

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Elektra



Music by Richard Strauss
Libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Adapted from the Greek tragedy,
Electra, by Sophocles

Opera in One Act

Setting: Mycenae, Greece,
courtyard of the royal palace
Time: After the Trojan war

Characters

Elektra (Electra), Agamemnon's daughter (soprano) Birgit Nilsson
Chrysothemis, her sister (soprano) Leonie Rysanek
Klytämnestra (Clytemnestra), their mother (mezzo-soprano) Mignon Dunn
Aegisth (Aegistheus), Clytemnestra's lover (tenor) Johannes Sembach
Orest (Orestes), son of Agamemnon (baritone) Karl Perron
Orest's tutor (bass) John Cheek
Klytämnestra's confidante (soprano) Gertrud Sachse
Her train-bearer (soprano) Elisabeth Anguish
A young servant (tenor) Charles Anthony
An old servant (bass) Talmage Harper
An overseer (soprano) Elizabeth Coss
Five servants ... Batyah Godfrey, Shirley Love, Ariel Bybee, Loretta di Franco, Alma Jean Smith

Conducted by James Levine

Performed by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Première performance at the at the Dresden State Opera on January 25, 1909

Synopsis

ACT I

Ancient Mycenae: The inner courtyard of the royal palace



Murder of Agamemnon
by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin

Background: Queen Klytämnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, have conspired to murder her husband, King Agamemnon. They also banished Agamemnon’s son, Orest, and prohibited his daughters, Elektra and Chrysothemis, from marrying, since their children would be bound to avenge Agamemnon’s death. Elektra lives only with the thought of atonement for her father’s death, desirous of the blood of her mother and Aegisthus. She lives as a wild beast, banished from society, the butt of ridicule by the servants — a horror to all. The murderers, Klytämnestra and Aegisthus, also have no rest; they are constantly haunted by the fear of vengeance against them.

As the curtain rises, servant girls are trying to wash away the blood where Agamemnon was murdered. They comment on the wild behavior of Elektra, Agamemnon’s eldest daughter.

Elektra enters the courtyard in a disheveled state. When the servants have gone, Elektra, half-crazed with grief, wails, “Agamemnon, Agamemnon, where are you, father?” She begs for his father’s help and promises to dance before his tomb once his murder has been avenged. The servants whisper that Elektra should be locked up, but they also hope that she will get her vengeance. Elektra, pointing to the place where Agamemnon had died, cries out that her brother Orest will one day return to avenge his father’s death and be hailed as the true king.

Chrysothemis, Elektra’s younger sister, enters the courtyard. Unlike Elektra, she is calm and accepts Klytämnestra and Aegisthus, and is thus treated well by them. Chrysothemis rebukes Elektra for her actions and begs her to give up her obsession for vengeance so that they can both lead normal lives. She is convinced that their brother, Orest, will never return. Chrysothemis warns Elektra that the queen and her new husband, Aegisthus, mean to imprison her. Elektra scorns her and, upon hearing that Klytämnestra has been suffering from nightmares, she is determined to confront Klytämnestra.

Noises from within the palace herald the approach of Klytämnestra. Chrysothemis rushes off, leaving Elektra to face their mother alone. Klytämnestra enters with a procession, staggering from drugs and lack of sleep. The queen reveals to Elektra that she has been having nightmares of her son, Orest, pursuing her and begs Elektra for help. She asks her what kind of sacrifice to the gods will give her peace. Elektra mocks her mother, saying that her nightmares will only end when the blood of an impure woman is shed. Confused, Klytämnestra demands that Elektra name the woman. Elektra screams that it is Klytämnestra herself who must die, and that she and her banished brother, Orest, will wield the axe. Klytämnestra appears shaken. Elektra then graphically describes her mother’s violent, vengeful death.

Klytämnestra’s confidante runs in and whispers something to her, which abruptly changes her mood. Laughing maniacally, Klytämnestra leaves her daughter wondering what news she has just received.

Chrysothemis returns to Elektra with news of the death of Orest. More determined than ever, Elektra declares that she and Chrysothemis must avenge their father’s death themselves, since Orest can no longer carry out his duty. Despite Elektra’s attempts to encourage her, Chrysothemis pulls away in terror and runs off, refusing to take any part in the planned vengeance. With no help from her sister, Elektra resolves to kill the murderers herself.



