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**Doç. Canan Özgür**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9441-8050>

Ankara Music and Fine Arts University, Music and Stage Performances Faculty, Ankara / TÜRKİYE

ROR Id: <https://ror.org/03470g923>

## A Musical and Psychological Approach to the Opera Salome by Strauss

### Strauss'un Salome Operasına Müzikal ve Psikolojik Bir Yaklaşım

#### ABSTRACT

Strauss is a composer of the late Romantic era, which is not so long ago and consists of the years from mid-1800's to the early 1900's. He has captivated opera audiences from the very first appearance of his adaptation of Wilde's story of Salome. The opera takes the biblical story of the Christian world and presents a deadly and erotic version of it. Through innovative use and reinterpretation of music, it questions the traditional cultural values of the time in a modern way. While composing his operas, Strauss took the splendor of the epics of Wagner and combined it with the emotions of the short Italian verismo opera style. In this study, the opera *Salome* is analyzed through a musical and psychological approach. According to research and analysis, it is seen that *Salome*'s music includes leitmotifs, short melodies with symbolic and rich meanings. They are associated with characters such as Salome and John the Baptist. The usage of leitmotifs by Strauss is complex with both uncertainty and symbolism. Besides leitmotifs, the opera's music includes many symbolic uses of musical color. Moreover, *Salome*'s harmony uses polytonality, chromaticism, unusual modulations, and ambiguous tones. Some of the major characters and major psychological themes have keys associated with them. With a psychological approach, it is pointed out that Salome is a wicked and greedy adolescent who wants to get whatever she wants immediately. She has obsessive-compulsive disorder tendency as well as being a "femme fatale". Her family background is also very immoral and unhealthy; his uncle killing her father and marrying her mother. All these negative issues contribute to her rotten personality.

**Keywords:** Strauss, Salome, opera, music, psychology.

#### ÖZET

Strauss, çok da eskiye gitmeyen ve 1800'lerin ortasından 1900'lerin başına kadar olan yılları kapsayan geç Romantik dönemin bestecisidir. Wilde tarafından yazılan Salome'nin hikayesini yeniden anlatarak opera seyircisini ilk sahnelendiği andan itibaren sarsmıştır. Opera, İncil'deki Hıristiyan temasının ölümcül ve erotik bir versiyonundan oluşmaktadır. Gününün geleneksel kültürel değerlerini, yenilikçi müzik kullanımı ve yeniden yorumlama yoluyla modern bir şekilde sorgulamaktadır. Strauss, operalarını yazarken Wagner'in destanlarının görkemini alıp, bunu kısa İtalyan verismo opera tarzının duygularıyla birleştirmiştir. Bu çalışmada, *Salome* operası müzikal ve psikolojik açıdan incelenmektedir. Yapılan araştırma ve analizlere göre, *Salome*'nin müziğinin sembolik ve zengin anlamlara sahip kısa melodiler anlamına gelen leitmotifler içerdiği görülmektedir; bunlar Salome ve Vaftizci Yahya gibi karakterlerle ilişkilendirilirler. Leitmotiflerin Strauss tarafından kullanımı hem belirsizlik hem de sembolizm nedeniyle karmaşıktır. Leitmotiflerin yanı sıra operanın müziği, müzikal rengin birçok sembolik kullanımını içerir. Ayrıca Salome'nin armonisi çok tonluluğu, kromatizmi, sıra dışı modülasyonları ve belirsiz tonları da bulundurmaktadır. Bazı ana karakterlerin ve önemli psikolojik temaların kendileriyle ilişkili tonaliteleri vardır. Psikolojik bir yaklaşımla, Salome'nin istediğini hemen elde etmek isteyen kötü niyetli ve ağgözlü bir ergen olduğuna dikkat çekilir. "Femme fatale" olmasının yanı sıra obsesif kompulsif bozukluğa da eğilimi vardır. Amcasının babasını öldürüp annesiyle evlendiği aile geçmişi de oldukça ahlaksız ve sağlıksızdır. Bütün bu olumsuz konular onun yozlaşmış kişiliğine katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Strauss, Salome, opera, müzik, psikoloji.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Salome* by Richard Strauss (1864-1949) is an operatic version of the Biblical story of John the Baptist's martyrdom. In this tragic one act opera, Salome's captivation by John the Baptist leads to her death. Strauss used one-act French play of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the Irish poet, novelist, and playwright, to write his opera (Newman, 1959: 372). He worked for the libretto of *Salome* from a German translation of Wilde's *Salome* by the poet Hedwig Lachmann (Ross, 2019). The subject capturing the imagination of generations of visual artists, was best realized in Wilde's 1891 tragedy with its full possibilities (The Metropolitan Opera, 2024). Wilde himself described *Salome* as having "refrains whose repetitive "motifs" make it so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad" (Carpenter, 1989). Although Wilde was one of the defining characters of the Victorian era, the performance was banned in a few countries (The Metropolitan Opera, 2024).

