

THE MUSICAL POWER OF *SALOME*: STRAUSS TRANSLATES WILDE

Karen Bennett*

NOVA University of Lisbon/CETAPS

ABSTRACT: When Richard Strauss saw Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* in Max Reinhardt's 1901 production, he felt that it "cried out for music". Indeed, the insistent repetition of dramatic phrases, incantatory dialogue, fashionable orientalism and stark emotional contrasts all lent themselves very well to iconic representation through music, as became abundantly clear in Strauss' famous opera, first performed in 1905. This paper examines the various semiotic resources that Strauss used to effectively "translate" Wilde's play into music. They include an exploitation of the possibilities for signification inherent in musical genre, traditional tonality and operatic convention, as well as the use of Wagnerian leitmotif and musical quotation. The result is a musical portrait of world teetering on the brink of moral bankruptcy – an effective rendering of Wilde's *fin-de-siècle* spirit, which also offers a subtle comment upon Strauss' own times.

KEYWORDS: *Salome*, Richard Strauss, Oscar Wilde, Musical Semiotics, Intersemiotic Translation

1. Introduction

On 15th November 1902, the composer Richard Strauss went along to the Kleines Theatre in Berlin to watch Max Reinhardt's production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.¹ Perhaps he was motivated by a desire to see Gertrud Eysoldt in the leading role, an actress who later went on to collaborate with him on numerous projects. Alternatively, he may have been stimulated by reports he had received from the poet Anton Lindtner, who had sent him a copy of the play, offering to turn it into a libretto. In any case, we know that he was impressed. He called it an "exquisite" play, and reputedly said that it "cried out for music" (*schrie nach Musik*).²

The performance he saw in Berlin was actually a private one because the play had not pleased the censors. In fact, till then, it had scarcely been performed at all. A London production launched by Sarah Bernhardt in 1892 had been interrupted and banned in the third week of rehearsal by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, while the Lugué-Poe production in Paris (February 1896), which was prepared in secret, only ran for one night. There was good reason for this. In Wilde's hands, the biblical story of the girl who danced for Herod and was rewarded with the head of John the Baptist had become a perverse psychosexual drama in which the tragedy was precipitated by lust – Herod's for Salome and Salome's for the ascetic Jochanaan. So while the ostensible reason for its banning was religious (a prohibition against portraying biblical characters on stage was used in both England and Germany), most critics have tended to assume that the real reason was its sexually transgressive nature, compounded of course by Wilde's own trial and conviction for gross indecency in 1895.

* karen.bennett@netcabo.pt

¹ Historical information about the genesis of the opera has been compiled from Puffett (1989, pp. 1-10), Tydeman and Price (1996, pp. 31-43, 122-136), Gilman (1988) and other sources. There is some disagreement between these authors about the precise date of the performance that Strauss saw.

² From *Erinnerungen*, cited in Chapple (2006, p. 49) and others.

The opera, however, was to change all that. From its premiere in Dresden on 9th December 1905, when the artists took thirty-eight curtain calls, Strauss' *Salome* was a huge success (a "sensation", according to one review [cited in Puffett, 1989, p. 5]). By November 1907, it had played fifty times in Berlin alone and had also shown in fifty other opera houses around Germany and beyond. Wilde's play also got a new lease of life in the wake of the opera and was subsequently translated and produced in a wide variety of languages.³ Only in the English-speaking world did it remain a pariah. Though performed spasmodically between 1905 and 1990 (Tydeman and Price, 1996, pp. 40-58, 78-112), it was consistently scorned by creators of canon as one of Wilde's minor plays, unworthy of serious attention (Donohue, 1997, pp. 120, 123-125).

One of the reasons for this disregard would have been its symbolist idiom, which was utterly alien to English audiences brought up on naturalist tradition in drama. The play is set, not in a concrete time and place, but in a mythical region somewhere in the hazy Orient, and its texture is static and dreamlike, built up of intricately intertwining patterns of repetitions and echoes. There is also a complex symbolism, involving colours, numbers, flowers, minerals etc., which insistently hint at the existence of a fearsome spiritual realm operating beneath the material.

While these features made the play seem strange to West End theatregoers, they also made it eminently suited to musical treatment. Strauss was not the only one to recognise this potential. In Wilde's own time, Richard La Gallienne, writing in *The Star* of 22nd February 1893, commented that the play "seems to me built to music. Its gradual growth is exactly like the development of a theme in music" (cited in Holland and Hart-Davis, 2000, p. 552); while on 11th May of the same year, William Archer (2003, p. 159), in the magazine *Black and White*, observed:

There is at least as much musical as pictorial quality in *Salomé*. It is by methods borrowed from music that Mr. Wilde, without sacrificing its suppleness, imparts to his prose the firm texture, so to speak, of verse. Borrowed from music – may I conjecture? – through the intermediation of Maeterlinck.⁴ Certain it is that the brief melodious phrases, the chiming repetitions, the fugal effects beloved by the Belgian poet, are no less characteristic of Mr. Wilde's method.

Wilde himself also described the play in musical terms on a number of occasions: for example, in the letter that he wrote from Reading Gaol which would eventually be published as *De Profundis*, he describes it as "a beautiful, coloured, musical thing", and refers to the recurring motifs that "make *Salome* so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad" (cited in Holland and Hart-Davis, 2000, p. 740). However, despite such

³ Walter Ledger's 1909 bibliography of translations, cited in Donohue (1997, p. 119), lists versions in German, Czech, Greek, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Catalan, Swedish and Yiddish. In Portuguese alone, there were seven translations between 1910 and 1992, more than any of Wilde's other plays (Bennett, 2003, p. 2).

