

*Virginia  
Opera*

*The Virginia Premiere*



**TRAGÖDIE IN GERMAN IN ONE ACT**

**Music By Richard Strauss**

Libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal after Sophocles's *Electra*  
Premiere: January 25, 1909, Königliches Opernhaus, Dresden

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## STORY OVERVIEW

In the courtyard of murdered King Agamemnon's palace in Mycenae, servant women ridicule Elektra, his haggard and ill-tempered daughter. Elektra has become consumed by her monomania: revenge against her mother, Klytämnestra, and her paramour, Aegisth, for their murder of her father, Agamemnon. Elektra, together with her sister, Chrysothemis, live in virtual imprisonment in the palace, surviving on hopes and expectations that their exiled brother, Orest, will return and avenge their father's murder.

Klytämnestra, seized with guilt, is prepared to make any sacrifice if the gods would free her from her plaguing nightmares: she confronts Elektra to seek her help, but Elektra advises her that there is but one sacrifice; her own death at the hands of kin.

Elektra and Chrysothemis receive false news that Orest is dead, shattering their dreams for revenge. In despair, Elektra pleads unsuccessfully with her sister to aid her in avenging their father's death; undaunted, Elektra decides that she alone will exact retribution.

Orest returns, at first in disguise, but afterwards reveals his identity to Elektra. Orest fulfills the deed: he slays Klytämnestra, and then Aegisth. Elektra celebrates her victory by erupting into a royal dance; afterwards, she falls lifeless to the ground.

## PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE OPERA

Elektra (Electra) Agamemnon's daughter	Soprano (Dramatic)
Chrysothemis, her sister	Soprano (Spinto)
Klytämnestra (Clytemnestra) their mother, Agamemnon's widow	Mezzo-soprano (Dramatic)
Aegisth (Aegistheus) Klytämnestra's paramour	Tenor (Helden)
Orest (Orestes) son of Klytämnestra and Agamemnon	Baritone (or Bass baritone)
Orest's Tutor (Guardian)	Bass
Klytämnestra's Confidante	Soprano
Klytämnestra's Trainbearer	Soprano
A Young and an Old Servant	Tenor, Bass
An Overseer	Soprano
Five Maidservants	Sopranos, Mezzo-sopranos

Men and serving women of the household

Time and Place: Ancient Mycenae. The courtyard of Agamemnon's palace.

(The ancient Greek names are Electra, Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Aegistheus. In the Strauss-Hofmannsthal cast list, those names in German are Elektra, Klytämnestra, Orest, and Aegisth.)

## DETAILED STORY NARRATIVE

### **SCENE 1:**

*A courtyard in Agamemnon's palace, the murdered King of Mycenae and the House of Atreus.*

Five of Queen Klytämnestra's maid-servants, watched by an overseer, draw water from a well at twilight, wondering aloud whether Elektra, Agamemnon's eldest daughter, will arrive as usual to wail for her dead father.

Elektra suddenly rushes into the courtyard, a ragged, unkempt creature, whose demeanor is anxious, hysterical, and raging: she sees the serving women and raises her arms instinctively as if to conceal and protect herself against a brutal assault from them. The orchestra resonates with themes associated with Elektra's inner turmoil: the ax falling, her self-protection, and her obsessive monomania for hatred and revenge.

Elektra's score is saturated with constant waves of deliberately ugly harmonies intended to convey a sense of nightmarish terror. The "Murder Chord" is initially an innocent third inversion of a seventh chord (D flat, F, A flat, C flat), but it is transformed into harmonic horror, a sense of murder in which a perfect fifth lower than its normal bass; an E natural, is added.

Klytämnestra's royal household, down to the humblest servant, hates, despises, and fears Elektra, believing that she is possessed by madness. Elektra continually reminds them that the blood of a murder haunts their palace, but anyone who dares to defend her is punished with a thrashing and imprisonment. Four of the maids gossip, gloating over Elektra's self-imposed depravity, standoffishness, and haughty contempt for them; they describe her as fearful and suspicious, like a vulture that claws at graves or a wild beast that should be caged.

Trembling, the fifth and youngest servant defends Elektra, protesting that she is of noble birth, a victim of evil injustice, and that the women are insensitive to her suffering. The outraged overseer removes the servant and savagely flogs her.

### **SCENE 2: Elektra alone**

After the servants depart, Elektra reemerges. Distraught and in great pain, she begins her great monologue, invoking her murdered father and his children's revenge. Elektra describes in vivid detail Agamemnon's gruesome murder by his wife, Klytämnestra, and her paramour, Aegisth: they struck him with an axe while he was naked in his bath.

Intoxicated by her monomania for revenge, Elektra calls for the spirit of Agamemnon to reveal himself and become his own avenger: "Father, do not leave me alone! Show yourself to your child as you did yesterday, like a shadow in the recess of the wall!.....with eyes wide open, glaring at the house, with slow relentless steps and vengeful eyes."

Elektra describes how Agamemnon's spirit urged his children to unite and exact a bloody vengeance on his murderers. The bond of love between Agamemnon's children, Elektra, Chrysothemis, and Orest, resounds ecstatically through the orchestra.

Elektra envisions the triumphant day of Agamemnon's children's revenge; when his children will honor their father by slaying the royal horses and hounds, and consecrate their victory with a royal dance at his tomb: "I will dance in triumph."

### ***SCENE 3: Elektra and Chrysothemis***

Elektra's savage dream of triumph and revenge is interrupted by the sudden appearance of her younger sister, Chrysothemis. The sisters confront each other; it is a contrast between human and demonic motivations in which Chrysothemis is weakened by love, and Elektra is strengthened by hatred and revenge.

Chrysothemis expresses her tearful despair and warns her sister that Queen Klytämnestra and Aegisth plan to punish her with imprisonment in a dark tower. Elektra scorns her sister's fears and weakness, tries to infect her with hatred, and reiterates their sacred duty to exact revenge against their evil mother and her wicked consort.

But Chrysothemis is unable to cope with their life of torment and confinement in the palace. She has become driven to virtual madness, demented by fear, and can no longer endure their futile vigil of anxiously awaiting their brother's return to exact revenge. She shrinks from violence and wants to escape from their misery, yearning to live a normal life of marriage and children; she passionately proclaims her yearning for love and a decent life, *Ich hab's wie Feuer in der Brust*, "There is a burning fire in my breast," and concludes with a climactic plea to Elektra, "Let me bear children."

The sound of a crowd is heard approaching: it is Queen Klytämnestra and her entourage: priestly slaughterers crack whips at the stumbling and shrieking cattle that are being prepared for a ritual sacrifice to appease the gods whom she believes have caused her anxiety.

Chrysothemis informs Elektra that Klytämnestra dreamed that Orest returned and pursued her to avenge Agamemnon's murder: she awakened trembling and screaming in fright and fear. Her anxiety has transformed into violence and terror, and Elektra should beware of crossing her path. But Elektra remains stoical, and with deadly determination, advises her sister that she is especially desirous of facing her mother today. Chrysothemis, aghast and filled with fright, rushes away.

