

**ELEKTRA; A GUIDE TO THE  
OPERA WITH MUSICAL  
EXAMPLES FROM THE  
SCORE**

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Elektra; A Guide to the Opera with Musical Examples from the Score by Richard Strauss & Ernest Hutcheson

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**RICHARD STRAUSS & ERNEST HUTCHESON**

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BY

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FROM THE SCORE

BY

ERNEST HUTCHESON



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# ELEKTRA

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## INTRODUCTION

*"I have in my hand a copy of the most infamous, the most scandalous, the most mischievous, the most blackguardly book that ever escaped burning at the hands of the common hangman. I have not read it: I would not soil my mind with such filth; but I have read what the papers say of it."*

When Bernard Shaw puts the above words into the mouth of Roebuck Ramsden, he describes exactly the typical attitude of prejudice that has been assumed in many quarters toward Strauss's latest music-drama. "Elektra" has been condemned, over and over again, and chiefly by persons who have not "soiled their minds" by hearing it or consulting the piano score, for lack of melody, for noisiness, for unbearable cacophony, for complexity, for the enormous orchestra required to perform it. Strauss himself is roundly abused for his choice of "morbid" subjects, and his artistic sincerity is freely called in question. These are criticisms which, after our experience with Wagner and his works, should be advanced with due caution; we have seen them urged,

reiterated and insisted on, only to expend their force in empty air. At the same time, they are perennially revived in the case of every composer who startles us by innovations, and it may therefore be timely to offer a few words of answer to the points raised. It would surely be well if we could get rid of facile misconceptions, put lurid newspaper accounts behind us, and prepare to examine the real merits or demerits of "Elektra" with candor and impartiality.

1. Perhaps nothing is more curious to the musician than the narrow conception of "melody" prevalent in the public mind. It is time for us to realize, first, that there are many different styles of melody, no particular style having any right to be considered better than another, and secondly, that melody constitutes only a single feature of any musical composition, many admitted masterpieces (*e.g.*, the first movements of Beethoven's fifth and ninth symphonies) containing an infinitesimally small proportion of tunefulness. To instance three widely different types, there is the contrapuntal melodic style of Bach, the lyric melody of Mozart and the older Italian opera, and the modern treatment of musical outline familiarized to us by Wagner and others. The clamor for "melody" usually means a demand



for Mozartian melody, which is a thing of the past, as impossible to revive as Palestrina's vocal polyphony. Strauss's melody is inevitably modern, but it is none the less true melody. Nor does it by any means appear in mere snatches, soon lost in a storm of discord; there are in "Elektra" many long passages of continuously tuneful character. Indeed, no composer since Wagner has created so much pure melody as Richard Strauss, his songs alone offering conclusive evidence of his lyrical gift.

2. It is safe to say that whenever music is not understood it seems "noisy," without any reference to the proportion of *forte* and *piano* contained in it. In this sense Strauss will unavoidably seem noisy to many listeners; otherwise the criticism is just as absurd as it was when directed against Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner. In actual fact, Strauss's use of the sustained *fortissimo* is, at least in "Elektra," very restrained; true, he piles up tremendous sonorities to meet appropriate situations, but these climaxes are held in discreet reserve, never losing their effectiveness by excessive frequency or prolongation. On the other hand, he is master of the sustained *pianissimo*, and it is one of his peculiarities that he shows a predilection for thrilling *pianos* in

conveying impressions of awe and agony. A magnificent example of this is the unearthly hush predominating during the greater part of the weird scene between Clytemnestra and Electra.

3. The use of dissonance has steadily grown in boldness since the day when Monteverde was venturesome enough to introduce an "unprepared" dominant seventh. Every composer who outruns contemporaneous taste is accused of cacophony. We must reflect that there is nothing fixed or immutable in our standard of beauty and euphony; history has proved, not once but many times, that much which seems strange and repellent to the ears of one generation is accepted as lovely and natural by the next. It is necessary, however, to distinguish between sounds harsh only because of their unfamiliarity and the dissonances deliberately employed for the artistic purposes of program-music. No longer is it possible to deny any composer the right to depict forbidding subjects or emotions by corresponding musical treatment. The only question open to discussion is whether, in so doing, he gains an effect sufficiently great to justify the means. For example, "Siegfried" abounds in music intentionally unlovely, but the temporary sacri-

fices of beauty to dramatic exigencies are justified and compensated for by the gain of the work as a whole in variety, color, and accurate characterization. Unfortunately, the average listener is incapable of adjudging the *proportion* of purposeful dissonance in a large work: amazed and horror-struck, he succumbs to the first shock and probably retains a permanent impression of confusion founded on a few isolated passages. Strauss's cacophonies, startling as they undoubtedly are, uncompromisingly as they are used where logically necessary, bear an insignificant relation to the totality of his art.

4. The enlargement of the orchestra is again a process which has continued uninterruptedly since the time of Haydn. Instruments were successively added until, at the beginning of the Romantic period, the palette of tone-color was fairly complete. After Berlioz had modernized orchestral technique by his unerring insight into the individualities of the various instruments, it remained for Wagner to demonstrate the advantages of completing each separate group, thus allowing harmony in three or four parts to be written in an absolutely homogeneous *timbre*. The "Hunding" motive in "Die Walküre" will at once suggest itself to the reader as an excellent