

Salome

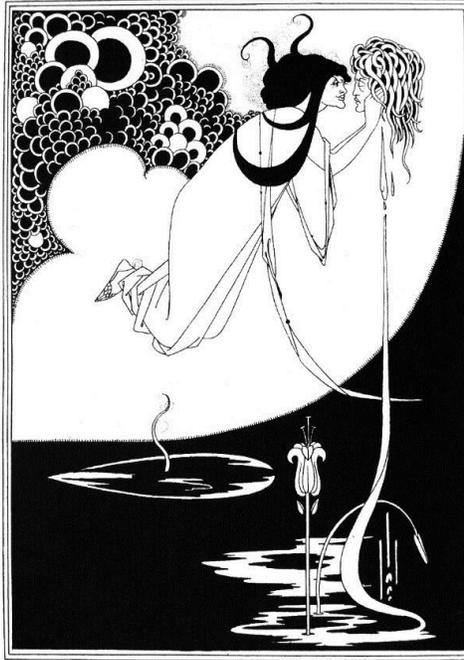
Music and Libretto by Richard Georg Strauss
Based on Hedwig Lachmann's German translation
of Oscar Wilde's stage poem by the same name

Study Guide to the Opera

While *Salome* could be considered a precursor to today's reality TV, and despite its shock value, the music takes the audience on a 90-minute emotional journey that prompts feelings of anger, disgust, and discomfort. But there is another way to view the young Salome; soprano Erika Sunnegardh, who portrayed Salome in Palm Beach Opera's production said, "For me it's always important to make it clear that this is not a born-evil child . . . she has been terribly damaged. She is the product of her environment. Her mother and stepfather are power-hungry, dysfunctional people, and it's likely Herod has been sexually abusing Salome for years."

Adding to this emotionally charged subject matter, Strauss created an exceptionally challenging soprano role: a singer must credibly portray a teen-aged girl, have the agility of a prima ballerina to keep the audience's attention through a 10-minute dance, and have a voice that can handle the intense vocal demands. It's not a role to be taken lightly, nor is it an opera the audience will forget. Let yourself go with the music and you be the judge of the character Salome.

Two drawings in the Art Nouveau/Aesthetic style by Aubrey Beardsley (1872 – 1898) for Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, which premiered in Paris in 1896. Left: "The Climax", Right: "Dancer's Reward"



Hell hath no Fury . . .

by Jill Leahy

In the history of opera, it isn't unusual to see storylines drawn from historical events, myths, fairy tales, and plays. While there have been operas that were based on stories from the Bible (*Nabucco* and *Samson and Delilah*), few have been as controversial as *Salome* by Richard Strauss. Dealing with themes of incest, psychosis, necrophilia, and murder, it's no wonder that from its premiere in Dresden on December 9, 1905, the opera created a sensation with opera audiences—it generated 38 curtain calls—but was disparaged by critics. In fact, censorship became the norm. In Vienna, Mahler tried to mount the opera but it was censored and not performed there until 1918. *Salome* premiered at the Met in New York in 1907 and closed after one performance, not to be heard in New York again until 1934.

Salome is a Greek form of an unrecorded Aramaic name that was related to the Hebrew word shalom, meaning peace.

Salome Synopsis

Setting: The Palace of Herod at *Tiberias*, Galilee (Judea), c. 30 A.D.

At King Herod's palace, the young captain Narraboth admires the beautiful princess Salome (**Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Nacht!**), who sits at the banquet table with her stepfather, Herod, and his court. A page warns Narraboth that something terrible might happen if he continues to stare at the princess, but Narraboth won't listen. The voice of Jochanaan is heard from the cistern, where he is kept prisoner, proclaiming the coming of the Messiah (**Nach mir wird Einer kommen**), and two soldiers comment on the prophet's kindness and Herod's fear of him.

Suddenly Salome appears, disgusted with Herod's advances toward her and bored by his guests (**Ich will nicht bleiben**). Jochanaan's voice is heard again, cursing the sinful life of Salome's mother, Herodias. Salome asks about the prophet. The soldiers refuse to allow her to speak with him, but Narraboth, unable to resist her, orders that Jochanaan be brought forth from the cistern. At first terrified by the sight of the holy man, Salome quickly becomes fascinated by his appearance, begging him to let her touch his hair, then his skin, and finally his lips. Jochanaan forcefully rejects her. Narraboth, who can't bear Salome's desire for another man, stabs himself. Salome, not noticing him and beside herself with excitement, continues to beg for Jochanaan's kiss. The prophet tells her to save herself by seeking Christ and retreats into the cistern, cursing Salome.