Electra and Orestes by Alfred Church

When everyone has gone, Elektra starts digging for the axe with which her father was slain, and which she had buried in order to give it to Orest on his return. A stranger enters the courtyard. At first neither recognizes each other. The stranger reveals himself to Elektra as Orest, her banished brother. He is shocked to see how disheveled and sickly Elektra has become. Orest tells Elektra that his death was only a rumor to throw Aegisth and Klytämnestra off-guard so that he can avenge Agamemnon's death.

Their reunion is cut short when Orest is summoned by Klytämnestra. Orest enters the palace, but Elektra forgets to give him the axe. Soon after Klytämnestra's death cries are heard. Aegisth returns, and Elektra coyly lights his way into the palace, where Orest kills him as well.

The palace halls resound with tumultuous confusion — some rejoice while others grieve. Chrysothemis describes to Elektra the awful scene and the wounds of the dead. Having fulfilled her promise to her father, Elektra, in a state of ecstasy, begins a triumphal dance which waxes ever wilder and more passionate. Chrysothemis returns, but Elektra doesn't notice her. As the dance reaches a feverish pitch she drops lifelessly to the ground as the curtain falls.



The Remorse of Orestes by William-Adolphe Bouguereau

Richard Strauss

Born: June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany; Died: September 8, 1949, Garmisch, Germany



Richard Strauss (no relation to the Viennese Waltz family) almost single-handedly carried the Wagnerian opera tradition and the Romantic Lisztian tone poem into the twentieth century. Outstanding in two major areas — tone poem and opera — Strauss is also one of the great composers of Lieder (German classical art songs).

Strauss started composing by the age of six, having received basic instruction from his father, Franz, a virtuoso horn player. This was, however, his only formal training. As a child, the elder Strauss instilled in his son a love of the classical composers, and his early works follow in their path. Strauss' first symphony premiered when he was just seventeen, his second (in New York) when he was twenty. These early works showed serious miscalculations of form but, with each new work he showed an increasing mastery.

Strauss spent two terms at Munich University, studying philosophy, aesthetics and art history. He left the university to begin a conducting career and, in 1885, succeeded Hans von Bülow as conductor of the orchestra in Meiningen. From this vantage point he developed a sense for orchestration that was unrivaled. For the next forty years he conducted orchestras in Munich, Weimar, Berlin, and Vienna.

In 1885 Strauss met Alexander Ritter, a composer and poet, who turned him towards the school of Franz Liszt, Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner. It took him some time to master this new form, but the tone-poem *Don Juan* (1889) immediately established Strauss as an important figure. In it, he found his artistic self, particularly in the creation of astonishing, unheard-of orchestral effects, which were to occupy him throughout most of his career. He also developed a new sense of dramatic movement, which he derived from Wagner, but which was more quickly paced. *Don Juan* inaugurated a series of tone poems, which keep their hold in the standard repertoire: *Tod und Verklärung* (1889); *Till Eulenspiegels Lustige Streiche* (1894); *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896); *Don Quixote* (1897), perhaps his most profound orchestral work, and *Ein Heldenleben* (1898), which influenced later generations of modernists in its orchestration and use of dissonance.

By the turn of the century, Strauss began to shift his focus to opera. While in Paris he was approached by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, a Viennese poet and playwright. With Hofmannsthal as his librettist, they created two revolutionary and shocking works: *Salome*, based on Oscar Wilde's controversial play, and *Elektra*, Hofmannsthal's version of the classical Greek tragedy. In these works, the intense emotions and often lurid narrative elicited a more daring and demanding musical language, full of extreme chromaticism and harsh timbres. His next opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, turned to a more focused, almost neoclassical approach.

By the twenties, Strauss seemed like a ghost from the past. His librettist, Hofmannsthal, had died suddenly, and Strauss was thrown to searching for new librettists, many of whom were of varied quality. As a result, the operas, as well as the instrumental works, became increasingly inconsistent in quality.

