

Ladies' Man

By Kathleen Watt

COMPOSER RICHARD STRAUSS lived a long life crowded with splendid women. But he belonged to only one—his wife, soprano Pauline de Ahna—and she to him. This was so even though, as a rich and famous international conductor, Strauss enjoyed a considerable female following. And it was so even though his wife was a famously unpleasant harridan, and he himself would become identified with an impressive queue of “other women”.

For Strauss's “other women” belonged to the illustrious gallery of heroines he would bring to the operatic stage, beginning with Freihild in *Guntram* (1896), Strauss' first opera and his inevitable homage to the colossus, Richard Wagner, in 1896. Fourteen operas and nearly a half-century later, Strauss' gallery culminated with the Countess Madeleine of *Capriccio*, his last numbered opus. Some of his many heroines were already immortal in name— Salome, Elektra, Ariadne, Daphne, Helen of Troy; others would become legendary by sobriquet alone—the Marschallin, the Countess, the Empress, the Dyer's Wife. Even his best male roles (Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*, the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos*) were written for women. Indeed all of Strauss' operas would exalt the soprano voice—perhaps because he composed with his wife's own inimitable voice in his ear.

By the time Strauss turned to composing operas he had already made his fame composing Lisztian-style, single-movement programmatic works for orchestra. By some accounts, Strauss's tone poems effectively retired the form, for his genius for description and opulent instrumentation could hardly be bested. His extravagant musical vocabulary would now require the human voice, and a very particular kind of vocal instrument at that—a voice as distinctive as it is elusive to describe, in any medium but its own.

The signature Straussian vocal line arches over a lavish orchestra, “reinforc[ing] the high harmonics of the orchestra in a way that Strauss calculated with absolute precision,” writes author Thomas May. The voice must soar with the steely lyricism

suggested in Strauss' well-known prescription for the ideal Salome: "a sixteen year-old ... with the voice of Isolde." A voice of thrilling power, yet limpid, and with exquisite poise, that would be referred to ever after as a "Strauss soprano." Strauss took for his model the "miracle" of Mozart's vocal melodies, describing them as "'ideas' ... not to be seen by the eye nor grasped by reason, but so essentially divine that they are to be intuitively perceived only by the emotions, which the ear enables to 'breathe' them in."

"Strauss sopranos" themselves are hard-put to define their satiny sheets of sound, flung out upon voluptuous air. Lustrous, creamy, full-throated billows of sound. "It's basically the color of the voice," says one, a certain brightness, not Wagnerian.... "It has to do with the ability to spin out a phrase," says another, sustaining Strauss' achingly long lines on endless oceans of breath. Flexibility between registers helps, for the radiant high notes that plunge to darkly sonorous depths. It's the elegance, it's the power, it's the nuance....

Ultimately, only the voices in the roles can convey the qualities of this sound experience, and often a Strauss singer's voice so thoroughly fits a role that the mention of one evokes the other. Lotte Lehmann, who sang nine great Strauss roles, and much of his vast portfolio of *Lieder*, was specially chosen by Strauss to originate *Ariadne's* Composer. Mezzo-soprano Tatiana Troyanos is cherished by many as the definitive Octavian. Birgit Nilsson's Salome was rivaled only by her own chilling Elektra. Lisa Della Casa perfectly inhabited *Capriccio's* Countess. The statuesque rapture of Jessye Norman's *Ariadne* is model Strauss vocalism.

Of course, voices maintain their individuality within the ineffable Straussian gestalt. For example, the luminous power of frequent Straussian Deborah Voigt is also suited to Verdi and Wagner. Reigning Marschallin Renée Fleming calls herself a Mozart-Massenet-Strauss soprano, while Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, for one, was known as a Mozart-Verdi-Strauss soprano. In the shared quality is essential "Strauss soprano".

The Strauss heroine is further characterized by her conscious exploration of her own psyche, her emotions, her awareness of her effect upon her world, and its effect upon her. Of several librettists who would serve Strauss, only poet-playwright Hugo von

Hofmannsthal shared the composer's profound preoccupation with a dense handful of themes—memory and time, restoration of lost trust, metaphysical transformation (typically through a woman's heightened consciousness) and love. After the *succès de scandale* that was *Salome*, Strauss began an unparalleled collaboration with Hofmannsthal that would yield ten extraordinary operas.

