

German Post-Wagnerian Opera. Richard Strauss

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Abstract: Richard Wagner’s scenic creations are considered the pinnacle of the genre in the 19th century for their technical-vocal difficulty, coupled with the need for endurance acquired over time through proper study, as well as a turning point in the entire history of music, for their innovative visions and impact on subsequent composers. Convinced of Wagner’s influence on the European cultural music scene, the second stage of the research focused on the composers who appeared in the German-Austrian area, particularly in the first decades of the 20th century, and who produced countless masterpieces, expressions of visions based on the various forms of reference to tradition and the obsessive tendency towards innovation, such as the treatment and deepening of psychological dramas, of ancient myths seen as symbols in which the great mysteries of the soul, human complexes and human powerlessness in the face of the all-powerful forces of destiny, of divinity, are found: Eugen d’Albert’s opera *Tiefland*, Hans Pfitzner’s musical legend *Palestrina*, Alexander von Zemlinsky’s *Der Zwerg*, Erich Korngold’s *Die tote Stadt* and Alban Berg’s expressionist opera *Wozzeck*. The “core” of the research concerns two of the most important operatic works given to posterity by the composer Richard Strauss in partnership with the famous librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Die Frau ohne Schatten* [The Woman without Shadow] and *Die ägyptische Helena* [The Egyptian Helen], which stand out for their original, syncretic vision, fuelled by a compositional talent of unfailing inspiration that the composer would consciously explore and exploit, completing the creation of post-Wagner German opera.

Keywords: Wagner, drama, Strauss, opera, myth, syncretism.

1. Introduction: Richard Wagner – The peak of German opera in the 19th century

The musical space of the 19th century was deeply influenced by Wagnerian creation, which managed to encompass all aspects of Romanticism, thus contributing to the emancipation of dramatic and symphonic forms. Richard

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Wagner (1813-1883) constitutes the peak and at the same time the moment of crisis of the tonal language, the one whose supremacy was manifested for two centuries, until the experiments of the atonalists in the first decades of the 20th century.² Poet, musician, composer, conductor and aesthetician, Wagner established himself as one of the most complex and influential figures in European musical culture. His works, especially those of the last period, are notable for their complex textures, rich harmonies and orchestrations, and for their elaborate use of leitmotifs – musical phrases associated with individual characters, places, ideas, or plot elements. His advances in musical language, such as abundant chromaticism and continuous shifting of tonal centers, set the course for the development of cult music in the century that followed.

The close connection between text and music is what drives the development of the harmonic process, still within the limits of the tonal language. It is worth mentioning the uninterrupted presence of orchestral comments, the musical themes being ingeniously symphonized by means of a varied timbral colour – resulting from the composer's call to a wide range of instruments, with the addition of some specially designed by him, in the form of a numerically amplified orchestral apparatus – dependent on the intrinsic course of each character, gaining a maximum expressive force in the moments of accumulation of dramatic tension. Wagnerian melodies thus become the expression of ideas, and their return suggests an intention to give them full meaning.³

During his compositional maturity, Wagner pays special attention to the evolution of unity in terms of the development of thematic material in his works; from one creation to another, he aims to overcome the differences between recitative and aria, in favor of an ample declamatory “arioso” that will lead to the concept of “infinite melody”.

The Wagnerian chant has been an intensely debated topic over time. Since the passing of the Bayreuth titan up until today, both singers and specialists in vocal art have tried to define aspects of this type of singing, in order to understand and render Wagnerian works in relation to the composer's primary intentions. The differences between the chant known today and that of Wagner's time are significant. In his day, the best known and by far the best manner was the “right” singing of sounds. The continuous vibrato, a specific element in today's operatic singing (designed to project and color the voice) was originally foreign to the composer. Once settled in Bayreuth, Wagner began writing a long essay entitled “On Actors and Singers”, in which he elaborated on his ideas on

² G. Pascu, M. Boțocan (2003), *Carte de istorie a muzicii* [Music history book], Vol. II, Editura Vasiliana'98, Iași, p. 367.

³ Ioana Ștefănescu (2002), *O istorie a muzicii universale* [A history of universal music], Vol. IV, Romantic Opera from Rossini to Wagner, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, p. 362.

the importance of gestures, mimicry and improvisation. In terms of technical aspects of singing, Wagner carefully prepared his performers in declamation, intonation, phrasing and dynamics by demanding clarity in the type of emotions expressed through the vocal melody.⁴

Compared to the previous works, *Tristan and Isolde* (1859) imposes itself through the colossal contribution of using leitmotifs, Wagnerian melody becoming an authentic art of interpenetrations and transformations that their symbolism undergoes. In the process of the new melodic pattern based exclusively on the leitmotif principle and on the exploitation of nuances that emphasize dramatic expressiveness, Wagnerian harmonic thinking acquires overwhelming values. Transcending the laws of classical harmony in the vocal-symphonic development of his music, Wagner proved to be the initiator of endless harmonic chains that rarely find a solution, being postponed in accordance with an ascending course of emotional tension that does not, in the last resort, leave the basic tonality. A novelty is the support of the modulating process on clear bridges between the change of tonalities, thus providing a tonal perspective to the entire harmonic course whose agitated character, due to continuous chromatic modulations, is in an interdependent relationship with the intrinsic feelings and situations experienced by the protagonists.⁵

Convinced of the value and impact of his works that had not yet been fully understood, Wagner embarked on a plan of vast proportions that, at first, seemed impossible to realize; the tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung* was inspired by the German cultural heritage, which included the old German epics as well as the works of writers who capitalized on Norse stories, on the famous collection *Edda* and some Scandinavian stories.

