will kiss it now", Strauss sets up a resolution on the dominant of G major, using an insistently repeating three-note gesture moving to a third above to emphasize her infallible

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[8] Ibid., 215

[9] Richard Cohn, "Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 2 (2004): 303.

intentions. For Salome this is the moment of consummation; she and Jochanaan are finally together now and her coital expectations follow. The aversion of G major, however, augments Salome's frustration. Since she is closer now than ever before to completing an action for which she has been waiting, Salome continues to aggressively press Jochanaan. She goes on to ask him why he refuses to look at her. "For nineteenth-century men, the sexual pleasure of looking, scopophilia, can plausibly be said to rival physical penetration as the chief means of satisfying sexual desire... Unpenetrated, the gazed-at female body is instead subjected to and by a 'penetrating' look: a sustained, transfixing look that, as Norman Bryson has suggested, renders whatever it sees a 'disposable termobject to be held in position, term of subservience, submission'."[10]

Read in this context, the sexually (re)frustrated Salome's expectation of finally being satisfied by her ideal, a character whom to Salome was, for the greater duration of the entire opera, either a voice or a disembodied head (never a physical phallus but more the idea of one), is diverted by Jochanaan's refusal (or more accurately at this point in the synopsis, inability) to 'perform'. His penetrating gaze is unattainable, and leaves Salome unsatisfied: "Your eyes that were so terrible, so full of rage, are shut now. Why are they closed? Open your eyes! **Lift up**(!) your eyelids, Jochanaan." Salome's reaction to Jochanaan's unsatisfactory performance is one of reproach, leading to her lengthy monologue on the (previous) beauty of Jochanaan.

The episode that follows is Strauss's musical depiction of Salome's final mental unraveling. The duality of her hysteria, her inner struggle and the unstable

[10] Kramer, "Culture and Musical Hermeneutics," 275.

teetering between (Jochanaan's) C major and (Salome's) C sharp major begins three measures after **R**329 with Salome exclaiming through a C major chord, to the head of Jochanaan, "*Nun wohl! Ich lebe noch*" ("Well! I am still alive"). She has tonally penetrated his world. The breakdown of a stable tonality begins with disturbing sexually violent penetrating chromaticism, repetitive stabbing sforzandos separated by rests, followed by dynamic swells leading up to Salome's declaration *Jochanaan, du warst schön* ("Jochanaan, you were beautiful"), intensified by a cadence on C sharp major. The familiar music from the C sharp major section of Salome's dance returns as she sings *Nichts in der Welt war so weiss wie dein Leib* ("Nothing in the world was so white as your body"). This is a clear connotation of sexuality as Strauss brings in the music previously used to underline Salome's seductive, sexually charged display of her own body to her father. A brief passing of C major occurs when Salome again utters "Jochanaan" four bars after **R**340, and just as at the end of the C-sharp major section of Salome's dance, here too, the music is diverted to A minor.

Kramer's idea of the scopophilistic is further supported at **R**342 as Salome sings, "... aber mich, mich , mich hast du nie gesehn. Hättest du mich gesehn, du hättest mich geliebt!" ("But me, me, me you never saw. If you had seen me you would have loved me"). Salome sings the same text again in **R**348, having slipped out of Jochanaan's C major and back into to her own domain of C-sharp major. **R**349 holds the aforementioned polar progression of G major to E minor, with Salome's text "…of love... of death."

R350 marks a kind of resolve for Salome, a melding of her tonal center (read: entire reality) with that of the disembodied Jochanaan. Her transformed C-sharp, now

minor, with Jochanaan's C, as she exclaims *Und das Geheimnis der Liebe is grosser als das Geheimnis des Todes…* ("And the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death…"). The music fades to a rhythmically idyll, sparsely orchestrated and dynamically distant C minor. Even Salome's ellipses add to her detached and wholly internal resolution to accept the reality of her loss.

This stunned and still C minor is underlined with *pianissimo* string tremolos and a tempo marking of *mässig bewegt* (moderately lively). Strauss's wit, irony and dark humor appear once again; the last time Strauss used 'C' string tremolos was at **R**329, when Salome exclaimed, "Well! I am still alive!" As a shocked court stands gazing in disbelief at the severity of Salome's mental and emotional disintegration, her father brands her a monster ("*Ungeheuer*!") and soon after orders her murdered.

Salome's speech is laconic and circular during the brief remainder of the opera, and most of her utterances are less songlike than they are constrained recitative, kept mostly within an interval of a fifth. She manages to call Jochanaan's name two more times, however, and in doing so eventually transports him to her nonexistent realm. She first sings his name in C-sharp minor, two measures before **R**356 (the key signature here indicates no sharps or flats). Her final mention of Jochanaan's name occurs one measure before **R**360 in C-sharp major (the key signature has changed to seven sharps three measures prior, at **R**359).

The opera rushes to finish with wild gestures, chromatic runs, tremolos, rhythmic excitement and markings of *fortissimo*. Though the implied harmony is C minor (there are E-flats in the penultimate measure of the opera), Strauss ends the piece with octave 'C's. The five measures before the final 'C' clearly outlines a C

minor tonality, and this C-minor passage is the same number of measures as the previously occurring C minor tonality at **R**350. The 'C' in the final measure is anything but traditional in such a convoluted context of shifting dualities and tonal and harmonic power struggles, suggesting a union in the afterlife of Salome and Jochanaan.

What kind of social commentaries and criticisms does Strauss make with this opera? The most obvious is Strauss's knowledge that sex sells, and controversy surrounding sex is even more profitable. Deeper still lie clear, derisive references to the Wilhemine court, beguiling taunts as regards to religion as a whole, and most importantly a kind of mirror pointed to the public. And it isn't only sex that Strauss was using to create controversy. In fact, sex during *fin-de-siecle* Vienna was a popular topic in art, coffee shops and conservatories. The bigger controversy, and the one in which Strauss was well aware, was to push to the forefront a woman, and a Jewish one at that. A shocking biblical story, rewritten by an openly gay Irishman (Strauss used the first German translation of Oscar Wilde's script almost verbatim for his opera), casting a Jewess into the limelight at a time when the focus on the worth of women was one of a purely sexual nature, and Nationalism was everything; this is real controversy. "Following the music, the unseen gaze of the audience re-enacts the drama of separation and empowerment, the triumph of masculine art over feminine style, of masculine culture over feminine nature. If Catherine Clément, in her provocative and problematic book on opera, is right to suggest that nineteenth-century opera thrives on the 'undoing' (*'défaite')* of women, then Strauss's monologue scene may tell us the reason why."[11]

[11] Ibid., 280.

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