⁴ The reference to Maeterlinck is of course significant, as Wilde was clearly aiming to produce a work in the symbolist mould which self-consciously used repetitions.

claims, Wilde actually seems to have known very little about music and his comments about it are superficial and impressionistic at best (Thomas, 2000, pp. 16-19). It seems likely, therefore, that he was referring to a use of language that deliberately plays down the referential meaning of the verbal sign in favour of the material or performative aspects, perhaps in an attempt to fulfil Walter Pater's famous claim that all art aspires to condition of music. This is borne out by the fact that he originally wrote *Salome* in French, which he repeatedly describes as a musical instrument (Eells, 2010, p. 116). In this sense, then, he was experimenting with new sonorities, using words as if they were musical notes, evoking sound before meaning (p. 119).

Nevertheless, the play did contain a number of specific features that made it suitable for dramatic scoring, and it is these that will be the central focus of this article. My aim is to determine how Richard Strauss effectively translated these features into music and to discuss the cultural reasons for and ideological implications of his options. First, though, it is necessary to establish just which versions to consider as our source and target texts – something that is by no means simple, given the complex transits undergone by this remarkable work.

2. An unstable text

Both source and target works in this translational transaction are what literary scholars would call unstable texts. In the first case, Wilde wrote a French and an English version of *Salome* (Wilde, 1912, 1917),⁵ which are by no means identical,⁶ while Strauss prepared German and French librettos for the opera, which are both linguistically and musically distinct.⁷ There are also a number of other versions which need to be taken into account. Though Strauss' French libretto was taken directly from Wilde, his German one used the Hedwig Lachmann translation that he had seen in Max Reinhardt's production, which was in turn based on one or both of Wilde's originals. The libretto, which involved extensive cuts and adaptations in relation to the play, was then translated back into English and French for performance in countries where these languages were spoken.

In this analysis I propose to consider the French and the English versions of Wilde's play as joint originals – or, as MacDonald (2011) puts it, as two sides of a "bilingual project"; for though Lord Alfred Douglas is named as the translator on many of the 20th century editions of the English play, most scholars now believe that Wilde's own interventions were so extensive that the text "became his own once more" (Raby, cited in Donohue, 1997, p.

⁵ All subsequent quotations of Wilde's play were extracted from these editions.

⁶ While the vocabulary and syntax of the French text rarely rise above the norm of contemporary everyday usage, the English is rich, literary and archaic, with a lexis that is heraldic, mythical and biblical, in keeping with his distancing agenda. What is more, the characters in the English version are carefully differentiated according to their spoken style, which does not happen in the French (Bennett, 2003, pp. 7-9).

⁷ "You will only realize the full extent of my work when you have the German edition to hand and can compare how I have modified the rhythm and melody to fit the character of the French language", Strauss wrote to Romain Rolland (cited in Eells, 2012, p. 80).

122).⁸ In the case of Strauss' libretto, the decision about which version to assume as definitive is made easier by the fact that the composer effectively abandoned the French one soon after its première in March 1907. Though the reasons for this are complex (see Eells, 2012; Yeoland, 2013), its effective demise is underlined by the fact that subsequent French performances have mostly used Joseph de Marliave's 1909 French translation of the German libretto instead.

Before discussing Strauss' score, let us look a little closer at the Lachmann translation on which his libretto was based. This was deemed by German reviewers to be not only scholarly and poetic, but also very natural-sounding, with one critic even going as far as to claim that it was an improvement on Wilde's originals (cited in Chapple, 2006, p. 50). However, it is by no means clear which of those originals Lachmann used as her source text. Her German version seems to contain elements from each, leading Chapple (2006, p. 49) to conclude that she may have used *both* in a "conscious re-(en)visioning process" which both "deviates from and expands on" Wilde's texts.

Chapple elaborates on this claim as follows. On the level of style, the German text follows the French in that it uses contemporary discourse rather than the archaic biblical tone of the English (Chapple, 2006, p. 47), but compensates for the "underlexicalisation" (p. 51) of that version by incorporating elements from the English (p. 61), expanding and varying the diction, and increasing the rhetorical effect (p. 50). There are also significant differences in interpretation, particularly as regards the main protagonist.

Whereas Wilde sees Salome as a perverse figure whose lust and desire are all consuming, Lachmann's interpretation of Salome is as a figure who is pure in her sensuality; a *Natürkind*. Her sensuality is an extension of her own connection with her body and surroundings, rather than an artifice [sic] affected to ensnare men (...). Lachmann's Salome is not a wanton woman revelling in her own perversity, but rather a woman who for the first time knows desire and is consumed by it and compelled into action. (Chapple, 2006, p. 53)

Genetic studies of Strauss' personal copy of Lachmann's translation (Tenschert, 1989; Tydeman and Price, 1996, pp. 123-125) reveal something of the process through which the composer transformed this text into a libretto. He was clearly concerned with eliminating anything that was incidental to the main narrative line, and cut out as much as 40% of the script, including some minor characters, as well as passages contributing to ambience, characterization and historical contextualization. There is evidence that he also eliminated subordinate clauses that impaired the precision and flow of the diction (Tenschert, 1989, pp. 39-40), and that he sought to "purge the piece of purple passages" (Puffett, 1989, p. 4). On the other hand, he did not hesitate to rearrange the word order in the translation or even introduce some additions (see below).

Another alteration that has some significance for the way we might interpret the opera is the insistence that Herodias' page be played not by a young man but by a contralto

⁸ Comparison of the (published) French and English versions undertaken for an earlier article also convinced me that the English was immeasurably more sophisticated than the French and ultimately served Wilde's artistic purposes much better than the so-called "original" (Bennett, 2003, pp. 7-9).

(i.e. female singer). As there seems to be no aesthetic reason for this gender switch, scholars (e.g. Chapple 2006, p. 97; Tydeman and Price, 1996, p. 123) have generally assumed that it was an attempt to expunge the homosexual element suggested by the character's affection for the Young Syrian, Narraboth. Such an interpretation would be consistent with the dominant attitudes to homosexuality in Strauss' Germany, where it was viewed as a "perversion" or pathology and linked to anti-Semitism (Gilman, 1988).