*Salome* shocks its audience by questioning the traditional cultural values of its day in a modernist way via innovative use of music, reinterpretation and themes. It refuses to be still, and makes the audience question the world through taboo issues and music (Pugh, n.d.). It made its debut in 1905 at the Königliches Opernhaus in Dresden, Germany (Pugh, n.d.). After two early failures, *Salome* is a sensation and the beginning of Strauss's productive and long career's second part (The Metropolitan Opera, 2024). Within two years, it was given in 50 other opera houses (Kennedy, 2001). In this opera, there is the use of dissonance and unique instruments, creating controversy among theater and music critics (Pugh, n.d.). Strauss combined the grandeur of Wagner's epics with the emotional blow and focus of the short Italian verismo opera style (The Metropolitan Opera, 2024).

## 2. THE OPERA *SALOME*

### 2.1. The Synopsis of *Salome*

The opera starts showing a great terrace above the feasting hall in Herod's Palace. There are some soldiers leaning over the balcony. A huge staircase is viewed at the right. At the back left side, there is an old cistern. The moon shines brightly.

The voice of the Prophet John the Baptist is heard from his prison in the palace cistern. Herod is afraid of him and orders that no one should talk to him. Salome, the mystical daughter of the Queen Herodias and also the step daughter of King Herod, gets tired of the feast, goes to the terrace and hears John cursing Herodias for marrying Herod incestuously and committing sins. She becomes mesmerized by John due to his prophecies. She makes Narraboth, who is the captain of the guard and is in love with Salome, bring John to her in return of her smile, despite Herod's orders. As soon as Salome sees John, she feels a great desire for him. She praises his white skin, black hair and lips, and wants to touch him, all refused by John. After hearing all these, her obsession increases and she decides to possess him in revenge while Narraboth kills himself from agony.

Herod enters the scene with his wife and the court. He stares at Salome in lust despite Herodias's objections. John shouts from the well that Herodias is sinful. Herod asks Salome to dance for him, although Herodias refuses again. He gives promise that he will give Salome whatever she wishes, even if it were half of his kingdom. She says that she wants the head of John in a platter, controlled by her obsession, and prepares for "The Dance of the Seven Veils". It is a dance in which she removes her seven veils slowly until she stays naked at Herod's feet. Herod tries to dissuade her wish to kill John by offering peacocks, jewels, and the sacred veil of the Temple, but she doesn't accept. An executioner comes out of the well, serving the head of John, which she caresses and kisses passionately declaring her love. Now she can do whatever she wants without John's rejections. Herod gets very afraid and terrorized, ordering his soldiers to "kill that woman" (Pugh, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2024).

