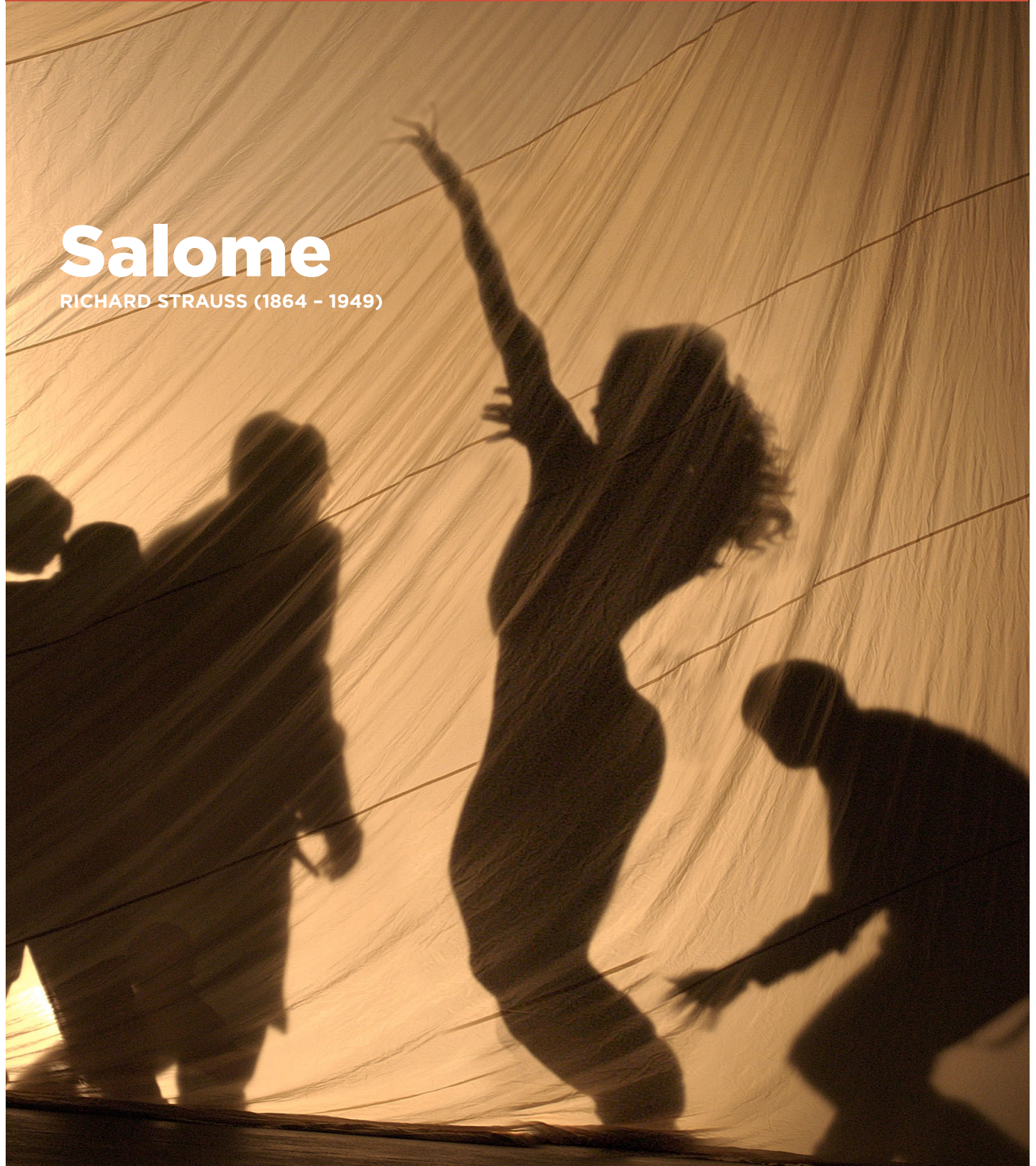


# Salome

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 - 1949)





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*Cover: Dancer Carolyn Woods. Left: Helen Field as Salome. Both photographs from the Canadian Opera Company production of Salome. Photos: Michael Cooper, 2002*

# Welcome

The Canadian Opera Company returns in 2012/2013 with the ultimate season of drama, mischief, love, horror and sacrifice. This spring, hear Lucia hit the high notes of madness with Donizetti's luscious cascading melodies in the dark and Gothic *Lucia di Lammermoor*; explore the biblical story of Salome in a celebrated production by Canadian film director Atom Egoyan; and witness the ultimate sacrifice by an order of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution in director Robert Carsen's staging of Francis Poulenc's riveting *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The season is sure to inspire, shock and ignite the creativity of your students!