Finally, in the light of the sweeping cuts made, the fact that he chose to retain the (apparently incidental) passage in which five Jews are squabbling over their religion is of particular interest, given the political and ideological climate in Germany and Austria at the time the opera was written. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

3. Strauss' intersemiotic translation

The semantic possibilities of music had of course been developed to the full by the Romantics, particularly Wagner, who influenced Strauss greatly in the early part of his career (Gilman, 1988, p. 37). This meant that, in his project to put Wilde's play into music, Strauss had a vast repertoire of semiotic resources to choose from. They included not only the quasi-indexical signs of rhythm, tempo, pitch and volume, which could be varied to express the full gamut of human emotion,⁹ and the iconicity of timbre,¹⁰ but also the grammar of Western tonality itself¹¹ and, by contrast, the disruptive potential offered by chromaticism and dissonance. Above all, there was Wagner's technique of the leitmotif, which went far beyond mere iconicity to allow for complex narrative development of character and theme across time.¹² As we shall see, all of these resources were mobilized by Strauss to create a work which some have called a symphonic poem,¹³ though which the composer himself labelled "a music drama in one act". Whichever genre attribution is preferred, the fact that this is a transposition into music of a work that had a prior existence in another medium makes it eminently suited to analysis as intersemiotic translation.

⁹ This semiotic potential derives from the link with human physiology (voice, movement, energy expenditure). Hence, emotional involvement may be evoked by increasing tempo and volume, widening the pitch range, and creating jerky rhythms and jagged melodic lines.

¹⁰ This refers to voice quality or, in an orchestral work, to the sound textures provided by different musical instruments.

¹¹ "The role of the tonic as a means for providing closure in music is specific to Western music. It was developed in the same period as central perspective in painting and had the same kind of unifying function. In the medieval modes, based as they were on the pentatonic, any note of the scale could provide the sense of an ending, and act as a 'key centre'. In the Renaissance a strict hierarchy became established between the fundamentals, so that any melody, whatever the harmonic progressions it traversed, had to return, ultimately, to the same predetermined note, the tonic. In this music there could be only one centre, one outcome, one conclusion" (Van Leeuwen, 1999, p. 98). See also Van Leeuwen (1999, pp. 35-90) and Painter (2001) on the Western tradition of homophony and its polyphonic other.

¹² A leitmotif is a melodic theme used to identify a character, or sometimes an abstract notion such as Love or Death. It does not necessarily remain intact throughout the whole work, but may be modified by transposition, inversion or a new harmonic underlay, or be subjected to pressures that cause it to break up altogether or mutate into something new. Thus the original meaning of the motif is extended, giving the impression that it is developing through time.

¹³ Fauré seems to have been the first to use this designation, though he was followed by others (see Puffett, 1989, p. 60).

In this section, then, I shall look at various features of the Wilde text that particularly lent themselves to musical translation and then examine exactly how Strauss chose to render them in his opera. I shall begin by considering the insistent repetitions of dramatic phrases which gave the play its incantatory quality, before moving on to the character portrayals and the potential they offered for leitmotif. Finally, I shall consider the implications of musical Orientalism and the way in which this was exploited by Strauss in order to transmit a particularly sinister message in the context of early 19th century Germany.

3.1 Repetition of dramatic phrases

To anyone used to the naturalistic style of Wilde's West End comedies, the insistent use of repetition in *Salome* comes as something of a shock. It gives the play a highly artificial and ritualistic feel, which has been compared to both a fairy tale or nursery rhyme¹⁴ and to a litany,¹⁵ and will certainly have contributed to the English audience's sense of estrangement. This was a marked feature of the French symbolist idiom, made famous by Maeterlinck, but with which Wilde's Parisian friends (Merrill, Schwob, Retté, Louÿs etc.) were experimenting at the time. It will certainly have been intended as a distancing device, enhancing the biblical feel of the text and evoking a faraway archetypal past.

As we have already seen, repetition is one of the aspects that most contributed to the play's supposed "musicality", and there are signs that it was actually enhanced by Strauss in his reworking of Lachmann's German translation. For example, in the opera, Jochanaan, in his prophesy of the coming of Christ (Sections 11-14 of the score), repeats the phrase "Wenn er kommt" ("When He cometh") three times instead of just once, as occurs in the play (Tenschert, 1989, p. 42; Tydeman and Price, 1996, p. 125).

I would like here to focus on the premonitions of doom which haunt the play from the outset. Wilde (cited in Holland and Hart-Davis, p. 740), in one of his letters, suggests that he conceived the theme of doom in musical terms ("the note of Doom (...) is one of the refrains whose recurring motifs make *Salome* so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad"), and indeed the first explicit mention of it, by Herodias' page, as he warns the Young Syrian Narraboth against looking at *Salome*, is dignified with its own leitmotif in Strauss' score (Section 8). The warning is repeated three times in both the play and the score, first with the modal verb "may" ("Something terrible may happen"/"Schreckliches kann geschehen") and then, the final time, with the more forthright "will" ("Something terrible *will* happen"/ "Schreckliches *wird* geschehen") in Sections 11 and 28. However, as Puffett (1989, pp. 69-70) explains in some detail, the musical motif does not remain exactly the same throughout the three repetitions. As is typical of this compositional strategy, it is modified each time, through subtle alterations to pitch, rhythm, harmony and orchestration, achieving an effect of gradual intensification.

¹⁴ See, for example, Kohlmeyer (cited in Chapple, 2006, p. 50) and Praz (1989, p. 16).

¹⁵ See Daniel (2007, p. 67).