### 2.2. The Religious and Orientalist Background of *Salome*

This opera was controversial even before it was staged due to matters such as suicide, revenge, obsession, necrophilia, the obsession of Herod with his stepdaughter (references to incest) and the femme fatale in Salome's character. These taboo topics were all against with the Biblical characters, so the original play by Wilde could not make it to its opening night in England. Lord Chamberlain's office rejected a license for its production (Newman, 1959). Even the actress playing Salome reported that she did not want to play the role because she was a respectable woman. The conservative mediums and the clergy denounced the opera, which contrasted with the traditional and cultural ideals of the time of Strauss. *Salome* raised crucial questions about the taboo topics, and opposed the religious authority. Any questioning of Biblical

characters' stories or motives by the modernist movement was seen as a danger, causing protests (Pugh, n.d.).

The Orient symbolized exotic images to the imaginations of 19th century Europe. It suggested limitless sexuality and desire, sexual promise and threat according to Europeans. They considered the Orient shaking with sensual and savage energy. Thus, the narration of *Salome* provided Wilde a great opportunity to illustrate Orientalist ideals (Skaggs, 2002: 129). Wilde develops the themes of counter-cultural ethics and orientalism. He enters the void of human emotion, revealing both the noble and savage heights. He analyzes the sexual perversities and the deeply rooted gender ideologies of modernity. The 19<sup>th</sup> century German culture is criticized by him through concentrating on the sexually perverse issues which Wilde developed. Besides, he caricatured the Jews in an anti-Semitic reinterpretation of Orientalism. The dancing daughter is a product of the mythic figure produced by Wilde and Strauss. The one encountered in the Biblical accounts in the Mark and Matthew gospels is totally a different Salome. According to the biblical narrative, the dancing daughter is a secondary character and she does not have a power to affect the result of the narrative. She does not even know what to ask for when Herod tells her to wish anything. Wilde chose to empower the sexuality of Salome, focused the narrative upon the dancing daughter and immortalized her. He created a more perverse and sexual daughter, embodying a unique paradox: Being both the virgin and the whore. She has a virginal beauty of innocence, as well as illegal lust. Wilde turns Salome's beauty from an object of inspiration to an object of horror: the femme fatale. She has a potential for dominance with her narcissistic position and alluring sexuality (Skaggs, 2002: 125-126). In Figure 1 Salome can be seen during "The Dance of the Seven Veils" in LA Opera production in 2017 (Rosenberg, 2017):



**Figure 1.** Patricia Racette dancing as Salome in "The Dance of the Seven Veils", in LA Opera production in 2017; Photo credit: Ken Howard (Rosenberg, 2017).

"The Dance of the Seven Veils" is a detailed version of the dance performed by Salome before King Herod on the New Testament story of the feast of Herod and the execution of John the Baptist. As written in the ten verses of Matthew 14, John was imprisoned for criticizing King Herod's marriage to Herodias, the former wife of Herod's half-brother. Herod asked his unnamed niece a reward of her choice for performing a dance for his birthday guests. In contrast to Strauss's story, Herodias persuaded her daughter to ask for John's head on a platter. Herod reluctantly participated in her request (Bourne, 2008). Wilde transforms this dance scene from a public performance for his guests (as told in the Bible) to a personal dance for the King himself. The idea of a series of veils was connected to a process of unveiling. Although Wilde does not describe her dance or imply that she removes any veils, the dance is assumed to be one of unveiling, thus revealing herself (Malik, 2008). Wilde's play was even proposed as the origin of modern "striptease". Strauss required that the dance should be "thoroughly decent, as if it were being done on a prayer mat". Still, many productions showed the dance to be frankly erotic. In a 1907 New York production, the dancer gave so many details while dancing that some ladies in the audience had to cover their eyes with their programs (Bentley, 2005).

