

Opera's Tragic Past: The Example of *Elektra**

Aber die alte Sage und was ihr Genüge tut, ist hier auch nicht mehr als ein Text zu einer neuen, unerhörten Melodie.

Karl Reinhardt, *Sophokles*

Attempts to revive Greek tragedy have long been the subject of suspicion, and Friedrich Nietzsche's is only the most vehement voice in a tradition that seeks to undermine opera's claim to affinity with the ancient art. August Wilhelm Schlegel, in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, held in 1808, gives an assessment that leaves little room for ambiguity. I turn to his dismissal of any analogy between the two art forms because it supplies an illuminating horizon for the interpretation of Sophocles' *Electra* proposed by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss with the opera of the same name, originally performed in 1909 – a century after Schlegel made his remarks. Under the telling title “False Comparison between Ancient Tragedy and Opera”, Schlegel states that this juxtaposition is in fact

the most inappropriate in the world and testifies to a complete ignorance of the spirit of classical antiquity. *That* dance, *that* music have only the name in common with what in our age is called thus. In tragedy the main thing was poetry: everything else was there only to serve it under the most rigorous domination. In opera, on the other hand, poetry is peripheral, a medium to hold the rest together: it almost drowns in its surroundings¹.

If a tendency to identify the effects of opera with the great poetry of the ancient tragedians may hint at an inadequate understanding of the proper Greek ‘spirit’, then Schlegel's statement exhibits an equally spurious disregard for what is not merely a misunderstanding but rather a fundamental concern of the modern art form. Without documents to serve as models, late Renaissance composers were confronted with an unusual mimetic dilemma. While the pioneers of the new art lacked sufficient knowledge of the rules and techniques of ancient music, two things were nevertheless safely attested in the available sources: the *effects* of music and its mythic *power*. ‘From Peri's *Euridice* to Monteverdi's *Orfeo* [...], opera is born’, in the words of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, ‘as the celebration of the occidental myth of music and lyricism’². That is to say that the alignment of opera and Greek drama never proceeded from a formal analogy, which is how Schlegel treats it, but always from the attempt to resuscitate a certain myth, power, effect, or indeed spirit. Speaking of *Electra*'s predicament, Schlegel elucidates his own take on this spirit and its specific Sophoclean manifestation, exemplified by

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¹ Schlegel 1996, 59. All translations are my own.

² Lacoue-Labarthe 2007, 16.

the heavenly serenity beside so terrifying a subject, the fresh air of life and youth, which breathes throughout the whole. The bright god Apollo, who ordained the deed, seems to spread his influence over it; even the daybreak at the beginning is significant. The grave and the world of shadows are kept at a distance [...]³.

It was against this dated but tremendously influential interpretation of Sophocles' drama that the new *Elektra* by Hofmannsthal and Strauss projected itself, as much a philological intervention as a literary and a musical one. It is important to remember that the controversy sparked by their collaboration had at least two aspects: on the one hand, there were the conservative critics, who, following Schlegel's lead, saw the hysteric Electra of Hofmannsthal and Strauss as a perversion of Sophocles' dignified heroine; on the other hand, there were the iconoclastic modernists, in the long run more damaging for the opera's reception, who turned against Strauss's frivolous application of disparate styles and the very use of antiquated mythic material. Hofmannsthal, at any rate, wanted his *Elektra* to be far from classical or Goethean and warned in his original stage directions for the play – first produced six years before the premiere of the opera – against all types of *Antikisieren*. The stage was to be void of 'all those columns, all those broad stairs, all those *antikisierenden Banalitäten*, which are more apt for sobering up than for creating suggestive effects'⁴. The task was to achieve something different from, and more than, a symbolic representation of the tragic universe; and although a *Literaturoper* deals with a finished linguistic artwork and Hofmannsthal's final libretto is best described as a shortened version of his drama, Strauss's opera is in many ways the fulfillment of this impulse that preexisted the music. Karl Reinhardt has remarked that *Elektra*, despite its length, is the most economical of Sophocles' plays⁵, and Hofmannsthal's interpretation loses nothing of this economy: after Strauss's cuts, the libretto amounts to just over half of Sophocles' circa 1500 lines. However, it is not simply through retaining concision and organization that Hofmannsthal's and Strauss's tragedy interestingly approximates the Greek. The librettist's refusal of paraphernalia indicates that what was to be transmitted of the ancient source was not an image – but nor was it only a form of discourse, and the collaboration with Strauss demands a consideration of whether it can be justified to speak of musical features as potentially 'tragic' beyond a perceived suitability to accompany tragic narratives. An answer to this question can perhaps be found in the conventions internal to a given musical language, but Hofmannsthal's rejecting classicist images of Greece in favor of 'suggestive effects' anticipated Strauss's greater ambition to convey musically structures present in the Greek text.