Other mentions of doom in the play lend themselves more to visual rather than musical treatment. There is, we learn, something eerie about the moon: the page and Narraboth notice it first at the start of the play, though they experience it differently (“Look at the moon!”, says the page. “How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things”); and when Herod comes out onto the terrace, it is the first thing he sees (“The moon has a strange look to-night. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers”). These are the first announcements of the lunar theme that permeates the play from beginning to end, associated at different times with femininity, chastity, death and crucially with Jochanaan’s prophesy of doom, which is ultimately fulfilled (“In that day the sun shall become black like sackcloth of hair, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars of the heaven shall fall upon the earth like ripe figs that fall from the fig-tree, and the kings of the earth shall be afraid”). This is of course usually translated visually through props and lighting rather than music, with the moon growing visibly red and then darkening, as the prophesy is fulfilled.

The next passage, however, offers the composer a perfect opportunity for musical iconicity. As the dead Syrian’s body is dragged away, Herod asks: “It is cold here. There is a wind blowing. Is there not a wind blowing?” As the singers pause, a chromatic rumbling starts up in the lower register of the strings (Section 164), almost imperceptibly at first, and then gradually builds in volume and pitch before subsiding again like an ominous gust (Example 1). Herodias – who is somewhat prosaic – cannot feel it: “No there is no wind”, she says. But Herod insists: “I tell you there is a wind that blows... And I hear in the air something that is like the beating of wings, like the beating of vast wings. Do you not hear it?” This time the chromatic rumble, when it starts, builds up further, sweeping up through the orchestra in a dramatic crescendo, replete with drums and cymbal clashes, before subsiding again to nothing (Sections 165-168). Herod hears the wind three times (Sections 164-172), but each time Herodias insists there is nothing there.

Elsewhere, the repetitions give the dialogue an incantatory feel more typical of a fairy tale or folk story, which lends itself very well to musical form. For example, in the passage where Herod is trying to seduce Salome (a scene that parallels Salome’s own attempted seduction of Jochanaan), he first asks her to come drink wine with him, then to eat a fruit with him and finally to sit next to him, but is successively rebuffed, as she tells him she is not thirsty, hungry or tired. The intersemiotic translation is achieved by means of a melodic refrain (Sections 172-184) that stands out from its jagged chromatic musical context and is thus highly memorable (Example 2). The whole passage therefore acquires something of the feel of a ballad, which is appropriate, given that Wilde (cited in Holland and Hart-Davis, p. 874) in his letters had several times indicated that he viewed the recurring motifs in *Salome* as “the artistic equivalent of the refrains of old ballads”.

164 (They take away the body)
 (Sie tragen den Leichnam weg)

Herodes ihm. *Alm.* Es ist
 It is

kalt hier. *accelerando* Es
 cold here. *cresc.* There

weht ein Wind....
 blows a wind....

Example 1. “The wind of doom”, first rendering (Strauss, 1943).

Ultimately, then, when critics, and indeed Wilde himself, describe *Salome* as a musical play, it is primarily these repetitions that they are thinking of. This is language used not denotatively but performatively, in that the formal patterning and insistent reiteration take precedence over referential meaning – as in biblical discourse (Bennett, 2002), which he was of course emulating in the English version. Some scholars (e.g. Coulardeau, 2010; Kramer, 2015; Thomas, 2000) have seen this repetition as symptomatic of psychological disorder, such as narcissism or obsessive-compulsive behaviour, while others, likening it to a nursery rhyme or folk tale (e.g. Kohlmeyer, cited in Chapple, 2006; Praz, 1989, p. 16) have implied regression to a pre-rational phase of individual or cultural development. All of these components are relevant for an analysis of Wilde’s play and the role it played for him and for society, though the issue is too complex to be dealt with in any depth here.

Sehr lebhaft. M. d. so
d = d des 3/2

Herodes Sa - lo-me, komm, trink Wein mit
 Sa - lo-mé, come drink wine with

mir, ei - nen köst - li-chen Wein.
 me, this is ex - quisi-te wine.

173

Herod
des

Cü - sar selbst hat ihn mir ge - schickt.
Wine that Cas - sar sent me him - self.

174

Herod
des

Tau - che dei - ne klei - nen Lip - pen hin - ein.
Pray, dip in - to it thy lit - tle red lips.

Example 2. “Salome, come drink wine” (Strauss, 1943).

3.2 Character portrayal

Another feature of Wilde’s play that lends itself to musical expression is characterization. The protagonists are all very clearly defined in a way that is verging on the archetypal: Herod is a lecherous tyrant, enslaved to his own libidinous instincts; Jochanaan is ascetic and sanctimonious; and Salome herself is the classic *femme fatale*, ultimately luring both men, in different ways, to their doom.

It is interesting in terms of the musical semiotics that Strauss has chosen to make Herod a tenor, who sings some of the most melodious passages of the opera, while Jochanaan – the ostensible “victim” of the piece – is a baritone. This is a curious inversion of roles in relation to operatic convention, according to which the hero (the civilized, gentle or chivalrous male) is usually the tenor and the villain a baritone or bass. Strauss may have deliberately mobilized this semiotic in order to reinforce the profoundly spiritual dimension of the play. Herod in this way becomes an example of weak humanity at the mercy of the cosmic forces he has unwittingly unleashed, while Jochanaan, whose prophecies of doom are ultimately inescapable, appears fearsome and powerful.

At start of play (Sections 11-15), Jochanaan is locked up in a cistern from where he bellows out prophecies, which become progressively more doom-laden (Example 3). The music associated with him has an austere churchlike quality, and progresses in a stately measured way like a hymn or psalm. It is also, significantly, in the key of C major, the hegemonic “white-note” key par excellence, and forcefully diatonic. It therefore contrasts forcefully – even clashes – with Salome’s theme, which is not only exaggeratedly chromatic and ornamental, but also centred on the black-note key of C# (Sections 91-98). Thus, we have here a clear case of what Dimova (2013, p. 39) calls “tonality symbolism”: Jochanaan represents the “unifying, centralizing force of tonality – its abstract, ‘masculine’ quality” which is profoundly challenged and destabilized by Salome’s “feminine style” (Kramer, 1990, p. 292).