### ***SCENE 4: Elektra and Klytämnestra***

Klytämnestra appears before Elektra, her tunic held by a Trainbearer as she leans on her Confidante. She is a horrible spectacle: her face appears sallow and bloated, ever more pale in the lurid glow of the torches and the starkness of her brightly colored robe; she wears talismans to ward off evil, is bedecked with gleaming bracelets and rings, and her cane is encrusted with jewels and precious stones. Her eyelids appear unnaturally large, but she has difficulty keeping them open. Klytämnestra conveys the image of a woman disfigured by debauchery: a terrifying woman whose mind is tortured and ravaged by guilt.

Although Klytämnestra staggers with pomposity and arrogance, she trembles with anger at the sight of Elektra, reproaching the gods for punishing her with such a wretched daughter whom she cannot endure to touch but cannot bring herself to annihilate. Elektra, seething with hatred, mocks her mother's invocation of the gods to placate her anxieties, reminding her sarcastically: "Why blame the gods? Are you not a goddess yourself?"

Klytämnestra chooses to disregard Elektra's scorn; on the contrary, she has come to meet her daughter with a purpose and announces to her entourage that she wishes to be alone with her: she dismisses both her Confidante and Trainbearer, both of whom depart reluctantly.

Passionately, Klytämnestra confides in Elektra, suspecting that her resentful and rebellious child possesses clairvoyant powers that can remedy and dispel her torment: her sleepless nights, her monstrous and hideous nightmares when she does sleep, and the evil demons that terrify and haunt her.

She claims that she is not ill, yet she senses that she is afflicted and disintegrating. Desperately, she reveals that she has become paralyzed by hallucinations and evil spirits, and vows to find the proper

sacrifice to the gods; she is prepared to slay any living creature in order to dispel her torment and exorcise her demons. Can Elektra propose a sacrifice?

Elektra replies in riddles, assuring her mother that once the sacrificial offering has been made, Klytämnestra's nightmares will end. Elektra announces that the sacrifice must be human, and that the chosen victim will be a woman, neither servant, child, nor maiden, but a wife: the sacrificial blood will be made to flow by an avenger who is both stranger and kinsman.

Elektra's riddle confounds Klytämnestra who becomes impatient, agitated, and demands more straightforward answers. But Elektra frustrates Klytämnestra by changing the subject, posing a sensitive question that her mother does not grasp initially: "When will Orest be allowed to return?" Klytämnestra trembles, warning Elektra that she has forbidden Orest's name to be mentioned and reveals that Orest has become weak-minded, stammers, lives with dogs, and can no longer distinguish between man and beast. She claims that she has sent gold to those who safeguard him, ensuring that he is treated befitting a king's son. But Elektra contradicts her mother and accuses her of lying, claiming that her offer of gold was a reward for his death, because she fears he will return to avenge his father's murder. Klytämnestra refutes Elektra, proudly boasting that she has no fear of Orest, and is utterly confident in the protection of her guards and servants.

Klytämnestra returns to her obsession, commanding Elektra to reveal who must be sacrificed to placate the gods, and threatening Elektra with prison and starvation if she does not reveal her secret. Klytämnestra, like her daughter, expresses her monomania: her determination to know whose blood must flow in order that she may exorcise her demons.

Elektra forgoes her ironic pretence, unmasks herself, and explodes into a wild frenzy: she has manipulated her prey, finds her adequately vulnerable, and is now bloodthirsty for victory. She reveals to Klytämnestra whose blood must indeed flow: it will be the blood from Klytämnestra's throat when the avenger captures her. With savage glee and gruesome and vivid imagery, Elektra describes the avenging hunter stalking the corridors of the palace and creeping up to the sleeping Klytämnestra; he seizes her throat, but she screams and flees. Elektra then joins the avenger and they pursue her, eventually cornering her and taunting her about the horror of her certain doom. In the shadow, the apparition of Agamemnon blesses their deed, and the executed Klytämnestra will fall at his feet, the wretched woman's blood flowing from her neck. The avenger will be Orest, wielding the sacred axe against the desecrated woman and her paramour: all will rejoice because Klytämnestra will be the sacrifice to the gods; Klytämnestra's nightmares will end, Elektra will dream no more of revenge, and those who survive shall "know the joy of life."

Elektra stands defiantly before Klytämnestra who shivers and cowers in fear. As she reels back speechless, they gaze at each other, both seething with intense passions of anger and hatred.

Klytämnestra's Confidante hastens in to whisper something into her mistress's ear. Suddenly, the Queen begins to relax, a smirk and evil expression of triumph replacing her anguish. She asks her Confidante to repeat the secret news to her, and then her terror transforms into hysterical joy and relief as she gallantly extends her hand to Elektra in a menacing gesture, and then sweeps away to enter the palace.

### ***SCENE 5: Elektra and Chrysothemis***

Elektra remains mystified, wondering what news brought her mother such sudden pleasure. Suddenly Chrysothemis rushes toward Elektra, screaming and crying in despair: *Orest ist tot!* "Orest is dead!" Elektra is seized with denial, orders Chrysothemis to be silent, and is convinced that the news must be untrue.

Chrysothemis reveals that two strangers arrived at the palace bearing news that Orest was killed in a chariot race, trampled by his own horses. Suddenly, a slave rushes into the courtyard and calls for a swift horse: he has been ordered to bring the news of Orest's death to Aegisth who hunts in the country.

Elektra is torn between disbelief and despair, her long-nurtured hopes for revenge now destroyed. Mournfully, she realizes that if Agamemnon's death is to be avenged, she and her sister must fulfill the matricide themselves. Elektra frightens Chrysothemis, who shrinks from her in horror after she reveals that she hid the axe for the day when Orest returned to avenge their father's murderers. She urges Chrysothemis to join her: both will wield the axe this very night while the Queen and her paramour are asleep.

Elektra complains that she does not have the strength to fulfill the double deed alone, weakened by her long suffering. She cajoles and begs her sister to enlist her help, telling her that she is young, robust, and full of strength and vigor: "Your virgin nights have made you strong." Elektra is undaunted, feverishly promising Chrysothemis that if she helps her, henceforth, she will be forever indebted to her and will become her slave; she will provide all of her future needs, and be a nursemaid to her child.

Chrysothemis reacts in shock and resists her sister's pleas, trying to dissuade Elektra from her obsession and urging her to escape and be free. But in her fear and fright, the weaker Chrysothemis cannot rise to Elektra's heights of fury. With a final cry of "I cannot!," she bolts away. Spurned and dejected, Elektra curses her with resolve; "I hate you!"

#### ***SCENE 6: Recognition scene, Elektra and Orest***

Elektra resolves to do the deed herself. Trembling, noisily, and untiringly, she begins to dig for the buried axe like a savage animal, but she stops when a mysterious stranger appears before her. The stranger watches her, notes her slovenly appearance, and assumes that she is one of the maidservants. He announces that he is a herald of woe who has come to personally deliver a message to the Queen: he bore witness to Orest's death, crushed by his own horses. Elektra becomes grief-stricken, unable to bear to think that this stranger lives, while her noble and beloved brother is dead, but she advises the stranger that the news will bring great joy in the palace.

Solemnly, the stranger announces that Orest was a noble man: he had loved life too much, and, therefore, angered the gods, who decreed his death. The stranger becomes moved by Elektra's profound anguish and passions of grief, and wonders whom this wretched woman can be who so deeply mourns the death of a member of the royal household. The stranger inquires if she might be kin of the dead Agamemnon and Orest, which prompts Elektra to reveal her identity: she is Elektra, Orest's sister. The stranger is shocked, unable to understand her wild and crazed condition. Softly, he whispers to her that Orest lives, and that he is safe and sound.