Strauss was a complicated man who was drawn to sexually charged issues throughout his life. In his operas, women dominate while men are shallow and weak. Wilde eroticizes John the Baptist in *Salome* as Salome enjoys the sight of his body, lips and hair. Strauss preserves this language of sexuality. Another

sexual approach in gay subtext surprises the audience. Herod points out at a point that Narraboth is himself beautiful. Although Strauss cuts a little monologue in which there is a mourn for Narraboth, Herod shouts out that “he has slain himself who was my friend! I gave him a little box of perfumes and ear-rings wrought in silver, and now he has killed himself!” (Ross, 2019). This gay approach is another reason why *Salome* is an unapproved opera under a religious perspective.

John’s death is written similarly in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. But the Gospel of Mark gives more details about how Herod feels about John. None of the Gospels tells the name of the daughter of Herodias. (Haag, et al., 1994: 256). There are some different legends in which Herod is fascinated by John, and Herodias hates John. Also, Salome vows not to belong to anyone except John, and that her father made him decapitated in the same legend (Pugh, n.d.).

### 3. MUSICAL APPROACH TO *SALOME*

Strauss’ score shows itself to be iconoclastic, exotic and compelling thoroughly from the first measure onwards (The Metropolitan Opera, 2024). The opera’s importance was registered by Schoenberg who often had its score open on his piano circa 1906. He told his students that perhaps in twenty years’ time someone would be able to explain these harmonic progressions theoretically. Many of the building blocks of Schoenberg’s post-tonal style between 1907 and 1909 can be seen in *Salome*. The opera introduced a new kind of lunatic, messy aesthetic into today’s music. One repeating fixation is a rapid run of notes that gives way to a trill - a kind of hurrying gesture. This became a common language of modern music (Ross, 2019).

*Salome* by Strauss shocked its audience by using orchestral cacophony described as noise and thunder. The audience has never heard anything similar before on the stage (Dierkes-Thrun, 2008: 376). The complex arrangement has forty-nine voice and instrument parts entwining with each other. This complicated score changed the operatic scene, while its antecedents have much smaller numbers of part. The effects created by the orchestra, bitonality and dissonance contribute to the feelings such as love, hatred or terror created in the opera, such that the exit of John from the cistern matches with the mystical quality of the music. In order to produce something new, Strauss left the old models of composing an opera and tried something new to reach the modernity in music. He even brought interesting instruments such as kettledrums and heckelphone to use in his orchestra. The oriental elements in “The Dance of the Seven Veils” was a dramatic and shocking shift from the traditional opera (Pugh, n.d.). According to Scott, “the eroticism of “The Dance of the Seven Veils” is encoded in the sensual richness (timbral and textual) of a huge orchestra, the quasi-Oriental embellishment of melody (intimations of “exotic” sensuality), and the devices of crescendo and quickening pace (suggestive of growing excitement)” (Scott, 2003). One of the critics complained that the opera “banged and rattled until the emotions were worn out; it no longer wants anything but explosions, and the dynamics of these has no effect but that of dynamite” (Dierkes-Thrun, 2008: 378). The orchestra should convey threatening dissonances and a quavering restlessness, as well as letting the voices on the stage be heard over the orchestra (Rosenberg, 2017).

Strauss cut a big deal of the Wilde play but left its mischievous and ostentatious language mostly unchanged. It was scandalous to deliver *Salome* more or less directly during the time (Ross, 2019). What was different about *Salome* from many operas that preceded it was Strauss’s decision to set the Wilde-Lachmann text word for word and not using a librettist. Russian composers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also used this practice. Debussy adopted it in his opera *Pelleas et Melisande* (Ross, 2019). Strauss, cutting almost half of Wilde’s play, wanted to emphasize its basic dramatic structure. There is a pattern in the structural form of the libretto. Symmetry and a hierarchical grouping of passages, sections and events in threes can be observed. For example, Salome’s attempt to seduce Narraboth to get John has a three-part structure. She tries to seduce him three times, and he yields at the third time. After John is brought to Salome, he gives three prophecies. Then Salome shows her admiration three times: His skin, his hair and his lips. Later on, Herod asks Salome three times to be with him: to drink, to eat and to sit. Moreover, he asks her to dance for him three times, twice which she refuses. After Salome asks for John’s head, Herod tries to dissuade her by offering three things: an emerald, peacocks and the Veil of the Sanctuary of the Holy of Holies (Carpenter, 1989).