However, there is some evidence that Jochanaan was not conceived from the outset as such a serious character. In May 1935, Strauss wrote in a letter to Stefan Zweig:

I tried to compose the good Jochanaan more or less as a clown: a preacher in the desert, especially one who feeds on grasshoppers, seems infinitely comical to me. Only because I have already caricatured the five Jews and also poked fun at Father Herodes did I feel that I had to follow the law of contrast and write a pedantic-Philistine motif for four horns to characterise Jochanaan. (cited in Tydeman and Price, 1996, p. 134).

Some vestige of this comic purpose can perhaps be seen in Strauss' use of the tam-tam, an instrument traditionally associated with religious ceremony and the Divine, and, by extension, with death, horror and the supernatural (Puffett, 1989, pp. 66, 183). In Jochanaan's first two speeches, the tam-tam is struck whenever his voice booms out of the cistern, coinciding, with "comic literalism" (Puffett, 1989, p. 66), with the prophet's references to God or Christ. Though the rigid association breaks down later on, it is sufficient to give a kind of pantomime quality to the character, undermining, to some extent, the prophesies of doom.

As for Salome's own leitmotifs, perhaps the most memorable is the one which Kramer (1990, pp. 285-286) describes as a "restless" figure consisting of a "six-four chord in descending arpeggio", which evokes "incompleteness and immediate demand", the "futility and unappeasability of her desires" and perhaps also "narcissism" (Example 4). Significantly, this figure also constantly resists "being incorporated in tonal order – the order of centrality, hierarchy, patriarchy", thereby providing a musical enactment of the subversive Other that Salome has always represented in the Western canon.

The leitmotif structure of *Salome* is of course much more complex than I am able to do justice to in this short essay, and is used, as in Wagnerian opera, to enable characters to develop as the plot progresses. This aspect has already been amply explored by musicologists, from the early leitmotif guides compiled by Lawrence Gilman and Otto Riese (cited in Puffett, 1989, p. 65) to more recent studies by Puffett (1989, pp. 58-87), Carpenter (1989), Ayrey (1989) and Kramer (1990), amongst others.

Subito molto più lento
M. 45

viel an. Schreck - li - ches kann go - - schehn. Plötzlich viel ruhiger im Zeitmass.
too much. Ter - rible things may Aap - pen.

Stimme des Jochanaan (aus der Cisterne)
 The voice of Jochanaan (from the cistern)

Nach mir — wird Plötzlich viel ruhiger im Zeitmass.
After me — shall

Ei - - ner kom - men, der ist stär - ker als ich.
come an - o - ther who is great - er than I.

Ich bin nicht wert, ihm — zu lö - sen den Rie - men an sei - nen Schuh.
I am not worthy so much — as to un - loose the latchet of his shoes.

Wenn er kommt, wer - den die ver - ö - de - ten Stüt - - ten froh -
When he comes, shall all the de - sert - ed pia - - ces be

Example 3. Jochanaan's theme (Strauss, 1943).

Example 4. Salome motif (Kramer, 1990, p. 285).

3.3 Oriental setting

When Wilde was writing his play, Orientalism had already been in vogue in Europe for well over a century with manifestations across the arts. Indeed, representations of the Orient as sumptuous, sensual, decadent and dangerous were already stereotypical by the time Wilde began work on this play, so the tropes would have been readily recognized by his audience. Like other authors and artists of the period, Wilde was using them not to paint a

realistic portrait of another part of the world, but to explore themes and issues that were prohibited or repressed in the Western society of his day. As Edward Said (1995) points out, the representations of the East that circulated in Europe at the time were created to serve Western power interests and legitimize its actions.¹⁷

In *Salome*, Wilde evokes the Orient in a number of ways, both visually and verbally. The action takes place somewhere in Judaea on a grand terrace outside Herod's banqueting hall, with a cast of exotic characters that includes the Syrian Narraboth, a Cappadocian, a Nubian and a Roman, as well as several nameless Jews and Nazarenes. There are explicit references in the text to the extravagant décor and exotic clothing associated with the Orient. Herod at one point calls for carpets and torches to be brought to the terrace along with "ivory tables" and "tables of jasper"; there are numerous mentions of veils, fans and other bodily adornments (Herodias, for example, wears "a black mitre sewn with pearls" and her hair is "powdered with blue dust"; the Greeks from Smyrna have "painted eyes and painted cheeks, and frizzed hair curled in twisted coils", while the "silent, subtle Egyptians" have "long nails of jade and russet cloaks"); and we even have a sense of the heavy scents that must linger in the air, not only from the gardens ("How sweet the air is here!"), but also from references to perfumes worn by various characters.

In addition to these descriptions of the concrete setting, Wilde also uses metaphor and simile as an excuse to further evoke Oriental interiors and mysterious landscapes. Hence, we learn from *Salome* that Herod's eyes are "like black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry. (...) like the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make their lairs (...) like black lakes troubled by fantastic moons"; Jochanaan's body is white "like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea" or "the roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia"; his hair is "like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom in the land of the Edomites" or "the great cedars of Lebanon that give their shade to the lions and to the robbers who would hide themselves by day"; and his mouth is redder than "the pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre".