Hofmannsthal's and Strauss's treatments of Sophocles' *Elektra* are the most popular topics among studies of the play's modern reception. Recent work has focused on Hofmannsthal's reading of the Greek original and on the discourses conditioning the reception of Strauss's opera⁶. I aim neither for an exhaustive account nor for a full bibliography but to demonstrate a set of techniques with which the modern op-

³ Schlegel 1996, 119.

⁴ Hofmannsthal 1997, 379.

⁵ Reinhardt 1976, 145.

⁶ Cf. Davies 1999, Paduano 2002, and Goldhill 2002.

era and the ancient drama reflect upon the imagined pasts of their respective art forms.

1. Text and Music.

The most obvious formal difference between Hofmannsthal's drama and Sophocles' is, of course, the unsurprising omission of the chorus, which in the modern play is replaced by a group of serving-maids, a substitution that disallows establishment of any position external to the dramatic events. The *Electra* of Hofmannsthal's play is utterly isolated with no ability to mediate her grief, which she instead addresses directly to her dead father, Agamemnon. In Strauss's adaptation, what is missing is not only the division between actors and chorus and hence an outside perspective but, firmly in the tradition of Richard Wagner, a clear-cut distinction between recitative and aria and, concomitantly, a differentiation between acoustic and narrative levels⁷. Lashings, screams, and slaughters along with other percussive elements that alert the characters and drive the conflict toward its inevitable outcome are never external to the music, which with unsurpassed onomatopoeia amplifies the action; and as the literature on Strauss's opera rightly insists, references to music, song, laments, and dirges, as well as more generally to the sense of hearing with its capacity for seduction and confusion, abound in Hofmannsthal's text⁸. Inserting and rendering explicit this aural element as a crucial part of the unfolding musical narrative was hardly Strauss's original invention – similar techniques are frequent in Wagner. With few changes to Sophocles' version, Hofmannsthal's *Orestes*, whom Clytemnestra has banished from her house, fearing that he will return to revenge her murder of Agamemnon, eventually enters the scene and carries out his deed, killing the mother and her lover Aegisthus perfectly according to plan. At this climactic moment, Chrysothemis, *Electra*'s sister, repeatedly asks whether she cannot hear the rejoicing people in the courts, whereupon *Electra* responds with a rhetorical question: 'Can I not hear it? Not hear / the music? But it comes from myself' [149]. The alignment between the effects of music perceived by the characters and the dramatic action in which they are involved has become so obvious that *Electra* only barely takes the question seriously.

However, this trait has a remarkable equivalent already in the Sophoclean version of the myth. To the opera's breaking down of the distinction between recitative and aria corresponds what Reinhardt calls a new level or stage of style (*Stilstufe*) in the works of the ancient tragedian. Comparing *Electra* and *Philoctetes* to *Ajax* and *The Women of Trachis*, Reinhardt writes: 'The pronounced content no longer stands, like in the earlier form of report, as something self-contained, as though it were a solid island surrounded by the surging waves of "pathos", but is rather carried away by the stream of communicative outpouring [«vom Fluß des Mitteilungsergusses fortgetragen»]⁹. Regardless of whether Reinhardt's narrative of stylistic development is tenable, his notion that *Electra*'s laments influence, determine, and indeed subordi-

⁷ Kittler 1987, 95 has examined incisively the significance of this.

⁸ See for instance Abbate 1989.

⁹ Reinhardt 1976, 152.

nate every narration of events is pivotal for understanding the exemplary status she is granted in Strauss's opera. What, then, distinguishes these laments?

