

CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUES

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
MICHAEL BECKERMAN



Edited by Aleš Březina, Anja Bunzel
and Lorraine Byrne Bodley

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Lifting the Curtain on the Twentieth Century: An Entertainment in Four Acts

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Abstract

Riffing on *The New Yorker* opera critic Alex Ross's claim that "When the clarinet slithers up a disjointed scale at the outset of the piece, the curtain effectively goes up on twentieth-century music," this "entertainment in four acts" focuses on the performance history of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* as a point of entry to the century itself. Though the tone is lighthearted rather than academic, the essay touches on serious themes in modernity—among them censorship and eroticism, avant-garde and kitsch, high culture and popular culture, and the accommodation of art to power. Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Metamorphosen*, and *Four Last Songs* are among other works encountered along the way, together with Irving Berlin's "Sadie Salome (Go home!)" (popularized by Ziegfeld Follies star Fanny Brice), and Bob Dylan's infamous *Self Portrait* album.

Act 1 The Curtain Rises

“When the clarinet slithers up a disjointed scale at the outset of the piece,” writes *The New Yorker*’s opera critic Alex Ross, “the curtain effectively goes up on twentieth-century music.”¹ The piece in question is Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome*, which had its world première at the Semper Opernhaus in Dresden on December 9, 1905. The first *Salome*, Marie Wittich, found Strauss’s reworking of Oscar Wilde’s 1891 play “distasteful and obscene.” Protesting “I won’t do it, I’m a decent woman,” she refused to perform the “Dance of the Seven Veils”—a professional dancer took her place, as would become the norm in many later productions—or to kiss the severed head of John the Baptist at the climax of the opera.² The audience had no such scruples. “It was received with unbounded enthusiasm,” Lawrence Gilman informed readers of *The North American Review*:

There were thirty-eight recalls for the singers, the conductor and the composer, when the curtain fell after the brief performance (the work lasts but an hour and a half). Since then, it has traversed the operatic stages of the Continent in a manner little short of triumphal. It has been jubilantly acclaimed as an epoch-making masterwork, and virulently denounced as a subversive and preposterous aberration: yet it has everywhere been eagerly listened to and clamorously discussed.³

Over the next two years *Salome* was staged in more than fifty European opera houses. Having been banned by the censor in Vienna (where it was not performed until 1918), it had its Austrian première at the Stadttheater in Graz on May 16, 1906. Such was its allure that Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Giacomo Puccini, and Alban Berg (and according to Richard Strauss, the young Adolf Hitler) were all in the Graz audience.⁴

Salome’s New World première took place at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on January 22, 1907, with Olive Fremstad in the title role. Two days later, the *New York Times* carried a letter from an eminent psychologist castigating Strauss’s opera as

“a detailed and explicit exposition of the most horrible, disgusting, revolting features of degeneracy (using the word now in its customary social, sexual significance) I have ever heard, read of, or imagined ... the fact that it is phrased in limpid language and sung to emotion-liberating music does not make it any the less ghastly to the sane man or woman with normal generic instincts.”⁵

- 1 Alex Ross, “The Endless, Grisly Fascination of Richard Strauss’s ‘Salome’,” *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2019.
- 2 Quoted in Shireen Malik, “Salome and Her Dance of the Seven Veils,” in *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, ed. Jennifer Heath (University of California Press, 2008), 149.
- 3 Lawrence Gilman, “Richard Strauss’s ‘Salome’,” *The North American Review* 184, no. 607 (1907): 180.
- 4 See Stefan Zweig, “Strauss and Stefan Zweig: A Fragment of History,” *Tempo*, no. 7 (1944): 8; Alex Ross, “Chapter 1, ‘The Golden Age (Opening),’” <https://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/06/chapter-1-the-g.html>, accessed November 7, 2024.
- 5 Imparo Ancora, “‘Salome’ Condemned: The Unqualified Disapproval of a Distinguished Physician,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1907, 8.



Figure 31.1: Edgar Leslie and Irving Berlin, cover by Edward H. Pfeiffer for sheet music of *Sadie Salome Go Home!* (New York : Ted Snyder Co., 1909), (Library of Congress, Music Division, ML31 .E3, photo: Library of Congress / Public domain).

