

SALOME

Composed by Richard Strauss

First Performed :Dresden, December 9, 1905

The action takes place in Galilee on the moonlit terrace of Herod's palace, off the banquet hall, where the Tetrarch is giving a dinner, the noisy proceedings of which are commented on by two soldiers as the opera begins. But the captain of the guard, Narraboth, a Syrian, has eyes only for Salome, who, he says, looks pale. A Page of Herodias warns Narraboth of the dangers of paying too close attention to the young Princess.

Suddenly, from the depths of an old cistern, comes the voice of Jokanaan (John the Baptist). He has been imprisoned by Herod, who fears him and has forbidden anyone to go near him. Salome runs on to the terrace. She has escaped from the banquet, from her stepfather's lascivious looks and from the noisy disputations of his guests, who include envoys from Rome and zealots from Jerusalem. But these thoughts vanish as Salome hears the voice of Jokanaan. She refuses to return to the table (Herod has dispatched a slave to summon her back) and demands to see the Prophet. The soldiers refuse, so Salome persuades Narraboth, who cannot resist her blandishments, to have the lid of the cistern raised and the Prophet brought forth. The strange, gloomy figure of Jokanaan, noble in the rags of captivity, emerges to extended orchestral music.

The sight stirs Salome, and there is a lengthy scene between them. As soon as he appears, Jokanaan denounces Herod and Herodias (the latter has killed her husband in order to marry the Tetrarch), proclaiming, 'Wo ist er, dessen Sundenbecher jetzt voll ist?' (Where is he, he whose sins are now without number?). Salome is fascinated and he turns on her ('Wer ist dies Weib, das mich ansieht?': Who is that woman who looketh at me?), and rages at her as the daughter of an iniquitous mother. Salome tells him in music of rising intensity of her desire for his body ('Jokanaan, ich bin verliebt in deinen Leib': Jokanaan, I am enamoured of your body'), his hair (In dein Haar bin ich verliebt': I'm enamoured of your hair) and his mouth ('Deinen Mund begehre ich': 'Tis your mouth that I desire).

All of Salome's seductive powers are brought into play, but with the sole result that the Prophet bids her do penance. This only drives her further. Nothing will dissuade her; not even Narraboth who, appalled by her actions, kills himself with his sword; Salome does not even notice. The Prophet warns her to seek the only one in whom she can find redemption, the Saviour of Galilee: 'Es lebt nur Einer, der dich retten kann' (There lives but one man who can save you now). But still Salome will not listen, and begs to kiss Jokanaan on the mouth. Revolted, the Prophet curses Salome ('Daughter of Sodom') and returns to the cistern.

After an orchestral interlude, Herod, Herodias and their guests come on to the terrace. The Tetrarch has come in search of Salome. The superstitious Herod veers between lucidity and a condition bordering on madness - not helped when he slips in Narraboth's blood, then spies the body. He has hallucinations that a wind is blowing round his head and that he can hear the beating of vast wings. Herodias says she feels and hears nothing and demands they go back inside. But Herod is determined to remain where he is.

In a scene which is an amazing depiction of neurasthenia and eroticism, Herod asks Salome to share his wine and eat fruit with him; she says she is neither thirsty nor hungry. He then asks her to sit beside him on her mother's throne; she says she is not tired. Herod's entreaties, Salome's indifference and Herodias's scorn are interrupted by the voice of Jokanaan. Herodias says the

Prophet insults her, and asks Herod to give him up to the Jews, who have been clamouring for him. Herod refuses, insisting that the Prophet is a holy man who has seen God. This starts an intense theological argument among the Jews, who dispute in a fugal quintet. No sooner is it finished than two Nazarenes proclaim their conviction that the Messiah is among them; he has even raised the dead from their graves. Herod is filled with misgivings, which are not dispelled by Jokanaan's continuing predictions of doom.

It is almost as much because of his dread of the future as for longing for her that Herod suddenly asks Salome to dance for him. She refuses, until Herod swears to grant her any request she may make of him. Salome performs the Dance of the Seven Veils (its self-contained music is often performed as a concert piece), which can be an exacting undertaking for any prima donna who has still the most taxing part of her vocal assignment to come. It has been performed by a dancer (for example, at the opera's first performance), but in the latter half of this century, a performance where a dancer, not a singer, casts her veils is something of a rarity.

Herod asks Salome what her reward shall be: She demands the head of Jokanaan, brought to her on a silver charger. Herod is shocked, while Herodias congratulates her daughter. Salome refuses the Tetrarch's compromise offers - precious stones, his white peacocks, the Mantle of the High Priest, even the Veil of the Temple - and will not release him from his oath. Finally, almost faint with weariness and fear, Herod gives in, saying that Salome is, indeed, her mother's child. The executioner descends into the cistern, while Salome hovers impatiently, to the eerie sound of a pinched B flat on a solo double-bass (said by the composer to represent not the execution but the excitement tense state of Salome as she awaits for her prey). The executioner delivers Jokanaan's head. Salome, in ecstasy, seizes the head, and, in a long monologue, pours out her feelings of revenge and lust as if Jokanaan were still living. Herod, quivering with fear, demands the torches be extinguished and his retinue go in to the palace. A cloud covers the moon. As it lifts, Salome is seen kissing the mouth of Jokanaan. Herod commands his guards, 'Kill that woman!' They crush her beneath their shields.