An evening at the opera is more than a night of entertainment. Opera provides many avenues for thought-provoking discussions and can be explored through many subjects beyond the arts, including history, social studies, media literacy, and yes, even science (think acoustics and sound!). The COC's Study Guides help enhance your students' visit to the COC by giving them a glimpse into the history, music, themes and the stories of the operas, while suggesting ways of putting their learning into practice.

Thank you for choosing to introduce your students to the thrilling and vibrant world of opera. It takes a creative and courageous educator to expose students to innovative subjects beyond the traditional curriculum, and I hope that the COC's Study Guides become a valuable educational resource for your efforts.

Katherine Semcesen  
Associate Director, Education and Outreach

## New this season:

### Careers in Opera Spotlight

This season each Study Guide features a spotlight on an individual working at the COC. Learn about the many careers in opera and discover how the COC connects to Canada's cultural landscape.

## Opera

### at any stage of life!

The COC runs over 20 programs for school groups, children, youth and adults. Discover more at [coc.ca/Explore!](http://coc.ca/Explore!)

# Opera 101

## WHAT IS OPERA?

The term “opera” comes from the Italian word for “work” or “piece,” and it is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de’ Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of serious nature (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children’s stories (*The Little Prince*), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

## What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don’t use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

## What does opera feel like?

Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing **everything**. Make an agreement with the students that it’s not about judging people’s voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don’t worry about singing “correctly.” Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions?

If so, how?



# Attending the Opera: Make the most of your experience

## WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



Photo: Sam Javanrouh

So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. What do I wear? Can I take photos of the performance? How will I understand it – isn't opera in another language?! Relax! Here are a few tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. Some people think of the opera and imagine the entire audience decked out in ballgowns and tuxes, but that's just not the case! People wear all sorts of things to the opera – jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable and show personal flair. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie, and grab a sweater before you leave home – the air conditioning can be a bit chilly! Additionally, skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to **arrive on time** for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act from a screen in the lobby rather than your seat. If you need to buy or pick up a

ticket, arrive as early as possible, as sometimes the line-up for the box office can be quite long before a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance starts. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about the performance, drop by the Welcome Desk to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about the opera, but about COC programs in general. A **pre-performance chat** takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3 of the lobby) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats, given by members of our **COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau**, offer valuable insight into both the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore the lobby**, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. The Four Seasons Centre is Canada's first purpose-built opera house, engineered with state-of-the-art design and technology for the best possible acoustics. Notice that the sound of traffic, streetcars and the general bustle of the city barely reaches the lobby, even though an airy glass wall looks out onto one of the busiest intersections in Toronto.

Stop by one of the bars and **purchase a beverage or a snack**. Browse the **Opera Shop** to pick up a memento of your experience at the opera. (Note: the Opera Shop is not open at dress rehearsals.) Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase – the longest free-standing glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you’ll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You’ll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

Chimes ring throughout the lobby starting **ten minutes** before the performance, reminding everyone to get to their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program from the usher, and find your designated seat. It’s best to use this time to open any candies or cough drops you might have and turn off your cell phone – the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! If you’d like to get a picture of you and your friends at the opera, do so now – **photography is not permitted** once the performance begins. A camera flash is very distracting to the performers, who are working hard to stay focused and in character.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, **listen carefully**. Whatever little bit of outdoor sound you might have heard in the lobby (a siren passing, a rumbling streetcar) has been virtually eliminated here. Not a peep! That’s because the auditorium is physically separated from

the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

Now it’s time to sit back and **enjoy the opera!** But wait – you forgot your German-to-English translator! Don’t worry about it. **SURTITLES™** are projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. SURTITLES™ originate from the idea of “subtitles,” which are most commonly used in foreign films to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the *libretto* (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: *above* the stage. SURTITLES™ were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages around the world.

Make sure to show your **appreciation to the performers** by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it’s absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting “bravo!” for a man, “brava!” for a woman, or “bravi!” for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

Strauss’s visceral thriller, *Salome*, will captivate you for approximately one hour and 40 minutes (no intermission!). The opera will be sung in German with English SURTITLES™.