The reputed opulence of the East is evoked above all by the sumptuous gifts that Herod promises *Salome* if she will desist in her demand for Jochanaan's head. First he offers her a "great round emerald... the largest emerald in the whole world"; and when she refuses this, a hundred "beautiful white peacocks, that walk in the garden between the myrtles and the tall cypress trees". When she again refuses, he launches into an extraordinary catalogue of riches that is as mesmerizing as a litany: a collar of pearls, set in four rows like "moons chained with rays of silver"; amethysts of two kinds; yellow, pink and green topazes; opals, onyxes and moonstones; sapphires "as big as eggs, and as blue as

¹⁷ "(...) we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do (...) is at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors are *for* Europe, and only for Europe (Said, 1995, pp. 71-72, emphasis in the original).

blue flowers”; chrysolites, beryls, chrysoprases and rubies... In addition to the jewels are other accoutrements, precious not just for their provenance and their rarity, but also, in some cases, for the magical powers they possess: “four fans fashioned from the feathers of parrots”; a garment of ostrich feathers from Numidia; a crystal “into which it is not lawful for a woman to look”, as well as coffers of nacre, ebony and amber containing still more wondrous offerings. What is important here is not so much the denotative reference to individual items as their sheer abundance and cumulative symbolic power, as well as the rhythmic patterns that Wilde sets up in enumerating them.

On stage, many of these Oriental elements, and of course the rich colours, will be represented visually through the set, props and costume design, drawing upon the repertoire of motifs available from visual culture. Others, such as the similes and list of gifts, were simply removed from the libretto as extraneous. However, there also existed a conventionalized way of representing the East in music which Strauss was able to exploit to the full in his version of *Salome*. As in other forms of Orientalism, this was not so much about importing non-Western musical practices as about evoking a culturally remote Other through stock features that depended upon “culturally learned recognition” (Scott, 1998, 326-327). Though there had been musical portrayals of Turks and gypsies since the 17th century, the Middle East only really became fashionable in the 19th century, “when Western composers, especially those working in countries engaged in imperialist expansion, were torn between, on the one hand, making a simple distinction between Western Self and Oriental Other, and on the other, recognizing that there was no single homogeneous Oriental culture” (Scott, 1998, p. 309). Works such as Saint-Saëns’ opera *Samson et Dalila* (1877), Rimsky-Korsakoff’s symphonic suite *Scheherazade* (1888) and the two *Schérazades* by Ravel (1898 and 1903) thus established a mode through which this part of the world could be represented.

Scott (1998, p. 327) in fact goes on to offer a comprehensive taxonomy of features which have been used to depict the Orient in music since this time. The list is too long to quote in full here, but the most relevant include: use of whole tones or modes (Aeolian, Dorian, Phrygian) instead of the conventional diatonic scale; intervals foreign to Western tonality, like augmented seconds and fourths; complex or irregular rhythms; ornamental devices like arabesques and trills; sustained ostinato or ad libitum passages; and of course an instrumentation featuring oboes and cor anglais, with their thin reedy timbre, percussion instruments like tambourine, cymbals and gong, as well as harps and flutes. Scott (1998, p. 327) concludes: “Whether or not any of the musical devices and processes listed in this paragraph exist in any Eastern ethnic practices is almost irrelevant. As Said explains, ‘In a system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a *topos*, a set of references.’”.

Strauss makes use of many of the devices on Scott’s list to portray the Oriental atmosphere in Herod’s court. Although such features are present throughout the opera, it is the dance in the final scene that allows the composer to fully indulge his Orientalist fantasies. This extended symphonic episode, which can take up to ten minutes, forms the

turning point of the opera, ultimately precipitating the action that seals Jochanaan's fate (Santini, 2011, p. 233).

The dance is a self-contained piece, inserted in between Sections 247 and 248 of the main opera, and was reputedly composed only after the rest had been completed (Puffett, 1989, p. 165). The change of tone is noticeable the moment it begins, with an introductory sequence characterized by manic flurry of "Oriental" percussion instruments, such as tambourines, clashing cymbals and dramatic gongs, ornamented by rapid turns on the oboe (Example 5). Then the mood changes to one of languid sensuality as the dance itself gets under way. The triple metre is marked by pizzicato strings and tambourine, and punctuated by shivering semiquaver figures on the viola and flute; and the main melody, when it begins, played on the oboe, makes use of rapid glissando figures and exotic intervals typical of the Orientalist mode.

However, what is particularly startling is that this "oriental knickknack" (Holloway, 1989, p. 149) gradually morphs into what sounds suspiciously like a Viennese waltz. After a transitional passage that becomes progressively more tonal in feel, with the Oriental flourishes becoming fewer and farther between, the key and time signatures stabilize eight bars before letter Q and we are launched into a graceful melody of the kind normally associated with Johann rather than Richard Strauss (Example 6).

This part of the dance has been described by critics as "camp and kitsch" (Holloway, 1989, p. 149) and as "self-parody" (Rowden, 2013, p. 6). However, when viewed through the lens of translation, this assimilation of the foreign other seems suspiciously like a case of *domestication*. This acquires significance when we realise that Vienna was actually one of the few places where *Salome* was banned until 1918 (Puffett, 1989, pp. 5-7; Tydeman and Price, 1996, p. 127) and where, according to Painter (2001, pp. 202-205), there was also extraordinary resistance to musical innovation. With this strange metamorphosis, might Strauss have been pandering – ironically or otherwise – to what Painter (p. 203) calls the "Viennese longing for melody", that is to say, to the notorious social and musical conservatism that Vienna was displaying in relation to the rest of the German-speaking world?¹⁶

¹⁶ Painter (2001, p. 203) suggests that it may have been the notorious conservatism of the Viennese musical establishment that actually prodded Mahler and Schoenberg to turn to polyphony as a site of innovation. The Second Viennese School became a pioneer of musical modernism, effectively bridging the gap between late Romantic tonality and more radical experiments such as the twelve-tone technique.

Sehr schnell und heftig.

2 Hoboens.

2 B-Clarineten.

1. 2.

3 Fagotte.

3.

Contrafagott.

3.4 Horn (F).

Pauken.

eine kl. Pauke (mit Eitschlägel).

Tamburin.

kleine Trommel.

Sehr schnell und heftig. (Die Musikanten beginnen einen wilden Tanz.) (Salome noch bewegungslos.)

Viol. I.

Viol. II.

Bratschen.

(1. Pelt.)

Celli.

(die übrigen.)

Contra-Bässe.

