

Study guide to Richard Strauss's classical tragedy

ELEKTRA

Presented by Michigan Opera Theatre at the Detroit Opera House,
October 18-26, 2014

THE BLOODY DETAILS

- Opera in one act
- Set in the palace courtyard of the assassinated King Agamemnon, Mycenæ (a city of ancient Greece, in the Peloponnese peninsula)
- Premiered at the Semperoper (the Semper Opera, named for its architect Gottfried Semper) in Dresden, Germany—January 25, 1909
- Text by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929, b. Vienna, Austria-Hungary)—his 1st of 7 libretti for the composer
- Music by Richard Strauss (1864-1909, b. Munich, Bavaria)—his 4th opera
- Adapted from Hofmannsthal's 1903 drama *Elektra*, based on ancient Greek mythology, chiefly as portrayed by Sophocles in his *Elektra* (ca. 418-410 BCE)
- Sung in German with English translations projected above the stage
- Running time about 1 hour, 45 minutes



***TWO HERREN, LETTING
THEIR HAIR DOWN:***

*The creators of Elektra, librettist Hugo von
Hofmannsthal (left) and composer Richard Strauss.*

THE STORY

(Adapted from Opera News:)

In the courtyard of the palace of Agamemnon, murdered king of Mycenæ, servant girls comment on the wild behavior of Elektra (usually spelled Electra in English), Agamemnon's eldest daughter. When they have gone, Elektra bemoans her father's murder at the hands of her mother, Klytämnestra (in English, Clytemnestra) and her mother's lover, Ägisth (Ægisthus). Calling on her father's spirit, she vows vengeance. She is interrupted by her younger sister, Chrysothemis, who urges Elektra to give up her obsession with revenge so that they both can lead normal lives. As noises from inside the palace announce the approach of Klytämnestra, Elektra's sister rushes off.

The queen staggers in; loss of sleep and fear of retribution have made a wreck of her. She appeals to Elektra to tell her what kind of sacrifice to the gods will give her peace. Her nightmares will cease, Elektra responds, when the blood of an impure woman is shed. Challenged to name the victim, Elektra screams that it is Klytämnestra herself, and that she and her banished brother Orest (Orestes) will wield the ax. Klytämnestra is shaken, but when her Confidante runs in and whispers something, her mood changes abruptly. Laughing maniacally, Klytämnestra leaves her puzzled daughter.

The mystery is explained when Chrysothemis reappears with news that Orest is dead. Stunned, Elektra tells her sister that she must now help to kill Klytämnestra and Ägisth. When the girl runs off in terror of the assignment, Elektra starts to dig for the buried ax that killed Agamemnon. She is interrupted by a stranger who says that he has come to inform Klytämnestra of Orest's death. When Elektra reveals her name, he tells her that Orest lives. Servants come and kiss his hand. "The dogs of the house know me," he says, "but not my own sister." Crying his name, Elektra falls into Orest's arms and tells him she has lived only for his return.

Their reunion is cut short when Orest is summoned before Klytämnestra. Hardly has he entered the palace when a scream is heard and Elektra, anxiously waiting, knows that he has killed their mother. Ägisth arrives, and Elektra lights his way into the palace, where he, too, meets his doom at the hands of her brother. Elektra, transported, begins an ecstatic dance. "Bearing the burden of joy," she falls lifeless to the ground, overcome.



EYES AS ROUND AS OLIVES:
The original Elektra, German soprano Annie Krull, and the original Ägisth, German tenor Johannes Sembach, in a publicity still from the world première in Dresden, 1909.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS (AND SINGERS)