Herod appears from the palace, looking for the princess and commenting on the strange look of the moon (**Wo ist Salome?**). When he slips in Narraboth's blood, he suddenly panics and has hallucinations. Herodias angrily dismisses his fantasies and asks him to go back inside with her, but Herod's attentions are now focused on Salome. He offers her food and wine, but she rejects his advances. From the cistern, Jochanaan resumes his tirades against Herodias, who demands that Herod turn the prophet over to the Jews. Herod refuses, maintaining that Jochanaan is a holy man and has seen God. His words spark an argument among the Jews concerning the true nature of God (**Wahrhaftig, Herr, es wäre besser**), and two Nazarenes talk about the miracles of Jesus. As Jochanaan continues to accuse her, Herodias demands that he be silenced.

Herod asks Salome to dance for him. She refuses, but when he promises to give her anything she wants, she agrees once she has made him swear to keep his word. Ignoring her mother's pleas not to, Salome dances seductively, removing her clothes (**Salomes Tanz**). The delighted king wants to know what reward she would like, and she innocently asks for the head of Jochanaan on a silver platter. Horrified, the king refuses, while Herodias laughs approvingly at Salome's choice. Herod offers other rewards, but Salome insists and reminds Herod of his oath. The king finally gives in. As the executioner descends into the cistern, the princess anxiously and impatiently awaits her prize. When the prophet's head is brought to her, she passionately addresses Jochanaan as if he were still alive and finally kisses his lips (**Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund küssen lassen, Jokanaan!**). The terrified Herod, outraged and disgusted at Salome's behavior, orders the soldiers to kill her.

Characters

Salome

[ZAH-loh-may] *soprano*
Step-daughter (and niece) of Herod

Herod Antipas

[HEHR-od AHN-ti-pas] *tenor*
Tetrarch (King) of Judea

Herodias

[hair-ODE-ee-uhss] *mezzo-soprano*
Herod's wife and widow of Herod's brother

Jokanaan (Jochanaan)

[yoh-HAH-na-ahn] *baritone*
The prophet John the Baptist

Narraboth

[NAHR-rah-boat] *tenor*
Syrian Captain of the Guard who desires Salome

Herodias' Page *alto*
Five Jews *4 tenors, 1 bass*
Two Nazarenes *bass, tenor*
Two Soldiers *basses*
A Cappadocian *bass*
A Slave *soprano/tenor*

Royal Guests
(Egyptians, Romans) *mute*

Meet the Composer

by Jill Leahy



Engraved portrait of composer Richard Strauss by Ferdinand Schmutzer 1922

Richard Georg Strauss (June 11, 1864 – September 8, 1949) was born in Munich, the first child of the second marriage of Franz Joseph Strauss and his wife Josepha. The composer's father was a member of the Munich Court Opera from 1847 and considered one of the best French horn players of his time. Music was a way of life in his home so young Richard could read music before he could read or write words. Strauss started piano lessons at the age of four and composed his first music works by the age of six. While still a teenager, he wrote a symphony, a serenade for 13 wind instruments, and a violin concerto.

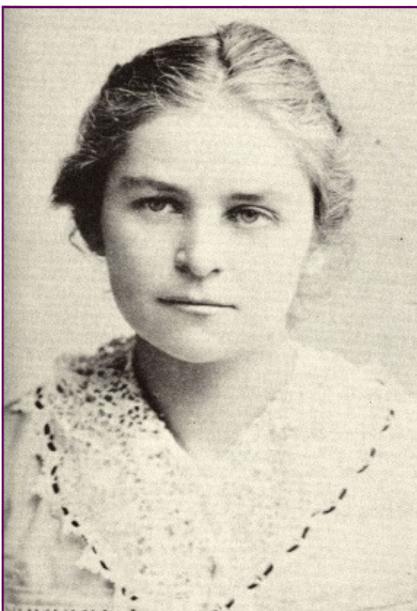
Continuing his musical development, Strauss made his professional conducting debut with his own *Serenade* in 1884 with Munich's Meiningen Orchestra under the tutelage of its chief conductor, Hans von Bülow. Strauss would himself become chief conductor and eventually move through a series of increasingly important conducting assignments. **Strauss's eminence as a conductor paralleled his rise as an orchestral and song composer**; he quickly became a major name in Germany's music