Banker J. Pierpont Morgan's daughter Anne, who is nowadays remembered as a pioneering feminist and member of the "Mink Brigade" of wealthy society ladies who supported the New York garment workers' strike of 1909,⁶ was equally distressed by the opera's immorality. Luckily Daddy sat on the Met board. Five days later *Salome* was pulled as "detrimental to the best interests of the Metropolitan Opera House."⁷ *Salome* would not be performed at the Met again until 1934.

Strauss's opera may not have been the only factor in the wave of "Salomania" (as the *New York Times* baptized it) that swept the US in 1907–9,⁸ but it certainly helped things along. Before long a *Salome* dance craze was conquering burlesque and vaudeville stages across the nation. Not everyone was enamored of this latest European import. The actress Marie Cahill, who had previously "startled Broadway by entering a strong protest to theatrical managers against compelling chorus girls to wear tights and excessively short skirts against their will," wrote to Teddy Roosevelt and other political leaders in August 1908 demanding "the establishment in the state of New York of a commission with powers of censorship over the dramatic stage." She

6 "Miss Morgan Aids Girl Waist Strikers," *New York Times*, December 14, 1909.

7 Peter Clark, "From the Archives: *Salome* at the Met," <https://www.metopera.org/discover/archives/notes-from-the-archives/from-the-archives-salome-at-the-met/>

8 See Marlis Schweitzer, "Prostitution and Brothel Drama in the Progressive Era," <https://brotheldrama.lib.miamioh.edu/essay-salomania/>

recommended the “very successful” Lord Chancellor’s censorship of London theaters as a model to follow.⁹ The *New York Times* took a lighter view, reassuring its readers that:

In spite of rumors which have been prevalent of late, it is extremely improbable that a ‘Salome’ dance will be substituted for the ‘Merry Widow’ waltz at the New Amsterdam ... As soon as any chorus girl shows the very first symptoms of the disease she is at once enveloped in a fur coat—the most efficacious safeguard known against the Salome dance—and hurriedly isolated.¹⁰

Irving Berlin, who was then working as a singing waiter at Jimmy Kelly’s on Union Square, had his first hit with a little comic ditty called *Sadie Salome Go home!*¹¹ The song was popularized by eighteen-year-old Fanny Brice, the original funny girl, in Max Spiegel’s burlesque musical *The College Girls*, in which she performed a spoof of Salome’s dance. Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. saw the show and immediately hired Fanny for his *Follies* of 1910.¹² It’s nice to know that the opera whose opening chords raised the curtain on twentieth-century music was indirectly responsible for Irving Berlin getting his first job in Tin Pan Alley. But Irving’s story of a good Jewish girl gone to the bad confirmed all Marie Cahill’s worst fears:

Don’t do that dance, I tell you Sadie
That’s not a bus’ness for a lady! ‘Most ev’rybody knows
That I’m your loving Mose
Oy, Oy, Oy, Oy
Where is your clothes?¹³

9 “The ‘Salome’ Dance Gets into Politics; Actress Marie Cahill Writes to Party Heads Urging Suppression of the Dance ...,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1908, 2.

10 “The Call of Salome; Rumors that Salomania Will Have a Free Hand This Season,” *New York Times*, Section M, August 16, 1908, 2.

11 Alex Ross, “Mysteries of Love,” *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2004.

12 “Fanny Brice,” *New World Encyclopedia*, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Fanny_Brice

13 Irving Berlin, “Sadie Salome (Go Home!),” [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sadie_Salome_\(Go_Home\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sadie_Salome_(Go_Home)), last updated December 30, 2020

14 Alex Ross, “Mysteries of Love.”

Act 2 The Return of the Repressed

New Yorkers with a taste for degeneracy were soon able to satisfy their perverted instincts when *Salome* was staged at Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House in January 1909, with “the bewitching Mary Garden”¹⁴ as Strauss’s lascivious heroine. Famous for creating the leading role in Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique in 1902, Garden performed the “Dance of the Seven Veils” herself, stripping down to a bodystocking. After Hammerstein’s opera company folded, Mary took her *Salome* to her hometown, reprising the role in the Chicago Grand Opera Company’s inaugural season at Louis Sullivan’s Auditorium Theater in 1910.