Unlike his previous works, in this epic operatic tetralogy Wagner adopts a much more complex use of leitmotifs, referred to in his philosophical work *Opera and drama* as “guides to feeling”, describing how they can be used to inform the listener about a musical or dramatic subtext of the action on stage, manner used by the choir in ancient Greek theatre. Moreover, significant innovations undertaken in orchestration are also noted. Composed for a large orchestra using the full range of instruments, both individually and in various combinations, the composer commissioned the production of new instruments, including the Wagnerian tuba, designed to cover the space between horn and trombone registers, as well as variations of existing instruments such as the bass trumpet and double-flap double bass trombone. In much of the tetralogy, especially since Act III of *Siegfried*, one can no longer speak of the use of

⁴ P. Bassettm, *Richard Wagner on the Practice and Teaching of Singing*, retrieved from: https://www.richard-wagner.org/userdata/filegallery/original/308_richard_wagner_on_the_practice_and_teaching_of_singing_1.pdf

⁵ *Idem*, p. 361.

traditional, clearly defined tonality for long periods of time, but rather of using the term “tonal regions”, each following the other in a continuous flow. The fluidity of these continuous changes required avoiding structural organization at clearly defined times, facilitating Wagner’s easy access to the construction of more complex structures⁶.

2. Post-Wagnerian German opera. Evolutionary path, features, outstanding representatives

In the late 19th century after the death of the titan from Bayreuth, as well as in the first decades of the 20th century, German opera was still marked by Wagnerian drama: leaning towards large librettos, loaded with philosophical and metaphysical meanings, the treatment of the leitmotif with symbolic and symphonic meaning, abundant chromaticism from a melodic and harmonic point of view, dense orchestrations with an illustrative, evocative role, the treatment of the voice in an instrumental manner and the presence of large declamatory scenes (arioso). All these are elements that we will find treated in personal ways, in terms of theme, aesthetics and language, in the creations of German and Austrian composers. As an extension, these features will merge with the new trends that have appeared in the European space, with the new theatrical typologies, with the increasing affirmation of entertainment genres in the cult area and especially with each composer’s own artistic, sonorous and scenic visions, the result of coming from a certain school of composition as well as leaning towards avant-garde or experimental orientations, abundantly manifested at the beginning of the century.

3. Richard Strauss

German composer and conductor, Richard Strauss (1864-1949) emerged immediately after the death of Wagner and Brahms, being considered one of the most gifted musicians of the time. During an artistic career that spanned eight decades, he composed in almost all musical genres, becoming best known for his symphonic opuses (composed in the late 19th century, in the early part of his career) and the scenic creations (from the early 20th century). Coming of age as a composer at a time when relations between the bourgeois class and artists had become increasingly problematic, Strauss managed to address the world of art and society through ingenious combinations of candor and irony.⁷ An admirer of Richard Wagner’s works and his ideas regarding *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“Total

⁶ The Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, *Richard Wagner, Der Ring des Nibelungen*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Ring_des_Nibelungen, viewed on 10.08. 2023.

⁷ B. Gilliam, C. Youmans (2001), *Richard Strauss*, in “Grove Music Online”, retrieved from, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40117>

Work of Art”), the composer turned to this concept of creating a “total” work of art that perfectly combines poetry, drama and music. While detaching himself from the Wagnerian metaphysics and philosophical visions abundantly manifested in the symphonic creation, Strauss also exploited the paradoxes, inconsistencies and potential depths that can be found in the everyday life of modern man.⁸

In the field of **opera creation**, Richard Strauss gave the public no less than 16 operas, each of which was the result of the composer’s predilection for contrasting subjects and styles. Thus, following the first two attempts *Guntram* (1893) and *Feuersnot* (1901), a tribute to Wagnerian principles (which to a certain extent anticipates the unique style that will characterize him later), the composer gives birth to the one-act operas *Salome* and *Elektra*, within which he resorts to an increased level of dissonance and chromaticism, pushing the size and color capabilities of the orchestra to new extremes, together with a tense melody. Breaking away from the expressionist manner, Strauss asserts the new possibilities he imagined by composing a series of stage works whose subjects are inspired by mythology, legends or fairy tales, with female protagonists, in which the juxtaposition of contemporary elements with anachronistic ones creates a stylistic pluralism that overshadows the later experiments of the late 20th century.

