

Salome
May 7-8, 2027

[Learn More About These Events](#)

Table of Contents

- **Notes on the Program by Aaron Grad**
 - **Richard Strauss, *Salome***

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By Aaron Grad

Salome [1905]

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born June 11, 1864 in Munich, Germany

Died September 8, 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Richard Strauss began his musical life with conservative tastes, taking after his father (a famous horn player) in a preference for the Classical style of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. It was only once Strauss left home that his ears opened up to the “music of the future,” to quote a phrase associated with his new musical idol, Richard Wagner. Borrowing a template from his other progressive hero, Franz Liszt, Strauss spent his twenties and thirties mastering the art of musical storytelling with just an orchestra in a series of tone poems that soon filled concert halls around the world.

Ever since he first attended Wagner’s operas as a teenager, Strauss had harbored ambitions of composing his own works for the stage. His first effort at a full opera proved to be an uncharacteristic failure when it premiered in 1894, and his next attempt, a one-act satire, fizzled after its 1901 debut when its raunchy sexual content proved to be too much for polite society.

Instead of shrinking away from controversy, Strauss doubled down with his next idea for an opera. He was already familiar with the scandalous play *Salome*, written in 1891 by the Irish provocateur Oscar Wilde, based on an episode from the Gospel of Matthew in which King Herod, installed by Rome to rule over Galilee, imprisons and executes John the Baptist for publicly railing against Herod’s incestuous marriage with Herodias (who was not only Herod’s niece but also, until recently, the wife of Herod’s half-brother). In Wilde’s dramatization, the tragedy centers around Herodias’ daughter Salome as both a victim and perpetrator of sexual violence. *Salome* was banned from the stage in England, and only reached the public once it was printed in French in 1893 and performed in Paris in 1896. After seeing a production of a German translation in 1902, Strauss was determined to set it as an opera, declaring that it “cried out for music.” He decided to work directly from the theatrical script as translated by Hedwig Lachmann, making cuts

that trimmed the already compact play into a libretto for an opera that would comprise about 90 minutes of uninterrupted, uncompromising drama.

After working on *Salome* until 1905, Strauss could hardly know what to expect from the premiere that November in Dresden—the scene of his last operatic failure. This time Strauss' adventurous music and exhilarating storytelling proved to be a sensation, and dozens of productions soon spread the opera around Europe and beyond, including an American premiere just 14 months later at the Metropolitan Opera (although the remainder of that run was canceled after the shock of the first performance). Strauss reigned supreme in German opera from that point on, creating 12 more works for the stage over the next 37 years, interspersed with leisure time at his villa in the Alps that he bought with his *Salome* royalties.

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Salome wastes no time jumping into the action: after only a few seconds of orchestral introduction to establish the emotional and harmonic ambiguity, we hear Narraboth, the lovestruck Captain of the Guard, romanticizing Salome to the queen's page (a "trouser" role, i.e. a young man voiced by a low-pitched woman's voice). Salome's soon rushes out of a party and voices disgust at her stepfather's lecherous gaze. Then she hears the firm, clear voice of the preacher Jokanaan (John the Baptist) emanating from the underground cistern where he is imprisoned, and she desperately wants to see him; she finally gets her way by coyly flirting with Narraboth.

Jokanaan's cryptic preaching and disheveled state intrigues Salome, and his disdain makes her want him even more. She rhapsodizes his pale flesh, his matted hair, and above all his blood-red lips. She begs to kiss him, and he curses her. Meanwhile Narraboth is so distraught to witness Salome lusting after the prisoner that he stabs himself and dies on the ground between them in a pool of blood. Through it all the orchestra sets the boiling emotional temperature, providing an ever-shifting bed of agitated, impetuous sound that uses the ongoing conflict between major and minor keys and Strauss' characteristically swirly, saturated orchestration to teeter on a disturbing knife-edge between romance and horror.

An orchestral interlude bridges the scene change as Jokanaan returns to his cell, and the mood becomes nervous and full of foreboding as Herod comes out looking for Salome, chased by his wife Herodias, who scolds him for leering at her daughter. Herod slips on Narraboth's blood and hallucinates the sounds of howling wind and beating wings (rendered by the orchestra in dissonant smears). Herod brazenly tries to woo Salome in front of her mother, and he bristles when he hears Jokanaan's prophecies and condemnations from below.

There is a brief distraction, often played as a moment of comic relief, where five nerdy Jews argue about theology, and then Herod becomes curious about Jokanaan's telling of a savior and interrogates two Nazarenes (i.e. followers of Jesus of Nazareth) who are on the scene. This fits into a long tradition of music from Protestant Germany that ridicules Jews

and scapegoats them for Jesus' death and so much more, a prejudice that becomes all the more disturbing in light of the Nazi atrocities to come. The fact that the principal characters of *Salome* are all Jewish is secondary to the opera's central preoccupation with the intersection of sex and power, but it speaks to the casual antisemitism of Strauss' world (and Oscar Wilde's too) that all of these Jewish characters are constructed to be so irredeemable, excepting John the Baptist.

Herod shrugs off the ominous prophecies and his wife's agitation by asking Salome to dance for him. She refuses, but when he offers to grant any wish, she agrees to dance, over her mother's vehement protest. The orchestra begins the infamous *Dance of the Seven Veils*, starting with a sinuous oboe melody shaded with particular intervals that impart a Mideast flavor to the music. The dance is measured and self-assured as Salome strips layer after layer, gradually accelerating until it reaches a feverish climax that leaves her naked and collapsed on the ground.

Herod asks for her wish, and she innocently asks to have brought to her, on a silver platter, the head of Jokanaan. Her demand only grows more insistent and strident as Herod tries to dissuade her, until he finally gives in. While the executioner goes to follow through on the command, the music tracks Salome's increasingly disturbed state. Then she is handed the bloody head on a platter and launches into what must be the strangest and darkest love aria in all of opera. Her rapturous state after kissing the mouth of the decapitated head is broken by Herod's command to kill her, and the opera ends abruptly with the orchestra sounding out the soldier's crushing blows.

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