The city’s guardians of public morality were not pleased by what they saw. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that patrons were “oppressed and horrified. But

of any real enjoyment, there was little or no evidence.”¹⁵ The *Tribune*’s theater critic Percy Hammond seems nevertheless to have relished the star’s erotic writhing, gushing “She is a fabulous she-thing playing with love and death—loathsome, mysterious, poisonous, slaking her slimy passion in the blood of her victim ... a monstrous oracle of beauty.”¹⁶ Chicago police chief Roy T. Stewart, who was invited to witness the spectacle for himself at the next showing, threw his weight squarely behind the middlebrow: “It was disgusting. Miss Garden wallowed around like a cat in a bed of catnip. If the same show was produced on Halsted Street, the people would call it cheap, but over at the Auditorium they say it’s art.”¹⁷ *Salome* was scheduled for four performances—all of which sold out in advance—but the company’s board of directors followed the Met’s moral compass and canceled the production after just three nights.

Back in the Old World, the Lord Chamberlain kept *Salome* off London’s stages until Thomas Beecham negotiated a compromise that permitted a censored production to be staged at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden on December 8, 1910. “We had successfully metamorphosed a lurid tale of love and revenge into a comforting sermon,” Beecham claimed.¹⁸ To soothe Christian sensibilities, the setting was shifted from Judea to Ancient Greece and all Biblical references were removed. Jochanaan (John the Baptist) became simply “The Prophet,” and his severed head was replaced by a bloodied sword. Still the Freudian does have a habit of slipping, and the repressed insists on returning. As Beecham related in his autobiography, the cast did not play ball with the censors. On opening night,

Gradually I sensed [...] a growing restlessness and excitement of which the first manifestation was a slip on the part of Salome, who forgot two or three sentences of the bowdlerized version and lapsed into the viciousness of the lawful text. The infection spread among the other performers, and by the time the second half of the work was well under way they were all giving in and shamelessly restoring it to its integrity, as if no such things existed as British respectability and its legal custodians.¹⁹

After two world wars it got more difficult to shock, even in the most conservative opera houses. When *Salome* was revived at the Met in 1949 under the baton of Fritz Reiner, the Bulgarian soprano Ljuba Welitsch sang and danced the title role, “her ripe form swathed in flimsy green garments that set off a mop of carrot-coloured hair.” This time, “when the great gold curtains finally swept together, the audience set up a thunderous roar, an ovation that lasted for fifteen minutes.”²⁰ *New York Times* critic Olin Downes hailed *Salome* as “a vital modern opera”:

15 “The Night that ‘Salome’ Shocked the Whole Town,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 30, 1987, updated August 9, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1987/08/30/the-night-that-salome-shocked-the-whole-town/>

16 Quoted in Claudia Cassidy, “Prima Donna Mary Garden Dies,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1967; reproduced at <https://chicagology.com/opera/marygarden/>

17 Quoted in “The Night that ‘Salome’ Shocked the Whole Town.”

18 Quoted in Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon. “‘Here’s Lookin’ at You, Kid’: The Empowering Gaze in ‘Salome,’” *Profession* (1998): 18.

19 Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1943), 169–70.

20 Frank Merklings, sleeve notes to Ljuba Welitsch, *Final Scene from Salome and Arias by Mozart, Puccini and Johann Strauss*, CBS Classics 61088, 1969, LP.

The music is white hot ... Strauss's use of dissonance, which is now child's play, but which in 1905, or 1907, was the last word of harmonic writing, is still very effective ... It still seizes you. But the whole score, with its inherent banalities intact, remains an astonishingly unified and indestructible whole, which, as of 1949, stands up astonishingly well.²¹

Seventy-five years on, *Salome* seems in no danger of falling out of fashion. That has not stopped producers outdoing themselves in attempting to *épater la bourgeoisie*. Atom Egoyan thought it cool to stage the “Dance of the Seven Veils” as a gang rape for the Canadian Opera Company in 1996.²² Lydia Steier’s production at the Paris Opera in 2022 climaxed similarly, with the added refinement of having Salome first stand stock still on a pedestal while her stepfather Herod danced around her, removing her garments one by one.²³ Catherine Malfitano was the first Salome to dispense with the bodystocking and bare her all for art in Peter Weigl’s production at the Deutsch Oper Berlin in 1990. Maria Ewing famously did the same for (her husband) Peter Hall’s production at Covent Garden in 1992.²⁴ The Met finally capitulated in 2004. New York Times reviewer Anthony Tommasini couldn’t get enough of “attractive blonde-haired Finnish soprano” Karita Mattila—who would play Herodias twenty years later in Steier’s Paris *Salomé*—as she “shed item after item of a Marlene Dietrich-like white tuxedo costume until for a fleeting moment she twirled around exultant, half-crazed and completely naked” (!).²⁵ Nowadays exposing the soprano seems to be par for the course. Among recent interpreters, Mlada Khudoley, Nicola Beller Carbone, and Patricia Racette have all ended Salome’s dance *au naturel*.²⁶

