

Richard Strauss, *Salomé* (1905)

Abstract

In 1901 Hedwig Lachmann's German translation of Oscar Wilde's scandalous one-act play *Salomé* (1893) was staged by Max Reinhardt in Berlin. Richard Strauss saw the play in 1902, and was creatively inspired by its shocking plot, which includes themes of obsession, incest, sexual harassment, blasphemy, violence, murder, and even a hint of necrophilia. At the time Strauss was the respected chief conductor at Berlin's Court Opera and decided to adapt the play as an opera using Lachmann's translation as the libretto.

The play reimagines the biblical story of Salomé, the stepdaughter of King Herod. Obsessed with the imprisoned prophet Jochanaan (John the Baptist), who spurns her advances, Salomé becomes consumed by desire and revenge. Herod, himself infatuated with Salomé, promises her anything if she will dance for him. She performs the infamous "Dance of the Seven Veils," removing one veil at a time, ending nude: as her reward, she then demands Jochanaan's head on a silver platter. Herod is horrified yet reluctantly complies. The play ends with Salomé kissing the severed head in a moment of macabre triumph, only to be executed by order of the horrified Herod. The opera thus underscores the destructive power of desire and obsession.

The opera's 1905 premiere was not held in Berlin or Vienna as Strauss had initially hoped, however, since censorship prevented its being staged in either of these cities. Instead, the opera premiered at Dresden's Royal Opera House. It became an instant success that not only made Strauss internationally famous but also a wealthy man. Many cities censored its performances or banned the opera outright, but that did not diminish its popularity. While Strauss used a large, late-Romantic orchestration for his opera, the dissonant harmonies he wrote into the score also showcase his modernist sensibilities. Featured here is the title character's (in)famous "Dance of the Seven Veils."

Source

Source: Richard Strauss, *Dance of the Seven Veils* from *Salomé*, 1905. Performed by The New York Philharmonic Orchestra, conductor: Leonard Bernstein, Columbia Masterworks, 1966.

Internet Archive

Recommended Citation: Richard Strauss, *Salomé* (1905), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:audio-5114>> [September 26, 2025].