Their debut work was based on Hofmannsthal's hit stage-play, *Elektra*. Like the Judaic princess Salome, this tormented daughter of Greece is unhinged by the salacious abuses of her times, suffering and carrying the sufferings of a people. Like *Salome*, *Elektra* exposes the exquisite pain of ruptured secrets, as would the new science of psychoanalysis. That psychic pain drives Elektra first mad, and then, in a frenzied soliloquy of maenadic dance, to her death—as her times warrant. Yet Hofmannsthal's Elektra was also a symbol of life-run-out-of-purpose. No consciousness of that “female” predicament had yet been realized with such immediacy. And for all the horror of her excess and its consequences, the Straussian orchestra gives us a way in to her crucible.

In *Der Rosenkavalier*, which came next, Hofmannsthal and Strauss took flight from scandal and psychic horror, into a jewel-box Vienna that never existed, splendidly realizing a Mozart-esque drama, within a Romantic sound-world, which Strauss would never renounce. Nevertheless, there was no going back dramatically, for they had already crossed territories that daunted Freud himself. Under cover of familiar sonorities, Strauss and Hofmannsthal developed characters resplendent with human complexity. *Der Rosenkavalier's* Act I curtain, for example, rises on a boundary-blasting bedroom romp between a noble field marshal's wife and her callow swain, sung and acted by a handsome mezzo-soprano. Then this aristocratic Marschallin, a maturing beauty, surprised by her mirror, begins her famous monologue, reflecting poignantly upon the wisdom of experience, and fleeting time, and her agency in it.

Strauss sought increasingly in his operas to replicate in music the rhythm of natural speech, demanding of his singers clarity of diction, and intelligent dramatic nuance, and continually refining his orchestration, ever-better to complement Hofmannsthal's eloquent text. “Always accompany a singer,” admonished Strauss, in his

Golden Rules for Conductors, “in such a way that he can sing without effort.” Brilliant singing actresses have shone in the introspective monologues and ambiguous farewells that are as characteristic of the Straussian heroine as the spun glories of her sound. One remembers the Salome of Mary Garden, Maria Ewing or Catherine Malfitano; , as well as Lauren Flanigan as the formidable Christine (a lovingly odd portrait of Strauss’s wife) in his autobiographical domestic tableau, *Intermezzo*.

Strauss was a humanist, and the divinity of his women often lay in their ordinariness. His objective was to “reveal the profundity inherent in the...mundane, ordinary, and intimate, [wherein] there was sufficient ambiguity and poignancy for serious art.” Even in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, it is the mortals’ troubled marriage that teaches wisdom to the semi-deities. Hofmannsthal conceived the Emperor and Empress and the Dyer and his wife as two pairs of beings, in two worlds that mirror each other, imagining that each would first reflect and then merge with and then transform the other, through Strauss’ music, “as an alchemist transmutes the elements.” Explaining this complicated mythology to Strauss, Hofmannsthal quoted Goethe: “ ‘From the law that governs all life, man is freed by rising above himself.’” And yet, he continued, “all human merit is linked with permanence, unforgetfulness, constancy.”

Hofmannsthal’s unexpected death, in the middle of his work with Strauss on *Arabella*, left Strauss bereft of his philosophical touchstone. Other works would follow with other librettists. But by the time Strauss came to *Capriccio*, he was eighty-eight, with nothing left to prove. This last opera was to be for himself, he thought, and possibly for a limited band of like-minded philosophers and musicians. And so it was. Even so, Strauss would not deny himself, nor the Countess, her final transcendent monologue.

A lifetime after the Marschallin and her hand mirror, *Capriccio*’s Countess, sublime in moonlight, also addresses her reflection. Her task is to resolve the age-old theoretical contest between words (reason) and music (passion). Of the “inner meaning” here Strauss wrote, “the *love issue* concerning the Countess must run side by side with the artistic question(s).”

Richard Strauss was a self-styled nineteenth-century modernist who would live and compose long enough to become old-fashioned among his twentieth-century contemporaries. Still, fashion ebbs and flows with the contexts of history, and by 2005 we have seen this composer reconstituted as one of his century's greatest. And his legacy of gloriously full-formed female characters will live, as it always has, in the voices of grateful "Strauss sopranos", into the far-flung future.

— *Kathleen Watt writes frequently on the performing arts.*