Elektra, daughter of the slain King Agamemnon of Mycenæ

- American dramatic soprano Christine Goerke

Chrysothemis, her sister

- American soprano Jennifer Check

Klytämnestra, her mother, the Queen of Mycenæ

- American mezzo-soprano Jill Grove

Orest, her banished brother

- German baritone Thomas Gazheli

Ägisth, the husband of Klytämnestra and usurper of Agamemnon's throne

- Canadian tenor Richard Margison

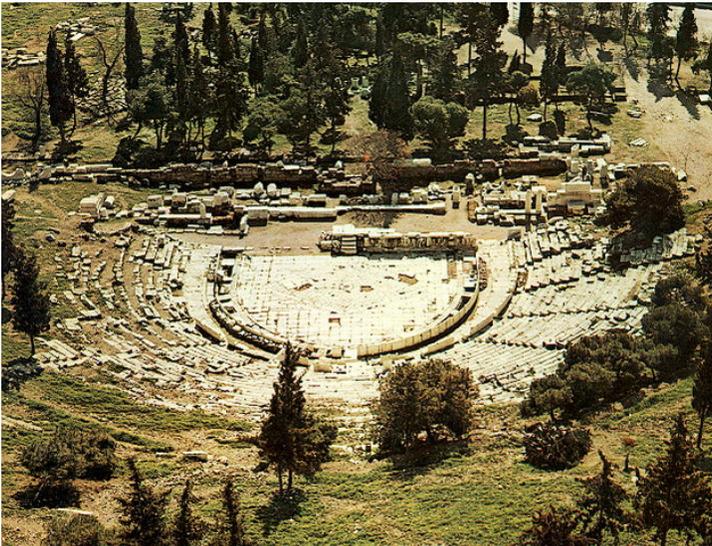
The production at the Detroit Opera House will feature the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra and Chorus, the latter directed by MOT Assistant Music Director and Chorus Master Suzanne Mallare Acton. American conductor Steven Mercurio and American stage director Nicholas Muni lead the artistic staff.



***A ROYAL HEADACHE:
MOT's Elektra, Christine Goerke, performs
in the role at the Lyric Opera of Chicago,
2012 (photograph by M. Spencer Green,
Associated Press).***

IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

The story of *Elektra* is rooted, like all of modern-day Western theatre, in the ancient dramatic tradition of the Greeks. Though theatre has existed at least since the days of the ancient Egyptians in 4000 BCE, its practical origins, as far as directly influencing the chain of dramatic creation that continues until the present day, lie in Greece in the 5th century BCE. Around 535 BCE, Greek actor Thespis took to the stage to win a “tragic contest”—his fame gives us the word “thespian,” meaning actor.¹ Drawing on Athens’ spirit of free expression and democracy, the arts flourished, and countless plays were produced to great popular acclaim in the city’s massive stone amphitheatres. These plays were mostly written by four creative giants, whose style and stories have never ceased to inspire playwrights, composers, artists, and their audiences: Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes—the former three known chiefly for their tragedies, Aristophanes for his comedies. All three of the great tragic poets wrote versions of the Electra myth: Æschylus in the second play, called *The Libation-Bearers*, of his trilogy *The Oresteia*, Sophocles and Euripides in their respective *Electras*. Thousands of years later, Viennese author Hugo von Hofmannsthal was inspired by all of these, and most closely by Sophocles, when he wrote his German-language play *Elektra*, eventually transformed into the opera by Richard Strauss.



ROCK AND ROLL:
Athens’ Theatre of Dionysus, named for the Greek god of wine and religious ecstasy. The first Greek plays evolved from religious ceremonies dedicated to that deity. Though the theatre is ancient and enormous (it could seat up to 17,000), it was brilliantly designed to have near-perfect acoustics.

Questions for students:

- Has any theatrical performance from your life made a great impact on you? How so? Do you think that particular work will stand the test of time, and be enjoyed by audiences for many generations to come? Why or why not?
- What about the story of Electra, do you think, has contributed to its appeal enduring for millennia?

¹ Frank M. Whiting, *An Introduction to the Theatre* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 13.

Activity idea:

—Find a book of ancient Greek myths, or think of one that you have enjoyed. With a few partners, devise a playlet based on that myth (just like the ancient Greek playwrights did with the myth of Electra), rehearse it, and perform it for the rest of the class. Bed-sheets can always serve as nice makeshift togas (wrapped cloths worn as robes by the ancient Greeks)! If you like, incorporate a few of these standard elements of the ancient Greek drama into your modern versions:

- elaborate masks
- a chorus (non-principal characters who watch and comment on the action as it develops)
- grand gestures, so that everyone in the enormous theatre could understand the actors' emotions
- a tragic hero/ine, whose fortunes fall drastically over the course of piece, often owing to some flaw in his or character, or a mistake that he or she makes
- a semicircular arrangement for the audience—the actors play not only to the front, but to all sides surrounding them

“ALONE, ALL ALONE”

Elektra's first major action in Strauss's opera is to step onto the stage and immediately sing a 10-minute scene of enormous vocal difficulty and dramatic intensity, all alone, with no scene partners upon whose energy to feed or to inspire the piece's rapidly changing moods. Rather appropriately, the first words of the scene are “Allein! Weh, ganz allein!” [Alone! Woe, all alone!]. In it, the Princess Elektra calls upon her buried father for company; remembers the grisly details of his murder; vows to enact vengeance through the killing of her mother and stepfather; and looks forward with feverish joy to that event, and the feast and dancing that will follow it.

Luckily, you are able to watch the Michigan Opera Theatre's own Elektra, Christine Goerke, performing this scene before she even arrives for rehearsals in Detroit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSX9gmNUU8I>. The video is from a concert held to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Strauss's birth (as our performance does), and took place June 11, 2014 in Dresden's Semperoper, the same site where *Elektra* premiered.

Questions for students:

As you watch, follow the words and translation printed below (with photographs of ancient Greek theatre masks), and think about the piece's musical and dramatic qualities.

- What internal or external demons appear to haunt Elektra?
- What is the tone of the text? Rather violent, no? (**Not appropriate for younger students!**) How does the music support or counteract the emotion that the text provides? What is revealed by the text consisting of such long run-on sentences?
- What clues does Strauss give us about Elektra's character or the coming narrative through the expressive and robust orchestral accompaniment? (For example, how it

drops out for a few moments near the end of the piece, allowing the soprano to sing the word “Siegestänze” [victory dances] a cappella, then comes in again with surges of sound.)

—What special dramatic or vocal qualities are needed to sing this particular piece? Know that this piece is intended for a “dramatic soprano,” a certain type of soprano (the highest female voice part) with a powerful voice that can soar over thick orchestration (many instruments playing at once).

—What words can you spot in the German that look like and mean the same thing as their English equivalents? Such words are called “cognates.” There are many of them shared by English and German, as the two are both of the “Germanic” language family.

Activity idea:

Be a stage director! (This is the person who creates the concept for a piece’s dramatic performance; works with the design teams—sets, costumes, props, lights, makeup and hair—to bring that concept to life; and coaches the singers on how to interpret their roles, interact with each other, and use the space of the stage.) As the performance you see in the clip takes place in an un-staged concert setting (that is, without closely choreographed movement or special costumes and sets), give a thought to how you would stage this scene were you to mount a full production. What would Elektra’s surroundings be as she sings? What would she be wearing? Would she carry any props? In what position might she sing it—when might she stand, when sit, when dance? What would her attitude(s) be as she sings, and how would she represent it in the way she moves and gestures? Write up a plan for your staging, and discuss with the class how your plans differ from one another’s, and in what ways they are similar.

ELEKTRA

Allein! Weh, ganz allein. Der Vater fort,
hinabgescheucht in seine kalten Klüfte.

(Gegen den Boden:)

Agamemnon! Agamemnon!

Wo bist du, Vater? Hast du nicht die Kraft,
dein Angesicht herauf zu mir zu schleppen?

Es ist die Stunde, uns’re Stunde ist’s!

Die Stunde, wo sie dich geschlachtet haben,
dein Weib und der mit ihr in einem Bette,
in deinem königlichen Bette schläft.

Sie schlugen dich im Bade tot,

dein Blut rann über deine Augen,

und das Bad dampfte von deinem Blut,

da nahm er dich, der Feige, bei den Schultern,

zerrte dich hinaus aus dem Gemach, den Kopf voraus,
die Beine schleifend hinterher:

dein Auge, das starre, offne, sah herein ins Haus.

So kommst du wieder, setzest Fuss vor Fuss

und stehst auf einmal da,

die beiden Augen weit offen,

und ein königlicher Reif von Purpur ist um deine Stirn,

der speist sich aus des Hauptes offner Wunde.