Of the many fine *Salome* recordings, Ljuba Welitsch’s 1944 Vienna Radio broadcast of the closing scene, conducted by Lovro von Matačić, is hors de concours. Welitsch and Matačić rehearsed the performance with the composer himself, who was by then in his eightieth year. “Richard Strauss was terrific,” Welitsch told an interviewer later, “he went through every bar, every phrase with Matačić and me. For example, this ‘Ich habe deinen Mmmmmuuuunnd

21 Olin Downes, “Vital ‘Salome’: Strauss Opera Brilliantly Revived with New Soprano, Ljuba Welitsch,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1949, 238. My emphasis.

22 See Stephanie Bunbury, “‘Seven Veils’ Review: Atom Egoyan’s Cold but Bracing Take on ‘Salome’ – Berlin Film Festival,” *Deadline*, February 22, 2024, <https://deadline.com/2024/02/seven-veils-review-atom-egoyan-cold-but-bracing-take-on-salome-amanda-seyfried-berlin-film-festival-1235834508/>

23 See <https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/season-23-24/opera/salome>

24 See “Maria Ewing – Tanz der sieben Schleier (Salome),” posted by Anatoli Kirov, YouTube, September 8, 2009, 4:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3jF3g4KBbw>

25 Anthony Tommasini, “Met Opera Review; ‘Salome’ Unveils Emotions (and a Soprano),” *New York Times*, March 17, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/17/arts/met-opera-review-salome-unveils-emotions-and-a-soprano.html>

26 See Theodore P. Mahne, “N.O. Opera unveils a sultry, strongly sung ‘Salome’,” *NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune*, March 4, 2012, https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/arts/n-o-opera-unveils-a-sultry-strongly-sung-salome/article_9372e5a8-ec4a-590f-a576-cb8d519a57dd.html; Pat Donnelly, “Diva Sheds All for Salome’s Dance of the Seven

Veils in Strauss Opera,” *Montreal Gazette*, March 24, 2011, <https://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment-life/theatre/article492807.html>; Julie Riggott, “Review: LA Opera’s ‘Salome’ With Soprano Patricia Racette,” *Culture Spot LA*, February 21, 2017, <https://culturespotla.com/review-la-opera-salome-with-soprano-patricia-racette/>

geküsst' (I have kissed your mouth), this desire, he said, must come out in you, it was fantastic."²⁷ For Jürgen Kesting, "In the 1944 recording, for the climactic phase, on the last syllable of 'Jochanaan' ... the slenderly sensual voice not only sparkles like a diamond, it burns. What Welitsch has left behind is not only the ominous best rendering or representation of this scene—but the only one ever."²⁸

Act 3 What Is This Shit?

Salome may have raised the curtain on twentieth-century music, but Strauss grew weary of being portrayed as the torch-bearer for modernism by his opponents and fans alike. As early as 1900 he confessed to Romain Rolland that "I am not a hero; I haven't got the necessary strength; I am not made for battle; I much prefer to go into retreat, to be peaceful and to rest. I haven't enough genius ... I don't want to make the effort. At this moment what I need is to make sweet and happy music. No more heroisms."²⁹ *Elektra* (1909) took Salome's experiments with dissonance even further, but with *Der Rosenkavalier*, which premiered in Dresden in 1911, Strauss and his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal offered something completely different—a camp pastiche of Mozart and Johann Strauss's comic operas which the critics mostly panned and audiences loved, then and since.³⁰

Der Rosenkavalier was the operatic equivalent of Bob Dylan's infamous 1970 album *Self Portrait*, another refusal to oblige his followers and assume the mantle of "the voice of a generation."³¹ Greil Marcus began his review of the latter in *Rolling Stone* with the words "What is this shit?"