R. Fraser Elliott Hall.  
Photo: Tim Griffith



# Characters and Synopsis

## MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Narraboth	Captain of the Guard	Tenor	NAH-rah-bot
Jochanaan	John the Baptist, prophet	Baritone	YOH-kah-nahn
Salome	Herod's stepdaughter	Soprano	ZAH-loh-meh
Herod	King of Judea and Perea	Tenor	HEH-rod
Herodias	his wife, Salome's mother	Mezzo-soprano	heh-ROH-dee-yas

## SYNOPSIS

Salome, princess of Judea, lives in the palace of her mother, Herodias, and stepfather, Herod. Imprisoned in a well beneath the palace is the prophet Jochanaan (John the Baptist). Salome leaves Herod's dining hall, troubled by the way her stepfather looks at her. Hearing Jochanaan's voice, she becomes enthralled by it. Salome seductively convinces Narraboth, the captain of the guard who she knows is secretly in love with her, to bring Jochanaan up from the cistern. Salome, her obsession growing, praises his beauty, begging him to let her kiss his mouth. Jochanaan ignores Salome's advances, refusing even to look at her, warning her she is damned. Meanwhile Narraboth, overcome with jealousy, kills himself.

Herod and his entourage appear in search of Salome, and discover Narraboth's body. Although suffering hallucinations from the burden of his conscience, Herod flirts with Salome, offering her lavish gifts, which she refuses. Herodias reprimands her husband for staring lasciviously at her daughter, and they argue. Jochanaan's voice is heard from the cistern, proclaiming the coming of Judgement Day. Meanwhile, a group of Jewish scholars resident in the palace disagree over the rumour that Jochanaan has seen God. Herod and a pair of Nazarenes jump into the argument, and the voice of Jochanaan is heard condemning Herodias. Herodias demands silence and Herod asks Salome to dance. Initially refusing, Salome agrees once Herod has promised that she may name her reward.

When her dance is finished, Salome requests her reward: Jochanaan's head. Herod is horrified and tries to change Salome's mind with offers of magnificent gifts, which she refuses. Since Herod has sworn an oath, Jochanaan is beheaded and his head brought to Salome.

In front of the court, Salome sings to the head as if it were alive. She asks Jochanaan why he still refuses to look at her, and chastises him for having cursed her. If only he had looked at her, she is sure he would have loved her. The moon emerges from behind a cloud, illuminating Salome engaged in a passionate kiss with the head of Jochanaan. Herod cries out an order to "kill that woman," and Salome is put to death.



# Genesis of the Opera



## **RICHARD STRAUSS - COMPOSER (1864 - 1949)**

Composer Richard Strauss was born on June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany into a musical family. His conservative father Franz was a successful horn player who worked frequently for composer Richard Wagner, though he strongly disapproved of Wagner's music.

Strauss and his friend Alexander Ritter (who was married to Wagner's niece) spent hours talking about the structure and form of Wagner's and Franz Liszt's music. These ideas came together to influence Strauss's tone poem *Don Juan* (1889) among others. The audience's reaction to *Don Juan* was strong and mixed but Strauss had grabbed their attention. He had made his mark.

In 1894 he married the singer Pauline de Ahna, for whom he wrote his first songs, including *Morgen* and *Cäcilie*. It seemed natural, with his dramatic instincts, to compose works for the operatic stage. After two unsuccessful initial efforts with opera, he had a great critical and financial success with *Salome* (1905) and went on to write *Elektra* (1909), *Der Rosenkavalier* (*The Knight of the Rose*, 1911), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (*Ariadne on Naxos*, 1916), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (*The Woman without a Shadow*, 1919), *Arabella* (1933), and *Capriccio* (1942). His final work, a song cycle entitled the *Four Last Songs* (1950) was a triumphant conclusion to a long and brilliant career. He died September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

Strauss was influenced by Liszt, Wagner and Mozart, but ultimately his music stands alone and still holds the ability to shock and thrill its audience.

## **HEDWIG LACHMANN - LIBRETTIST (1865 - 1918)**

Hedwig Lachmann was born in Pomerania (now Slupsk, Poland) in 1865 and died in Krumbach, Germany, 1918. Now recognized as a talented poet and sensitive translator, she began her working career as a governess in England and Germany. Arriving in Berlin in 1889, Lachmann began to receive notice for her writing. She was among the first wave of translators to bring the Symbolist poetry of Rossetti, Swinburne, Verlaine and Wilde to Germany. With her husband, Gustav Landauer, she also collaborated on translations of Balzac, Poe and Conrad.



## **OSCAR WILDE - PLAYWRIGHT (1854 - 1900)**

Full of talent, passion and, most of all, full of himself, Irish-born Oscar Wilde was widely renowned for his wit, flamboyance and creative genius. His literary career achieved notoriety with the publication of the short novel *The*

*Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), though he was primarily known for his success as a playwright with works like *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895). With his keen interest in the theatrical, he turned his thoughts to the lurid biblical tale of Salome. In 1891, after an evening of discussion about the various ways that Salome's story had been represented across different historical epochs, Wilde returned to his hotel and started immediately on a play about the subject. He wrote it very quickly and, somewhat unexpectedly, in French. The story of Salome comes from the Bible originally (the Book of Mark in the New Testament), but Oscar Wilde's play was influenced in its style by the sensual Old Testament book, the Song of Solomon.

