

## Prometheus Program Notes: May 22, 2022 Concert

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

*Dance of the Seven Veils* from *Salome* (1905)

When the author of the Gospel of Mark first sat down to write the story of Herod and Herodias's daughter Salome, little could he have imagined the rich erotico-violent template he was gifting to future generations. The whole story only takes up a few lines in the New Testament, but those lines contain enough jealousy, betrayal, intrigue, lust, and murder to fill nine tenths of a Netflix Original Series. Paralleled by the author of the slightly later Gospel of Matthew, the tale as originally told in Mark is this: Salome was once entreated by her father, King Herod, to dance for his guests. Impressed by her performance, Herod offered her anything she wanted as a reward. After consulting with her mother, whose marriage to Herod had been criticized by John the Baptist, Salome asked for the head of John on a platter, which she duly received.

In the centuries that followed, the subject of Salome recurred as a favorite of painters, who for their own sundry reasons couldn't get enough of depicting beautiful young women in various stages of undress, capering about with severed heads. (By the by, my favorite is probably Mariano Maella's from 1761 in which Salome looks like a slightly put out waitress in the act of delivering the dessert course). In literature and music, however, it wasn't until the late 19th Century, after the decades of upright Victorianism had run their course, that the story of Salome was taken up again and good old fashioned sex and violence returned with a vengeance to the full artistic menu. Gustave Flaubert told the tale in the short story *Herodiade* in 1877, and in 1891 Oscar Wilde reworked the material, with the descriptive note that the dance Salome performed before Herod was to be the "Dance of the Seven Veils."

Wilde's *Salome* placed lust and desire squarely in the center of Salome's story, with her motivation for demanding John's head rooted less in dynastic politics and more in the jealousy of a spurned lover. At the play's conclusion, Salome lifts John's head from its platter and proceeds to fiercely kiss it - one of many reasons for the incensed censorship before its premiere in England. By 1901, the play had made its way to Germany under the direction of Max Reinhardt, where it was a smash success, running for 200 performances. Richard Strauss first read it in 1902 and began composition of an opera based on its salacious source material soon after, completing everything but the Dance of the Seven Veils by 1905.

The Dance we are going to hear today was the last section of the opera composed by Strauss, and the most controversial. The original soprano slated for the role of Salome simply refused to do it, believing that a woman of her Wagnerian proportions would appear indecent and foolish trying to perform a lithe and youthful erotic dance (though Strauss's original note for the dance was that it was to be, "thoroughly decent, as if it were being done on a prayer mat.") Today, its rich Middle Eastern orchestral textures and tonal palette have made it a favorite in the symphonic repertoire the world over. So sit back, pull over your favorite rubber severed head, and prepare to listen to a dance two thousand years in the making.

~Dale DeBakcsy

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)  
*Symphony No. 3 "Eroica" (1805)*

The story behind the *Eroica* is perhaps the most well known in the entire history of symphonic composition. In 1803, when the first sketches for the symphony appear in Beethoven's sketchbooks, Napoleon Bonaparte was on top of the world. As a general, he had humbled the greatest armies of Europe one by one, and as First Consul of France, he had brought order to the chaos of Revolutionary France without reverting to full monarchy. He was a harbinger of that future promised by the Enlightenment where kings would become obsolete and the people would take back the reins of governance at last.

According to Beethoven's personal secretary Ferdinand Ries, who had occasion to see the first copy of Beethoven's score (completed sometime in early 1804), the word "Buonaparte" was originally emblazoned front and center at the top of the symphony's title page, a testament to Beethoven's admiration for Napoleon as a hero in the best Roman tradition. On May 20th of that year, however, Napoleon elevated his title to Emperor. Ries broke the news to Beethoven, resulting in one of the most famous scenes in musical history. By Ries's account,

I was the first to bring him the intelligence that Buonaparte had proclaimed himself emperor, whereupon he flew into a rage and cried out: 'Is he then, too, nothing more than an ordinary human being? Now he, too, will trample on all the rights of man and indulge only his ambition. He will exalt himself above all others, become a tyrant!' Beethoven went to the table, took hold of the title page by the top, tore it in two and threw it on the floor. The first page was rewritten and only then did the symphony receive the title: 'Sinfonia Eroica.'

Under its new title, the *Eroica* stormed the world in 1805, its proportions every bit matching the world historical grandeur of its former dedicatee. Clocking in at three quarters of an hour, it was twice as long as the traditional symphonies of the Classical era (though Mozart's later symphonies pushed the half hour mark). Its instrumentation was on a grand scale for the time, including parts for three horns, and its alterations of mood and key were far more sudden and violent than audiences of that era were accustomed to. To many musical historians, this is the work that began the grand Romantic tradition of symphonic writing that continued through Brahms and into the towering sonic cathedrals of Anton Bruckner a near century later. Leonard Bernstein, for his part, declared that the first two movements represent, "perhaps the greatest two movements in all symphonic music" though audiences at the time were left thoroughly confused by the work on just about every conceivable level.

We, of course, have the very best audience in the world, and trust that you will find Beethoven's great Middle Period masterpiece neither ponderous nor confusing - that you will indeed revel in its peaks and valleys, from funereal depths to triumphant horn-ringed heights and dizzying displays of fugal virtuosity.

~Dale DeBakcsy