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A Reassessment of Elektra by Strauss

Margery Enix

Successive generations reinterpret the history of music according to their own interests and experience and in the light of intervening developments. The purpose of this article is to reëxamine an opera by Richard Strauss which at the time of its premiere and since has had a widespread reputation as a progressive work. This study will proceed from an assumption that the progressive or radical label has been mistakenly applied to Elektra and that the opera is, in all its essential musical features, a conservative work for its time.

In the context of the complete works of Strauss, Elektra (1909) has been viewed as his most "advanced" composition. According to this assessment avant-garde tendencies in the composer's musical vocabulary were nurtured in the symphonic poems and developed to a peak bordering on the radical in Elektra. After that, beginning with Der Rosenkavalier, Strauss turned back to a more conservative vocabulary which paralleled not only a decline in his creative powers but also a decline of influence on the course of stylistic evolution. He thus relinquished his position on the cutting edge of stylistic development to others such as Mahler, Debussy, and Schoenberg who turned out to be the true revolutionaries of music in that crucial period of change around the turn of the century.

In her excellent portrait of the epoch in which the opera was spawned, Barbara Tuchman quotes the composer himself as saying that in Elektra he "went to the uttermost limits of harmony and psychic polyphony (?) and of the receptive capacity of present day ears."[1] Tuchman calls him "the bold bad man of music at the turn of the century, innovator in form, modern and audacious in concept . . ." and says that he was hailed by some of his contemporaries as "the prophet of a new musical age, even the 'inventor of a new art.' . . ."[2] Confirmation of this assessment is found in more technical sources such as Stuckenschmidt's essay on twentieth-century music:

> The harmonic language (of Salome and Elektra), with its use of cumulative unresolved dissonances, often extends beyond the bounds of tonality. . . . After Elektra, Strauss felt he could no longer continue on the same course, and he abandoned it.[3]

Salzman agrees with this view: ". . . Strauss extended

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Wagnerian contrapuntal chromaticism to the edge of atonality in *Salome* and *Elektra* and then backed away."[4] Norman Del Mar opens his fine three-volume study of Strauss with a comparison of Mahler and Strauss:

> Both contributed to the musical revolution which caused the final break in the tradition to which they owed so much. . . . Mahler's style had developed steadily until at the time of his death he was in the vanguard of advanced trends in contemporary music. . . . Strauss also had an important influence . . . and had he died in 1909 immediately after the composition of *Elektra* it might have seemed as if he, too, would have continued on as adventurous a road as his more introspective colleague.[5]

And in Rufer's book on early serialism we find this statement:

> The music of Richard Strauss carried this process of the dissolution of tonality a decisive step forward, especially in *Salome* and *Elektra*.[6]

William Mann, in his book on the operas of Strauss, remarks on the "masterly complexity of the harmonic vocabulary" in *Elektra* "which took Strauss as far as he was ever to penetrate the jungle of advanced tonality."[7] Mann also offers an explanation for the conservative turn after *Elektra*:

> Strauss, in his early forties already Germany's outstanding progressive composer, was destined to be influenced for the rest of his life by his work with Hofmannsthal--influenced, it may be argued, detrimentally: since Hofmannsthal dragged Strauss away from the vanguard of influential musical thought toward a product less provocative. . . .[8]

Thus, in these and other sources which echo their views, we find a consistent assessment: *Elektra* was a tonally "advanced" work for its time; as such it had a significant effect on the evolution of early twentieth-century musical style; and it was the most radical work which Strauss ever produced.

Close analysis of the musical materials and procedures used in the opera does not support this judgment. Rather it reveals that *Elektra* is a conservative work for its time, that traditional procedures of major-minor tonality control its unfolding, its harmonic vocabulary and tonal syntax. Before illustrating this conservatism in detail we may venture an explanation of why the avant-garde label has been mistakenly attached to *Elektra*. The libretto by Hofmannsthal is a modern version of Sophocles' drama and is based on one of the most horrifying chapters in the tale of the

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house of Atreus; regicide, matricide, and suicide are the central actions of the plot. This stark drama is set in one continuous act, and the unrelieved tragedy is vividly reflected in the music. Strauss demonstrates here the full power of literal musical representation which he had developed in the symphonic poems. The superficial harshness and dissonance demanded by the plot are easily mistaken for substantive departures from traditional tonality; the fact that the opera is performed unbroken by the traditional respites of intermission contributes to the intense effect. Perhaps the mistaken perception of surface for substance, of dramatic shape for musical content are responsible for the judgment that *Elektra* is a radical work.