Imagine a kid in his teens responding to *Self Portrait*. His older brothers and sisters have been living by Dylan for years. They come home with the album and he simply cannot figure out what it's all about. To him, *Self Portrait* sounds more like the stuff his parents listen to than what he wants to hear; in fact, his parents have just gone out and bought *Self Portrait* and given it to him for his birthday. He considers giving it back for Father's Day.³²

But unlike Dylan's *Self Portrait*, which few would rank among his best works, *Der Rosenkavalier* remains Strauss's most popular opera. Strauss had found his operatic métier, and he never looked back. He knew well indeed, he said, that as an art form opera was dead. Wagner was so gigantic a peak that nobody could rise higher. "But" he added, with a broad, Bavarian grin,

27 Interview in *Opernwelt*, quoted in "Salome by Richard Strauss—the opera guide," <https://opera-inside.com/salome-by-richard-strauss-the-opera-guide/>, accessed November 8, 2024.

28 Quoted in *ibid.* The 1944 recording is available on Ljuba Welitsch, HMV, HLM 7006, 1972, LP.

29 Letter of March 1900, in Richard Strauss and Romain Rolland: *Correspondence*, ed. Rollo Myers (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), 132.

30 See Gary Le Tourneau, "Kitsch, Camp, and Opera: *Der Rosenkavalier*," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, no. 14 (1994): 71–97.

31 See Rob Horning, "The Voice of a Generation Yawns," *Dissent* (Winter 2014), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-voice-of-a-generation-yawns/>

32 Greil Marcus, "Self Portrait," *Rolling Stone* (June 8, 1970). Marcus took a kinder view of *Self Portrait* when it was revisited in Dylan's celebrated *Bootleg Series* in 2013. See his sleeve notes to Bob Dylan, *The Bootleg Series vol. 10: Another Self Portrait* (1969–1971), Columbia Records, 2013.

‘I solved the problem by making a detour around it.’”³³ A string of Strauss/Hofmannsthal hits followed: *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), *Die ägyptische Helena* (1928), and *Arabella* (first performed in 1933). After Hofmannsthal died in 1929 Strauss turned to the Jewish writer Stefan Zweig for his next opera, *Die schweigsame Frau* (The Silent Woman).

By the time Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, Strauss was Germany’s pre-eminent living composer. At first, he thought he could quietly retreat to the villa in the Munich suburb of Garmisch, which he bought with the proceeds from *Salome*, until the storm passed. “I made music under the Kaiser,” he supposedly told his family. “I’ll survive under this lot, as well.”³⁴ He soon discovered that for an artist of his stature, neutrality was not permitted. Strauss “met frequently with Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels,” recalled Zweig, “and at a time when even Furtwängler was still in mutiny, allowed himself to be made president of the Nazi Chamber of Music.” The Reichsmusikkammer regulated all aspects of German musical life. Its brief was to make “good German music,” which meant such modernist deviations as expressionism and atonality, together with jazz (“Negro music”), swing, and anything by Jewish composers like Mendelssohn, Mahler, or Schoenberg—not to mention Irving Berlin—was verboten. Fortunately Strauss’s years of dissonance were far behind him. For a while, “at all festive evenings at [Hitler’s mountain lodge at] Berchtesgaden, besides Wagner, Strauss songs were sung almost exclusively.”³⁵ But by the time Strauss conducted his *Olympic Hymn* at the opening ceremony for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, he had been forced to resign his position. He was already in trouble over his insistence on including Stefan Zweig’s name in the program for the première of *Die schweigsame Frau*, when a letter to Zweig in which he criticized Nazi racial politics was intercepted by the Gestapo. *Die schweigsame Frau* was canceled after the second performance and banned throughout Germany.

Strauss was undoubtedly vain, loved fame and money, and had hoped to use his influence at the Reichsmusikkammer to improve the lot of German musicians. But as Zweig makes clear, the composer also had other reasons for working with the Nazis:

To be particularly co-operative with the National Socialists was ... of vital interest to him, because in the National Socialist sense he was very much in the red. His son had married a Jewess, and thus he feared that his grandchildren whom he loved above everything else, would be excluded as scum from the schools; his new opera was tainted through me, his earlier operas through the half-Jew, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, his publisher was a Jew.³⁶

