THE HARP AS LEITMOTIF: THE EXPRESSION OF FREUDIAN IDEAS AND FEMININITY IN SALOME BY RICHARD STRAUSS

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ABSTRACT
In all operatic history there is almost no opera analyzed through its treatment of the harp. One of the oldest instruments, it has long been chosen by composers to accompany especially programmatic sections of works. Operas contain an inherent program for the orchestra to portray musically, and composers have used the harp in varied instances in their works, not allowing it to represent simply a single emotion or idea. Though early works like Orfeo ed Eurydice by Gluck feature the harp briefly, it was not yet an instrument vital to the interpretation of the opera, simply representing the lyre Orpheus plays in the legend. Before Sebastian Erard created the modern pedal harp in 1810, the instrument could not handle the literature written for it today. As the harp evolved toward its modern form, composers took advantage of its new capabilities to write faster passages in a greater variety of keys. However, even in 18th and 19th-century bel canto works the harp is not yet integral to understanding operatic themes and motives. As seen in Lucia di Lammermoor by Donizetti, which features a beautiful and lengthy harp cadenza in Act 1, the instrument is only used this one time to play this theme for the purpose of tone color as an instrumental interlude between scenes. Neither the harp nor the theme is heard again. Operas written after the development of the modern harp included not only more virtuosity and easier accessibility to chromaticism and keys, but also more programmatic usage in the way that the orchestra represented and commented on the details of the work or idea that the music was trying to portray, especially towards the end of the Romantic era. The programmatic devices used in these works are based in the timbre of the instrument, as well as common perceptions of it. This expanding instrumental language was inherited by an era of composers who created for themselves, and were free from commissions of specific types of works. They were no longer constrained by specific instrumentation or the limitations of amateur salon players.

INTRODUCTION
The musical giant of the Romantic era, Richard Wagner, established a tonal language and decadent style that would epitomize operas of this era. His imprint on the musical language would be used and adapted by his contemporaries, most notably by Richard Strauss. While both figures of German Romanticism composed for the era’s typically large orchestra, their instrumentation was far different, specifically in the utilization of the harp. Freudian theories, as well as Strauss’ mastery of orchestration, cause the use of the harp to become more leitmotific and predominant in the opera Salome than it is in Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, as seen by examining the use of the instrument throughout both operas. This correlation allows another level of interpretation by combining orchestration with ideologies at the time of composition.

Before either of these works was composed, French composer Hector Berlioz published his 1843 grand Treatises on Orchestration. He had a large impact on both Wagner and Strauss. Wagner speaks extensively of Berlioz in Mein Leben, and of the relationship between the two contemporaries as composers, conductors and music critics, and the respect that Wagner felt towards Berlioz. On the Tristan score given to Berlioz, Wagner inscribed a dedication to Berlioz, thanking him specifically for his Romeo et Juliette. As technological advances allowed instruments to advance toward their modern forms, Strauss edited the Berlioz Treatises as well as became a
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master orchestrator in his own right. Rimsky-Korsakov, the author of his own treatise on this topic, was not yet known in Western Europe for his orchestration, due to political and nationalist reasons, so the work by Hector Berlioz was the definitive word on orchestration. In this work Berlioz details not only the technical possibilities and ranges of each instrument, but also the connotations that their timbre suggests. In his descriptions of instruments, Berlioz never denotes any with a specifically “masculine” connotation. The closest he comes is to describe brass instruments as symbolic of army bands marching off to war, and battle and glory.\(^1\) He does however, gender several instruments as feminine. In contrast with his martial brass, Berlioz says the “unisons of clarinets playing with them seem to represent the loved women, proud-eyed and deeply passionate,”\(^2\) and mentions their “feminine timbre.”\(^3\) He deems the violin section as a whole “the orchestra’s real feminine voice, at once passionate and chaste, heart-rendering and gentle; it can weep, cry and lament, or it can sing, pray and dream, or it can break out in joyful strains, like no other instrument.”\(^4\) And yet, this connotation of femininity is not seen in the chapter about the harp, an instrument known today for its overwhelming feminine connotations. Berlioz, the first prominent composer to use the harp virtuosically in his Symphonie Fantastique, describes the harp simply as expressing magical and fairy-like ideas.\(^5\) Almost 100 years after the original publication, Richard Strauss would edit the work, adding a completely new horn chapter and extended explanations or musical examples on certain instruments. He did not, however, touch what Berlioz said about the harp. This is not to say that Strauss was a novice when orchestrating for the instrument. The harp can be found in all of the tone poems by Strauss, as well as his chamber works such as the Duett-Concertino for Clarinet, Bassoon, Strings and Harp. Strauss does, however, use the “feminine” voice of the violins in his many love themes as in Don Juan, the “Von den Hinterweltl” from Zarathustra, and “Des Helden Gefahrtn” from Ein Heldenleben to name a few instances. For two of the most well-known orchestrators to agree on the timbre of the harp and yet not describe it using gendered terms, while other instruments are deemed feminine, shows that the sound of the instrument is not necessarily feminine. Even Rimsky-Korsakov in his own guide to orchestration called the harp tender and poetic, but not feminine.\(^6\)

