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Music History Final Paper
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Richard Strauss: Elektra

With much pride, Brahms once said of Richard Strauss that he was 'the last of the classical composers.' Strauss was ever surrounded by the developments of his contemporary, Mahler, and was one of the figureheads of German composition as it moved into atonal territory (Del Mar, 1). Together, Strauss and Mahler eventually carried the momentum that broke the bond between classical and more modern styles of composition. Mahler, however, died at the peak of his career, leaving Strauss to continue pushing the envelope (Del Mar, 1). This momentum would carry through his entire compositional life, for better or worse in some cases.

Richard Strauss was born on June 11, 1864 in Munich, Germany. The son of Franz Joseph Strauss and Josephine Pschorr, Richard grew up in a musical family, as his father was the principal horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra for 49 years (Kennedy, 218). Strauss's family situation could not have been more ideal in helping to fertilize his musical aspirations. His mother, Josephine, was from a well to do family of brewers, which removed any burden of financial strain from the family (Del Mar, 2). This financial security allowed Franz to help financially support Richard in his musical ventures. Strauss was naturally gifted in music as a result, and showed promise at a young age. He took piano lessons at age four, and at age eight was taught the violin by his father's cousin, Benno Walter. Walter was the leader of the court orchestra (Kennedy, 218). Strauss wrote his first composition at age six, and as any precocious youngster might, he heralded his early achievements with great adulation (Del Mar, 2).

To illustrate how much his family believed in his potential, his uncle George Pschorr took one of his works, the *Festmarsch*, to a leading publisher of the day to have it distributed, accompanied by a letter written by the young Strauss. Strauss was only 12 at the time this took place. When he was 18 years old, Strauss left school to enter the University of Munich in 1882. His subsequent enlightenment from his studies greatly improved the quality of his compositions, and this is generally regarded as the start of his professional composing career (Del Mar, 10).

While Strauss is noted for his compositions in many different areas of music, the work that will be focused on in this examination is his opera *Elektra*. Based on a Greek tragedy by Sophocles, the adaptation that Strauss wrote the music for was written by Hugo van Hoffmannsthal (Puffett, 17). Hoffmannsthal's association with Strauss was to become one of the most important and, in many ways, ideal artistic partnerships ever.

Hoffmannsthal and Strauss first met in Paris around 1900. He approached Strauss about working together on what would become *Elektra*, but Strauss was less than enthusiastic (Del Mar, 288). Three years passed before he and Hoffmannsthal would be in contact with each other again, but upon a viewing of the stage adaptation of *Elektra*, his interest was renewed greatly (Del Mar, 289). Hoffmannsthal wrote to Strauss again when he heard his interest had been piqued, and Strauss replied soon after, expressing his desire to work together (Del Mar, 289). Strauss's main concern with the project was that it was too similar to his recently completed *Salome* in terms of subject matter. The ever-persistent Hoffmannsthal assured Strauss that the only similarities were superficial items,

specifically the fact that they "were both in one act, had as a title the name of the heroine, were based on subjects of classical antiquity, and had been recently launched in Berlin with Eysoldt (the lead actress) in the title role" (Del Mar, 289).

It is interesting to note how Hoffmannsthal's personal situation informed his writing of *Elektra*. Early on, he dealt with issues concerning his financial and marital status, and his life was plagued with conflict (Puffett, 18). It is very possible that the dramatic conflict and passion with which he adapted Sophocles' original work was borne out of frustration with his situation (Puffett, 19). Hoffmannsthal offered these views on his current situation, detailing the issues he was dealing with:

> It was my twenty-eighth birthday, and I believe I can understand as follows the alarming paralysis of my productive powers which has been going on for nearly two years – with certain deceptive interruptions: it is the painful transition from the productivity of youth to that of manhood, a deep inward process of transformation, felt outwardly only through grief and dullness (Puffett, 19).

He also stated that he "hope(d) to show other friends more clearly and richly than I could in words though the dramatic products that are tentatively taking shape in me" the kinds of conflicts he was dealing with (Puffett, 19). Ultimately, Hoffmannsthal wrote *Elektra* quickly, almost as a cathartic release. The fact that he wrote it so quickly, with few alterations, adds to the passion contained in the work. When this passionate writer

combined his talents with a composer of Strauss's caliber, good things were bound to happen, and they did.