ELEKTRA

Alone! Woe, all alone. Father gone,
driven down into his cold chasms.

(Facing the ground:)

Agamemnon! Agamemnon!

Where are you, Father? Do you not have the power
to drag your face up to me?

It is the hour, it is our hour!

The hour, when they slaughtered you—
your wife and he who sleeps with her in one bed,
in your royal bed.

They struck you dead in the bath,

your blood ran over your eyes,

and the bath steamed from your blood,

then he took you by the shoulders, that coward,

dragged you from the room, head first,
your legs dragging behind:

your staring, open eye, looked into the house.

Thus will you return, one foot at a time,

and you will stand up there all of a sudden,

both eyes wide open,

with a royal crown of purple around your brow,

feeding itself from your head’s open wound.

(continued on next page)

Agamemnon! Vater!
Ich will dich sehn, lass mich heute nicht allein!
Nur so wie gestern, wie ein Schatten,
dort im Mauerwinkel zeig dich deinem Kind!
Vater! Agamemnon, dein Tag wird kommen!
Von den Sternen stürzt alle Zeit herab,
so wird das Blut aus hundert Kehlen
stürzen auf dein Grab!
So wie aus umgeworfenen Krügen wird's
aus den gebundenen Mördern fließen,
und in einem Schwall,
in einem geschwollenen Bach wird ihres Lebens Leben
aus ihnen stürzen—
und wir schlachten dir die Rosse,
die im Hause sind,
wir treiben sie vor dem Grab zusammen,
und sie ahnen den Tod und wiehern in die Todesluft
und sterben; und wir schlachten dir die Hunde,
die dir die Füße leckten, die mit dir gejagt,
denen du die Bissen hinwarfst,
darum müsst ihr Blut hinab, um dir zu Dienst zu sein,
und wir, wir, dein Blut, dein Sohn Orest und deine Töchter,
wir drei, wenn alles dies vollbracht
und Purpurgezelte aufgerichtet sind,
vom Dunst des Blutes, den die Sonne nach sich zieht,
dann tanzen wir, dein Blut, rings um dein Grab:

(In begeisterten Pathos:)

und über Leichen hin werd' ich das Knie hochheben,
Schritt für Schritt, und die mich werden so tanzen sehn,
ja, die meinen Schatten von weiten nur
so werden tanzen sehn,
die werden sagen: einem grossen König
wird hier ein grosses Prunkfest angestellt
von seinem Fleisch und Blut,
und glücklich ist, wer Kinder hat,
die um sein hohes Grab
so königliche Siegestänze tanzen!
Agamemnon! Agamemnon!

Agamemnon! Father!
I want to see you, don't leave me alone today!
But just like yesterday, as a shadow,
there in the corner of the wall, show yourself to your child!
Father! Agamemnon, your day will come!
As time tumbles down from the stars,
thus will blood from a hundred throats
rain onto your grave!
As out of overturned pitchers,
it will flow from the bound murderers
and in a surge,
in a swollen stream, their life's blood
will pour out of them—
and we will slaughter your horses for you,
the ones in the house,
we will drive them together to the grave,
and they will scent death and whinny in the death-air
and will die; and we will slaughter your dogs for you,
who once licked your feet, and hunted with you,
to whom you threw your scraps,
so must their blood spill, to serve you,
and we, we, your blood, your son Orest and your daughters,
we three, when we have accomplished all this
and purple pavilions are raised
from the haze of blood that the sun draws to itself,
then we will dance, your blood, around your grave:

(With excited seriousness:)

and over the corpses I will raise my knee high,
step by step, and they who see me dancing thus,
yes, those who, even from afar,
see my shadow dancing thus,
they will say: for a great king
this great and splendid celebration is being prepared
by his flesh and blood,
and happy is he, who has children
who, around his high grave,
will dance such kingly victory dances!
Agamemnon! Agamemnon!

♪ Michigan Opera Theatre Communications Department ♪

♪ For group tickets, contact Kim Gray, Ticket Services Assistant Manager, at kimg@motopera.org ♪

♪ Guide written and prepared by Michael Yashinsky, Assistant Director of MOT's *Elektra*,
yashinsky@post.harvard.edu ♪