33 Zweig, “Strauss and Stefan Zweig,” 6.

34 Quoted in Clemency Burton-Hill, “Richard Strauss: A reluctant Nazi,” BBC, June 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140610-richard-strauss-a-reluctant-nazi>

35 Zweig, “Strauss and Stefan Zweig,” 8.

36 Ibid.

After 1936 the regime kept Strauss on a tight leash, and his daughter-in-law Alice and grandsons Christian and Richard were in effect hostages for his good behavior. Both Alice and the boys were harassed during the November 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom. After Alice's grandmother Paula Neumann was detained in Prague in 1942, Strauss drove to the gates of Terezín concentration camp to personally demand her release. He was unsuccessful. Together with twenty-five other relatives of Alice's, Paula perished in the camps. By the time Strauss rehearsed the final scene of *Salome* with Lovro von Matačić and Ljuba Welitsch for Vienna Radio, he had been living in the Austrian capital for two years. He moved there with Alice and her children in 1942, promised protection by Baldur von Schirach, the Gauleiter of Vienna. The Gestapo arrested Alice together with Strauss's son Franz in 1944, but Strauss was able to secure their release and allowed to take them back to Garmisch, where they remained under house arrest until the end of the war.³⁷

The final months of the war hit Strauss hard as he watched opera house after opera house where his works had triumphed—the Lindenoper in Berlin, the Semper in Dresden, the Vienna State Opera house—reduced to rubble and ashes by Allied bombs. He poured his grief into the “solemn, dark, and resigned music from the end of a sorrowing composer's life” of *Metamorphosen*,³⁸ a suite for twenty-three solo strings composed between March 13—the day after the destruction of the Vienna Opera House—and April 12, 1945. A few days after finishing *Metamorphosen*, Strauss recorded in his diary that:

The most terrible period of human history is at an end, the twelve-year reign of bestiality, ignorance, and anti-culture under the greatest criminals, during which Germany's 2000 years of cultural evolution met its doom.³⁹

In keening music of unrelenting ferocity, *Metamorphosen* plumbs the depths of sorrow, grief, misery, despair. One might very well ask “Ist dies etwa der Tod?” (Is this perhaps death?)

Act 4 *Metamorphosen*

“Ist dies etwa der Tod?” is of course the last line of “Im Abendrot” (At Sunset), the Alfred von Eichendorff poem that concludes the last of Strauss's *Four Last Songs* in the order in which they are customarily performed, though not the order in which they were written. The musical mood could not be more different from *Metamorphosen*. Here the strings soar, the soprano shimmers and shines, the horns softly glow, and the flutes trill in imitation of Eichendorff's two skylarks nightdreaming as they climb into the sky at dusk. “At the

37 See Michael H. Kater, “Music; Richard Strauss and Hitler's Reich: Jupiter in Hell,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/06/arts/music-richard-strauss-and-hitler-s-reich-jupiter-in-hell.html>

38 Bryant Manning, “Richard Strauss, reflecting on his artistic life, in ‘Metamorphosen,’” *Chicago Symphony Orchestra website*, October 12, 2020, <https://cso.org/experience/article/1285/richard-strauss-reflecting-on-his-artistic-li>

39 Quoted in Stanley Corngold, “On Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*,” *YellowBarnBlog*, August 2, 2013, <https://www.yellowbarn.org/blog/richard-strauss-s-metamorphosen>

end of a long and successful career, when a composer still has the power to move his audience with a swansong of such sublime beauty that it takes your breath away—well, you know that work is a masterpiece,” writes Jane Jones. “The overwhelming effect is one of a feeling of serene peace. It’s simply one of the most touchingly beautiful ways for a composer to end his career.”⁴⁰ “Strauss clearly is making a final statement, offering a credo of sorts, particularly in the song ‘Im Abendrot,’ which describes death as a vast, tranquil peace after the weariness of wandering,” agrees Renée Fleming, who has performed the *Four Last Songs* more often than any other work in her repertoire.⁴¹ I’m not so sure about that “clearly.” Strauss did not know that these would be among his last compositions, and the poignant title was given by his publisher.