Despite all his success, Wilde spent his final years exiled in France, living in near poverty. He died in 1900.

## **THE OPERA**

Wilde's play was initially banned in England and premiered in Paris to mixed reviews in 1896. In 1903, Hedwig Lachmann wrote a German translation of Wilde's play which was staged in Berlin later that year and opened to great acclaim. Upon seeing the play, Richard Strauss decided it was tailor-made for musical adaptation. He began work on the musical score in late 1904, completing it in the summer of 1905.

The opera premiered on December 9, 1905, in Dresden, Germany. The singers engaged for the premiere were horrified at the demands placed on them by the score, and the leading soprano refused to appear in the "Dance of the Seven Veils" (necessitating a body double); but the opera, which received 38 curtain calls, was an immediate success and cemented Strauss's reputation as a major young composer. The audience and critics were shocked by its subject matter and erotic themes, including the infamous dance and the final scene in which Salome declares her



love and passionately kisses the severed head of John the Baptist. New productions were immediately mounted in several countries. The first New York production, which opened on January 22, 1907, had its remaining performances cancelled after some wealthy, influential patrons objected to its content. However, *Salome* is considered a masterpiece and has remained a mainstay of the operatic repertoire.

Strauss composed the opera in German, and that is the version that has become widely known. In 1930, he made an alternate and less-performed version in French using the language of the original Oscar Wilde play.

### SINGING THE ROLE OF SALOME

Richard Strauss described the character of Salome as “a 16-year-old princess with the voice of an Isolde.” Strauss was making a comparison to the notoriously demanding soprano role in Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1865). In general, the soprano voice is the highest of the female voices, but the Wagnerian role of Isolde is what’s called a **dramatic soprano** role: it requires a voice that can sing with great intensity and power. Moreover, because Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* uses a large orchestra, singing Isolde means having an even larger voice of exceptional reach, one that’s capable of being heard without amplification over the sound of 80 – 100 instruments playing at the same time.

Like Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, Strauss’s *Salome* features a very large orchestra – approximately 100 instruments – which is why the composer suggested that singing Salome was a vocal undertaking comparable to Isolde. (For more on the musical affinities between Strauss and Wagner, see page 10.)

But in addition to all those vocal attributes, the singer must also be someone who can plausibly personify a 16 year-old woman, which is a consideration that becomes particularly significant with the opera’s famous “Dance of the Seven Veils.” Different productions and singers have treated the dance in a number of permutations – many singers opt to use professional dancers as stand-ins, others take on the dance themselves – but it’s clear that the role of Salome requires a combination of extraordinary talents and natural attributes that rarely occur within one individual.



Salome (1909) by American painter Robert Henri

Other soprano types include the coloratura soprano, who is able to sing very high notes and skip through rapid passages with ease, and the lyric soprano, who can sustain long and beautiful melodies.

# Listening Guide

*Salome* is laden with literary, cultural and musical influences. First of all, its libretto was taken directly (with some edits) from Oscar Wilde’s sensational play of the same name. Wilde considered his play to be highly musical in language, but Richard Strauss was able to use his score to illuminate and transfigure the emotions and motivations behind Wilde’s words. After all, Strauss was also working during a fascinating period: the early years of psychoanalysis – Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* had been published only five years before *Salome*’s premiere in 1905. And, like Richard Wagner before him, Strauss’s complex and sophisticated orchestral writing didn’t just tell a story: it seethed with the emotions, neuroses and unspoken drives of the characters.

Wagner’s influence on Strauss is well illustrated in *Salome*, with its expanded orchestral language, long, sometimes unresolved melodies, and extensive use of motifs throughout. Its music combines lush exotic lyricism with

moments of hair-raising dissonance. When Strauss first played the score for his father, the latter made a comment to the effect that the music had “ants in its pants.” The rich score has no set arias or ensembles but is a churning experience of unresolved lines of agitated and manic music.

All this combined to create one of the most thrilling pieces ever composed, and one which still has the power to leave its audience breathless.

Recording: Richard Strauss, *Salome*. Orchester der Deutschen Oper Berlin under Giuseppe Sinopoli, conductor. With Cheryl Studer, Bryn Terfel, Horst Hiestermann, Leonie Rysanek, Clemens Bieber, Marianne Rørholm. Deutsche Grammophon, 431 8102. You can also experience the Listening Guide online at [www.coc.ca/Radio](http://www.coc.ca/Radio).

