

William Mann Richard Strauss: A Critical
Study of the Operas London Cassell 1904

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music critics of the day were hidebound academics, and devoted their notices to abuse.* The less unregenerate had to admit that nothing so exciting had occurred in opera since the première of Verdi's *Falstaff*, indeed since Wagner's last works were introduced to Dresden. One or two bluntly proclaimed the advent of a masterpiece, as Mahler did in a private letter to his wife after he saw it at Berlin in 1907. Breslau, where Wilde's play had its first success in 1901, was the second company to produce Strauss's *Salome*. Other towns followed without delay, fifty of them within two years. By 1911 it had been given in almost every country in Europe. Strauss first conducted it in the Austrian première at Graz on 16 May 1906; he also directed the Italian première at Turin. Four days later Toscanini followed suit at La Scala.

Schuch was luckier with the Dresden censor than some of his colleagues. Strauss, who had suffered enough from interfering quasi-moralists at the time of *Feuersnot*, took it for granted that he would have no trouble with *Salome*: first since Wilde's drama, as he reminded Schuch, was regularly given in the theatre; secondly since he had carefully removed all precise historical references. One of his expected obstacles, the Kaiser in Berlin (who was known to dislike Biblical subjects on stage), had actually suggested that Strauss should write an opera about Herod, and so had to show interest when Strauss confessed he was already doing so. But the Kaiser experienced new qualms when *Salome* came up for a Berlin première, and was only pacified by the promise that the Star of Bethlehem would be seen to twinkle on the backcloth at the end of the opera! This worked so effectively that Berlin notched up fifty performances in eleven months. Mahler in Vienna, where the première was to have been ready at the same time as in Dresden, was point-blank refused permission by the church; a guest production by the Breslau company was allowed, by some curious act of conscience-squaring, to be seen in Vienna at the German Volkstheater in May 1907, but the ban on home performance was only lifted in 1911, after Mahler's death alas. In New York two productions were quashed by influential private patrons. In London the Lord Chamberlain banned the opera in 1907, and four years later still insisted on modifications memorably recalled, in hilarious detail, by the conductor of this British première, Sir Thomas Beecham.† London critics quickly pointed out that Maud Allan had danced the story of *Salome* in unblushing detail, for Londoners—without interference from his Lordship.‡ Many critics, in many countries, echoed the Kaiser's remark

* Many are quoted verbatim in *Steinitzer* (Vol. 1, p. 259 ff.) and in *Gregor* (p. 76 ff.). It is curious to find that one major obstacle to acceptance was the use of a libretto in prose.

† *A Mingled Chime*, Chapter 21, p. 102 ff.

‡ Allan's *The Vision of Salome*, with music by Marcel Rémy (not Strauss, as is sometimes stated), was first performed in Vienna in 1904, then throughout the continent until in 1908 she reached the Palace Theatre, London, where her *Salome* ran for 250 consecutive performances. This ballet was based, it should be added, on Flaubert, not Wilde (see p. 60) though of course it included the famous head on a silver charger.

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SALOME

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Toscanini's feat, and the composer, who knew how difficult this score was, would not believe it."*

The Paris première took place in May, 1907, again under Strauss's direction. The opera was given six times, and Strauss, who cared about such things, was pleased to receive the Légion d'Honneur. Artur Rubinstein, then beginning his career, met Strauss in Paris. He remembers him as being alternately "sleepy and light-hearted." When somebody called *Salome* unique, Strauss replied, "I can fabricate another one in no time at all."

London had to wait until 1910. After the great success of *Elektra*, Sir Thomas Beecham determined to give the earlier work. He was stymied, as Wilde had been, by the Lord Chamberlain. Beecham tells the story with great gusto in his autobiography.† To the arguments he advanced that Strauss was the most famous "and in common opinion the greatest of living composers," and that this work deserved to be heard, and that at any rate being given in German it would be comprehended by few, the Lord Chamberlain replied that he agreed, if Beecham would consent to certain modifications of the text. What were they?

The first thing we did was to eliminate the name of John, who was to be called simply The Prophet; and having invested him with this desirable anonymity, we went on to deprive every passage between him and Salome of the slightest force or meaning. The mundane and commonplace passion of the precocious princess was refined into a desire on her part for spiritual guidance, and the celebrated line at the end of the drama, "If you had looked upon me you would have loved me," was transformed into "If you had looked upon me you would have blessed me." It is only fair to say that my collaborators in this joyous piece of nonsense were, in spite of their outward gravity, as exhilarated as myself; for we all of us alike felt that we were making a solemn sacrifice on the altar of an unknown but truly national god.