While the sound of the harp might not be inherently feminine, modern studies show how deeply ingrained the image of the harp as a feminine instrument is in the minds of listeners. In 1981, in the second study ever conducted on instruments and sex-stereotypes, P.A. Griswold found that both students and adults, including music majors, have various stereotypes about the genders of instruments. The harp was seen as one of the most feminine, along with flute and violin.\(^7\) This idea of a sex-less object having gender is a process that becomes ingrained in people over time through socialization. This idea of appropriate instruments and actions for each sex and gender is perpetuated by one aspect of the androcentric hegemony that dominated the 19th century, now referred to as Separate Sphere. This idea of Separate Spheres dictates not only the physical separate spaces for men and women, but also the elevation of men over women, as well as appropriate activities based on sex.\(^8\) This idea takes an entire group and immediately seeks to discredit them based simply upon biological sex, and permeates to things that are not inherently feminine, but perceived as feminine.

Separate Spheres was not the only ideology that permeated 19th-century Europe. Richard Wagner placed his stamp not only on music, but also on arts in general. Oscar Wilde, who wrote the play on which Strauss based his opera Salome, referenced the impact of the musical giant, saying “the 1890s became increasingly Wagnerian in their musical taste.”\(^9\) This all-encompassing adulation of Wagner became the idea of Wagnerism. This belief, also known as “the cult of Wagner, which included an adulation of his opera and his many essays on various subject [sic] like race and the purpose of art, came from the continent [Europe]. But more importantly, many French writers who soon became famous in England were very fond of Wagner’s opera and their work employed Wagnerian themes and methods.”\(^10\) Oscar Wilde was a member of this Cult of Wagner, and references to Tanhauser can be found in The Picture of Dorian Grey, while The Ring Cycle is referenced in The Importance of Being Ernest. This interplay of ideas between Germany.
and England would lead eventually to the completion of *Salome* by Wilde, and, in turn, the Expressionist opera of the same name by Strauss.

*Tristan und Isolde*, one of Wagner’s most influential operas, was premiered in 1860 and is saturated with these 19th-century gender norms. Wagner, famous for his controversial ideas on race, religion, and music, aligned with the Separate Spheres ideology, as shown in the portrayal of the prima donna, Isolde. Isolde is a princess; however, as the opera opens she is being transported to marry a king she does not love. The 19th-century idea that women could not have influence in the public sphere is shown in she is not able to rule her own kingdom. As the story proceeds, Isolde becomes subservient to a different man than intended: not to the king, but to Tristan. Wagner, the man known for his thickly textured, behemoth Gesamtkunstwerken, was conservative in his use of the harp, utilizing it in only three sections of the entire opera: always underscoring the love between Tristan and Isolde.