From the very beginning of Sophocles' play, Electra is caught within song. It is the past within which she dwells, and she performs her dirges as an unending ritual, evinced by her first lines in the drama, an anapestic lament from the *skene*, which may indeed have been sung¹⁰. She exclaims:

ὦ φάος ἀγνὸν καὶ γῆς ἰσόμοιρον ἀήρ, ὅς μοι
πολλὰς μὲν θρήνων ᾠδὰς,
πολλὰς δ' ἀντήρεις ἦσθου
στέρονων πληγὰς αἵμασσομένων,
ὅπότεν δνοφερὰ νύξ ὑπολειφθῆ
[86-91]¹¹

O holy sun and air, with equal share in light,
how many songs of laments,
how many strokes against the bloodied breast,
have you heard from me
when the dark night withdrew

The sounds that Electra emits are a mix of songs and strokes, lashes she inflicts onto herself. As in Strauss's opera, the one is not distinct from the other: the songs and the diegetic sounds are transmitted on the same semiotic level. Electra as a character would be unintelligible without her song of lamentation, her ᾠδή, coextensive with her very being. 'I', Sophocles' Electra assures, 'will never cease my dirges and sorrowful laments' [104], laments that are a seduction to the returning Orestes and supposed pleasing to Agamemnon and the gods but met with suspicion and hatred by the pedagogue and Clytemnestra respectively¹².

If in Sophocles' play the character Electra is accorded a centrality unequalled in any other ancient source, her viewpoint is even more dominating in Hofmannsthal and Strauss, where her claim at the beginning of the original play – that as long as she lives she will be singing her laments – is understood literally. In the absence of an instance mediating between the various voices within the drama, Electra's voice often merges with the narrative voice of Strauss's music¹³, and when in her final ecstatic triumph her song is extinguished through joy, so is her life, and she collapses shortly after uttering the imperative 'Be quiet and dance' [151]. Having let the sung memory of Agamemnon's murder become her only purpose, she expires as the deed is avenged – and this is unique to Hofmannsthal's text.

¹⁰ Finglass 2007, 117-21 supplies a lengthy discussion of this possibility.

¹¹ Here and elsewhere I rely on Finglass's edition of the Sophoclean text.

¹² Loraux 2001, proceeding from the phonetic semblance between the adverb ἀεί, 'always', and the exclamation of grief αἰαῖ, sees Electra's unceasing laments as exemplary for the 'antipolitical' protest against the city's efforts to present itself as eternally identical to itself. More important for my purposes, Loraux, refusing the reduction of θρήνος to γόος, of musical lamenting to unarticulated moaning, insists on the sensuous dimensions of Electra's grief, the 'sonorous pleasure' that attaches to her complaints [53-7]. I thank Pietro Pucci for drawing my attention to these passages.

¹³ See Abbate 1989 for a more detailed version of this interpretation.

The dance with which in Hofmannsthal and Strauss mournful singing is replaced has no clear counterpart in Sophocles' drama, but the opposition between endless dirges and joyful dance is already present as the chorus of the original play laments right before the entrance of Orestes:

ὦ χθονία βροτοῖσι Φάμα,
κατά μοι βόασον οἰκτρὰν
ὄπα τοῖς ἔνερθ' Ἀτρείδαις,
ἀχόρευτα φέρουσ' ὀνειδή
[1066-9]

O Voice of the underworld that reaches mortals,
shout for me a piteous
cry to the Atridae down below,
bringing reproaches unsuited for dance

The reversal of this state of things is posited at the beginning of Hofmannsthal's version, where Electra speaks of 'royal victory dances' [118], and it is achieved at the very end, when she, dancing, silently carries 'the burden of joy' [151]. Only a dance suffering from bliss can overcome the endless songs of mourning.

