

When Fritz Reiner conducted Richard Strauss's *Salome* and *Elektra* at the Metropolitan Opera in the early 1950s, he brought to these uncompromising scores a combination of iron discipline and dramatic urgency that few conductors of the period could equal. These two one-act operas, composed within four years of one another, represent Strauss at his most extreme: orchestral writing of relentless intensity, vocal lines pushed to the limits of human endurance, and a dramatic language stripped of sentimentality. Reiner's approach to this music was unsparing, precise, and unflinchingly modern.

The performances preserved here originate from Metropolitan Opera broadcasts given in 1952, later issued on vinyl in 1981. Although these recordings have long been valued by collectors, they deserve to be heard not merely as historical documents, but as major interpretative statements. Reiner's command of large orchestral forces, allied to his absolute control of tempo and rhythm, brings a powerful sense of inevitability to both works. Nothing is allowed to sprawl or linger. Each scene unfolds with a taut dramatic logic that keeps the listener constantly aware of the music's forward momentum.

Salome, first performed in 1905, remains one of the most shocking operas of its era. Its relatively brief duration conceals a densely compressed dramatic arc in which desire, obsession and brutality collide with terrifying speed. Under Reiner's direction, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra plays with exceptional clarity and bite. Tempi are firm, textures sharply etched, and climaxes precisely judged. There is no attempt to soften the score's violence or eroticism. Instead, Strauss's orchestration is presented with a hard, gleaming edge that heightens the opera's sense of moral and psychological danger.

At the centre of the performance stands Ljuba Welitsch, whose *Salome* had already become one of the defining portrayals in the Metropolitan Opera's history. Her performance combines vocal brilliance with an almost reckless dramatic immediacy. Welitsch captures both the character's volatile youth and her chilling emotional detachment, moving effortlessly between sensuous lyricism and savage declamation. Reiner supports her without compromise, never cushioning the voice, and in doing so intensifies the sense of inexorable momentum that drives the opera towards its catastrophic final scene.

If *Salome* presents obsession as erotic fixation, *Elektra* pushes psychological extremity still further. Strauss's 1909 score abandons almost all traces of lyrical consolation, replacing them with a dense, searing orchestral fabric and vocal writing of unprecedented intensity. Reiner's Metropolitan Opera performance is notable for its unrelenting drive and structural focus. The music advances with grim inevitability, each episode locked into place with absolute rhythmic control, leaving little room for emotional release.

In the title role, Astrid Varnay delivers a portrayal of overwhelming dramatic force. Her *Elektra* is not merely a figure of hysteria, but a character consumed by purpose, driven by memory and vengeance rather than emotion alone. Varnay's vocal authority and concentration are matched by Reiner's uncompromising direction, which refuses expressive indulgence in favour of clarity and momentum. The result is a performance of almost frightening intensity, culminating in a final collapse that feels not cathartic, but brutally inevitable.

What unites both operas in these performances is Reiner's refusal to sentimentalise Strauss. Where some interpretations seek to cloak this music in warmth or rhetorical breadth, Reiner insists on discipline, precision and dramatic coherence. The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra responds with playing of extraordinary focus, projecting Strauss's massive orchestral forces with power but without excess.

Heard today, these performances reveal Strauss stripped of luxury and theatrical varnish. In Reiner's hands, *Salome* and *Elektra* emerge as works of stark power and classical severity: unsparing, concentrated, and unforgettable. They stand as a testament not only to the conductor's formidable authority, but to a moment in the Metropolitan Opera's history when these radical works were performed with a directness and intensity that still feel startlingly modern.