When I was younger, I loved these songs. In my seventies, less inclined to go gentle into that good night, I have become more ambivalent—and the more so, the more I have learned about the circumstances of their creation. In ill health, short of money, with his reputation irrevocably sullied by his association with the Nazi regime, Strauss and his wife, soprano Pauline de Ahna, left defeated Germany in October 1945 for Switzerland where they lived an itinerant life staying in hotels. The recent past continued to shadow him. Between finishing “Im Abendrot”—which was actually the first of the *Four Last Songs* to be composed—in Montreux on May 6, 1948, and completing “Frühling” (Spring) on July 18 in Pontresina, Strauss faced a de-Nazification hearing. In the end, he was cleared of collaboration. He finished “Beim Schlafengehen” (Going to Sleep) in Pontresina seventeen days later, and “September” in Montreux on September 20.

There are undeniable moments of astonishing beauty in these works. The violin solo before the lines “Und die Seele unbewacht/will in freien Flügen schweben” (And the unguarded soul/Wants to float in free flight) in “Beim Schlafengehen” is breathtaking. But—for me at least—it also brings back another violin solo, in Janáček’s opera *Jenůfa*, ascending from the orchestra pit up to the gods where I was sitting in Glasgow’s Theatre Royal way back when. Only, that solo came at the climax of Kostelnička’s aria “Co chvíle” (A Moment) in which the sextoness resolves to kill her daughter Jenůfa’s illegitimate baby. The violin ratchets up the tension unbearably as Kostelnička snatches up the child and rushes out into the icy night. Compared with this, the solo in “Beim Schlafengehen” feels like cheap artifice. And this is my problem with the entire cycle. Not least, with those trilling skylarks with which “Im Abendrot” ends. What kind of shit is this? I ask. Especially coming from the composer whose courageous, cacophonous *Salome* lifted the curtain on twentieth-century music? When all is said and done, are the poems not trite, the sentiments shallow, the music less a coming to terms with death than a determined looking away from it, cloaking its terrors in a blanket of saccharine loveliness with not a dissonant note to disturb the reverie? Could we ask

40 Jane Jones, “Richard Strauss: Four Last Songs—a swansong of sublime beauty,” at <https://www.classicfm.com/composers/strauss/guides/richard-strauss-four-last-songs/> 4

41 Quoted in “Four Last Songs: A musical masterpiece from Richard Strauss,” English National Ballet website, 3 August 2023, at <https://www.ballet.org.uk/blog-detail/four-last-songs-musical-masterpiece-richard-strauss/>