2. The Temporality of the Leitmotif.

What remains in the opera after Electra's collapse is only the final transformation of the famous and constantly recurring so-called Agamemnon motif, which frames the work, appearing in the very first bars of music as well as the very last. This motif haunts the entirety of the opera, which thus appears imprinted with the seal of the mourned father; and indeed, in Electra's monologue his name's four syllables are repeatedly mapped onto these notes. But there are, nevertheless, other ways of interpreting this persistent figure. It has been suggested that if the motif signifies anything at all, it is first and foremost Electra's own desperate voice¹⁴. The violent first bars would then be Strauss's analogue to Electra's hopeless cry Ἰὼ μοί μοι δύστηνος, 'Oh wretched me', which in the beginning of Sophocles' drama Orestes hears from inside the gates and desires, recognizing Electra by no more than the quality of her wailing (γόων), but decides not to act upon for fear of being discovered by Clytemnestra's minions.

Whichever way the motif is understood, Strauss's opera is in every sense determined by a tragic past that haunts it, and this determination stretches beyond the signifier Agamemnon – perhaps beyond even the Electra myth and the opera's narrative. Whether Electra ultimately appropriates the motif may have importance for the gender aspects of the work; what interests me here is its temporality: its capacity to conjure up a past that only gradually is elucidated but ultimately governs the course of events. Hofmannsthal perhaps expressed it most succinctly some thirteen years after the original staging of his play: '[Electra] is the father (he exists only in her)' [466]. Song is the medium within which Electra persists; the so-called

¹⁴ For this interpretation see, again, Abbate 1989.

Agamemnon motif is its refrain. With no chorus to act as her addressee, Electra does not simply lament her past but invokes it directly through the name of the murdered king. In this sense, the famous motif comes to stand neither for Agamemnon nor for the pure, empty voice of Electra but more generally for a past that possesses her entirely. When juxtaposing the motif with the equally famous *Elektra* chord, what emerges is primarily a temporal difference. The former points always to an absence that appears within the drama and determines it from the outset, a past that is sometimes lamented and that sometimes returns triumphantly, as in Electra's final dance of death or when she, in response to the dying Aegisthus' call for help, ironically reassures him that Agamemnon listens. The chord that has come to bear Electra's name and is introduced with her 'Alone! Alas, all alone', on the other hand, rather than referring to Electra herself – Strauss never mentions the chord as proper to her – accompanies her current isolation, her emptiness, the absolute absence and inaccessibility of the past that at the same time haunts her. This is not a simple matter of music's ability to announce presences and absences through using the available conventions, but of Strauss's attempt to render what Hofmannsthal understood as *Elektra's* fundamental problem. Two years after the opera's premiere, the librettist finds the occasion to return to the work, and he writes to the composer:

It is [like *Ariadne auf Naxos*] about a simple and enormous problem of life [*Lebensproblem*]: that of fidelity. To cling to the lost one, to persist forever, unto death – or on the other hand *to live*, to live on, to overcome, *to transform oneself*, to relinquish the unity of the soul, and nevertheless to preserve oneself in the transformation, to remain human, not to stoop to the level of an animal with no memory¹⁵.

'Electra is no longer Electra precisely because she devoted herself so completely to being Electra' [416]. 'The person [is] lost in order to save itself' [465]¹⁶, and it is this ethos of at the same time remaining oneself and losing oneself through remembering someone lost that leads Sophocles' Electra to her apotheosis, in the *parodos*, of the eternally weeping Niobe [150].

However, the tragic past that permeates the *music* of Strauss's opera should, again, perhaps not be reduced to the personal history of Electra herself. Though it is of course Electra's subsequent words that make us identify the opening motif with the power of the past, its shattering effect preexists its signification. It is a striking case of *hysteron proteron*: while the first bars of the opera indicate an attachment to a past event, this attachment is not glossed or even made intelligible until later in the drama. The powerful attack with which the so-called Agamemnon motif is first introduced and the opera begins is not correlated with any scenic action and hence can refer, if at all, only to something that has already taken place or to the possession of a past that has yet to receive its signification.

Retroactively, the motif appears to unify the entire drama, if not to contain it in advance. The opera naturally cannot be 'summed up' by this small figure, but the temporal structure that I have outlined exemplifies an operatic ambition or obsession as old as the art form itself: to accomplish a tragic effect through the sheer force of

¹⁵ Hofmannsthal 1997, 458.

