



Richard Strauss, Hugo von Hofmannstahl, and a Change of Style

In October 1905 Richard Strauss attended a performance in Berlin of Max Reinhardt's production of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play *Elektra*. In up-to-date twentieth century fashion, the playwright had been reading Freud and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria* when he wrote his play. Strauss was so enthralled; he contacted Hofmannsthal and mentioned that he would like to set *Elektra* to music. Hofmannsthal replied in a letter, dated March 7, 1906:

"My very dear Sir, How goes it with you and 'Elektra'? It is, I must say, the hope of no mean pleasure which you have so unexpectedly aroused in me. Will you let me know in a very few lines whether this hope may remain alive or is it to be buried?"

Four days later Strauss replied: "Dear Herr von Hofmannsthal, I am as keen as ever on 'Elektra' and have already cut it down a good deal for my own private use."

This was the start of a relationship which would last until Hofmannsthal's untimely death in 1929, and produce eight operas with music written by Richard Strauss, including his next opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, and *Arabella*.

In *Salome*, Strauss' previous opera, the score works up to a climax, the "Dance of the Seven Veils." In *Elektra* there is also a climax, a summing up of emotions, in one eloquent burst of song that occurs when Elektra recognizes her brother Orestes.

In the opera, Elektra is distraught almost to the point of madness because her father, Agamemnon, whom she loved very much, had been murdered many years earlier by her mother Clytemnestra. Elektra had secured her younger brother Orestes in a foreign land, and is hopeful that he will now return to avenge his father. The scene starts with a cacophony associated with Elektra's hearing that her brother has been killed; she then sees a stranger in the courtyard. Here Strauss wrote eight minutes of the most profoundly tender music of the whole opera as Elektra, first fearful of the stranger, comes to recognize her brother, alive and well. It may be because this comes in the midst of so much frightful dissonance that its effect is enhanced. But I think it is not only one of Strauss's most spontaneous lyrical outpourings, but one of the most beautiful I have ever heard.

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Elektra is Opus 58, directly followed by *Der Rosenkavalier*, Opus 59, which premiered exactly two years later, and represents a distinct detour from the dissonance associated with *Salome* and *Elektra*. There was much controversy over why Strauss changed his musical style so quickly - from a dissonant style being developed by Schonberg, Berg and Webern, back to what the music critics of the time called the Viennese 'decadence' of *Rosenkavalier*. However, listen closely to the 'recognition' scene in *Elektra* and I think you will hear the embryonic elements of *Der Rosenkavalier* quite clearly. Even though *Der Rosenkavalier* is cherished today, *Elektra* is not far behind. It is certainly not something you will forget.

The partnership between Strauss and von Hofmannsthal was the century's most important composer/librettist collaboration. Although Strauss determined many matters of drama and style, the writer exercised great influence as well, including the choices of opera subjects. Together they helped to forge a national German style of opera in the first third of the twentieth century.

- Peter Dundas, Opera Guild of Rochester.