In order to more fully understand certain elements that will be discussed further in this paper, a cursory understanding of the story of *Elektra*, the person, is needed. When Agamemnon, Elektra's brother was killed by their parents, Clytemnestra and and Aegisthus, Elektra's brother Orestes was saved from future harm by being smuggled from the palace by either Elektra herself or by a servant. Growing up under the watch of King Strophius, alongside his son Pylades, Orestes thought all was well. It wasn't until later in life, when he consulted the Oracle at Delphi, that he discovered the truth behind his past. The Oracle commanded him to have revenge by stealth on his father's killers (Puffett, 12). Elektra had in the meantime been prevented from getting married so as to further reduce the chance of avengers being born (Puffett, 12). Eventually, Orestes came back to his homeland with Pylades and met Elektra, but neither of them knew whom the other one was. When their identities became clear to each other, they plotted together to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, their father's killers. Orestes came into the palace in disguise, proselytizing news of his own death. After murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Orestes went mad, but in the end was saved with Apollo's assistance. Elektra ended up marrying Pylades as well (Puffett, 12). Some key steps taken that are essential to note in the story are Elektra's incarceration and her inability to get married, which was an unusual set of circumstances in Greek society, the element of the non-recognition between brother and sister, the and the murder plot itself. Elektra's role in the murder

plot, as well as the events following the murders, is especially notable in that it raises her status, as a female in Greek society, to that of her male counterparts (Puffett, 12-14).

Hoffmannsthal's organization of the story's elements was a delight to work with for Strauss. This organization, listed below, offers an ideal framework for symphonic composition:

1. Prologue – the five servants.
2. Elektra.
3. Elektra and Chrysothemis (1).
4. Elektra and Klytemnestra.
5. Elektra and Chrysothemis (II) (including a short scene between two serving men).
6. Elektra and Orestes.
7. Finale – the murders, Elektra's Dance of Triumph and Death (Del Mar, 296).

While an in-depth analysis of each movement would serve the reader well, in the interest of space a brief analysis of Strauss's overall approach to the work and certain key points seems most appropriate. Since the work deals almost exclusively with dark moods and themes, a very expressionistic slant seems to be the most musical response (Puffett, 56). Not for Strauss, however. His approach was to address the work with a dense, forceful tone that belied conventional expressionist tendencies, which consisted of a moderately atonal slant to the tonal resources utilized (Puffett, 56).

Elektra's organization and compositional resources were unique in that it "had motives, chords, cadences, textures, and forms which, in principle if not in character, are comparable to those compositions that dealt with radically different subjects and express diametrically opposed moods" (Puffett, 56). The musical language Strauss dealt with at the time was "fundamentally a dialogue between musical assertion and allusion, in the sense that two essentially opposed characteristics relating to tonality can be brought into a confrontation in which one (assertion) will triumph over the other (allusion)" (Puffett, 56). The intent in this organization is such that allusion and confrontation collide in the music just as they do in the dialogue of the drama (Puffett, 56). With this in mind, Strauss "matched the gruesome subject of Elektra's obsession with revenge with his most advanced music, outdoing anything in *Salome* in dissonance and harmonic waywardness" (Kennedy, 229).

In the context of tonality, this juxtaposition is seen in how Strauss, while not fully embracing atonality, somewhat stretched the idea of bitonality to its blending edge with the former. His "dissonant polytonal episodes, sometimes crossing the border into atonality, are offset by passages of simple diatonicism, which usually arise from Strauss's contrapuntal textures, but occasionally are used for shock value" (Kennedy, 229).

Strauss treated tonality as a very fluid concept. Instead of composing *Elektra* in a given key and progressing from there, he used different keys for different characters, thus creating a pan-tonal sonic environment. This concept will be explored more fully later on. Also setting the stage for Strauss's explorations is his establishment of the principal

harmony, derived from a "single germinal chord whose flavour pervades the score" (Kennedy, 229). The terminology commonly used to refer to Strauss's method of composing, specifically in the context of *Elektra*, is a closed-form symmetry. In this method, one half of a work can be superimposed upon another, blending all sorts of tonalities and emotional ideas. The two halves are separate, yet equal.

