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Helen with the Blue Dress on: Strauss' *Die Ägyptische Helena*

In 1920, Hugo von Hofmannsthal began to devise an opera about Helen and Menelaus, set after the fall of Troy and intended to provide the missing link between the extant ancient sources, Homer and Euripides. Soon thereafter Hofmannsthal asked Richard Strauss to collaborate on the project, which was originally envisaged as an operatic ballet.[1] Fuller conceptualization and writing continued through the fall of 1923, with the bulk of the music and text being completed by the end of the year. Over the next few years, corrections and revisions were made, mostly through letters between the composer and his librettist.[2] On June 6, 1928, their long-awaited collaboration *Die Ägyptische Helena* premiered at the Dresden Opernhaus, to mixed reviews.[3] In the text Hofmannsthal considers the issues of remembrance and forgetfulness, reality and illusion, stemming from his reading of Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Helen.*[4] Using these ancient sources as reference points for the opera, I will examine the representation of Helen and her beauty in *Die Ägyptische Helena*,[5] taking into consideration

[1] Letter written on Sept. 8, 1923 from Strauss to Hofmannsthal: "I hope to find *Helena* at Garmisch, preferably with entertaining ballet interludes" (transl. Hammelmann and Ewald Osers 1961: pg. 364)

[2] The letters between Strauss and Hofmannsthal provide fascinating glimpses into the making of an opera. Letters on *Die Ägyptische Helena* begin in later 1923 and continue through the opera's premiere in 1928. See Mays 2001 for a fuller treatment.

[3] While many appreciated the music, most critics were in agreement that the libretto was incredibly convoluted and difficult to understand. But even the genre itself was in doubt, as Stuckenschmidt wrote, soon after the opera premiered: "Has the effect of the traditional long opera been exhausted? There is some truth to this assumption, in particular the somewhat questionable success Strauss achieved with *Die Ägyptische Helena*" (576).

[4] We are reminded in Euripides' *Helen* of an alternate version of the myth describing the abduction of Helen, where Hera sends a phantom (*eidolon*) of Helen to Troy with Paris, in retaliation for Paris' choice of Aphrodite as the fairest goddess, and relocates the actual Helen to Egypt for the duration of the Trojan War.

[5] In 1933 a revised version came out, editing much of the second half. Some opera houses still perform the revised version, but I am commenting upon the original 1928 version.

her physical and vocal portrayal, as well as discussing other characters' opinions of Helen and stage directions.

In doing so, I will argue that Strauss and Hofmannsthal, in their conception of this opera, work from the viewpoint of "selective sentimentality."[6] Some of the characters on stage, most notably Menelaus, are encouraged at several points to remember specific memories, and, at other times, to forget different events from the past. The continuous shift between remembrance and forgetfulness confuses Menelaus,[7] and may also produce confusion in the minds of the audience.[8] In the end, remembrance defeats forgetfulness,[9] but only in a limited sense: Menelaus is urged to move forward with his life by remembering the good while simultaneously disregarding the bad. Helen most fully embodies this principle of selective sentimentality; her renowned (and restored) beauty, one of the recurring themes of this work, is meant to evoke pleasant recollection and weaken sour memories for Menelaus.

Just as Menelaus is asked to overlook Helen's previous indiscretions, the audience too is encouraged to do this for Germany. Strauss and Hofmannsthal wish to inspire their audience to feel a sense of restored happiness and pride for Germany by recalling its previous days of glory. They want to remind the audience that Germany is still worthy of their support and respect, not only through the themes of the opera, but also through the genre of opera itself, which had a

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[6] I coined this phrase in part from Jeremy Tambling's assertion that Strauss and von Hofmannsthal's collaborations form part of a culture of sentimentality that he believes is tied into a culture of fascism. See Tambling 182.

[7] Hofmannsthal's conception of Menelaus' confusion may stem from Euripides' *Helen* 483-496, where Menelaus has just learned that "Helen" has lived in Egypt for the last 10 years, and is (understandably) puzzled.

[8] The author wonders if this may be part of the reason for the mixed reviews.

[9] Strauss to Hofmannsthal (April 9, 1928), regarding Hofmannsthal's recently published essay on *The Egyptian Helen*: "One thing only: I should have liked—for the reading public at large—to see the beautiful 'potion of remembrance' stressed a little more."

storied, proud past in Germany, and more generally, through music, widely looked upon as Germany's crowning achievement as a nation.