Proper reëvaluation of the opera requires consideration of the interaction of a number of elements and procedures, from the broad contours of form and tonality design to details of harmonic connection and motivic construction. Comparison with earlier nineteenth century works and contrast with works by some of Strauss' contemporaries will also be useful and will furnish perspective.

Consider first the matter of tonality and the larger dimensions and proportions of tonal organization. Does *Elektra* really step "beyond the bounds of tonality"? Does it stand on the "edge of atonality"? The answer to both questions is no. The work is not only strongly tonal throughout, its tonality is rooted in the traditional major-minor system of the common practice period. The various sections of an expanded, loosely constructed sonata form are set in a series of major and minor keys as outlined in Figure 1.

Introduction	Exposition		
Section 1 to #35^{9}	Section 2 #35-	Section 3 #64-	Section 4 #130-
d minor	b♭-c-B♭-C/E	E♭ major	b minor - - -
Development	**Recapitulation**		**Coda**
Section 5 #1a-	Section 6 #120a-	Section 7 #187a-	Section 8 #219a-end
e♭/E♭---G	d-A♭-d	c-E♭-c	E-C-E-C-E-C

Figure 1. Outline of form and key scheme of *Elektra*.

Throughout most of the opera one is aware of a definite tonal center. While they are not sustained without interruption or digression, clear key areas still dominate every

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section. The overall key scheme is not concentric (an operatic rarity in any event). However, key return plays an important role in the formal structure. D minor, which dominates the opening section, returns at the beginning of the recapitulation and frames Section 6. It also reappears at several dramatic moments in the opera to recall the house of Atreus and various related characters or actions. Other keys of the exposition return in the recapitulation, albeit in slightly altered order. The paired keys of C major and E major which appear in Elektra's first solo scene (Section 2) reappear, alternating with one another, throughout the coda. B-flat major-minor and B minor are linked to keys a fifth below in the recapitulation, E-flat and E, in an extension of the traditional practice of having exposition materials return transposed down a fifth. Within the opera, keys are used in the classical manner to frame sections (as in Sections 6 and 7) or in an interlocking sequence of tonalities. In Section 2, B-flat minor and B-flat major interlock with C minor and C major. In Section 3, which is dominated by the lyrical aria of Elektra's sister, Chrysothemis, the key of E-flat major alternates in a rondo-like pattern with episodes of unstable tonality. The same scheme is used in Section 4 where stable B minor sections alternate with episodes of uncertain tonality. Thus we see at least four cardinal principles of common practice tonal design employed here--areas of key stability, key return coinciding with formal division, key return by descending perfect fifth, and key frames for individual sections of the work.

What does represent advancement beyond strict classical practice is the absence of fifth relationships between adjacent tonalities. As the outline indicates, second and third relations have replaced the more traditional intervals of key connection. But this represents an expansion of rather than a departure from classical practice. Far from being radical, the key scheme of Elektra follows tradition more predictably than does that of Tristan und Isolde, written fifty years earlier. Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande, which antedates Elektra by nearly ten years, is much more radical than the latter in its departure from traditional key design.

In his handling of key anticipation and unexpected key arrival, and in the juxtaposition of keys by chromatic third relation and other intervals, Strauss showed that he understood as thoroughly as Wagner the power still inherent in the major-minor key system. Like Wagner he understood that by the time he was using the system a key once established lost interest rapidly; a clear key soon became a dull key. He therefore constructed his tonality scheme so that no single key is prolonged throughout an entire section or throughout a large part of any section. Some digression or interruption, by modulation or chromatic obscuring of the tonal center, regularly breaks off clearly established

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keys. Again like Wagner, Strauss often focuses on the process of modulation as the most intense moment in a passage. The effect of modulation is sometimes used, as in the climax of the first half of the opera at the end of Section 4, to move through a striking series of remote tonal regions, each more surprising than the last, until the final point of arrival, in this case on the tonal center of B-flat. The passage begins in B-flat minor (p. 103, #253+8), moves through E major-minor to C major-minor (#256) with the chord a tritone away from tonic emphasized (at #257), and returns to B-flat at #259 through that same F-sharp major harmony (with a seventh added) functioning as an enharmonic German six-five of the key of B-flat (#258+5).