¹⁶ Notes taken by Hofmannsthal in 1905 and 1916 respectively.

music. In the case of *Elektra*, this means not a simple subordination of discourse to music, as in Schlegel's assessment. Rather, Strauss uses music to make explicit a tragic temporality, without reference to an oracular proclamation that would sanction it discursively. Tragic temporality should here be understood broadly as the conflict between the unfolding of events as decreed by the oracle and the unfolding of events which at any moment may be regarded as plausible from a given character's point of view. Strauss's tragic temporality would then be his deployment of the leitmotif technique to make present this conflict throughout the opera; and the leitmotif itself comes to exhibit a remarkable structural analogy with the reported saying of the oracle, which is never mentioned in the libretto but the presence of which is made to resound throughout the opera. Indeed, the leitmotif, such as it is used by Strauss, performs an oracular function: it first appears as a message that is opaque and eludes immediate decipherment – but is then gradually revealed to concern the whole course and outcome of the drama.

In Sophocles' play, Orestes uses his first speech to inform the pedagogue of the oracle's pronouncement:

ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤνιχ' ἰκόμην τὸ Πυθικὸν
μαντεῖον, ὡς μάθοιμι' ὅτῳ τρόπῳ πατρὸς
δίκας ἀροίμην τῶν φονευσάντων πάρα,
χρῆ μοι τοιαῦθ' ὁ Φοῖβος ὣν πέυση τάχα·
ἄσκειον αὐτὸν ἀσπίδων τε καὶ στρατοῦ
δόλοισι κλέψαι χειρὸς ἐνδίκου σφαγᾶς.
[32-7]

When I came to the Pythian oracle
in order to learn in what way I might
avenge my father on his murderers,
Phoebus proclaimed to me what you will now hear:
that I alone, without arms or assistance,
stealthily and cunningly effect the killings with righteous hand.

However, it is worth noting that whereas in Sophocles' version Orestes' intentions to revenge Agamemnon and purify the household are clear from the beginning, an unassuming audience of Strauss's opera may well doubt whether the lost son will in fact return. It is only through the transformations of the initial motif, which culminate in the uncompromising *ostinati* of the opera's finale, that the past – the past of the oracle's decree and the past which that decree concerns – is gradually revealed to have influenced subterraneously and indeed decided in advance the outcome of the drama. If the motif reminds one of the tragic inescapability of a past event, of Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' having murdered Agamemnon, then this inescapability is presented with unequalled force and clarity before a tragic structure has even begun to unravel discursively. It is in part this insistence on music's capacity to precipitate and condense a tragic conflict that renders Strauss's opera exemplary of the modern art form's efforts to compete with the ancient dramas that reach us as purely linguistic documents.

3. Myth.

The tragic past that haunts Strauss's music is thus not only that of Electra or the house of Atreus, but the supposed tragic past of opera itself, and it is not least in this way that the *Elektra* of Hofmannsthal and Strauss presents a worthwhile attempt at solving a problem that may be termed Wagnerian (or rather post-Wagnerian) and which has yielded so many literary and philosophical debates and polemics¹⁷. The question concerns the role of myth: in lieu of inventing a new myth, which would flatter the audience that they too may be a tragic people, Hofmannsthal and Strauss collapse the form of opera into its model. *Elektra* is not, as Lacoue-Labarthe would have it, a feeble effort to revive a dead art – or the hopeless endeavor to outdo Wagner by saturating the operatic form beyond recognition. Instead, the collaboration glosses the occidental myth of music, lyricism, and tragedy in general, and this broader mythic complex is not separate from the particular myth of Electra's fate. As I have briefly indicated, already Sophocles' version of the Electra myth presents her as encapsulated within a song heard by every character in the play as well as the invoked sun and air. Epicedia, dirges, laments, and threnodies define her existence. This appearance of the singer-composer as a theme within the musical drama is of course not particular to *Elektra* among Strauss's operas. In the later *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Capriccio*, the preoccupation with the figure of the composer is explicit, and as the centrality of Electra's voice and position is made manifest by her exclamation that the music proceeds entirely from her, she becomes an archaic incarnation of this figure. Such an interpretation of Electra is warranted not simply by her ceaseless lamentation but first and foremost by her own self-understanding as partaking in a tradition of women mourning and singing the deaths of their kin. Electra inserts herself into a mythic complex and a fiction of herself as a nightingale, a song-maker¹⁸. In remembering her dead father, Electra recalls, invokes, and identifies with those who suffered similarly before her. She is Procne, who, once she has been turned into a nightingale, never stops singing of the child she killed to avenge the rape of her sister [107]. Or she is Aëdon, lamenting in song no longer Itylus, the mistakenly killed son, but Agamemnon, the murdered father [146-53]. Sophocles does not figure Electra's mournful song as the first of its kind but rather situates it within a larger mythic context that the chorus affirms¹⁹. This must be seen, with Nicole Loraux, as a device with which tragedy thinks its lyric origins and its own specificity [90 f.], and perhaps what in Reinhardt's reading becomes a new level of style in Sophocles' works, which collapses narrated content and the uncompromising outflow of Electra's laments, is indistinguishable from this reflection on a mythic musical past.