I shall focus first on Helen's physical representation in the opera.[10] When the Omniscient Seashell describes Helen on the ship, it says, *Die Schlafende ist von allen Frauen der Welt die Schönste*, or "the sleeping woman is the fairest of all the women in the world" (Act One Prologue). The adjective *Schönste*, meaning "fairest, most beautiful" is repeated no less than eight times in reference to Helen. In Act One, Scene Three, Aithra utters it directly to Helen, after having restored her beauty.[11] She then identifies Helen as *Schönste* when speaking to Menelaus in Act One, Scene Four. Later in this scene, the elves use the adjective to characterize Helen when they are trying to trick Menelaus. In Act Two, Prince Altair twice tells Helen that she is *Schönste* (Scene Two, Scene Three), while in Act Two, Scene Two, Menelaus and Da-ud also refer to her as such. Da-ud even says that he is willing to die for her beauty: *Denn es ist recht, daß wir kämpfen und daß wir sterben im Blachfeld um dieser willen—denn sie ist die Schönste auf Erden,* "For it is proper that we fight and that we die on the battlefield for her sake—because she is the most beautiful woman in the world!" This is a rather explicit allusion to the Trojan War and its cause, but also indicates that, even ten years later, Helen still stirs men to action. When the characters make these statements about Helen, emphasis is often placed on the eyes. Stage directions specify an exchange of erotic gazes between the (mostly) male characters and Helen, directly before they announce how beautiful she is. The powers of

[10] For a discussion of Helen's beauty in other literature and drama, see Maguire and Blondell.
[11] The close relationship of Helen and Aithra may reflect the bond forged between Helen and Theonoe in Euripides' *Helen*, as the two (along with the help of Menelaus) create an ultimately successful plan to deceive Theoclymenus. Though her life is in danger, Theonoe is willing to assist Helen. Helen speaks of Theonoe's actions as "a favor to me" (ἐμὴν χάριν, line 1373). Female solidarity also arises between the Chorus (of Egyptian women) and Helen (Chorus: "a woman must suffer together with a woman," line 329.) See Wright 297 for a different view of the decision of Theonoe.

the eyes and of gazing add intrigue to the opera, as Menelaus is often unsure of whether he is seeing the real Helen, or her "phantom."

Helen is also referred to as a goddess, *Göttin*, by Prince Altair and by Menelaus (twice) in Act Two, Scene Two, both times in connection to her beauty. The word "goddess" can often be used as a colloquial expression to describe a beautiful woman, whom the ordinary man cannot even think of possessing. Nonetheless, Menelaus' suggestion that she is a fear-arousing goddess (*mich ängsticht der deine, schöne Göttin,* "I am frightened by [your look], lovely goddess!") reminds the audience member of *Iliad* III.158, where the old men say that Helen looks dreadfully like a goddess: αἰνῶς ἀθανάτῃσι θεῇς εἰς ὦπα ἔοικεν.[12] Moreover, Helen, unlike other women, was literally a goddess. At the end of Euripides' *Helen,* the Dioscuri, Helen's brothers, announce her eventual fate as a goddess (lines 1666-1669). The abundance of superlative and divine adjectives used to describe Helen shows that her physical reputation precedes her, even in Egypt. Obviously Helen's appearance is something that people would remember and *want* to remember about her.

Aithra's restoring of Helen's beauty in Act One, Scene Three is a pivotal scene, as it emphasizes the features of Helen that are considered her most important and most memorable. In this scene sight is highlighted once again; both these women have powerful gazes that attract and enchant both men and women. Aithra touches Helen's cheeks, remarking that they have been "marred by the salt of the sea" (*Die lieblichen Wangen so entstellt vom Salz des Meeres*). This could allude to Euripides' *Helen* 1189-90, where Theoclymenus questions why Helen is lamenting, moistening her cheeks with fresh tears, before she performs his burial rites on the

[12] The Greek text cited is from Volume One of Oxford's *Homer: Homeri Opera*, edited by Monro and Allen. See also Allan.

sea.[13] Aithra then touches Helen's hair, making it shine again: *Ohne Glanz die Haare! Meinst du, ich brauche Salben und Öl, damit sie dir leucthen*, "No luster in your hair! Do you think I need salves and oils to make it shine?" Hair is a significant feature in this opera: as she arrives on stage, Helen is labeled a beautiful woman with luxurious golden hair (*üppiges goldblondes Haar*). Throughout the opera she is often found fixing it, as in Act Two, Scene One, where she "weaves pearls into it" (*Helena entnimmt dieser einen goldenen Spiegel und flicht Perlenschnüre in ihr Haar*, stage directions) before her second aria. Both of Hofmannsthal's ancient sources appear to have provided inspiration here: Homer refers to Helen, more than any other female, as having lovely hair, both in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.*[14] In Euripides' *Helen*, Theoklymenos associates Helen cutting her golden hair with the mourning of Menelaus.[15]