The opera is uniquely demanding on the singers, especially the scary title role, Salome, whose lines stretch from the highest to the lowest ranges. She sometimes works against the huge orchestra. It is one of the most thrilling and challenging roles in opera history in its dramatic and musical challenges (The Metropolitan Opera, 2024). The vocal demands of it are the same as those operatic roles such as Turandot, Isolde or Brünnhilde. The role needs a true dramatic soprano with the required continuous vocal power, volume in order to be heard over an undulant orchestra and stamina. It is difficult to cast these four

roles since they all are expected to be a young woman with a truly dramatic voice. In addition to the physical and vocal demands, the role also requires the gracefulness and agility of a *prima ballerina* for the famous “Dance of the Seven Veils” (Wikipedia, 2024). She should be elegant and charismatic to dance it without being cliché and awkward. Besides, she should possess the acting skills to traject an emotionally damaged fifteen-year-old kid defeated by longing and lust (Rosenberg, 2017).

*Salome* includes a system of leitmotifs, which are short melodies rich in symbolic meanings. Some of the leitmotifs are ingenuously related with characters such as Salome or John the Baptist. There are also abstract leitmotifs in meaning. Strauss uses leitmotifs in complex form; there are symbolism, transformation and ambiguity. Leitmotifs associated with Herod have frequently changing symbolic meanings and forms. Besides leitmotifs, the opera’s music includes symbolic uses of colors. For example, every time there is a reference to Salome’s dance, the sound of tambourine can be heard (Carpenter, *et al.*, 1989).

Moreover, there are uses of chromaticism, unusual modulations, polytonality, tonal ambiguity and a wide range of keys in the harmony of *Salome*. Some of the major characters such as Salome and John have associated keys with them. Also, some of the major psychological themes such as death and desire have related keys (Wikipedia, 2024).

During the final scene of the opera while Salome is kissing John’s severed head, the music reaches to a dramatic climax. It ends with a cadence having a very dissonant unorthodox polytonal chord, which has been called as the most sickening chord in the whole opera world. Strauss takes Salome to the depth of degradation with this music (Ayrey, 1989).

#### 4. PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SALOME

Salome is a deeply disturbed adolescent, whose father was murdered to satisfy the ambitions of her uncle, Herod, who married Salome’s mother Herodias later on. This action is labelled as an act of incest by John the Baptist (or Jokanaan). Her mother craves only wealth, power and position, caring little for her maternal love. Herod has lust for his step-daughter with obvious desire, and thus the atmosphere in which Salome is raised is very immoral. The first time the audience meets Salome, she wonders why Herod is always looking at her with revolting eyes (Rosenberg, 2017).

Another interesting concept about both Wilde’s and Strauss’ approach to Salome is that she acts in her own pleasure and will in John’s death. It is divergent from the interpretation of Bible; in which she acts under the shadow of her mother or tries to revenge him for what he said about her mother. Strauss portrays Salome as “femme fatale” who has a demonic feminine sexuality (Banks, 1988: 19). The men who are in touch with her in a way, Narraboth, Herod and John, all experience tragedy to some extent. Narraboth’s suicide is because of Salome’s insensitivity. He is deeply in love with her, and thus he allows the guards to bring up John at her request although he does not want. His warnings to her about her obsession are in vain, and he kills himself because of her lack of attention to him. She herself experiences this tragedy of death after her obsession with John increases to a level that the society cannot bear anymore and Herod has to order her demise (Pugh, n.d.). In Figure 2, Olive Fremstad as Salome holding the head of John the Baptist in a performance at Metropolitan Opera House in 1907 at the wildest scene of the whole opera can be seen. After seeing this performance, a physician wrote to the *Times* magazine that Salome was “a detailed and explicit exposition of the most horrible, disgusting, revolting, and unmentionable features of degeneracy... that I have ever heard of, read of, or imagined.” (Ross, 2019).