4. *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (*The Woman without a Shadow*)

In early 1914, Hofmannsthal returned to his “metaphysical” fairy tale, and Strauss began composing the opera later that year. *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, with its rich orchestration, dense polyphony and deep symbolism, is Strauss’s most complex stage work, but in many ways it is also his most personal. Although the subject concerns the Shadowless Empress’s intrinsic search for humanity, the secondary subject of the dyer, his wife, and their tumultuous relationship characterized Strauss more deeply than any other aspect of the plot through the lens of his own troubled marriage.⁹

Die Frau ohne Schatten, whose premiere took place in 1919 on the stage of the Vienna State Opera, stands out for its narrative structure revolving around two different marriages unfolding in three distinct worlds: the invisible, spiritual realm of Keikobad, the shining “semi-mortal” kingdom of the emperor, and the noisy, prosaic world of humanity (Barak and his loved ones). The empress “stands between two worlds”, according to Hofmannsthal, “not released from

⁸ Richard Strauss (1903), *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 44, no. 719, Musical Times Publications Ltd.

⁹ B. Gilliam, *The Strauss-Hofmannsthal operas*, retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-companion-to-richard-strauss/strauss-hofmannsthal-operas/E3F41B262027D09C17E5C7C75C1E8793>; p. 126.

one, not accepted by the other”. The daughter of the omniscient Keikobad, the empress was captured by the emperor first while appearing as a gazelle, and then frozen in human form after losing her magical talisman. She has no human relationship with her husband and is treated like a trophy (“the prey of all prey”), a sexual object, as the Nurse stated: “At the dawn of the first ray of light, he leaves her side, when stars appear, he is there again. His nights are her day, his days are her night.”¹⁰

Hofmannsthal undoubtedly provided Strauss with a number of challenges through the most complex, expansive and symbolic libretto he ever wrote. Transposing himself into the text of the action, the composer acquired the necessary understanding of the unfortunate situation of the empress which, intertwined with the metaphysical principle of love put forward by Hofmannsthal, made it possible to transpose the story into a palpable, authentic human conflict. Strauss benefited from a complex libretto, the profusion of which he managed to portray on the stage of the opera house, while also exploiting a wide range of timbres, techniques, styles and musical forms: extended orchestral interludes, hymns, instrumental solo moments, leitmotifs endowed with dramaturgical role, arias based on the Wagnerian continuous melody, large vocal ensembles etc.¹¹

5. *Die ägyptische Helena (Egyptian Helena)*

Die ägyptische Helena (1923-1927), an opera structured in two acts, completes Strauss’ trilogy of “marriage” operas (along with *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and *Intermezzo*), and for the purpose of this theme it returns to the elevated world of Greek myth. Here, several important themes are explored, which later became the focus of action in works such as *Ariadne auf Naxos* or *Die Frau ohne Schatten*: memory, marital fidelity and the restoration of trust.¹²

Hofmannsthal considered the text conceived for this work to be his best libretto, and despite being ridiculed by many commentators, it still remains underrated. However, as in all great works of art, the universal covers the particular. In an imaginary conversation with Strauss, which appeared in the opera’s original program booklet, Hofmannsthal implored the composer to imagine the plot of the opera’s Trojan War action “as if it had happened two or three years ago, somewhere between Moscow and New York” (that is, in central

¹⁰ T. A. Kovach (1984), *Die Frau ohne Schatten: Hofmannsthal’s Response to the Symbolist Dilemma*, The German Quarterly, Vol. 57, No. 3, Wiley on behalf of the American Association of Teachers of German, p. 380.

¹¹ B. Gilliam, *The Strauss-Hofmannsthal operas*, retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-companion-to-richard-strauss/strauss-hofmannsthal-operas/E3F41B262027D09C17E5C7C75C1E8793>; p. 127.

¹² *Ibidem*.

Europe and more precisely in Austria and Germany). Hofmannsthal thus highlighted the correlation between the Trojan War and the First World War – and their aftermath – felt by contemporary audiences and posterity alike.¹³

Linking a mythological past with a mythicized present, *Die ägyptische Helena*, which premiered in 1928 at the *Semperoper* in Dresden, explored the post-war dialectic between the mythical and the modern. In the view of Hofmannsthal and Strauss, modernity was fundamentally founded on myth: the present represented both the reflection and the continuation of an existence that transcended history. As in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, Strauss turns to a complex subject that evokes a higher human level. Strauss's musical pages for this subject are generous and inventive. The thematic transformations are endless, the orchestral tableaux broad, and the rhythm is continuously subject to the variational principle¹⁴.

6. Conclusions

The personality and music of Richard Wagner had an overwhelming impact on generations of composers in 20th century Germany. The post-Wagnerian opera creation has Richard Strauss as its main exponent, who in operas *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and *Die ägyptische Helena*, managed to combine in an ingenious way the tradition with the new stylistic and musical trends of the time, carefully exploring mythological themes, human conflicts and the complexity of symbolism.

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¹³ P. Graydon (2010), *Between Moscow and New York: Richard Strauss's Die ägyptische Helena in Cultural Historical Context*, Journal of the Royal Musical Association, Vol. 135, No. 2, Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Royal Musical Association.

¹⁴ D. Murray (2002), *Die Ägyptische Helena*, in “Grove Music Online”, retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O007407>, viewed on 20.07.2023.

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