Once Aithra finishes restoring Helen's facial features and hair, she moves on to her clothes. As Helen falls asleep, Aithra orders her servants to put Helen in her "most beautiful" *(schönste*) robe—the blue one, which may be a reference to Egypt and the Blue Nile.[16] When viewing images of prior performances of the opera, Helen always is shown with long, flowing blonde hair, intricate jewelry and makeup, and a dress in different shades of blue.[17] Including a scene with the restoration of Helen's beauty seems contrary to earlier representations of Helen

[13] Cheeks are a sign of beauty in the *Odyssey* as well; Homer refers to Penelope's cheeks when depicting Athena's pouring of beauty upon her (XVIII.172, 200).
[14] καλλίκομος in the *Odyssey* (XV.58), εὔκομος in *Iliad* III.329, VII.355, VIII.82, IX.339, XI.369, 505, XIII.766. The word εὔκομος is used more of Helen than any other goddess or heroine in antiquity (Llewellyn-Jones 263).
[15] *Helen* 1224.
[16] The choice of blue may also have to do with the influence of prior German authors on Hofmannsthal, such as Goethe (see Brilliante 2010), and perhaps Novalis, whose novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* contained the "blue flower," a symbol of hope and desire to strive for the unattainable, which influenced many later German Romanticists and was also used as a symbol of inspiration on posters used by the German Youth Movement in Weimar Germany.
[17] See, e.g., the image of Helen in Tommasini's *New York Times* review of the 2007 Metropolitan Opera staging.

in literature, where she is eternally beautiful. Aithra has made Helen look as Helen thinks she did on her wedding night, and this is important to the overall themes of the opera. Potential inspiration for this scene is found in the *Odyssey*, where the goddess Athena refreshes Penelope's appearance before she addresses the suitors (Book XVIII.190-196). When Penelope appears before the suitors, her newly restored beauty helps the suitors to remember why they are there. In the same way Aithra returns Helen to her former famous state, which should serve to arouse Menelaus' memories of their wedding celebration and wedding night, helping to remind him why he has fought for her. However, Menelaus still has to be convinced of the goodness of Helen's beauty (Act One, Scene Four). Her beauty may remind Menelaus of good memories, but it is also the cause of some very painful experiences, such as losing Helen to Paris, the Trojan War, the death of many good Greek soldiers, etc. This is why I emphasize the idea of *selective* sentimentality: not all memories stirred up by past appearances or experiences will be good, but the opera suggests that it is one's task to appreciate the good, release the bad and move forward.

We now turn to Helen's musical representation in the opera.[18] Helen's first aria, "*Bei jener Nacht*," occurs in Act One, Scene One, when Helen and Menelaus have just reached Aithra's palace. Helen is trying to calm Menelaus and offer him something to drink. She sings:

Bei jener Nacht, der keuschen einzig einen	By that night of singular chastity
die einmal kam, auf ewig uns zu einen	that came once and made us forever as one;
bei jenen fürchterlichen Nächten	and by those terrible nights
da du im Zelte dich nach mir verzehrtest;	when in your tent you hungered for me;
bei jener Flammennacht, da du mich zu dir rissest	by that flaming night when you pulled me into your arms
und mich zu küssen doch dir hart verwehrtest	and could hardly resist your desire to kiss me,
und bei der heutigen endlich, da du kamest	and by this past night, when you finally came to me

[18] Accompanying the American Symphony Orchestra, the soprano Deborah Voigt gives life to Helen. It is her performance that provides the basis for this discussion. I must give due credit here to Fritz's 1998 dissertation, which helped me to form some of my observations and arguments about the music.

mich jäh und zart aus allem Schrecknis nahmest	suddenly and tenderly took me away from all the horror:
bei ihr, die mich aufs neu dir schenkt,	by this night which gave me to you again,
trink hier, wo meine Lippe sich getränkt!	drink here, where my lips have drunk. (trans Fox)

The lyrics include a significant amount of night imagery, describing Helen and Menelaus' first night as one of chastity, then Menelaus' many nights of longing for her, followed by the flaming night (probably when Troy burns) when Menelaus reclaims her, and finally the night when they leave. Throughout the course of the aria Helen connects nighttime and their love, more specifically Menelaus' desire for her. She posits Menelaus as the agent in all of these actions, thus removing agency from herself: "you hungered for me…you pulled me into your arms… you took me away," etc. But at the end, she becomes the agent, telling him to drink from the cup that she offers to him. She emphasizes her lips as a way of seducing him, coaxing him to notice her beauty. Nighttime is a period where passion and seduction can take over, as Helen has related in the earlier sections of the aria. However, nighttime can also be a suitable time for deception, as things are not as clearly seen in the dark. The aria seems designed to prompt Menelaus' pleasant memories, by making him feel like the romantic hero, and will not allow him to reminisce about unpleasant experiences. Perhaps this explains why she avoids any mention of days, such as the day when Paris took Helen, or the many days of fighting Menelaus had to endure.[19]