¹⁷ Naturally, the very idea of the leitmotif as a technique that aims in part to recreate what I have called a tragic temporality broaches the question of Wagner's ambition finally to revive Greek drama, too vast an issue to be treated here. For a comparison of Wagner's and Hofmannsthal's/Strauss's respective visions of Greece, see Goldhill 2002, 160-6. For a recent approach to Wagner and tragedy that carefully traces his *Musikdramen* back to an Aeschylean model, cf. Badiou 2010, 144 f. I note, by the way, strong affinities between my analysis of tragic temporality in *Elektra* and what Badiou's terms 'the time of the tragic paradox' [157-60].

¹⁸ Cf. Chantraine 2009 for the connection between ἀηδών and ἀείδω.

¹⁹ For instance, the chorus repeats the comparison with the nightingale [1077].

But it is important to emphasize that Hofmannsthal's and Strauss's merging of the myth of the power of music with one particular mythic figure does not serve to privilege a Greek tragic past as the only origin of music and song; instead, it renders an operatic fantasy, now spanning four centuries, explicit. Hofmannsthal and Strauss do not reinvent a Western myth of music, adapting it to their own time and place, but work through a structure of exemplarity within which the figure of Electra is not arbitrary. At the same time, the opera does not simply lift the Electra myth as helpful for understanding modern music's tragic obsession. By short-circuiting opera, at the end of its historical existence, into the myth it provides of its own origins, the *Elektra* of Hofmannsthal and Strauss supplies a commentary on the limits of opera's possibilities as a form of art. At the climax of the narrative, Electra tells Chrysothemis and everyone who shares in her joy over the death of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus to keep quiet. The plot and the exchange of information are interrupted for the sake of that music which Electra herself professes to create and which, with Schlegel's word, 'drowns' Hofmannsthal's poetry. Indeed, this has been interpreted as another testament to the primacy of music over language in opera²⁰. Electra would succumb to the power of her own song, proceeding in a wordless ecstasy from the world of representation to a higher realm of music and confirming Schlegel's commonplace notion that in opera words are peripheral and that whoever fails to apprehend the dominance of poetry – that is, of discourse – in tragedy is, as he puts it, 'completely ignoran[t] of the spirit of classical antiquity'. But it is arguably rather the ignorance of ancient music, the emptiness of the model reduced to its subjective effects, the effects of song as it is sung and heard, which opera aspiring to tragedy comes to convert into sheer musical force, into sound. Of this Hofmannsthal's and Strauss's *Elektra* is perhaps the most instructive and convincing example.

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²⁰ See Puffett 1989, 42 f.

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Abstract: This article explores Hugo von Hofmannsthal's and Richard Strauss's treatments of Sophocles' *Elektra* and uses them to shed new light on the original play. Rather than presenting a holistic account, the paper focuses on a set of techniques with which the modern opera and the ancient tragedy reflect upon the imagined pasts of their respective art forms. Special attention is paid to how innovations and stylistic choices in the opera are tied to properties of the Greek text, and Strauss's use of the leitmotif technique is analyzed as a particularly apt way of recreating a tragic temporality within a new medium. The essay concludes with a discussion of *Elektra's* place and importance among Western myths of music and lyricism.

Keywords: tragedy, opera, leitmotif, temporality, myth, exemplarity.