Suddenly, an old servant prostrates himself before the stranger and kisses his feet; others arrive and embrace his hands and his robe. Surprised, Elektra inquires who the stranger is, and he replies, "The dogs of the house recognized me, but not my own sister!" In an ecstatic moment of recognition, Elektra cries out "Orest!," and brother and sister embrace.

Elektra, drained by her madness, relinquishes all of her savagery as she pours out her joy, relief, and love for her brother. She excuses her abject condition, explaining that she was once the beautiful daughter of a mighty king, but she sacrificed her soul in homage to her father and her obsession for revenge; but all of her suffering was not in vain, because Orest has finally returned. Orest promises to fulfill his duty to avenge Agamemnon's death, and Elektra, relieved of tension and celebrating the bliss of reunion, praises him and blesses his noble purpose.

Suddenly, Orest's tutor-companion interrupts him, advising him that he must appear before the Queen, and reminding him that silence and cunning are necessary if they are to succeed in their task.

## *SCENE 7:*

A servant with a torch appears and gestures that the two strangers follow her into the palace.

Alone, Elektra paces the courtyard in wild anxiety and becomes petrified when she realizes that she has forgotten to give Orest the axe. But from within, Klytämnestra is heard shrieking and Elektra cries out demonically, "Strike again!" The courtyard fills Chrysothemis and hysterical and frightened serving women who have heard Klytämnestra's death cries, but they scatter as Aegisth returns from the hunt. Aegisth inquires about the strangers who came with news of Orest's death, and Elektra replies that they are in the palace where they have received a friendly welcome.

Aegisth strolls confidently towards the palace entrance and calls for attendants to light his way. With irony, Elektra disconcerts him and waves a torch, dancing around him with derisive zeal, bowing to him, and enveloping him seductively. She lures him to enter the palace by announcing that the strangers who came with news of Orest's death are inside, expressing their joy to the friendly hostess.

Aegisth enters the palace, and seconds later appears at a window, covered with blood, and calling for help while in the clutches of his murderers: "Does no one hear me?" Elektra responds, shouting in triumph and with maddening excitement: "Agamemnon hears you!" Aegisth is killed.

Chrysothemis and the women reappear to announce that Orest has slain Aegisth and Klytämnestra, and that all those faithful to Agamemnon are fighting to the death with Aegisth's soldiers and slaves. In the palace, there is noise and tumult, and distant cries of "Orest!" joyously celebrate the defeat of the traitors; Elektra exults in the sounds of slaughter, the defeat of the traitors.

Chrysothemis acknowledges the grace and goodness of their gods because new life has returned. She urges Elektra to enter the palace where Orest is being honored, but Elektra, overcome by the ecstasy of her great moment of triumph, decides that she must lead a dance of victory. Chrysothemis enters the palace to join Orest.

Elektra becomes intoxicated by her triumph, exulting that she has been the instrument through which the gods have wrought their tardy justice. She erupts into her dance with unrestrained emotion and rapture, but her mind has shattered, crushed by her own demons; she is no longer conscious of her surroundings, and her dance become neurotically impassioned as if in a trauma.

Chrysothemis returns and shrinks away in terror as she witnesses Elektra at the climax of her dance; the celebration of the triumph of her will. Elektra bids that all be silent and join her, but in shock, they watch in horror. She continues her dance, her motions awkward and haunting. Suddenly, she collapses, falling lifeless to the ground.

Chrysothemis rushes to the palace and pounds on the locked door, crying vainly for Orest. The orchestra thunders the theme of "Agamemnon!"



## Meet the Composer: Richard Strauss

Richard Strauss (1864 – 1949) became the foremost post-Wagnerian German composer during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His fame was attributed to his genius as a composer of opera, lieder (or art songs), and symphonic tone poems. Strauss's musical style was distinctly different from the hyper-Romanticism of his predecessor, Richard Wagner: his musical Expressionism was unique, individual, and possessed an independent musical signature.

Strauss was born and educated in Munich, the son of Franz Strauss, recognized at the time as Germany's leading French horn virtuoso. From the age of 4, the young Richard devoted all of his energies to music: by age 18 his musical output had already become prodigious, and he had composed more than 140 works that included lieder, chamber, and orchestral pieces. Those early compositions were strongly influenced by his father: they were classical and rigidly formal in structure.

In 1884, at the age of 20, Strauss was commissioned by Hans von Bülow to compose the *Suite for 13 Winds* for the Meiningen orchestra: the young composer conducted the work's premiere, which led to his appointment as assistant conductor of the orchestra, and henceforth, he became eminent throughout Europe as both composer and conductor. Strauss proceeded to conduct major orchestras in both Germany and Austria, achieving praise for his interpretations of Mozart and Wagner, which eventually led to his appointment as director of the Royal Court Opera in Berlin (1898-1919) and musical co-director of the Vienna State Opera (1919-1924).

Strauss's musical compositions fall into three distinct periods. His first period (1880-87) includes a *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1883), the *Burleske* for piano and orchestra (1885), and the symphonic fantasy, *Aus Italien* (1887), "From Italy," the latter heavily influenced by the styles of Liszt and Wagner; in Strauss's early compositions, he expressed his admiration for Wagner in secret so as not to affront the elder Strauss who detested Wagner both musically and personally.

In Strauss's second creative period (1887-1904), his unique musical style burst forth, in particular, his unprecedented mastery of orchestration. Like Franz Liszt, Strauss abandoned classical forms in order to express his musical ideas in the programmatic symphonic tone poem, an orchestral medium that was totally free from the restrictive forms of classical styles. Strauss perfected the tone poem genre, imbuing it with profound drama that he achieved through the recurrence and interweaving of leitmotif themes, and the exploitation of the expressive power of a huge orchestra, the latter saturated with impassioned melodiousness, descriptive instrumentation, and harmonic richness.

Strauss's symphonic poems dominated his musical output during his second creative period: *Don Juan* (1889), *Macbeth* (1890), *Tod und Verklärung*, "Death and Transfiguration," (1890), *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*, "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks," (1895), *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," (1896), *Don Quixote* (1897), and *Ein Heldenleben*, "A Hero's Life," (1898), the latter portraying Strauss himself as the hero who was battling his adversarial critics. In 1903, he composed the *Symphonia Domestica* for a huge orchestra, its programmatic theme described a full day in the Strauss family's household, a portrait that included duties tending to the children, marital quarrels, and even the intimacy of the bedroom.

Strauss endowed the tone poem form with a new vision and a new language through innovative harmonies and sophisticated instrumentation that vastly expanded the expressive possibilities of the modern symphony orchestra; nevertheless, his textures were always refined and possessed an almost chamber-music delicacy. His Expressionism is magnificently demonstrated in works such as *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* in which instrumental colors depict the 14<sup>th</sup> century rogue's adventures amid the sounds of pots and pans, and the hero's murmurs as he goes to the gallows: in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, ostensibly a homage to Nietzsche, the essences of man and nature are brilliantly contrasted

through varying tonalities; and in *Don Quixote*, the music magically captures images of sheep, windmills, and flying horses.