1

## MUSICAL EXCERPT

Act I: “Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Nacht!” (“The Princess Salome is very beautiful tonight!”)

## CONNECTION TO THE STORY

As the opera opens, we are plunged right into a scene of palace attendants and guards watching the royal family (offstage) at dinner. Narraboth, a young Syrian, adoringly watches the princess Salome; the Page watches Narraboth nervously, and the soldiers watch everyone, commenting on the action.

## MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The opera has no formal opening like an overture or prelude. It is as though it starts right in the middle of a scene. The first notes (0:01) feature the clarinet rippling upwards in one of Salome’s themes: light and somewhat twisted at the same time, with a tantalizing hint of exoticism. Narraboth’s vocal lines (0:10) are *legato* (smooth and flowing) as he rhapsodically describes Salome’s beauty. On the other hand, the Page’s lines are more declamatory and sombre, tinged with fearful premonition (0:21).

## FURTHER REFLECTION

At the start of the opera, the characters on stage are voyeuristically peering into the palace dining room. We, the audience, are voyeurs as well, as we watch the action on stage. What does this say about the way Strauss structured his opera? Why do you think, in this instance, that the composer chose to do away with an overture and just jump right into the action?

### Legato:

a musical term, literally translated from the Italian as “tied together,” indicating that musical notes are played or sung smoothly with no intervening silence.



## 2

### MUSICAL EXCERPT

“Jochanaan! Ich bin verliebt in deinen Leib” (“Jochanaan! I am enamoured of your body”)

### CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Salome has had the imprisoned Jochanaan brought out of the cistern. She is fascinated by him, first praising his body. He rejects her and she rails angrily, telling him it is his hair she loves. Again he rejects her and she tells him it is not his hair, but his mouth she wants. This time he rejects her more severely and is taken back to the cistern, but she promises that she will kiss his mouth.

### MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The role of Salome is a hugely challenging one for a soprano. The orchestral writing is sometimes so “thick” that it’s a challenge for the singer to cut through the sound with her own voice!

In this excerpt, Salome’s vocal lines are full of lyricism in those moments when she is praising Jochanaan’s features (0:12), including an almost waltz-like motif (0:34). This mood turns to dissonance when she angrily reacts to his stern rejections (2:18). As for Jochanaan, this character is often sung in the key of C major, upright and straightforward. His tones are declamatory (1:46); Jochanaan doesn’t talk *with* Salome, but *at* her, all the while refusing to look at her, a refusal that torments her.

### FURTHER REFLECTION

Salome is a kind of femme fatale – a sexually dangerous young woman who aggressively pursues a man who doesn’t want her. This was a shocking idea at the time, especially considering that Salome is only supposed to be 16 years old. Wilde thought Jochanaan was a zealot about his strength and faith as much as Salome was a zealot about trying to get what she wants. What does this opera say about these two very different characters? How have their past lives informed how they are behaving?



## 3

### MUSICAL EXCERPT

The Dance of the Seven Veils

### CONNECTION TO THE STORY

Herod has promised his stepdaughter Salome that he will give her anything she desires if she dances for him. Salome agrees even though her mother, Herodias, is not happy with this arrangement.

### MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE

This piece is often played as a stand-alone excerpt in orchestral concerts. In its unabashed and lush *Orientalism*\*, it is full of the mystery and exoticism that was such a lure for Europeans at the time of composition. But amid its lavish decadence, this music contains recurring motifs heard elsewhere in the opera, bringing the unresolved issues of the characters subconsciously to the listener.

### FURTHER REFLECTION

The staging of the Dance of the Seven Veils can pose a thrilling challenge. Depending on the nature of the production, a director might choose to have the piece choreographed many different ways. How would you approach it?

\**Orientalism*: term used to describe the imitation of aspects of Eastern cultures by artists and enthusiasts from the West, particularly in the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century. The works created were often highly romanticized and idealized.



**4****MUSICAL EXCERPT**

“Es ist kein Laut zu vernehmen” (“There is no sound, I can hear nothing”)

**CONNECTION TO THE STORY**

Salome leans over the cistern in anticipation of her prize. She is stunned at Jochanaan’s silence and wonders why he doesn’t cry out.

**MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE**

As Salome listens, we hear high double-bass pinched sounds (0:07), which are to represent, according to Strauss, moans of anticipation from the impatiently expectant Salome, not – as might be expected – the cries of the victim. The vocal and orchestral writing builds (1:20), more and more maniacally (2:03), until – preceded by a rumble of timpani (2:16) – the executioner presents the head of Jochanaan (2:20).