Strauss's intent at a musical realization of human emotions can be seen in an analysis of prominent parts of the opera. For example, while it could be said that Elektra's monologue is most prominently in C (major and minor), it does a disservice to Strauss's musical intent to assert this. In keeping with his intent of alluding to human emotions and their characteristics through music itself, Strauss uses varying related and unrelated tonalities in his work. Other characters' parts extent to conveniently close key areas, such as Eb major (Puffett, 58), imitating the distinct voices of other people, which are not always harmonious. Additionally, the opening scene charges forward in a strident D-minor tonality, thus further extending the tonal reach of the piece (Puffett, 59). Another important tonal detail is found in the Fifth Maid's defense of Elektra, which occurs early in the performance, in which the appearance of a motive in the 'correct' B-flat minor tonality foreshadows its use later in the piece (Puffett, 60). Strauss used this technique to great effect, aiming to "integrate the opera's enormous, unbroken single span" (Puffett, 60). These tonal reminders also served a much larger purpose than simply unifying the work. In keeping with Wagner's influence, a German opera must have some

sort of unifying elements across the movements. Additionally, these recurring elements mirror a key aspect of the opera itself: the inability to forgive or forget (Puffett, 60). Strauss also used harmonic rhythm to his advantage as well. For example, in Elektra's monologue, he at one point sustains a B-flat minor tonality for 6 bars, exemplifying the "sheer solemnity with which she evokes her father" (Puffett, 60). Strauss soon after uses "tender A-flat music" as she is imagining her grandeur in being Agamemnon's child, music which will be used later when she first sees Orestes again for the first time (Puffett, 60). The final stages of the opera most crucially confirm the connection Strauss wished to establish between musical content and human emotion (Puffett, 71). The closing scene is more dependent on changing moods than on a series of events. In the final stages, Elektra is left to deal with her actions, and in doing so she realizes her burdens are irresolvable. She has been kept alive only by hate (Puffett, 73). All she can do, at least in terms of her earthly existence, is to die. She has accomplished what she needed to do on earth, so she is already with the gods (Puffett, 73). Strauss depicts these key moments tonally by first touching on "tonal brightness" with a movement in E major (Puffett, 73). This movement then moves to C major, and after wavering between the two tonalities, representative of the confusing coexistence of joy and horror in her actions, Strauss ends the opera abruptly. Ending first on E flat minor, then moving to C minor, Strauss represents Elektra's death (E flat) and Agamemnon's vengeance.

Strauss's conception of tonality served to further his wishes of having the music more fully express the range of human emotions, which rarely are clear-cut and linear.

By utilizing tonality in a discrete fashion and very programmatically, Strauss took traditional harmony and ripped it to shreds, creating a new language unique unto himself, and advanced the romantic ideals of music and emotion being one entity to great new levels.

With the above examination of the story and its musical elements in mind, we can examine the overall reaction to such an intense work. The public anxiously anticipated *Elektra*, especially since *Salome* was such a huge success, and it was said "all of Europe turned up in Dresden for the first performance on January 25, 1909" (Mann, 72). The week *Elektra* was premiered was a week that featured Strauss's works exclusively. The hype accompanying the performance and surrounding events is probably what skewed the opinions of those who experienced it. Some have called the work "needlessly ugly and… clumsily composed" (Mann, 73). Most German critics at the time derided the work, calling it the "Barnum of German music", and criticizing its blatant exposure of "immortality and perversity" (Mann, 73). However, some found it to be fascinating and enlightening, with the Viennese critic Hermann Bahr declaring that "it was a glorious evening," and proceeded to go into full detail on how the work affected him (Mann, 73).

However the work was received, it is clear that *Elektra* was by no means ignored in its day, and was controversial in many regards. Like any great work, it pushed boundaries and introduced certain elements that delighted and offended. The use of tonal ambiguity and harshness in composition was a device long used by composers to upset the audience and to place them in a less comfortable mindset than they might have been

used to. The structure of the work, and the constant crescendo that is felt throughout lends uneasiness to the work that few had dealt with before. There is a constant 'overlapping of the complete and incomplete, (and the) work derives its sense of unpredictable inevitability' from this (Puffett, 38). It is for this reason that *Elektra* may have upset so many people. However, some find beauty in this sort of harshness. It is no different than modern music either pleasing or upsetting listeners. Viewed in this light, it is logical to say that for all the hoopla, *Elektra* isn't that different from any other form of music in its emotional reach, and is a fine testament to the power of music to affect the human psyche.

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