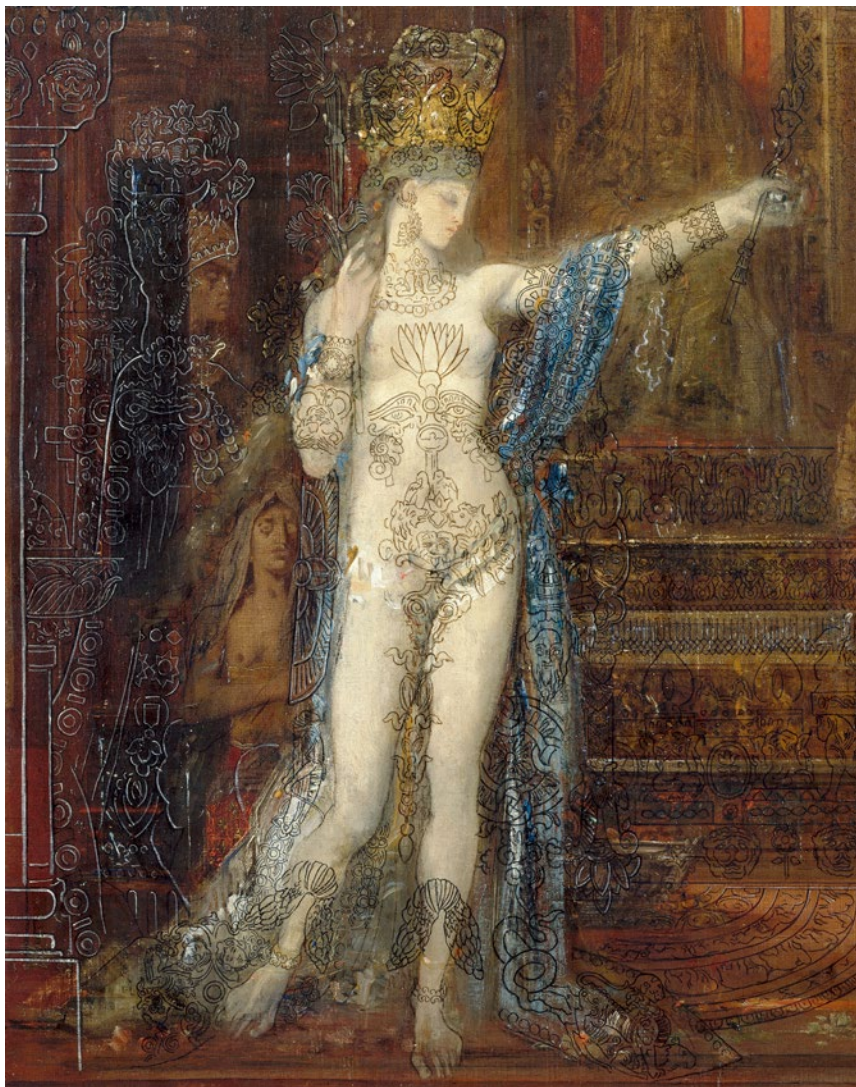


Figure 31.2: Detail from Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing*, also known as *Salome Tattooed*, 1874, oil on canvas, 92 × 60 cm (Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris, Cat. 211, photo: © GrandPalaisRmn, Musée Gustave Moreau / René-Gabriel Ojeda).

for a more perfect example of kitsch as Milan Kundera defines it—“the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection”?⁴² The *Four Last Songs* bear the same relation to *Metamorphosen* as *Der Rosenkavalier* does to *Salome* and *Elektra*. Richard is up to his old tricks again. Taking a detour, with plentiful opportunities to show off the soprano voice he so loved.

Or is he? As I sat down to write this piece, I listened for the first time in years to Gundula Janowitz’s exemplary rendition of the *Four Last Songs*.⁴³ David Bowie listed this as one of his favorite albums, alongside *The Fabulous Little Richard*, Steve Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians*, John Lee Hooker’s *Tupelo Blues*, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, Charles Mingus’s *Oh Yeah*, *The Fugs* self-titled debut album, and Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. “Janowitz’s performance ... has been described, rightly, as transcendental,” he explains. “I know of no other piece of music, nor any performance, which moves me quite like this.”⁴⁴ By chance, my laptop was open on Gustave Moreau’s never finished 1874 oil painting *Salome Dancing*, aka *Salome Tattooed* [FIG. 31.2], which I had

42 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 135.

43 Richard Strauss, Gundula Janowitz, Berliner Philharmoniker, Herbert von Karajan, *Vier Letzte Lieder—Four Last Songs—Tod Und Verklärung—Metamorphosen*, Deutsche Grammophon, 447 422-2, 1995, LP.

44 David Bowie, “David Bowie’s favorite albums” *Vanity Fair*, November 20, 2003, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/04/david-bowie-favorite-albums>

downloaded while searching for possible illustrations for this essay. On the face of it, Moreau's salacious painting and Strauss's sublime music couldn't be further apart. Yet this "fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane" (Max Ernst)⁴⁵ produced a remarkable synesthesia. The surrealists would have called it *hasard objectif*. Letting the music wash over me, I continued to gaze—with, no doubt, a very male gaze—at Moreau's Salome. Strauss's lush orchestration mirrors all the dark richness of Moreau's colors, the glowering reds, the glints of blue and gold. Janowitz's limpid soprano, soaring effortlessly over the orchestra, is the perfect aural counterpart to Salome's luminous dancer, exposed and vulnerable and yet commanding the rapt attention of all.

I briefly wondered what might happen if we were to stage the final scenes of *Salome* to the accompaniment of the *Four Last Songs*, or alternately substituted the words "Ich habe deinen Mund geküsst, Jokanaan" for "O weiter, stiller Friede! so tief im Abendrot" (O vast, silent peace, so deep in the sunset). The idea is not so preposterous. After all, a mere four years separated the *Four Last Songs* from that definitive recording of the final scene of *Salome* for Vienna Radio in 1944, when the old master coached Ljuba Welitsch on how to pour every last ounce of desire into the princess's triumphant "Ich habe deinen Mmmmmuuuunnd geküsst, Jokanaan." A sixteen-year old princess, with the voice of an Isolde.

Somewhere, I'm sure, Richard Strauss is grinning that broad Bavarian grin.

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45 Quoted in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (University of Michigan Press, 1972), 272.