**FURTHER REFLECTION**

All we hear as the execution takes place are Salome’s frantic declamations. The silence is part of the eeriness. Does this emphasize Salome’s isolation? What is her state of mind right now? How does that make you feel about her? How do you feel about Jochanaan?

**5****MUSICAL EXCERPT**

“Sie ist ein Ungeheuer, deine Tochter” (“Your daughter is monstrous”)

**CONNECTION TO THE STORY:**

Herod is revolted by Salome just as Herodias is delighted with her daughter’s actions. Herod calls for the lights to be extinguished. He is full of foreboding. The moon comes out from behind a cloud to show Salome kissing Jochanaan’s mouth. Herod orders his soldiers to kill Salome.

**MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANCE**

As Herod asks for the lights to be extinguished, the music is held on a long, chilling trill (1:07). As Salome kisses Jochanaan’s mouth, she sings a brief rhapsody (1:53), which builds to a stunning climax (4:57) ending with a sudden dissonant chord (5:04) that has been described as the most sickening chord in all opera, and the moment when – if there was any doubt before – Salome loses her sanity. Herod cries for his soldiers to kill her to the repetitive, grim poundings of the orchestra (5:42).

**FURTHER REFLECTION**

*Salome* shocked its audiences in 1905 and at many subsequent performances. Today, Strauss’s thrilling music and Wilde’s disturbing tale still has the power to engage its audience in a gripping, edge-of-your-seat way. Does this make the story timeless? Could Salome’s story ever become stale?

# What to Look for



## BACKGROUND

This critically acclaimed Canadian Opera Company production of Richard Strauss's *Salome* is directed by celebrated Canadian film and stage director Atom Egoyan, whose award-winning films include *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Exotica*, *Ararat*, and *Chloe*.

The COC first approached Atom Egoyan to direct *Salome* in the 1990s. He was asked to consider this piece because his film work – especially *Exotica* – so adeptly addressed an interrelated web of psychological and sexual themes that corresponded closely with the Wildean/Straussian treatment of the biblical story of Salome. Egoyan created a multi-media production featuring film and video imagery for the COC in 1996. It was subsequently remounted in 2002.

## PRODUCTION

In his production, Egoyan brings some of the original erotic shock value back to Strauss's *Salome*. He moves the **setting** of the opera from a first-century palace in the Holy Land to a foreboding, abstract environment that could signify any number of spaces: a palace, a spa or even a sanatorium. There, Herod is surrounded by men in white coats who supply him with drugs and alcohol, and otherwise cater to his every whim. With a prominent moon presiding over the stage, the colour palette of the design is sombre, and almost monochromatic, were it not for an exceptionally bright blue backdrop.

The **costumes**, like the set design, are somewhat abstract; without committing to a particular time period, they suggest anything from the 1970s to a modern period closer to our own time. The costumes include colours like clinical white, hot Middle Eastern orange, or a militaristic khaki.

This stripping down of Herod's luxurious palace, which is traditionally presented with "exotic" markers of affluence like fans and feathers, is what allows the audience to focus on the characters themselves. Instead of removing an audience from the psychological/dramatic core of the opera, Egoyan strives to emphasize the unadorned perverse natures of Herod, Herodias and Salome.

**The production makes use of a video screen** in the background to convey sequences that normally take place offstage. For example, when Jochanaan, who is

captive in an underground cistern, berates members of Herod's family for their numerous sins, his moving lips are projected on the screen behind the actors. Such uses of the video screen are a powerful help in heightening the opera's impact. Salome's "dance," which in this production ends in a brutal rape, is realized using multimedia techniques including film footage, shadow puppetry and lighting effects.

By exploring *Salome's* world of voyeurism and sexual abuse, Atom Egoyan brings today's audience the same gut-wrenching response that the opera produced at its shocking premiere.



Top Left: Atom Egoyan. Photo: Anthony Woods | Above: Helen Field as Salome in the Canadian Opera Company production of *Salome*, 2002. Photo: Michael Cooper





Roger Honeywell as Narraboth and Helen Field as Salome in the Canadian Opera Company production of *Salome*, 2002. Photo: Michael Cooper

Atom Egoyan is committed to seeing this as a new interpretation of his earlier production, not a straightforward remount. So while the 2012/2013 staging maintains many of the fundamental artistic elements of the original, Egoyan offers new insights and additional nuances that correspond to an artist's naturally evolving take on Wilde and Strauss's piece.