The harp does not enter until near the end of the first act, when Tristan and Isolde drink the love-potion that prompts them to declare their feelings for one another. The harp plays almost continually throughout the scene, pausing only for interjections from other characters, but always playing when Tristan and Isolde are singing to each other, or singing about their feelings for one another.\(^1\) The idea to drink the potion is Isolde’s, but instead of the love potion it was intended to be a lethal poison. Tristan is the murderer of her fiancé, and instead of the atonement Isolde seeks she in instead tricked by her maidservant into loving Tristan. The entire scenario of the opera is then borne out of Isolde losing her authority and becoming subservient to another’s desires. When the lovers have their midnight rendezvous for the love duet in the second act, the harp reappears. Even in this context of overpowering love, Isolde remains in a subservient position to Tristan. Although this section is a love duet, it is dominated by Tristan pitching woo to Isolde, making her an object receiving his affection instead of an equal partner. While Isolde sings about the abstract ideas of love and mortality, foreshadowing her “Liebestod,” Tristan focuses his attention on Isolde, calling her a dream and an “image of the heart.”\(^2\) Isolde is trivialized as a girl musing over the ethereal idea of love, whereas Tristan, tasked to guard her and bring her to his adopted uncle, the king, takes a dominant role as a driving force in the duet. The duet ends with a consummation of their love as the pair realizes their relationship must only be secret and by night, and the harp completes the love duet by playing a descending sequence of arpeggios that musically portray the stage direction in which Tristan pulls Isolde “to the side with a bank of flowers, descends in front of her on her knees, and nestles his head in her arm.”\(^3\) But the lovers are found and separated, with Tristan grievously wounded in the altercation. In his delirium Tristan sings of Isolde, and the harp returns as Tristan exclaims about the beauty of Isolde, and how her smile will comfort him to sweet rest. Isolde arrives as Tristan is dying. Here Isolde is at the height of her subservience, as she renounces her own life to follow a lesser man to his death. She sings the famous “Liebestod,” in which Isolde describes a vision of Tristan and his beauty, and joins him in death. Here the harp is at the peak of virtuosity for the opera, and plays the longest passage it has for the last three acts. After describing the shining vision of Tristan, Isolde continues her monologue of how Tristan fills her senses and her very self, the harp accompanying her until the end of the aria. Isolde, a princess, gives up her elevated position as a princess to lose herself in love for Tristan, a lower adopted nobleman. She alone sees this vision of Tristan and dies to follow him into another night, like the metaphorical one in which they first consummated their relationship. By accompanying Isolde with the harp when she is vulnerable and passive in her love for Tristan, Wagner chooses to imbue the harp with an all-encompassing femininity, which epitomizes Isolde in the Separate Spheres ideology idea of womanhood.\(^1\)

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1 To be sure, Wagner was not the only composer to be influenced by Separate Spheres Ideology. Across the continent of Europe prominent composers such as Giuseppe Verdi and Charles Gounod also used the harp for similar purposes, such as in their famous operas *La Traviata* and *Faust*, both written the same time as *Tristan*. In *La Traviata*, the harp is only used once during the caballeta “Sempre Libera.” Accompanying Alfredo as he sings about the resounding force of love, convincing Violetta to forsake her mantra of being always free and love him for the rest of
 Strauss’s opera *Salome* updates the themes of *Tristan und Isolde*, morphing its story of redeeming love into one of perverse obsession. DiGenati, in his commentary on *Salome*, calls it a grotesque, modern version of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. The theme of obsessive and yearning love is used in both works, and both works end with a monologue for the soprano addressed to a dead hero. In *Tristan und Isolde*, the opera ends with Isolde’s gorgeous ‘Liebestod,’ the most famous and often performed part of the whole work. Strauss’s *Salome* also involves obsessive love, but here, of course, the effect is much more grotesque and gruesome.  

*Salome* takes the idea of an all-consuming love from a pure form in *Tristan und Isolde* and mutates it into the obsession that culminates in the final scene where Salome fulfills her carnal lust with the head of John the Baptist.

Though she is not named in the bible, it is alluded to that Salome was the daughter of Herodias who danced for King Herod. She was championed and used in the arts, and became a symbol in various artistic mediums. These incarnations of Salome became symbols, according to Gilman, and an analysis of the “basic themes of the fin-de-siècle reveals the complex relationship of the creator (usually male) to this figuration of the feminine.” As the quintessential femme-fatale, Salome overcomes her male creators with her femininity.