**Figure 2.** Olive Fremstad holding the head of John the Baptist in the Metropolitan Opera’s 1907 production of *Salome* by Richard Strauss; Photograph from DEA / Biblioteca Ambrosiana / Getty (Ross, 2019).

Salome can be evaluated as a mentally deranged girl by an obsessive compulsive disorder. She wants to touch everything she desires, count things around her and repeats things over and over again. She is the archetypical monster in Christianity; provoking everyone around her and pushes them to the extreme limits (Coulardeau, 2010). It is an interesting fact that Salome begins to admire John's body parts such as his skin and his mouth, as she sings directly to these body parts after being rejected by him and turning him to an obsession. His beheading can be understood and evaluated more easily under the light of her objectification. Since she cannot have him as a whole when he is alive, she has to take him dead (Pugh, n.d.). Her distorted perception about love can be understood better by analyzing her last retort in the opera during the famous kissing scene:

SALOME:

Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan.

I have kissed thy mouth.

There was a bitter taste on my lips.

Was it the taste of blood?

Nay: but perchance it was the taste of love

They say that love hath a bitter taste.

But what matter? what matter?

I have kissed thy mouth (Coulardeau, 2010).

One can understand from these lines that Salome has a catastrophic confusion about love; even if the symbol of her love is dead and she is tasting his blood, she is satisfied that she reached it.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Strauss was a German Romantic composer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. His outstanding sixteen operas became an essential feature of the standard repertoire. He pioneered the musical style of modernism with famous operas such as *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*. He had a remarkable descriptive power and ability to depict psychological details in his operas.

The Biblical story of Salome became popular in Christian art, especially during Renaissance. Oscar Wilde's one-act play *Salome*, first performed in 1896, influenced Strauss, who interpreted Wilde's text musically, highlighting the emotions of the characters via melodic and dissonant orchestration in also one act. He delivers Salome's lust for John the Baptist and her stepfather Herod's immoral court. He creates a sexual and pervert daughter being both the virgin and the whore at the same time. This approach is totally different than the Biblical records. Some of the original performers were reluctant to perform several of the scenes such as "The Dance of the Seven Veils", which is seen as the origin of modern striptease with oriental elements. Thus, Salome becomes an erotic symbol in art. Taboo issues such as suicide, obsession, incest and necrophilia makes the opera *Salome* unique, intriguing, disgusting and seductive. This modernist movement questioning Biblical characters was evaluated as dangerous and caused protests.

The music of *Salome* is described to be cacophonous and noisy in its orchestra. The effects created contribute to dissonance, chromaticism, polytonality and mysticism. It is criticized to be banging and rattling, wearing out the emotions. It is interestingly seen that there is a pattern of three-part structure and symmetry in the libretto. Moreover, the title role Salome is difficult to stage because of the demanding needs such as a continuous vocal power and volume in order to be heard over the very loud orchestra. Another feature seen in the opera is the use of leitmotifs, symbolizing the characters or emotions.

In a psychological approach, Salome is a disturbed, ruined adolescent with an unhealthy family background. She doesn't know maternal love, and her father is killed by her uncle, who marries to her mother. The uncle has incestuous attempts towards her, making the audience pity her even more. However, with Strauss's depiction of her as a femme fatale with demonic feminine sexuality, one can easily get afraid of her personality. Salome's obsession with John the Baptist's body features can be evaluated as an obsessive compulsive disorder. She is so fixated on him that she gets satisfaction by touching and kissing him although he is dead.

In short, Strauss's *Salome* is an opera creating suspension over the audience while depicting a distorted Biblical story. It touches deep emotions regarding human lust, power, sexuality, obsession, death through a splendid musical festivity in dissonance and polytonality. This opera will certainly continue to be at the focus of musical authorities in the future.

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