world. When he turned to composing music for the stage he had two early failures, but the premiere of *Salome* caused a sensation and launched the second part of his long career. Strauss created his own libretto on the work of author and poet Hedwig Lachmann, who based her German translation on Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, originally written in French. Strauss's other most well-known operas were based on "comic fantasy"—*Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and *Intermezzo*.

Richard Strauss "knew how to test the limits of an orchestra to their fullest, and shape its sound into something unbelievably delicate. His rules for conducting, written down in 1925, included instructions for the doubling of tempos where it hardly seemed possible and the careful muting of the winds and horns. He also gave one piece of obvious but oft-overlooked advice to conductors of his own work, which applied equally well, to any part of the repertory: *Above all, don't be dull.*"

<http://www.richardstrauss.at/biography.html>

Meet the Poet/Translator Whose Work Inspired Strauss



Hedwig Lachmann (1865 – 1918) was a German author, translator, and poet. Born in Stolp, Pomerania (a historic region between Germany and Poland), she was an excellent student with a propensity for language and poetry. At the age of 15, she passed exams to become a language teacher, and at 17 became a governess in England. She belonged to poetry societies, and in 1899 met her future husband, Gustav Landauer. It's interesting to note that one of their grandchildren was Mike Nichols, who grew up to be a well-known American stage and film director, known for *The Graduate*, *The Birdcage*, and *Closer*.

Lachmann translated many English, French, and Hungarian works into German and, according to historians, her translation of *Salome* is an improvement upon Oscar Wilde's original in French, and was the basis for the libretto written by Richard Strauss for his opera of the same name.

Meet the Playwright: Oscar Wilde



Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854 – 1900) was born in Dublin, Ireland to accomplished parents; his mother was a respected poet and translator, and his father was a knighted surgeon. As a student, Wilde excelled at the Greek and Roman classics, received prestigious scholarships to Trinity and Magdalen College, Oxford, and won prizes for poetry. Influenced by Oxford aestheticists

Walter Pater and John Ruskin, he became one of the key founders of the **aesthetic movement**, a theory of art and literature that emphasized the pursuit of beauty for its own sake, rather than promoting any political or social viewpoint.

After giving 140 lectures in America, he returned to London, married, fathered two sons, and published several collections of **children's stories and Irish folktales**. Wilde experienced the height of his writing career from 1890 to 1895, but it also marked the beginning of Wilde's ill-fated love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, which would soon prove to be his downfall. ***The Picture of Dorian Grey*** appeared in 1891, shocking the public with its homoeroticism. During the time that Wilde spent in France with members of the symbolist and decadent movements, he wrote his French short drama, ***Salomé*** (1891). Among the symbolists of late 1800s Paris, the legend of the princess who dances for the head of John the Baptist had experienced a massive revival in both the visual and literary arts. After an evening spent discussing the legend with fellow writers, Wilde drafted the bulk of the play in a single sitting. In a café later that night, Wilde asked the orchestra to help him by playing something that might conjure a "woman dancing in her bare feet in the blood of a man she has craved for and slain." Wilde published the play in French (because Britain's Lord Chamberlain forbade theatrical depiction of biblical figures), and never saw it produced in his lifetime. A string of hugely successful plays followed: ***Lady Windemere's Fan*** (1892), ***A Woman of No Importance*** (1893), ***An Ideal Husband*** (1895), and ***The Importance of Being Earnest*** (1895). Scandalous in their assault on Victorian mores, Wilde's new comedies of manners conquered the London stage.

Broken by public disgrace, Wilde spent his last years sick and poor, wandering Europe and sinking into drug addiction. He died of cerebral meningitis in Paris in 1900. Sadly, Wilde is best known for ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***, ***The Importance of Being Earnest***, as well as for his infamous arrest and imprisonment for being gay.

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