*Salome* is far removed from a Separate Spheres standpoint, with her “woman-ness” moving from something passive to that of a psychotic temptress who seeks a severed head to fulfill a sexual fantasy. The fin-de-siècle was a specifically French idea, yet France held sway on English authors, Oscar Wilde in particular. It is his source material that provides the basis for the libretto for *Salome*, and Wilde had a large influence in Germany. According to Sander L. Gilman, Wilde became “a litmus test between the right, which condemned him as a representative of the decay of the British, and the left, which saw the persecution of homosexuality as a sign of the inherent hypocrisy of German Society.” This fascination with Wilde led to his works becoming widely read and performed in Germany. Between 1900 and 1934 there were more than 250 publications of his works, and during the 1903–04 theater season there were 248 performances of Wilde dramas, 111 of these being of *Salome*. It is important that Wilde was able to extend influence over Germany when he could not do so in his home of England. While Germany was involved with Expressionism, an outpouring of pathos, it was not experiencing the fervor in the more Western part of Europe with the approach of World War I. The works of Wilde carried with them the tinge of the apocalyptic French idea about the end of the century into Germany.

These hysterical French ideas mingled very well with the work of an Austrian focusing on hysteria, Sigmund Freud. The grotesque ending of *Salome*, and the impetus that drives all of the story’s dramatic action, is the intertwining of the sexual intrigue and rejection between the characters. One of the main tenants of Freudian psychology, examined by DiGaetani in his essay on the play *Salome*, is that “sexual frustration is the basis of modern civilization.” By this idea, all actions are an attempt to ease this frustration. These actions are addressing such a basic need that they may not even be done consciously. These actions then address our Internal Desire (ID), which, according to Freud, is a set of uncoordinated instinctual trends. The function of the ID is then to alleviate this pressure, as seen in the characters and their desires of *Salome*.

Each of the characters in *Salome* is driven by their desire for another character that is oblivious to other’s existence. DiGaetani traces the various overlapping sexual desires of the characters, which are apparent from their first appearance onstage:

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the opera. In *Faust*, four harps signify Marguerite, who is so pure she is protected by heaven. The instrument plays during the vision of Marguerite, and plays periodically when she is referenced until she is seduced at the end of the Second Act. The harps do not play again until the finale, when Marguerite prays for forgiveness in the final trio. All four harps play throughout the finale as Marguerite is taken to heaven and repents. Violetta, or the image of a pure, docile woman, Marguerite, and the harp is used to comment on it.
In the opening scene of the play, it is obvious that the Page loves Narraboth [captain of the Guard], who is totally uninterested in him but is clearly in love with Salome. While Narraboth remains entranced with Salome, she clearly loves Jokannaan; when Herod enters the play the viewer soon perceives that while his wife Herodias desires him, he is obsessed with his daughter Salome.20

These interweaving obsessions drive the dramatic action as each character attempts to garner the attention of their intended affections. Salome uses Narraboth’s desire for her to bring out John the Baptist, who enrages her with his fanatical devotion to Christ. Narraboth entreats Salome to look at him, and commits suicide when she spurns him for Jokannaan. The combination of Salome’s fascination with John the Baptist, and Herod’s lust, causes Herod to swear to give Salome anything she asks if she dances for him, and so Salome dances the Dance of the Seven Veils in return for the head of Jokannaan.

As Freudian desires drive the action onstage, Wagnerian compositional techniques drive the orchestra. Salome is chromatic and dissonant, and so Strauss relies on Wagnerian leitmotifs to give the opera unity. According to DiGaetani, “Strauss, following Wagner’s lead, uses this structure as well so that Salome has her leitmotif, her obsession with Jokannaan has a leitmotif, he has a leitmotif, etc.”21 These leitmotifs permeate the entire two hours of opera. They are not simply melodic or rhythmic fragments, but something more complex, providing unity to the work as a whole with their constant repetition. Strauss utilizes Wagner’s leitmotif idea, and goes further to combine the technique with his expertise in orchestration in order to assign the very instruments as leitmotifs. Here is where Strauss diverges from Wagner, specifically with his use of the harp.