In Strauss's third period (1904-49), he became the foremost opera composer in the world. Earlier, he had composed his first opera, *Guntram* (1894), but it was a failure, considered a slavish imitation of Wagner. Likewise, his second opera, *Feuersnot* (1902), "Fire-Famine," was a satirical comic opera about small town prudery and hypocrisy that was also poorly received. Strauss was not yet in full command of his operatic powers.

In 1905, Strauss emerged into operatic greatness with *Salome*, a blasphemous, scandalous, explosive, and unprecedented "shocker" that portrayed female erotic obsessions. *Salome* immediately became a major triumph, although notable exceptions were in Vienna where the powerful prelates forbade Gustav Mahler to stage it, and at the New York Metropolitan Opera House, where it was canceled because of its scandalous subject matter. Strauss followed with *Elektra* (1909), his first collaboration with the Austrian poet and dramatist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Elektra*, like *Salome*, became another exploration into female fixations, in the latter, a monomania for revenge.

Both *Salome* and *Elektra* were composed for the opera stage as one-act operas; as such, they possess intense and concentrated musical drama. Strauss, a contemporary of Zola, Ibsen, Wilde, and the *fin du siècle* malaise, demonstrated in these operas his mastery at conveying psychological shock and intense emotion through the power of his music. He was a musical dramatist *par excellence* – as well as a musical psychologist – who was most comfortable with emotionally complex and supercharged characters: *Salome*, *Elektra*, and later, the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911). Both *Salome* and *Elektra* contain furious explosions of human emotion, pathological passion, perversity, horror, terror, and madness: nevertheless, both operas profoundly reflect the new discoveries in psychiatry that were evolving during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal eventually exercised a profound influence on Strauss: they collaborated on six operas, all of which considered Strauss's finest works. After *Elektra*, Strauss abandoned the violence and psychological realism of "shock" opera and composed *Der Rosenkavalier*, a "comedy in music" set in 18<sup>th</sup> century Vienna; a sentimental story evoking tenderness, nostalgia, romance, and humor, that is accented by the sentimentality of its anachronistic waltzes.

With Hofmannsthal, Strauss composed *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912, revised 1916), a play-within-a-play that blends *commedia dell'arte* satire with classical tragedy, but combines the delicacy of Mozart with overtones of Wagnerian heroism: the philosophical *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), "The Woman without a Shadow," a symbolic and deeply psychological fairy tale in which the spiritual and real worlds collide; *Intermezzo* (1924), a thinly disguised Strauss with his wife, Pauline, in a "domestic comedy" involving misunderstandings emanating from a misdirected love letter from an unknown female admirer; *Die ägyptische Helena* (1928), "The Egyptian Helen," based on an episode from Homer's *Odyssey*; and Strauss's final collaboration with Hofmannsthal, *Arabella* (1933), which returns to the ambience of *Der Rosenkavalier's* Vienna and amorous intrigues.

After Hofmannsthal's death, Strauss composed operas with other librettists, though never equaling his earlier successes: *Die Schweigsame Frau* (1935), "The Silent Woman," a delightful comedy written to a libretto by Stefan Zweig after Ben Jonson; *Friedenstag* (1938), "Peace Day"; *Daphne* (1938); *Midas* (1939); *Die Liebe der Danae*, "The Love of Danae" completed in 1940 but not staged until 1952; and his final opera, *Capriccio* (1942), an opera-about-an-opera described by its authors as "a conversation piece for music" in which the relative importance of opera's text and music is argued.

Strauss was most fertile in producing songs – *lieder* – some of the finest after those of Schumann and Brahms: among the most esteemed are *Zueignung*, "Dedication," (1882-83) and *Morgen*, "Morning," (1893-94). Other works include the ballet *Josephslegende*, "Legend of Joseph," (1914), *Eine Alpensinfonie*, "Alpine Symphony," (1915), and *Vier Letzte Lieder*, "Four Last Songs" (1948).

Strauss's musical style was daring, brilliant, ornate, and ostentatious; a post-Romantic bravura that thoroughly pleased audiences during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although the successes of *Salome* and *Elektra* earned him accolades as an avant-garde composer, after *Der Rosenkavalier*, he became more conservative and classical, unaffected by experiments in serial and atonal music that were dominating his contemporary musical world. The greater part of his career – the 38 years following *Der Rosenkavalier* – was spent polishing his unique style, striving for a perfect fusion between the distinctive refinement and delicacy of Mozart, and the profound poetic and dramatic expressiveness of the Romantics.

Strauss lived in Germany during the Nazi period: he was neither interested nor skilled in politics, and none of his operas – before or after the Nazis – contains a political subtext or underlying ideological message. In 1933, after the National Socialists came into power, Strauss at first closely identified closely with the new regime, unwittingly allowing himself to be used by them; from 1933 to 1935, he served as president of the Reichsmusikkammer, the state's music bureau. However, very soon thereafter, he came into conflict with government officials.

After Hofmannsthal's death in 1929, Strauss collaborated with the Jewish dramatist Stefan Zweig on the lighthearted comedy, *Die Schweigsame Frau*, "The Silent Woman," a relationship that became unacceptable and particularly embarrassing, if not scandalous to the Nazis. The Nazis eliminated Zweig's name as the librettist, citing the story as an adaptation "From the English of Ben Jonson." In an heroic protest and gesture of defiance, Strauss restored Zweig's name to the libretto with his own hand, nevertheless, in 1935, after 4 performances, *Die Schweigsame Frau* was banned: Strauss was forced to resign as president of the Reichsmusikkammer, and was compelled to work with a non-Jewish librettist, Joseph Gregor.

Above all else, Strauss was a family man who used every shred of his influence as Germany's greatest living composer to protect his Jewish daughter-in-law, Alice Grab, and his two grandchildren: Strauss seemingly collaborated with the Nazis by making an "arrangement"; he would not speak out against them, but they in turn, would leave his daughter-in-law and his two grandchildren alone.

Strauss was supposedly apolitical, claiming that art supersedes politics. He tried to ignore his perception of the Nazi's disgrace to German honor, but he did become the compliant artist who quickly usurped the music posts of emigrating Jewish artists such as Bruno Walter. In 1933, after Toscanini protested and withdrew from a *Parsifal* performance at Bayreuth, he later met Strauss in Milan and greeted him with a reproachful remark: "As a musician I take my hat off to you. As a man I put it on again." Nevertheless, Toscanini was not living in Germany, nor was he obliged to protect a Jewish daughter-in-law or Jewish grandchildren.

Life under the Nazis could not have been pleasant for Strauss: he was tolerated, but treated with contempt; at one point, an hysterical propaganda minister, Goebbels, forced him to relinquish his prized Garmisch villa and make it available for bomb victims. Strauss spent part of World War II in Vienna and in Switzerland where he was out of the limelight. After the war, an allied commission investigated him, and he was exonerated of any collaboration with the Nazis.

Strauss was no hero, nor was he a martyr. In historical hindsight, it would be presumptuous to stand in judgment of Strauss for his political silence. Strauss was another suffering artist, struggling for survival in a world that went mad: nevertheless, his less than heroic opposition to the Third Reich continues to shade perceptions of his works. In 1949, Strauss returned to Garmisch where he died three months after his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## MEET THE LIBRETTIST: HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 1874 – 1929, poet, playwright, and essayist, was born into an affluent and cultured Viennese family of Austrian, Italian, Swabian, and Jewish origins; he inherited a cosmopolitan spirit and a predilection for the arts.