"Credit to Atom Egoyan for making opera exciting and relevant to a 21st-century audience."  
Glenn Sumi, *NOW Magazine*



# COC Spotlight: Claire de Sévigné

Take a peek behind the scenes and learn about the many diverse careers available in the arts! In this edition, we interview Claire de Sévigné – a new member of the COC’s Ensemble Studio, which is a training program for young artists making the transition to full-fledged opera

professionals. As Claire stands at the cusp of her career – she’ll be understudying roles all year, as well as appearing on the mainstage in *Die Fledermaus* and *Salome* – we ask her some questions about the excitement and challenges of opera, and find out just how much she loves pajamas.



Claire de Sévigné  
(Soprano)

**Position:** Soprano

**Name:** Claire de Sévigné

**Role in the Company:** New COC Ensemble Studio Member (soprano)

**Hometown:** Hudson, QC

**Education:** Bachelor of Music (McGill University), Masters of Music (University of Toronto)

**When did you first become interested in opera?** I first became interested in opera when I was 17 years old. I had to rent an opera production on DVD from the library. After I saw one I went back and rented them all!

**What made you decide to pursue this career path?**

I was originally in a rock band in high school! I sang and wrote my own songs. When it came time to go to university my parents said that I could study music but that it couldn't be "rock and roll." So I went into classical music as I had some previous experience singing in my home town choir and musical theatre shows.

**If someone was interested in becoming an opera singer what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?**

Choral, band, community theatre and musicals can be a great experience when you are young and a positive way to develop beginner music reading, ensemble and stage skills. Assuming one is enrolled in a music degree at university, summer "opera camp" programs, competitions and young artist programs are great resume building tools too. However, there are many paths to becoming an opera singer. I know many singers who didn't study music in university. Finding the right private teacher and having a ton of patience while your voice grows are also big factors. Very few of us become opera singers overnight.

**What do you love most about this career?**

Meeting new people and endlessly learning new things with each and every project that I do. Although opera is an old art form, nothing about it ever gets old or boring for me because there is always something more to explore and develop. The music of course is my number-one love – the costumes, drama and getting to be a whole other person is an added bonus! I also love to be moved and experience different emotions, thoughts and feelings, and opera is an art form that fulfills all of those things for me.

**What do you enjoy the least about this career?**

Travelling. I love to be in my PJs at home in my own bed too much.

**What surprises you most about this career?**

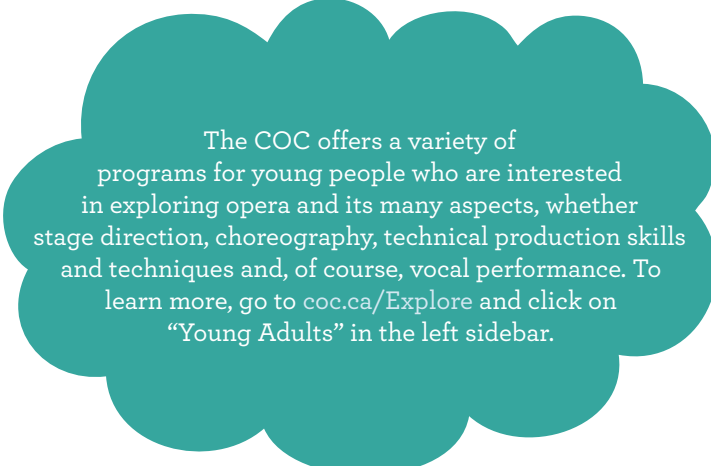
There was a way to sing “academically” when I was in school and now that I am out I have to make different vocal choices that I may have refrained from in school and be more of an “artist” with my voice and work. Things are not so carved in stone with “right and wrong” in the professional singing world. There is so much more to being an opera singer and performer than the accuracy of singing what’s on the page.

**What are you most anticipating about this production?**

Being close up in the big dramatic action and getting to hear and sing beside big Strauss voices such as Erika Sunnegårdh (Salome) who can make sounds that I can only dream of! Especially as I am a light coloratura soprano!

**What do you enjoy outside of opera?**

Throwing dinner parties, getting coffee with friends around the city, watching movies, biking and swimming.



The COC offers a variety of programs for young people who are interested in exploring opera and its many aspects, whether stage direction, choreography, technical production skills and techniques and, of course, vocal performance. To learn more, go to [coc.ca/Explore](http://coc.ca/Explore) and click on “Young Adults” in the left sidebar.