Unlike Wagner who used the harp only sparingly in Tristan, Strauss uses the harp manically throughout the entirety of Salome. He not only deploys it far more often, but also calls for two harps, instead of the one in Tristan. Wagner and Strauss both use vast, Romantic-sized orchestras, but Strauss supplements his with obscure instruments like heckelphone, celesta, and organ. Neither of these men was shy to write for harp, with Wagner calling for seven in Das Rheingold. Yet, whereas Wagner used the timbre of the harp to indicate femininity, beauty and subservience, Strauss chose to use the instrument for darker imagery. Far from the magical, fairy-like ideas touted by Berlioz, or the Separate Spheres ideological roles of Wagner, Strauss uses the harp to express the Internal Desires of his characters in Salome.

John the Baptist, or as he appears in the opera libretto, Jokannaan, does not have the same overt sexual frustrations of the other characters, but he is as fanatical about his devotion to Christ as Salome is for Jokannaan or Herod is for Salome. From the depths of the cistern at the beginning of the opera, we hear the voice of Jokannaan singing about the coming of Christ, accompanied by harp chords.22 Each time we hear Jokannaan as he prophesizes from offstage he is accompanied by the harp, either praying that people “may hear the words, who prepares the way of the Lord,” (Rehearsal 74), or simply his voice, crying out from the cistern at (Rehearsal 185), or mingling with the quartet of Jews seeking his freedom (Rehearsal 208). Jokannaan’s all-encompassing obsession with Christ is his ID, his counterpart to the sexual desires of the other characters, as indicated by Strauss’s use of harp to accompany his words.

The devoutness of Jokannaan is juxtaposed against the incestuous lust of King Herod. Herod is constantly chastised for leering at his stepdaughter Salome, from the first time he is mentioned and the first time he is seen. Nonetheless, he seeks to be closer to Salome, beginning with the desire to drink wine with his guests (Rehearsal 159). He begs Salome to drink wine with him later (Rehearsal 182) and the harp plays there as well. Herod then sees the dead body of Narraboth, who he remembered looked longingly at Salome, and orders his body taken away (Rehearsal 163). Herod asks Salome to dance for him, while Jokannaan sings of Christ (Rehearsal 223). Herod begs Salome a second time to dance, (Rehearsal 237) and both harps glissando at the climax of his sexual frustration before the Dance of the Seven Veils. Salome agrees to dance (Rehearsal 243) sating both her own desire for Jokannaan and Herod’s desire for her. Herod
declares he will not go inside until Salome dances, and Salome declares she is ready to begin (Rehearsal 247). The harp plays throughout the Dance of the Seven Veils, and afterwards Herod promises Salome her reward (around Rehearsal 248). Salome asks for the head of Yokannean. This occurs at Rehearsal 256; the harps play arpeggios at Herod’s ecstasy over the dance, while chords punctuate Salome’s desire for the head. Herod then tries to dissuade Salome, and when she refuses (Rehearsal 269) he offers her many treasures instead (Rehearsal 276). What follows is a long scene of Herod offering anything in his possession in a list besides giving Salome a life (Rehearsal 286).

Salome herself is filled with an insatiable desire to see Yokannaan from the first time she hears his voice. From his removal from the cistern, even in stage directions, she is entranced: “Salome, lost in his sight, slowly backs in front of him.” She is completely obsessed with him, to the extent that even when she simply calls out his name the harps play (Rehearsal 90), and again as she describes each part of his body in detail, like his fair skin (Rehearsal 91), his hair (Rehearsal 102), and finally his lips (Rehearsal 111). It is this fascination with his lips that serves as the drive for her frustration in the final scene, and represents itself in the Kiss motif (Example 1), which is sung to the words “Ich habe ihn geküßt, deinen Mund” (“I have kissed your mouth.”). This motif weaves its way into the orchestra, including the harp part, as it does during the interlude music between the opening scene and the scene at the palace, (Rehearsal 142). Strauss has established various leitmotifs to comment upon the action, from Yokannaan’s prophecies, or Salome’s allure, allowing them to be passed around by the orchestra. The harp, at one point or another plays with each of these motifs, solidifying that these motifs not only reflect an action onstage, but one of the frustrations of the Internal Desires of the characters.