By the age of 17, his lyric poetry and extraordinarily sensitive intelligence earned him recognition as a literary phenomenon, astonishing artistic circles in Vienna and throughout the German-speaking world; he had already written a copious outpouring of lyric poems that possessed a mature beauty and perfection of form.

By his mid-20s, Hofmannsthal's muse was in transition, provoking a crisis of intellect and sensibility: he rejected the aestheticism of his earlier poetry and began to explore new artistic forms of expression that would forge a connection between art and the human experience. Ironically, Hofmannsthal had developed a distrust of words and language as the sole bearers of emotional expression, and ultimately concluded that words by themselves were inadequate, isolated, disconnected, and insufficient to raise consciousness; he decided to abandon lyric poetry and turned his artistic insight toward theater.

Hofmannsthal envisioned the theatrical arts as a unity of expressive elements, by its nature, the most capable art form to emphasize ideas, attitudes, and sentiments: theater integrated acting, gesture, scenic design, music, and dance, and in its most ideal form, was a fusion of all the arts; an ideal wholeness represented by the sum of its parts. His conception of a unified theatrical art form was ostensibly broader in scope than Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a theory that Hofmannsthal deemed too heavily weighted toward music.

Hofmannsthal concluded that words performed through the integrated theatrical arts could express what language alone had exhausted, and, therefore, could possess a new power to stimulate thought and affect the entire range of human sensibilities. He had supreme faith in his ideals and proceeded to write robustly for the theater, much of his work reinterpreting traditional and mythological subjects, but endowing them with contemporary social, moral, and humanistic ideals.

Max Reinhardt, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century innovative stage and theater director of Berlin's Kleines Theater, experienced a huge success with Oscar Wilde's *Salome*; the play had been translated into German by Hedwig Lachmann, and featured Gertrude Eysoldt in the title role. Reinhardt recognized Hofmannsthal's extraordinary theatrical talents and commissioned him to write an adaptation of Sophocles's *Elektra*; Hofmannsthal completed the play in mid-1903, and it became the first significant materialization of his new artistic sea change: his search for a theatrical alternative to the poetic world of his youth.

Hofmannsthal, in discussing his theory about the inherent unity of the theatrical arts, commented: "In action, in deeds, the enigmas of language are resolved." In implementing his theories in *Elektra*, he reduced Sophocles's drama to its bare essentials, eliminating the stagnant elements of the Greek chorus altogether, as well as what he considered superfluities interfering with the main thrust of the drama. Ultimately, all the accoutrements of the theatrical stage became integrated with his text: gesture, body movement, sacrificial rituals, torch-bearing processions, and most importantly, dance; the idealistic whole indeed became the sum of its various artistic parts.

Nevertheless, Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* received much antagonistic criticism: it was considered a transgression against Sophocles that was saturated with excessive violence, and contained a distorted emphasis on hysteria and neuroticisms. As such, the critics claimed that he had reduced the drama to a reportage on the dysfunction of an abnormal and diseased family; that the character of Elektra was overburdened with revenge madness; that Chrysothemis was too possessed by denial and escape; and that Klytämnestra's paranoia and tortured conscience was too excessive.

But Hofmannsthal intentionally endowed Sophocles's classic drama with a modern, *fin de siècle*, Freudian treatment, distinctly separating it from the ancient world by removing its inherent conflicts and tensions between gods and mortals. Hofmannsthal's reinterpretation of Sophocles reflected the *zeitgeist* of his times, an era when Freud was revealing discoveries in the realm of traumas, dreams, fantasies, and the subconscious: his library included first editions of the Breuer and Freud *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), and Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), all obviously relevant to his conception of the *Elektra* drama.

Specifically, Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* treated the conflicts and tensions of Sophocles's drama in psychological terms, so that the drama's raw evil, dark hatreds, and violent passions of revenge are not ordained by the gods, chance, nor fate, but motivated by mysterious, subconscious forces deep within the human psyche. He admitted that his imagination was initially fired by Sophocles's description of Electra as a woman with a "tongue of fire." As a result, Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* is motivated by a psychological, hysterical monomania that transforms her into savagery: her revenge becomes an external manifestation of incomprehensible aspects of her dark subconscious; her mind becomes maddened and distorts her perceptions of love, alienation, jealousy, and sexuality.

In Sophocles, Clytemnestra prided her murder of Agamemnon as justifiable revenge for the sacrifice of her beloved daughter, Iphigenia, an element of the story omitted from Hofmannsthal's version. Therefore, in the Freudian sense, Hofmannsthal presents Clytemnestra as a classic psychological study of inner torment, neuroses, and trauma; she appears as a debauched, decadent despot eerily shrouded with talismans. She is saturated with guilt for her crime and unable to cope with her past deeds; by her own admission she has suppressed the murder and is only able to recall events before and after. The Confrontation scene between *Elektra* and *Klytämnestra* represents the centerpiece of Hofmannsthal's drama as well as Strauss's opera, the hollow-eyed murderess erupting into uncontrolled hysteria in her obsession to exorcise her haunting demons. Hofmannsthal clearly presented his characterizations of *Elektra* and *Klytämnestra* as if they were Freudian case studies.

## THE HISTORY AND STORY OF *ELECTRA*

Electra and the misfortunes of the House of Atreus, derive from Homer's celebrated classic, the *Iliad*. Afterwards, some 2500 years ago, the Greek classical dramatists, Aeschylus, Euripedes, and Sophocles, wrote their own versions of the tragedy.

In Homer, Atreus, King of Mycenae, had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus; it was Menelaus's wife, Helena, who was carried off by Paris, son of Priam, King of Troy, causing the Trojan War between Greece and Troy. Agamemnon, then ruler of the powerful ancient city of Mycenae and King of Argos, was chosen by the Greeks to lead the punitive war against Troy which lasted ten years. Unfavorable winds prevented his sailing because Artemis had become angry after Agamemnon killed one of her sacred bulls. But the goddess promised him that she would be placated and ensure his journey if he sacrificed his first-born daughter, Iphigenia. Believing that his cause was just and right, Agamemnon obeyed the gods and ritually slew his beloved daughter.

Agamemnon's wife, Queen Clytemnestra, became obsessed with revenge against her husband for sacrificing her favorite daughter and demanded justice and punishment. During Agamemnon's long absence, Clytemnestra took a lover, Aegistheus, a sworn enemy of Agamemnon, who craved revenge against the king because of injustices committed by the House of Atreus against his father.

When Agamemnon returned to Mycenae after his long absence in the Trojan wars, Clytemnestra, abetted by Aegisthus, slew him in his bath with an axe. Afterwards, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus ruled Mycenae with a reign of terror. They feared retribution from Clytemnestra's children, so her daughters, Electra and Chrysothemis, were kept in virtual poverty and imprisonment in the palace, and the son, Orestes, was exiled. But Orestes was rescued from death by a faithful slave, who placed him in safe keeping far from Mycenae.

As Electra grew to adulthood, she became consumed with revenge against Clytemnestra and Aegistheus. Finally, Orestes returned and fulfilled his filial duty and avenged his father's murder by killing Clytemnestra and Aegistheus. In the rapture of Electra's triumph, she danced in celebration, and then died.