Furthermore, the severed head was to be eliminated and Salome was to be given a bloodstained sword. At this, the prima donna,

* Howard Taubman, *The Maestro: The Life of Arturo Toscanini*.

† *A Mingled Chime*.

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Aino Ackté,* a beautiful Finnish woman, protested, "objecting that the gruesome weapon would ruin her beautiful gown." They arrived at the compromise that Salome should have a large platter with a cover, "but that under no circumstances could any object, even the minutest, be placed beneath it, that might suggest by its bulging protuberance the presence of the precious head."

On the night of the performance the artists began by singing the deformed text. Then a curious change took place: ". . . gradually I sensed, by that telepathy which exists between the conductor of the orchestra and the artists on the stage, a growing restlessness and excitement of which the first manifestation was a slip on the part of Salome, who forgot two or three sentences of the bowdlerized version and lapsed into the viciousness of the lawful text. The infection spread among the other performers, and by the time the second half of the work was well under way, they were all living in and shamelessly restoring it to its integrity, as if no such things existed as British respectability and its legal custodians."

After the fall of the curtain, the party that had witnessed the performance from the Lord Chamberlain's box advanced on Beecham. His first impulse was to fly. To his astonishment, he heard effusive words of praise for the manner in which he and his colleagues had met and fulfilled their wishes. "To this day I do not know whether we owed this happy finishing touch to the imperfect diction of the singers, an ignorance of the language on the part of my co-editors of the text, or their diplomatic decision to put the best possible face on a dénouement that was beyond either their or my power to foresee and control."

Parenthetically, it may be mentioned that *Salome* was capable of creating another London furor much later, in the season of 1949-50, in a production created by Salvador Dali. His scenery and costumes were so scandalous that the affair led to the downfall of Peter Brook, who resigned under fire as the artistic director of Covent Garden.

* William Mann says in his book—*Richard Strauss: A Critical Study of the Operas*—that Strauss had an affair with her. I asked him where he got this information and he replied that a trustworthy acquaintance of Strauss told him and it was confirmed by one other person. Since I have been unable to find any documentary evidence I must consider the statement as gossip rather than fact.

George Mack,

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of a score. And yet, when credit is given to its extraordinary accomplishment, we are likely to judge *Salome*, in the cold light of day, as the nastiest opera in existence—much more unpleasant because, through its music, much more explicit than Wilde's drama.

Whatever possessed Strauss to choose such a subject? He has told us, with blindest *naïveté*, that he merely wanted to surpass the cheapjack pseudo-exoticism of existing operas with Oriental settings; 'they lacked the colour and the sunlight of the East'. He was drawn to the story of *Salome*, as artists have been for nineteen hundred years, by the brutal contrast of the young innocent girl and her power to order the murder of a holy man; the problems of guilt and responsibility; at its simplest level, the confrontation of life and death. Gustave Flaubert (whose short story on the subject was used as the basis of Massenet's opera *Hérodiade*, 1881) had suggested that Herodias's motive in ordering John's death was frustrated love—and in this version *Salome*, who is also in love with the Baptist, has no part in the execution, indeed stabs herself when she hears the news. Wilde simply carried this interpretation a step further, out of that fascination with Eastern ways of thought, and particularly Oriental cruelty, which was in the French cultural air at the time. Wilde may also have had a private interest in demonstrating what *he* regarded as sexual perversity.

For Strauss the stimulus was partly, no doubt, a provocative one—to make his listeners sit up and attune their ears to a new wave-length; provocation is part of the progressive artist's stock in trade. But, even more than this, *Salome* was a technical challenge to the composer who had been for more than a decade investigating the power of music to express verbal and psychological concepts with absolute precision: sheep, windmills, Don Quixote's hallucinations, the diatribes of music critics, the mercurial whims of a woman, the humdrum details of domestic life. His first two operas had not given him the opportunity to carry these investigations significantly further; they are less adventurous in language than the orchestral works written immediately before them. *Salome* gave Strauss every opportunity to demonstrate his thesis, expounded to Romain Rolland, apropos of literary censorship,* that 'in music one can say anything; people won't understand it'.

Strauss grasped these opportunities; *Salome* was the most adventurous of all his works to date, and today remains one of the great monuments of twentieth-century music. He himself was particularly proud of his 'shot-silk cadences' (as in Exs. 16 and 25). We may point with special interest to his introduction of the heckelphone into an orchestra; his highly individual usage of the E flat clarinet, particularly in high, tense trills; the extraordinary string effects (double bass glissandi, multiple harmonics,

* The censor in Berlin had attempted to ban *Die Walküre* because of the incest of Siegmund and Sieglinde; it was suggested that they should be declared cousins!