# Active Learning

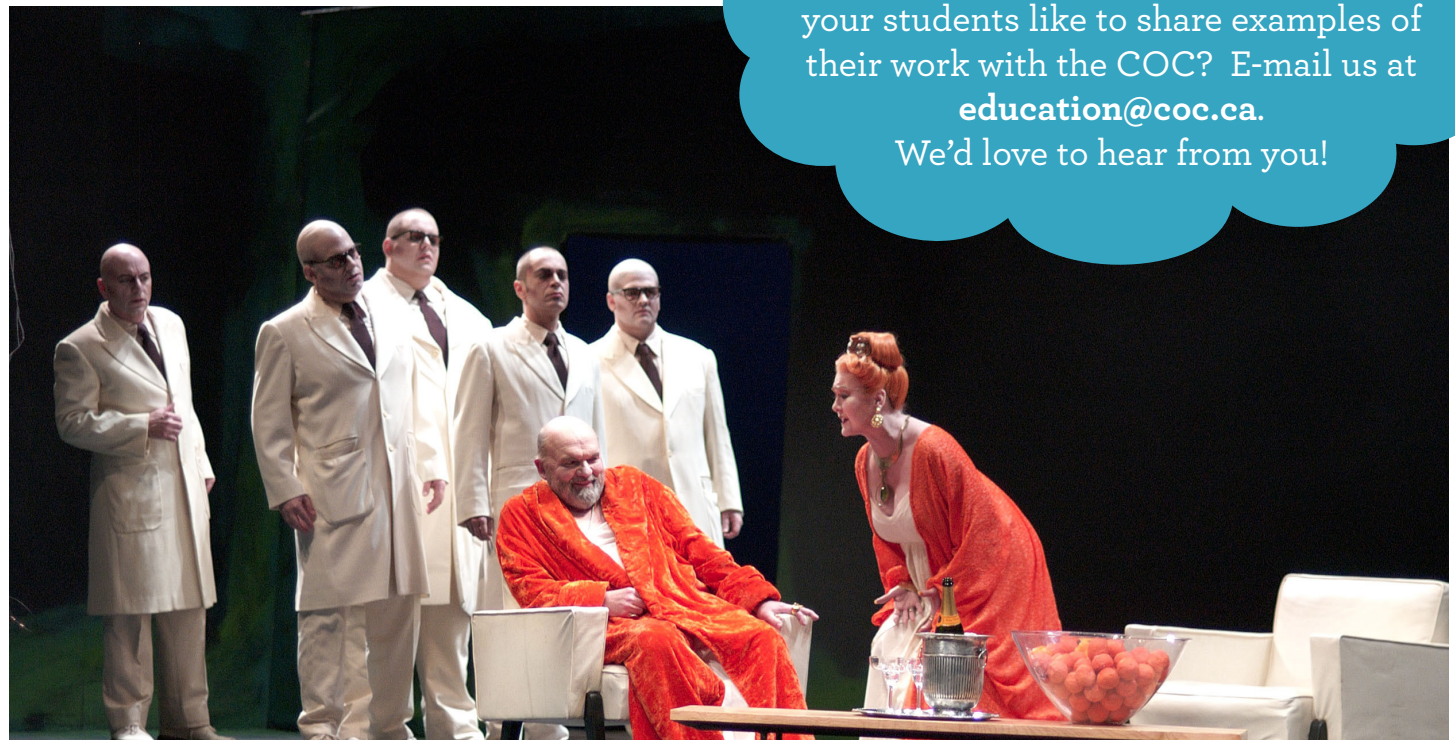
One of the best parts of taking your students to the opera is the discussion that live theatre can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *Salome* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

## DISCUSSION

- ◆ Atom Egoyan is primarily known as a film director rather than an opera director, but here he has staged a successful production that has already been presented twice by the COC. What challenges do you think he faced in switching art forms? How has he met these challenges? What similarities exist between opera and film? Which art form do you feel creates a stronger emotional connection with the audience?
- ◆ Discuss the power of beauty in society. How important does it seem in today's society to be beautiful? Is life easier for those who are considered conventionally beautiful? Would there be a story at all if Salome was not beautiful enough to get whatever she wanted from Herod?

## FURTHER EXPLORATION

- ◆ Read Oscar Wilde's play with your English class and compare and contrast it with the opera. Discuss the steps that might be involved in translating a play into



Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at [education@coc.ca](mailto:education@coc.ca). We'd love to hear from you!

A scene from the Canadian Opera Company production of *Salome*, 2002. Photo: Michael Cooper



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Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988. Print.

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“Salome.” *The New Penguin Opera Guide*. 3rd ed. 2011. Print.



*Dancer Carolyn Woods in a scene from the Canadian Opera Company production of Salome, 2002. Photo: Michael Cooper*



The COC offers a wide variety of school programs for Kindergarten to Grade 12.

To find out more, visit our website at [coc.ca/Explore](http://coc.ca/Explore) or contact:

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