Aeschylus, Euripedes, and Sophocles, each told this same fundamental story about violence and hateful revenge, but each used the tragedy as a forum to speculate about man's responsibility for his actions: Are there gods or providential powers controlling human actions? Or, are all human actions the result of fate or chance?

In Aeschylus's trilogy, the *Oresteia*, the central character is the son, Orestes, now grown into manhood and returning to claim his rightful kingdom. He recognizes his sister, Electra, among the serving women, and emboldened to justice, joins her in vengeance by killing his mother and her paramour. However, after the deed, Orestes becomes conflicted: he believes that he acted justly and according to the wishes of Apollo, the god of prophecy and reason, but he shatters under the emotional strain of his guilt, and imagines avenging gods pursuing him, because he caused family blood to spill. Eventually, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, rescues his soul and restores his sanity by removing evil from the world. In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the tragic conflict is resolved by the intervention of the god's higher truth: in this drama, the gods emerge as omnipotent powers that teach man true justice and prescribe the moral codes for human action.

Euripedes dramatized this pathological drama of obsessive revenge by shifting the sympathy away from the siblings, Orestes and Electra, and condemning the gods for allowing such incomprehensible and horrible acts to occur: the gods are deemed destructive and cause the tragedy by inflicting their capricious wills on defenseless man. Euripides viewed the gods with irony and ambivalence, concluding that if they existed at all they were impotent, merely representing a projection of fears and desires

evolving from humanity's collective unconscious or imagination. Euripides suggests that if indeed the gods existed, they were evil; and if the gods did not exist, man's destiny was ordained by mere chance.

Sophocles built upon Euripides's conception of random incidence, stressing that all human destiny resulted from uncontrollable fate. Sophocles made Electra the central character in his drama: a once beautiful young woman full of love and tenderness, who becomes transformed into savagery by her all-consuming obsession to avenge her father's murder. After Electra hears news that her brother is dead, unaware that it is false news spread by Orestes himself in order to gain access to the palace to fulfill the deed, she decides to fulfill the vengeance herself after trying unsuccessfully to enlist the help of her sister, Chrysothemis. While she frantically digs for the axe, a disguised stranger appears and presents her with an urn that supposedly contains Orestes's ashes. Moved by her grief, the stranger realizes that he has found his sister and reveals that he is her brother, Orestes: he immediately enters the palace and slays his mother, Clytemnestra, and her paramour, Aegisthus.

Sophocles stark drama portrays Electra incensed and driven into savagery by her monomania; nevertheless, he endows her with qualities of heroism and tragic endurance. Electra expresses an entire range of human emotions, alternating between passionate love for both her brother, sister, and father, cruel hatred of her mother, numb despair at the news of Orestes's death but joy when he indeed returns, and ecstasy when the avenging deed is fulfilled. Sophocles portrays Electra as mentally and emotionally distraught, incurably disturbed by her all-consuming monomania with her obsessive passions of hatred and revenge.

In Sophocles, the tragic events occur because of human moral weakness: the gods are nonexistent, indifferent, and distant; and therefore, without providential powers in the universe, man lives in dark ignorance and becomes a helpless pawn of incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces. Electra, not the gods, precipitates the ultimate horrifying tragedy: she is the unwitting victim not of the gods, but of natural forces of evil in the universe. However, in the end, virtue and justice seem to triumph: with the deaths of Electra, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus, harmony is restored because those fatal, evil forces have been removed, and the universe has been reconciled.

In antiquity, the natural sequel to the Electra tragedy was one in which Orestes paid the penalty for his offense against the moral law and was pursued by the Furies.

## THE HISTORY OF THE PRODUCTION

Strauss's *Elektra* was introduced in Dresden on January 25, 1909, and premières followed swiftly throughout the world; in Berlin, Vienna, and in Italian in Milan. Its premiere was not unsuccessful, but certainly not the triumph that *Salome* had experienced. In New York, *Elektra* was guilty by its association with the scandalous *Salome* that had been banned by the Metropolitan Opera in 1907: in 1910, *Elektra* was performed by Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company, inexplicably in French.

Indeed, *Elektra* made a forceful mark everywhere, by no means always favorable. Many found it repellent and irritating, gross, brutal, saturated with horrifying violence, and overweighted by its assaults on the human psyche with its all-pervasive hysteria and delirium. Paradoxically, some critics turned with nostalgia to *Salome*: the *Wiener Fremdenblatt* was prompted to cynically rephrase Narraboth's impassioned desire for Salome; *Wie schön war die Prinzessin Salome*, "How beautiful the Princess Salome is tonight." Strauss cynically replied to the accusations that his music was excessively ugly: "When a mother is slain on the stage, do they expect me to write a violin concerto?" Nevertheless, *Elektra* was inundated in controversy; a large consensus of critics and audiences considered Strauss's music ugly, violent, and possessed by a discord bordering on cacophony, while a small few considered it great music drama.

Strauss relied heavily on his unrivalled orchestral talents to narrate the drama, and his integration of symphonic motives added power, coherence, and monumental effects to the work. He scored *Elektra* for a Herculean, 115-piece orchestra, prompting the critic Carl Mennicke to comment, "His orchestra doth protest too much." Likewise, the gargantuan orchestra prompted humorous sketches that showed the audience squeezed into the pit while the orchestra occupied the auditorium; there were reports suggesting that Strauss intended to augment his next opera with four locomotives, ten jaguars, and several rhinoceroses; and it was alleged that at one performance a part of the orchestra played *Salome*, and another *Elektra*, but no one noticed the differences.

When *Elektra* made its Covent Garden premiere, a lively interchange was provoked between the noted critics Ernest Newman and George Bernard Shaw: Newman considered the Strauss-Hofmannsthal work an ugly perversion of Sophocles; Shaw noted that "Not even in the third scene of *Das Rheingold*, or in the Klingsor scenes in *Parsifal* is there such an atmosphere of malignant and cancerous evil as we get here. And that the power with which it is done is not the power of the evil itself, but of the passion that detests and must and finally can destroy that evil, is what makes the work great, and makes us rejoice in its horror."



## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ELEKTRA

Strauss called *Elektra* a *tragödie*, describing the work in the literal sense: a serious drama that typically portrays conflict between its protagonists against superior or opposing forces, and concludes in sorrow or disaster, ultimately provoking - and evoking - senses of pity or terror. *Elektra's* conclusion epitomizes that description of tragedy: passions explode as Orest leaves to commit matricide and murder while the exultant Elektra cries out from the shadows, "There are no gods!" And at the moment of the murderous retribution, she calls out with horrifying barbarity, "Strike again!", a savage and terrifying conclusion that evokes spine-tingling sensibilities of pity and terror.

Sophocles was called the "pure artist"; his tragic dramas portray the truthful and realistic state of the human experience. In Sophocles, man is free and possesses the power of will to resolve destructive and adverse afflictions. The gods, those rational forces in the universe, fail to intervene in human destiny and ultimately man falls victim to the irrepressible powers of chance that control his fate. Sophocles also emphasized the conflict between truth and ignorance by dramatizing human flaws and failures that result from deception, rumor, false optimism, hasty judgment, as well as madness. As such, Elektra is a quintessential Sophoclean tragic heroine: in her monomania and ultimate triumph of her will, she commits grave errors and precipitates her own ruin as well as the destruction of others.