Consider next the choice and treatment of modes. Strauss worked exclusively in this opera as in the tone poems with pitch materials of the major and minor modes. Unlike his contemporaries Mahler and Debussy, who were reviving antiquated modal and pentatonic patterns and exploring exotic scale formations, Strauss was content with the major-minor set. While in most of the tone poems (e.g., Ein Heldenleben) the extent of his conservatism did not admit even a significant amount of mixture of the two modes, in Elektra he was a bit more adventurous. Major and minor pitch materials are frequently combined here in a mixture which, though no more advanced than the mixture found in the songs and piano works of Schubert, at least demonstrates recognition of the expanded modal ambience of the nineteenth century. The final measures of the opera illustrate Strauss' use of major-minor mixture in the tonality of C (#262a-end). Much of the chromaticism in Elektra is the result of just such merging of major and minor harmonic materials on the same tonal center. As such it represents an expansion of rather than a step beyond the classical tonal system.

The melodic structure of Elektra, again, is much closer to early-nineteenth-century models than to that of Strauss' contemporaries cited above. The principal leitmotives--there are more than twenty in the opera--are harmonically conceived. Each grows out of the accompanying tertian structure and is dependent upon the vertical support of that structure. This treatment is reminiscent of melodic design by Schumann and Mendelssohn. (See, for example, the powerful Agamemnon motive which opens the opera and which outlines a D minor triad.)

Harmonic vocabulary and syntax--the selection and sequence of vertical sonorities--are important in any discussion of this kind. In considering these two aspects of tonal organization one must beware of certain pitfalls which may lead to false conclusions. A method of analysis, in vogue until recently, involved tabulating the number of various sonority types or chromatic alterations in a work and drawing inferences about stylistic development from the sums obtained. Such statistical methods can be misleading. The interaction of tempo, metric and formal placement, and

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contrapuntal motion with chord and chromatic frequency may alter the importance of perceived impact of the latter elements. While box scores give the comforting illusion of scientific objectivity, the results of that analysis are of limited usefulness. Like the results of public opinion polls they are often either simplistic or seriously compromised by the manner in which the analytical questions are posed.[10] In discussing the harmonic vocabulary and syntax of Elektra we will make assessments without the aid of statistics, but the reader may assume that numerical frequency was taken into account combined with a number of other, equally important, factors such as those mentioned above.

The chord vocabulary which Strauss used in Elektra is virtually the same as that of Beethoven and Schubert. It consists of all the triads of the combined major and minor diatonic scales, dominant seventh and ninth chords, other seventh chords--diminished, half-diminished, minor, and major sevenths--and augmented sixth chords, especially the French four-three. Much more drastic changes in the vertical organization of sound were taking place in the works of some of his contemporaries. Such significant changes as occur in the chord vocabulary of Strauss can be measured in the slightly increased use of seventh, ninth and augmented sixth chords and in the occasional, brief, and often striking use of bichordal writing. In these latter passages vertically paired triads are usually employed for some programmatic purpose (e.g., in Klytemnestra's aria in Section 4, pp. 78-79, #195-#197).

There are several densely chromatic passages in Elektra. But their frequency is mitigated by placement at less crucial points in the unfolding form. The great climaxes and the important hinges in the form are marked by diatonic, mostly triadic, clearly functional harmonic progression. Contrast, for example, the passage which appears in the middle of Section 4 and has programmatic significance (pp. 69-70, #172 to #172+5, "sick men . . . and their loathsome sores . . ."), with the passage in the recapitulation which climaxes the entire opera, the "recognition" aria of Elektra (p. 169, #148a+9 to #149a+8). In the first passage, thick chromaticism dissolves into a series of parallel French augmented sixth chords and is finally stabilized on the dominant of C major. In the second, functional, mostly triadic harmonies (I, iv, V_7) are broadly spaced beneath a lyric, diatonic vocal line.

