

Salome

Richard Strauss, 1864–1949, with libretto by the composer, based on the play by Oscar Wilde (1896)

Salome is not mentioned by name in the Bible, but Christian tradition from the early first century relates that the step-daughter of Herod danced for him and his wife, Herodias, at a birthday celebration for the tetrarch. New Testament accounts imply that she asked for the head of John the Baptist at the behest of her mother, who resented his preaching against her divorce and remarriage to Herod. The story was a popular subject for painters in the Renaissance, and in 1877 was the subject of the story “Herodias” by Flaubert, which in 1881 became the basis of the opera *Herodias* by Jules Massenet. In both of these, Salome’s mother was the instigator of the request for the head of the prophet. In Oscar Wilde’s play, 1896, (written in French because in Britain it was illegal to depict Biblical characters) Salome becomes the protagonist of the story, who punishes John the Baptist for refusing her sexual advances. Wilde included the famous Dance of the Seven Veils.

Marie Villich was the original Salome, but she balked at the dance. “I won’t do it, I’m a respectable woman.” (In many productions, the dance has been performed by a stand-in.) The opera shocked early audiences, but this did not prevent it from being a resounding success with the public, if not the critics. At the Dresden premiere in 1905 it received 38 curtain calls, and its popularity was further assured by its being banned from court by Kaiser Wilhelm II. There was still opposition, however; after its premiere at the Met, there was such a reaction that further performances were cancelled. But Strauss’ friend Gustav Mahler was of the opinion that it was “one of the greatest masterpieces of our time.” After Dresden, it was performed at 50 other opera houses within two years.

A telling story about that single performance at the Met: Olive Fremsted, a noted soprano of the day, sang *Salome*, and did her research. Curious about the feel of a human severed head, she visited the morgue. Discovering a head to be quite heavy, she dramatically staggered under its weight when she received it on stage, provoking horrified gasps in the audience. Perhaps her contribution to those cancellations.

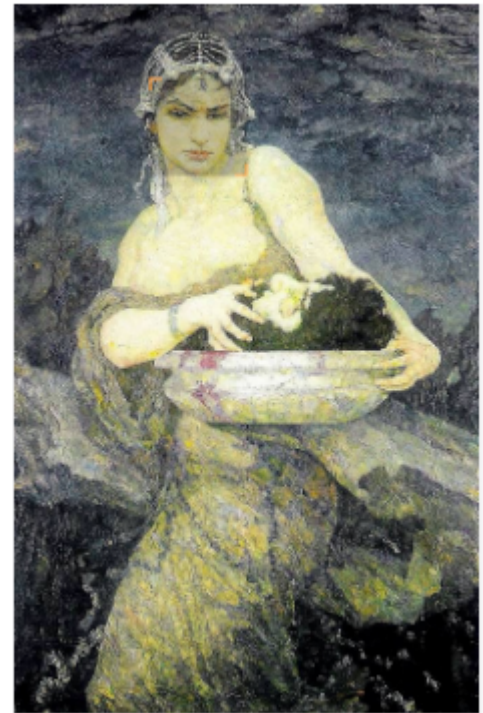
Mordenn, Ethan, *Opera Anecdotes*, Oxford University Press, 1985, p.146

Salome was an early opera by Strauss, and the composer's first operatic success. But he had honed his craft and achieved recognition as a master of orchestral composition with his tone poems, *Don Juan*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *An Alpine Symphony*. He went on to compose twelve more operas, six with the librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, a partnership about which Strauss wrote, "We were born for one another." Many of his operas are in the repertory, including *Electra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Arabella*, and *Capriccio*.

Summing up Strauss' skill in *Salome*'s orchestration, Michael Kennedy says

Whatever the mood in this opera, whether it be sultry, savage, sadistic or sensuous, Strauss finds the orchestral colors to convey it to the listener with overwhelming intensity. Holden, Amanda, ed., *The New Penguin Opera Guide*, Penguin Books, New York, 2001, p. 890.

Carol Crocca



A painting by Hans Unger (1876-1932) depicting *Salome*, with Eva von der Osten as the model.



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