The Strauss-Hofmannsthal *Elektra* brims with elements of Freudian psychology: in this drama the powers over human destiny dwell in the realm of the subconscious: irrational and incomprehensible forces that consume, possess, and drive Elektra to horrifying acts; there is no reason, but only emotion, imagination, and fantasy. In *Elektra*, Richard Strauss became Freud's musical successor, dramatizing the psychological aspects in his art form: the music drama portrays the mental, emotional, and physical souls of Elektra and Klytämnestra as they become transformed by forces overpowering the darkest niches of their subconscious.

Elektra has become haunted, seized, and possessed by her monomania to avenge Agamemnon's murder: his murder becomes the demon that haunts her soul, and she survives vicariously through the glory of his past, as well as the glory that avenging justice will bring to his children. As such, Strauss's Agamemnon leitmotif haunts the score like a grotesque nightmare; a powerful four-note phrase represents a majestic musical imprint of his name. The motive resounds as the very first notes of the opera like a passionate accusation: it is recalled as Elektra envisions her father's ghost urging her to avenge his murder; it echoes in all of Elektra's recollections of her father; and when the tragedy concludes, it shrieks with explosive menace. Agamemnon's theme represents the demon - the trauma - that is imbedded in Elektra's psyche: it is the musical incarnation of the psychological monomania that gnaws in Elektra's soul.

Likewise, Klytämnestra is haunted and tormented, a woman paranoid and overpowered by subconscious fears, guilt, and memories of the past. She is pursued by demons, hardly able to sleep, and when she sleeps, her dreams become horrifying nightmares. But it is Elektra's monomania that is the engine that drives the drama: the consummation of her *idée fixe* that has transformed her subconscious into an irrational and deranged obsession for revenge. And after retribution, she explodes into her final, hysterical victory dance; the triumph of her will, and the victory of the demons within her dark subconscious.

Strauss's musical language in *Elektra* probes deep into the psychological realms and subconscious of its characters. As such, *Elektra* possesses unprecedented musico-dramatic power that by the very nature of its story can often be horrifying and nerve-wracking: the soul of the vengeance-crazed Elektra, the description of the bloody axe-murder, or the paranoid Klytämnestra. But the drama's psychological aspects - its neuroses, trauma, and hysteria - all make their profound impact through Strauss's musical language, at times, music that possesses a nightmarish harmonic terror and frenzy.

## THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

*Elektra* is a music drama in one-act. It is a consummate operatic event that transcends its compact length: not only is it impossible to perceive of any other opera capable of sharing the same bill with *Elektra*, but the opera's breathless and powerful continuum of conflict and tension, precludes an intermission, or even a rest.

Seven scenes represent the essential dramatic components of *Elektra*:

- 1) The opening scene presents the maidservants in a screaming cacophony as they provide a vivid portrait of Elektra's wretched life;
- 2) Elektra, in her monologue, relates the lurid details of the murder of Agamemnon, and expresses her craving for vengeance;
- 3) Chrysothemis warns Elektra that Klytämnestra and Aegisth plan to imprison her, and confesses her desire to escape from their futile life pursuing revenge;
- 4) The Confrontation Scene between mother and daughter in which Elektra taunts Klytämnestra that her blood will be the sacrifice that will end her haunting nightmares;
- 5) A dialogue between Elektra and Chrysothemis in which Elektra, believing that Orest is dead, entreats her sister to join her and murder Klytämnestra and Aegisth;
- 6) The Recognition Scene in which Orest arrives, reveals himself, and then goes off to commit the murders;
- 7) The Final Scene in which Chrysothemis rejoices with the news that Agamemnon's death has been avenged, and Elektra dances in triumph, ultimately falling lifeless to the ground.

Strauss structured Elektra's rise and fall like a pyramid, a symmetrical harmonic design containing a unity of structure. The keys in the first 3 scenes ascend, reach their apogee in the climactic fourth scene (the Confrontation Scene between Elektra and Klytämnestra), and then descend almost to their beginning keys: its rigorous tonal symmetry parallels the conflicts and tensions of Hofmannsthal's original drama.

The opera opens with a deliberately ugly cacophony in which the maidservants shriek in reaction to Elektra's madness and demented condition. Immediately, leitmotifs race across the orchestra: themes identifying the axe that slew Agamemnon, Elektra's fear, self-protection, and her monomania of hatred and revenge that are juxtaposed on the "Murder Chord": "I am nourishing a vulture inside me." In her opening Monologue, *Allein! Weh, ganz allein!*, "Alone, alas, completely alone," Elektra is musically identified with a clear, simple, and precise leitmotif, but her motive gradually interweaves with the "Agamemnon" motive: the theme of Agamemnon's ghost, revenge, suggestions of the victory dance, and the falling axe with which Agamemnon was slain, the very axe that she has buried in the courtyard, preserved for her day of retribution.

When Elektra refers to her father "coming back to his child," the music possesses melodiousness, tenderness, and yearning, but when she refers to his murder, it becomes angrily dissonant: Strauss's harmonic portrayal of Elektra's transformation from innocence into a bloodthirsty instrument of

revenge. In Elektra's Monologue, Strauss, the musical dramatist, reveals Elektra's subconscious and the traumatic memories that terrorize her: the demons with which she is unable to cope, control, nor exorcise; that harmonically dissonant sounding "murder chord" that is illusively innocuous at first, continuously echo to emphasize the terror of Agamemnon's murder: what Elektra calls the "butchering."

Both musically and psychologically, the pivotal scene of the drama is Scene 4, the Confrontation Scene between Elektra and Klytämnestra; the mother's entrance is announced by savage, grotesque music signifying the sacrifice of animals to the gods that will placate the demons gnawing within her. A terrifying excitement pervades their dialogue as the gruesome intensity of their unabashed mutual hatred emerges to the surface, develops, and their quarrel ultimately explodes into violent and frenetic hysteria. Elektra is as much the embodiment of memory as she is the personification of revenge: to her thinking, her mother's crime was not just the deed, but that she has repressed that deed. In this bitter confrontation, Elektra becomes the self-appointed cure for her mother's nightmares: like an oracle, she predicts the end of Klytämnestra's torment with a gruesome description of her murder at the hands of her son, Orest; an ingenious manipulation of Klytämnestra's fears that compounds her desperation.

The Recognition Scene between Elektra and Orest is at first an explosion of ecstatic emotion and rapture, but it transforms into a rare and delicate moment in the score that possesses profound lyricism and melodic tenderness. Elektra has discovered her brother, her dreamed-of instrument for revenge, whom she believed lost forever, and Strauss's driving music acknowledges her relief, relaxing into tenderness to express Elektra's overwhelming joy: "Now everything is still." Elektra bears her soul to Orest, explaining that she has sacrificed her body and soul to avenge their father's murder: "When I rejoiced in my own body, do you think his sighs did not reach, his groans did not press up to my own bed?...he sent me hate, hollow-eyed hate as a bridegroom."

As Orest prepares to fulfill the sacred deed, Elektra blesses him: *Selig, wer ihn erkennt, selig, wer ihn berührt*, "Happy is the man who does this deed," a moment in which Strauss's music leaps into almost Wagnerian heroic splendor.