PACO 231
DISC ONE

reiner

conducts r. strauss

salome
ljuba welitsch
hans hotter
set svanholm

elektra
astrid varnay
elisabeth hängen
paul schöffler

metropolitan opera orchestra

Pristine
XR

live performance recordings, 1952

XR remastered by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a
photograph of Fritz Reiner

disc one (62:44)

R. STRAUSS Salome

1. Scene I: Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Nacht! (5:07)
2. Scene II: Ich will nicht bleiben (7:59)
3. Scene III: Wo ist er, dessen Sündenbecher jetzt voll ist (8:44)
4. Jochanaan! Ich bin verliebt in deinen Leib! (14:35)
5. Scene IV: Wo ist Salome (6:51)
6. Wahrhaftig, Herr, es wäre besser (7:22)
7. Tanz für mich, Salome (3:50)
8. Tanz der sieben Schleier (8:15)

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
conducted by Fritz Reiner

Salome

Performance date: 19 January 1952
Metropolitan Opera, New York
Live broadcast performance
Duration: 1hr 31:49

Elektra

Performance date: 23 February 1952
Metropolitan Opera, New York
Live broadcast performance
Duration: 1hr 41:29

Total duration: 3hr 12:58

CAST

R. STRAUSS *Salome*

Salome — Ljuba Welitsch
Jochanaan — Hans Hotter
Herodes — Set Svanholm
Herodias — Elisabeth Höngen
Narraboth — Brian Sullivan
Ein Page — Hertha Glaz
Erster Nazarener — Alois Pernerstorfer
Zweiter Nazarener — Emery Darcy
Erster Soldat — Norman Scott
Zweiter Soldat — Lubomir Vichogonov
Ein Cappadocier — Osie Hawkins
Ein Sklave — Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)
Erster Jude — Gabor Carelli
Zweiter Jude — Thomas Hayward
Dritter Jude — Alessio De Paolis
Vierter Jude — Paul Franke
Fünfter Jude — Gerhard Pechner

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
conducted by Fritz Reiner

Performance date: 19 January 1952
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PACO 231
DISC TWO



reiner
conducts r. strauss

salome
ljuba welitsch
hans hotter
set svanholm

elektra
astrid varnay
elisabeth höngen
paul schöffler

metropolitan opera orchestra

Pristine
XR

live performance recordings, 1952

disc two (64:30)

R. STRAUSS Salome (*concluded*)

1. Ah! Herrlich! Wundervoll, wundervoll! (12:49)
2. Ah! Du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund küssen lassen, Jochanaan! (15:57)

R. STRAUSS Elektra

3. Wo bleibt Elektra? (5:54)
4. Allein! (9:17)
5. Elektra! (2:30)
6. Ich kann nicht sitzen (5:25)
7. Was heulst du? (1:58)
8. Was willst du? (10:42)

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conducted by Fritz Reiner

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CAST

R. STRAUSS *Elektra*

Elektra — Astrid Varnay
Chrysothemis — Walburga Wegner
Clytemnestra — Elisabeth Höngen
Aegisth — Set Svanholm
Orest — Paul Schöffler
Ein alter Diener — Lubomir Vichegonov
Ein junger Diener — Paul Franke
Die Schlepptägerin — Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)
Die Vertraute — Jean Madeira
Der Pfleger des Orest — Alois Pernerstorfer
Die Aufseherin — Thelma Votipka
1. Magd — Martha Lipton
2. Magd — Hertha Glaz
3. Magd — Lucine Amara
4. Magd — Mildred Miller
5. Magd — Genevieve Warner

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
conducted by Fritz Reiner

Performance date: 23 February 1952
Metropolitan Opera, New York
Live broadcast performance
Duration: 1hr 41:29



PACO 231
DISC THREE

reiner
conducts r. strauss

salome
ljuba welitsch
hans hotter
set svanholm

elektra
astrid varnay
elisabeth höngen
paul schöffler

metropolitan opera orchestra

Pristine
XR

live performance recordings, 1952

disc three (65:44)

R. STRAUSS Elektra (*concluded*)

1. Ich habe keine guten Nächte (11:11)
2. Was bluten muß? (6:13)
3. Orest! Orest ist tot! (0:32)
4. Platz da! (3:00)
5. Wie stark du bist! (2:20)
6. Von jetzt an will ich deine Schwester sein (2:20)
7. Nun denn, allein! (1:16)
8. Was willst du, fremder Mensch? (8:27)
9. Orest! (12:28)
10. Seid ihr von Sinnen (3:40)
11. He! Lichter! (4:52)
12. Agamemnon hört dich! (3:24)
13. Wir sind bei den Göttern (6:01)

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