Example 1: Kiss motif. (Harp 1 & 2, Rehearsal 142)

Because Salome can only achieve her frustrated desires through the death of Yokannaan, the final monologue is still psychologically driven by her desire to be loved by the now-dead man. The harps play again as she sings about kissing his mouth (Rehearsal 319), and about the beauty of his hair (Rehearsal 333), and body (Rehearsal 343), as she did earlier. Her psychotic monologue is broken by fits of anger, which are always placated by returning to the head she now possesses (Rehearsal 323), signaled by the return of the harps. The opera culminates with both harps playing sextuplets, and the kiss motif with the climax of Salome achieving her goal (Example 2), before Herod orders her death. While the harps have played sextuplets prior to this they have not been in unison, and they have also not been required to arpeggiate different chords simultaneously in both hands. This is the culmination of the Salome’s desire, which has driven the entire opera, and therefore the harp is employed to its maximum.
Example 2: Accompaniment to conclusion of Salome’s final scene (three after Rehearsal 359)

Strauss does not simply use the harp as an orchestral color, but also to orchestrate the leitmotif for its greatest effect. The harp plays when Salome first sees Jokannaan and she sings about the love she has for his body. When Jokannaan rebukes her the harp is suddenly silenced as Salome now sings that his body is frail, emaciated and grotesque (Rehearsal 98). The harps do not return until her sexual fixation returns upon his hair and his lips, further solidifying the harp as a leitmotif for this desire. In the opening scene, Narraboth tries to gain the attention of Salome, while she refuses to look away from Jokannaan, as the harp is playing. At Rehearsal 59, when Narraboth cannot gain her favor, he commits suicide, with no harp playing. Moments later, as Salome begs for a kiss from Jokannaan, the harps return, playing the kiss motif at Rehearsal 128. By establishing the harp as the urge to sate sexual frustration, Strauss optimizes his leitmotif to be silenced to signify that each frustration is resolved in each death: the suicide of Narraboth and the murders of Jokannaan and Salome. Even Herod’s desire dies: by the end of the opera he is disgusted by Salome and her desire for the head of Jokannaan, and orders her death after she kisses the head.

Composed only forty-five years apart, the two operas star female leads representing two very distinct sides of the same coin. Both sopranos portray princesses, but Isolde is restrained by her sex, relegated to the submissive femininity that Separate Spheres ideology permits. Though she is royalty, she becomes devoted to Tristan, a lesser nobleman, and follows him into death. Salome, though obsessed with Jokannaan, overcomes all the male characters through her femininity. She seduces Narraboth and gains the head of Jokannaan to get the kiss she desires by using her feminine charms to seduce her lustful stepfather. As the world moved towards World War I, a new set of expected behaviors formed, turning docile femininity into a viper lying in wait. Just as these new ideas transformed how we saw women, the use of the harp transforms from Isolde’s subservience to a male into the ID and sexual frustration of Salome.

All things are socialized. Therefore, when the dominant ideology changed, moving more towards the repression and psychological aspects of Freud, the symbols of one ideology became transferred to the symbols of the other. The harp, which for Wagner accompaniments his story of love and transfiguration, is turned into a leitmotif within a leitmotif for Strauss. The harp plays the various leitmotifs established by Strauss in Salome; however, Strauss also uses the harp itself as its own leitmotif, orchestrating it specifically to not only commentate through a leitmotif of pitch or rhythm, but one of the timbre of the harp itself. The Freudian reference to Internal Desires is applied to the desires of all the main characters in the opera, symbolized by the harp. In this way, Strauss not only raised the importance of the instrument in his opera, but also ignored the feminine connotations that it carried: regardless of sex, the ID of each character is represented in the same instrument. In the move towards an era with equality for women, the creation of Salome is the ultimate masterpiece combining Expressionism and Freudian theories, and the height of the German Romantic musical language before the new sounds of Second Viennese School. The forward-looking nature of Salome caused the opera to be scandalous, but its masterful construction by Strauss created an opera for the modern world.

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