## THE MUSIC OF ELEKTRA

Strauss was a quintessential musical Expressionist, depicting in his music language subjective emotions, responses, and objects: his musical style became a perfect marriage with Hofmannsthal's new aesthetic of gesture. The score contains vivid musical images of action and movement: there are galloping horses describing the messenger en route to advise Aegisth about Orest's supposed death; there are images of the eerie glow of Klytämnestra's magic stones that are supposed to drive away her demons; the overseer's whip; animals screaming before their sacrifice; Klytämnestra's description of monsters crawling and gnawing within her psyche; and, of course, those horrifying images of the all-pervasive axe.

But amid the bleak, violent musical mountains of harsh harmonies in the score, its cascading blood and relentless psychic turmoil, Strauss's music occasionally flows like golden honey. Chrysothemis's music in the third scene is endowed with melodic loveliness, tenderness, and harmonic richness: her music soothes and catches one by surprise as it blossoms into a sustained lyricism, a momentary relief from the score's underlying musical horrors and doom. Her music portrays robust femininity, innocence, a desire for freedom, and dreams for a serene existence overpowered by love rather than hate: *Ich hab's wie Feuer in der Brust*, "I have a fire in my breast." Likewise, in Scene 5, there is unabashed lyricism when Elektra pleads with Chrysothemis to join her in revenge; in the Recognition Scene; and in Elektra's seductive waltz that urges Aegisth into the palace. These mellower sections of the score make the surrounding sounds of anxiety even more ferocious, so that musically, Strauss's *Elektra* becomes a marriage of harmonic and tonal horror and exceptionally beautiful lyricism.

Nevertheless, for this musical psychodrama, Strauss composed much of the opera's lurid music with the deliberate intention to convey shock, superhuman horror, nightmarish terror, and hysteria: for the most part, its music is savage and even approaches sadism; at times it provokes sensations that transcend the very limits of what human ears can endure; and at times completely engulfs singers and listeners alike. Most of *Elektra's* melodies are mounted upon simple harmonies, but they very quickly become immersed in discordant harmonies that possess a relentless lurid thrust. Strauss commented about *Elektra*, as well as *Salome*: "In them I penetrated to the uttermost limits of harmony, psychological polyphony (Klytämnestra's dream), and of the receptivity of modern ears."

The orchestra is the fundamental expressive vehicle that narrates and dramatizes this story. *Elektra* is not a Strauss tone poem that uses voice as an additional instrument, but rather, it is an opera - a music drama - with bloodthirsty and angry music that is supported by an explosive orchestral score. Musically and orchestrally, *Elektra* is a colossus, certainly a supreme challenge to a singing-actress who must appear in every scene except the very short introduction, and at the end of this dense and detailed score, must execute a grotesque dance of triumph. Elektra's final dance is one of the most remarkable musico-dramatic moments in the score, an intricate and masterful symphonic tour de force that recapitulates some of the most dramatic themes in the opera; a powerful conclusion that invokes its musico-dramatic catharsis.

In Strauss's earlier operas, *Guntram* and *Fuerrnnot*, his musical style emulated Wagner, and he dramatized themes of redemption and German folklore. With *Salome* and *Elektra*, Strauss broke with those conventions and established a new stylistic direction, embracing in his text and music the spirit of the *fin de siècle*. When Strauss composed *Salome* and *Elektra*, he was admittedly in his "tragic vein": these operas became seminal works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, powerful and graphic music dramas that focused on demonic themes of violence and psychological perversion.

Therefore, the immediate effect of *Elektra's* music is unbelievably shattering: no opera up to its time had probed such psychological depths, created such awesome and forceful musical climaxes, or exploited such a vast orchestra. In its time, *Elektra's* harmonies were unprecedented and daring, its

score ingeniously interwoven with fractured phrases, chromaticisms, brutal dissonance, as well as consonant Romantic harmonies. However, Strauss was not inclined nor predisposed to atonality, at the turn-of-the century, the avant garde, or music of the future. Though passages in *Elektra* approach Schoenberg's harmonic world of atonalism, what may seem atonal, or anti-tonal in *Elektra*, are dissonances intended to convey the exacerbated mental or spiritual condition of the characters, rather than make a statement for musical radicalism. Therefore, *Elektra's* seemingly atonal harmonic elements intentionally provide profound dramatic contrast, disorient, create discomfort, and convey violence: these harsh harmonic patterns and dynamics certainly irritated and unnerved early 20<sup>th</sup> century audiences who had become attuned to post-Romantic tonalities. Nevertheless, they appropriately served the underlying psychological essence of the drama.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF OPERA

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus* which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity for personal reflection. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods of development which produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Huguenots*) led the adaption by the French which ranged from *the opera comique* to the grand full scale *tragedie lyrique*. The Germans von Weber (*Freischutz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed tone poems. The English (*ballad opera*), Spanish (*zarzuela*) and Viennese (*operetta*) helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Samuel Barber, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas which have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

## THE OPERATIC VOICE

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices which can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique which allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra which accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of roles as diverse as Gilda in *Rigoletto* to *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b>SOPRANO</b>	Norina (Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (Boheme) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca Amelia (Ballo) Leonora (Trovatore)	Turandot Norma Donna Anna
<i>Mezzo Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber) Don Ottavio (Giovanni) Ferrando (Cosi)	Carmen Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne)	Azucena (Trovatore) Ulrica (Ballo) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber) Don Ottavio (Giovanni) Ferrando (Cosi)	Pang (Turandot) Rodolfo (Boheme) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber) Count Almavira (Marriage of Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Pasquale)	Ping (Turandot) Don Giovanni Sharpless (Butterfly)	<u>Verdi Baritone</u> Germont (Traviata) Di Luna (Trovatore) Rigoletto	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir)	Leporello (Giovanni) Colline (Boheme) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<u>Buffo Bass</u> Don Pasquale Don Alfonso (Cosi) Sacristan (Tosca)	<u>Basso Cantate</u> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

# OPERA PRODUCTION

Opera is created by the combination of a myriad of art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra which accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. These performances are further enhanced by wigs, costumes, sets, and specialized lighting all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto which contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the Composer and Librettist entrust their new work to a Conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assume responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The Conductor collaborates with a Stage Director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The Stage Director and Conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a Design Team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set Designers, Lighting Designers, Costume Designers, Wig and Makeup Designers and even Choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The Set Designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans in order to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the Set Designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage the Lighting Designer works with a team of electricians in order to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the Designer along with the Stage Director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the Costume Designer in consultation with the Stage Director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The Wig and Makeup Designer working with the Costume Designer designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance, which will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



## ***ELEKTRA* ESSAY QUESTIONS**

### English

1. The Greeks believed that plays should take place in “real time” and in one location. How does this version of *Elektra* follow the guidelines of the Greek style of playwriting and how does it go against the style as well?
2. What is some of the symbolism and foreshadowing found in *Elektra*?

### History

3. How does Elektra taking revenge for her father’s death rather than her brother Orest go against the views of Greek society?

### Psychology

4. What is the psychology of the Elektra Complex and how does it relate to the opera?

### Government

5. Ancient Greece was the birthplace of many important political ideas. What were some of the major political ideas developed in Ancient Greece? Are any of these ideas still used today.