By the thirties Strauss settled into a comfortable place in German musical society. In 1933, when Hitler came into power, Strauss was chosen to replace Bruno Walter and Toscanini in conducting engagements, and was appointed president of Reichsmusikkammer by Goebbels. He eventually broke with the Nazis on moral ground. The fact that his grandchildren were part-Jewish made him keep his criticisms to himself; however, the Nazis intercepted his private letters and he was forced to resign from his post. His silence and his continued residence in Germany caused him problems during the postwar de-nazification programs. Strauss's final work, *Four Last Songs* (1948), was a masterpiece and a culmination of his song-writing. Strauss died peacefully at the age of 85, following several heart attacks. He was left virtually penniless in the aftermath of World War II.

Elektra

Greek tragedy by Sophocles

The plot of *Elektra* is based upon the classical Greek tragedy of the same name by Sophocles. Set in the city of Argos, Greece, a few years after the Trojan war, it is based around the character of Electra, and the vengeance that she and her brother Orestes take on their mother Clytemnestra and stepfather Aegisthus for the murder of their father, Agamemnon.

Elektra by Richard Strauss

Strauss' story of *Elektra* was heavily criticized at the time for its depictions of “perverse” violence, with one critic bemoaning that “a classical work has been dragged from its pedestal.”

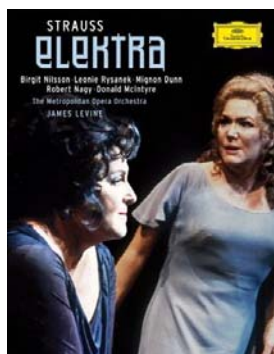
The music is full of extreme dissonances, which works well to express the mood of such a story. As in *Salome*, there is a weft and woof of leading motifs. In “Salome” the score works up to one set climax, the “Dance of the Seven Veils.” In the opening bars of *Elektra*, the orchestra alone heaves up the shattering sound of the name “Ag-a-mem-non,” gripping us in the psychodrama. There also is a set composition, a summing up of emotions, in one eloquent burst of song, known as the Elektra chord, which occurs when Elektra recognizes Orest. It may be because it came in the midst of so much cacophony that its effect was enhanced.

The orchestra. To support the overwhelming emotional content of the opera, Strauss uses a very large and, in some ways, unusual orchestra, which includes a heckelphone, 2 basset horns, 2 F bass Wagner tubas, bass trumpet, 2 tenor trombones, bass trombone, contrabass trombone, 6-8 timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, tambourine, castanets, glockenspiel, celesta, 2 harps and 8 double basses.

Ernestine Schumann-Heink, the Klytämnestra of the original production in Dresden said: “I will never sing the role again. It was frightful. We were a set of mad women... There is nothing beyond ‘Elektra.’ We have lived and reached the furthest boundary in dramatic writing for the voice with Wagner. But Richard Strauss goes beyond him. His singing voices are lost. We have come to a full stop. I believe Strauss himself sees it” — and, indeed, in his next opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, the composer shows far more consideration for the voice, and has produced a score in which the melodious elements are many.

Elektra: The Video (1980)

Starring Birgit Nilsson and Leonie Rysanek; James Levine conducting



This February 16, 1980 matinée performance of *Elektra* was Birgit Nilsson's triumphant return to the Met after a five-year absence and her final performance in a complete opera at the Met. It also marked one of the last appearances of Leonie Rysanek in one of her own signature roles as Chrysothemis. This is a landmark video of historical proportions, a cast that comes around rarely in one's lifetime, with some of the finest music opera has to offer. There's only one word to describe it — *Elektrafying!*

When Birgit Nilsson sang this performance of *Elektra* she was almost 62, yet she was singing *Elektra* — the most demanding dramatic soprano role in the entire standard operatic repertoire. Also, many attending this performance were unaware that Rysanek was suffering a fever of 102°F., and had contemplated cancelling midway through the opera. James Levine and the Met orchestra perform out of their minds. The audience carried on for over twenty minutes at the curtain's fall (included as a Bonus Feature).

The performance took on legendary proportions even before it was performed! The public queued up for days, even sleeping in the Lincoln Center tunnels, in order to secure a ticket. Recognizing the historic nature of this performance, James Levine and the Met secured funding for this unexpected telecast in less than ten days. The result is a recording of historic importance.