Example 5. Opening of “Dance of the Seven Veils” (Strauss, 1911).

col'ada sempre

piu espr.

allmählich etwas fließender gradatamente ravvicinando

(Ped. mit jedem Takt) (Ped. with each bar)

Example 6. “Dance of the Seven Veils”, waltz (Strauss, 1943).

Finally, I would like to close my analysis by reflecting on a more sinister form of Orientalism that is barely detectable in Wilde’s text, yet has been enhanced by Strauss in a move that seems designed to comment upon an ideological debate taking place in his own time. I am referring to the passage known as the Jew Quintet (Sections 188-206), described by musicologists (e.g. Gilman, 1988; Painter, 2001) as an example of musical anti-Semitism. In Wilde’s play, we learn from one of the soldiers that the Jews inside the banquet hall

are constantly disputing about their religion (“like wild beasts howling”), an observation that is confirmed by Salome when she comes out onto the terrace (“How sweet the air is here! I can breathe here! Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies”). When Herodias, tired of hearing Jochanaan bellowing curses from his cistern, asks Herod why he does not hand him over to the Jews, they make their presence felt, breaking into an abstruse theological argument. In this passage, the referential component of the discourse again fades; what is important here is the evocation of meaningless babble or cacophony, a depiction of Jewish speech that had become stereotypical on the fin-de-siècle stage (Gilman, 1988, p. 58).

Musically this has been given comic treatment as a quintet of four shrill tenors and a bass, a format derived from the *opera buffa*. With this high-pitched voicing, Gilman (1988, pp. 57-62) argues, Strauss was drawing on a complex semiotic that already linked the Jew to femininity and homosexuality,¹⁷ and therefore to a whole discursive formation of perversion and biological degeneration. When Herod joins in their debate (with the shrillest voice of all) and continues their role after the quintet is finished, the anti-Semitic caricature becomes even darker. The implication, Gilman argues, is that “Herod tries to seduce his stepdaughter *because* he is an Oriental Jew (...). And he is understood to be an Eastern Jew, an *Ostjude*, because he is rich and materialistic and because his voice breaks” (pp. 61-62, emphasis added).

Painter (2001) takes this analysis further in her study of the semiotics of counterpoint in the early 20th century. The fact that Strauss made each part in the Jew quintet rhythmically and melodically independent created a particularly discordant form of polyphony, which contrasts markedly with the consonant harmony of the Nazarene (i.e. Christian) chorus that comes immediately after. According to her, Strauss was, with this, deliberately caricaturing the musical modernism associated with Jewish composers Mahler and Schoenberg. Thus, when *Salome* was performed in Dresden the night before the German premiere of Schoenberg’s *First String Quartet* (*op. 7*) in 1907, the quintet “triggered a (...) virulent antisemitism directed against Schoenberg, with allusion to the stereotype of the unassimilated Eastern Jew” (Painter, 2001, p. 202).

This is, therefore, an interesting case of what translation studies scholars have called the (inevitable) “manipulation” of literature to enable it to serve a new function in a new context.¹⁸ In the hands of Strauss, Wilde’s *Salome* not only comments on the political tensions in Germany at the time of writing, but also participates in debates that were beginning to erupt in musical circles about the whole future of Western tonality. The semiotic that had culminated in the Wagnerian music drama was now being challenged as modernists like Schoenberg experimented with new forms of musicality that destabilized, and would eventually abolish, the whole notion of a tonal centre. Thus, the harnessing of

¹⁷ Jews were portrayed with high-pitched voices as a reference to circumcision, which was associated in the popular mind with castration. The leitmotif associated with the Jews is also high-pitched and played on the oboe, an instrument that has a “thin, whining sound” (Gilman, 1988, p. 56).

¹⁸ “From the point of view of the target literature, all translation implies a certain degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose” (Hermans, 1985, p. 11).

atonality and polyphony to Judaism in this, Strauss' "Jewish" opera, sets up a relationship of metonymy between tonality and Western culture in general. The implication is that Western culture was now under threat – politically, musically and morally – from an Oriental Other bent on overturning the very order that sustained its hegemony.

We know of course how this played out on the broader stage. Strauss went on to collaborate with the Nazis, becoming president of Hitler's Reichsmusikkammer (Reich Music Chamber); and even though he was exonerated of the most serious anti-Semitic charges at a denazification trial in 1947-1948, his legacy remains ambivalent (Burton-Hill, 2014). In *Salome*, we are privileged to be able to watch him actively grappling with some of the thorniest issues ever to face Western culture when they first started to raise their head in the early decades of the 20th century.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to show in this article that Strauss' opera *Salome* is susceptible to analysis using the tools supplied by translation studies. As with any interlingual translation, we see him adapting the source material to a new environment under a series of constraints that include not only the "internal control system" imposed by the musical code but also an external one determined by the culture of reception (Lefevere, 1985). His musical choices show evidence of a concern for what Lefevere calls the "poetics" of the system (i.e. the inventory of musical devices able to be deployed for semiotic purposes and the theoretical models underpinning their use) and also for ideological factors operating in the new universe of discourse. As for the constraint that Lefevere calls "patronage", though this would later be manifested explicitly in his recruitment by the Nazi regime, at this point in time, it is most evident in the commercial logic that prompted him to select such a fashionable theme. The bid of course paid off: the income resulting from the opera's success enabled Strauss to end his contract with the Berlin Opera and dedicate himself full-time to composition (Puffett, 1989, p. 5).