Moments of arrival such as the "recognition" aria cited above are consistently articulated by classical functional cadence patterns so familiar as to amount almost to clichés. At an earlier peak of intensity in the opera, during Chrysothemis' aria in Section 3, the harmonic pattern vi-ii^6_5-V_7- I is used to cap the final lyric outburst of that section (see pp. 46-47, #107+5 to #109+2). The harmonic rhythm of the passage consists of chord changes every four measures (at a tempo of 𝅗𝅥. =76). This classicized patterning

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is typical of both the phrase structure and the harmonic rhythm in *Elektra*. Chord changes most frequently coincide with strong beats of the prevailing meter or with four- or eight-measure groups where the tempo creates one beat per measure. Classical cadence patterns are also used to close sections. A traditional V_7-I cadence (in the key of C major/minor) is used at the very end of the opera. It is freshened up a bit by the approach from a dominant seventh chord on F-sharp which harmonizes a chromatic passing tone in the upper line and by the modal cadential extension in the last measure, ♭iii-I. Frequently in *Elektra* conventional cadence patterns are embellished with chromatic interpolations which heighten the effect of traditional resolution. The cadence in d minor at the end of Section 1 consists basically of a i^6_4-V_7-i pattern. The V_7 is preceded and followed by dominant seventh chords on G and A-flat so that the entire pattern consists of i^6_4-(V_7/)-(V_7/)-V_7-(V_7/)-i. Except where quantities of nonfunctional chromaticism are used in the service of programmatic representation (as in the passage cited above from Section 4), chromatic alteration is largely limited to the kind of embellishing function and modal fusion common in the early nineteenth century. It consists of secondary dominant, embellishing diminished seventh, and augmented sixth chords, and to modal mixture of major and minor. Enharmonic spelling and resolution often make harmonic connections seem more complex than they are. In passages involving enharmonic reinterpretation such as that cited on page 35(end of Section 4, #258+3 to #259), strong contrapuntal control is used to direct the motion of the harmonic progression. This is also illustrated in Section 8 in the first change from E Major to C Major where contrary motion in the outer voices is used to control the modulatory process (p. 214, #236a-2 to #236a+1). This modulation involves an enharmonic common chord and third relation root movement in a three-measure passage during which the change of tonal center is accomplished.

The kinds of functional chromaticism described above serve basically to strengthen rather than disperse a central tonality. In most of the passages cited it is possible to affix functional labels to the harmonic progressions. The succession of chords, like the larger key plan of *Elektra*, is thoroughly grounded in traditional harmonic practice. Expansion, even exploitation of the resources of major-minor tonality, can be found in this opera, but ultimately it has the character of an affirmation of the system rather than an attack upon its basic structure.

In spite of their use here in a somewhat unconventional stage piece, the various musical elements and procedures of *Elektra* are traditional, not radical or revolutionary. Nothing which can be termed atonality or even a systematic exploration of the outer edges of major-minor tonality can be attributed to Strauss' *Elektra*. To say that the opera is tonally conservative carries with it no pejorative

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implications. As a matter of fact it is stunningly effective in performance. It works both dramatically and musically. But one must look to composers other than Strauss for profound revolutionary tendencies. Wagner, in Tristan and Parsifal, went further into the realm of chromatic dissolution of tonality; Mahler with much simpler pitch resources broke the bonds of functional progression; and Debussy explored new formal shapes, as well as new and old means of establishing tonal coherence without the use of traditional functional harmony. These latter composers planted the seeds of revolution which developed in the early twentieth century.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Barbara W. Tuchman, The Proud Tower (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966), 333.

[2]Ibid., 219.

[3]H. H. Stuckenschmidt, Twentieth Century Music (New York: World University Library, McGraw-Hill, 1969), 11.

[4]Eric Salzman, Twentieth Century Music: An Introduction (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 94.

[5]Norman Del Mar, Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on his Life and Works, Vol. I (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 1-2.

[6]Josef Rufer, Composition with Twelve Notes, translated by Humphrey Searle (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), 16.

[7]William Mann, Richard Strauss: A Critical Study of the Operas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 74.

[8]Ibid., 65.

[9]The numbers used to identify sections in this outline refer to rehearsal numbers in both the full orchestral and piano-vocal scores published by Boosey and Hawkes. In later citations page numbers refer to the piano-vocal score and measure numbers refer to the closest rehearsal number. Thus on page 35 the reference to #253+8 indicates the eighth measure after rehearsal #253.

[10]For additional thoughts on the problem of tonality and statistics see Edward Lowinsky's Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-Century Music (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), Chapter VII, 72-74.

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