The modernist composers that came after Strauss reacted forcefully against the semiotic excesses of the Romantics, by denying that music could mean anything at all and attempting to return it to a formal abstract art. Today, however, the "new musicology" movement fully recognises the semiotic potential inherent in all cultural practices. Time will tell if this still-specialized knowledge will ever become part of a broader programme to educate translation scholars in the intersemiotic dimensions of the processes they study.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- Strauss, R. (1943) *Salome*, Op. 54. Piano Reduction/Vocal Score, arranged by Otto Singer. London: Boosey and Hawkes.
- Strauss, R. (1981) *Salome in full score*. Op. 54, Orchestral Score. New York: Dover.
- Wilde, O. (1912) *Salome, a tragedy in one act translated from the French of Oscar Wilde with sixteen drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*. London: John Lane; New York: The

Bennett, K. – The musical power of *Salome*
Translation Matters, 1(2), 2019, pp. 43-61, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tma3>

Bodley Head. Available at:
<https://archive.org/details/salometragedyino00wilduoft/page/n8> (Accessed: 6
September 2019).

Wilde, O. (1917) *Salomé, drame en un acte*. Paris: Georges Crès et Cie.

Secondary sources

- Archer, W. (2005) 'Mr Oscar Wilde's new play' [1893] in Beckson, K. (ed.) *Oscar Wilde: the critical heritage*. London: Routledge, pp. 159-160.
- Ayrey, C. (1989) 'Salome's final monologue' in Puffett, D. (ed.) *Richard Strauss: Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 109-130.
- Bennett, K. (2002) 'Mediating between God and man: towards a poetics of sacred discourse', *Máthesis*, 11, pp. 109-123.
- Bennett, K. (2003) 'The seven veils of Salomé: a study of Wilde's play in Portuguese translation', *The Translator*, 9(1), pp. 1-38.
- Burton-Hill, C. (2014) 'Richard Strauss: a reluctant Nazi', *BBC Culture*, 10 June [online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140610-richard-strauss-a-reluctant-nazi> (Accessed: 7 September 2019).
- Carpenter, T. (1989) 'Tonal and dramatic structure' in Puffett, D. (ed.) *Richard Strauss: Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 88-108.
- Chapple, N. (2006) *Re-(en)visioning Salome: the Salomes of Hedwig Lachmann, Marcus Behmer and Richard Strauss*. MA thesis, University of Waterloo.
- Coulardeau, J. (2010) 'Salome, an iconoclastic myth from Oscar Wilde to Richard Strauss', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 72, pp. 131-148.
- Daniel, A. M. (2007) 'Lost in translation: Oscar, Bosie and Salome', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 68(1-2), pp. 60-70.
- Dimova, P. (2013) 'Decadent senses: The dissemination of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* across the arts' in Rowden, C. (ed.) *Performing Salome, revealing stories*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 5-47.
- Donohue, J. (1997) 'Distance, death and desire in Salome' in Raby, P. (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 118-142.
- Eells, E. (2010) 'Wilde's French *Salomé*', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 72, pp. 115-130.
- Eells, E. (2012) 'Transposing Wilde's *Salomé*: the French operas by Strauss and Mariotte' in Radford, A. and Reid, V. (ed.) *Franco-British Cultural Exchanges, 1880-1940: Channel Packets*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 66-83.
- Gilman, S. L. (1988) 'Strauss, the pervert, and avant-garde opera of the fin de siècle', *New German Critique*, 43, pp. 35-68.
- Hermans, T. (1985) 'Translation studies and a new paradigm' in Hermans, T. (ed.) *The manipulation of literature: studies in literary translation*. London: Croom Helm, pp. 7-15.
- Holland, M. and Hart-Davis, R. (ed.) (2000) *The complete letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Holloway, R. (1989) '*Salome*: art or kitsch?' in Puffett, D. (ed.) *Richard Strauss: Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 145-160.
- Kramer, L. (1990) 'Culture and musical hermeneutics: the Salome complex', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2(3), pp. 269-294.
- Kramer, L. (2015) 'Opera as case history: Freud's Dora, Strauss's Salome, and the perversity of modern life', *The Opera Quarterly*, 31(1-2), pp. 100-115.

- Lefevere, A. (1985) 'Why waste our time on rewrites? The trouble with interpretation and the role of rewriting in an alternative paradigm' in Hermans, T. (ed.) *The manipulation of literature: studies in literary translation*. London: Croom Helm, pp. 215-244.
- MacDonald, I. A. (2011) 'Oscar Wilde as a French writer: considering Wilde's French in *Salome*' in Bennett, M. (ed.) *Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salome*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 1-20.
- Painter, K. (2001) 'Contested counterpoint: "Jewish" appropriation and polyphonic liberation', *Archi Für Musikwissenschaft*, 58(3), pp. 201-230.
- Praz, M. (1989) 'Salome in literary tradition' in Puffett, D. (ed) *Richard Strauss: Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 11-20.
- Puffett, D. (ed.) (1989) *Richard Strauss: Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rowden, C. (2013) 'Introduction' in Rowden, C. (ed.) *Performing Salome, Revealing Stories*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 1-14.
- Said, E. (1995) *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin.
- Santini, D. (2011) "'That invisible dance": reflections on the "Dance of the Seven Veils" in Richard Strauss's *Salome*', *Dance Research*, 29(2), pp. 233-245.
- Scott, D. B. (1998) 'Orientalism and musical style', *The Musical Quarterly*, 82(2), pp. 309-335.
- Tenschert, R. (1989) 'Strauss as librettist' in Puffett, D. (ed.) *Richard Strauss: Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 36-50.
- Thomas, D. W. (2000) 'The 'strange music' of *Salome*: Oscar Wilde's rhetoric of verbal musicality', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 33(1), pp. 15-38.
- Tydeman, W. and Price, S. (1996) *Wilde, Salome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (1999) *Speech, music, sound*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Yeoland, R. (2013) 'Richard Strauss and his French Salomé', *THE OSCHOLARS* [online]. Available at: <https://oscholars-oscholars.com/special-issues/contents/yeoland> (Accessed: 5 September 2019).

About the author: Karen Bennett has a MA and PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Lisbon, and lectures in Translation at NOVA University, Lisbon. She is also a member of the Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies (CETAPS), where she coordinates the Translationality strand.