The music accompanying Helen's first aria has elements of waltz and is quite melodious. It begins and finishes in the same key (B major) and notes, a common feature of Strauss' arias (Fritz 41). Stringed instruments are highlighted in this aria, which Fritz believes is connected to one of the leitmotifs in the opera, associating the stringed instruments with Helen's seductive powers (163). While these elements of the orchestra can be heard and felt, it is clear that the true

[19] While there were many days of fighting, Troy was captured during the night, which only adds to Menelaus' string of unsuccessful days and successful nights.

emphasis of this aria is on the voice. Schlötterer (89) notes that Strauss was always willing to learn when Hofmannsthal or Zweig wanted him to enhance the melodic and vocal element of the music at the expense of the orchestral apparatus, which is exemplified here. Helen's voice consistently builds tension, with subsequent resolution into a major key; she often switches rapidly from low to high notes, and she uses a lot of coloratura, including melisma. Strauss liked to emphasize the vertical over the horizontal dimension in his exploration of tonality (Agawu 57), which can be heard here through her melismas. Helen's style is also intended to be "classical," with four-bar phrases (Fritz 37). The aria showcases the strength of the soprano's voice, and it seems that Helen is trying to prove her worth to Menelaus through the aria. Both the lyrics and the music build up to a triumphant conclusion: Helen begins to believe that she has won Menelaus back.

Even after the beauty restoration scene, Helen continues to prove her virtue to Menelaus with her voice, employing the same musical tropes and leitmotifs. She opens Act Two with her second aria "*Zweite Brautnacht*":

Zweite Brautnacht! Zaubernacht,	Second bridal night, magic night,
überlange! Dort begonnen	extended magic night! There it began,
hier beendet: Götterhände	here ended: godly hands
hielten das Frühlicht neider in Klüften	held the dawn down in the crevices;
spät erst jäh aufflog die Sonne	it was late when the sun first flew up
dort überm Berg! Perlen des Meeres,	suddenly over that mountain! Pearls of the sea,
Sterne der Nacht salbten mit Licht diesen Lieb.	stars of the night anointed my body with light.
Überblendet von der Gewalt	Overwhelmed by their power,
wie eines Kindes	like a child's
bebte das schlachterzogene Herz!	the battle-raised heart trembled!
Knabenblicke aus Heldenaugen	Boyish glances from a hero's eyes
Zauberten mich zum Mädchen um:	transformed me again into a maiden,
zum Wunder ward ich mir selbst,	into the wonder I myself became,
zum Wunder, der mich umschlang.	into the wonder of he that embraced me.

In "*Zweite Brautnacht*," Helen uses much of the same imagery as in "*Bei jener Nacht.*" She again begins by describing the nighttime, comparing this past night to her bridal night. This

recalls and reinforces Aithra's restoration of her beauty in Act One, Scene Three, where Helen herself says that she looks just as she did on her wedding night. Later in the aria, she emphasizes sight, when the hero is glancing at her and making her feel youthful again, reminiscent of her scene with Aithra. As in "*Bei jener Nacht*," Helen connects nighttime and passion, underscoring the power of good memories. She and Menelaus share a night longer than naturally possible; she speaks of divine hands holding the day back and how late it was when the dawn finally arrived. She believes that she has restored herself to Menelaus during the past evening, which explains her triumphant sound. Allowing for the day to arrive, however, means allowing the potential for reality to return: it was not just their bridal night, she is not who she was ten years earlier, she has not been in Egypt for the last ten years, and she has not been a good wife to Menelaus. The night imagery serves as manipulation to lure Menelaus closer to her and to remind him of their passion.

The music opening "*Zweite Brautnacht*" echoes the beginning of Helen's aria in Act One, but this time it moves into a higher range before reprising the leitmotif (2:30). Again Strauss emphasizes the stringed instruments, but there are more audible horns in this piece, which point to the upcoming action.[20] The aria concludes with a cadence of cymbals clashing, giving a sense of triumph and completion, as of a battle that has just been won. Helen sings in a higher register in this aria, further displaying the strength of her voice. Occasionally the singing resembles *recitativo*, though still being rhythmic and stylized.[21] Even so, Helen incorporates more examples of melisma and ends the aria with one incredibly embellished syllable, fluctuating between higher and lower notes successively and rhythmically for about fifteen

[20] A hunting scene forms a large part of Act 2, where there is a strong emphasis placed on horns. Strauss takes this from Wagner, who often includes horn leitmotifs in scenes of hunting.
[21] See Fritz 1998: 41.

seconds, with almost no breaks for breath. It is a powerful, dramatic ending, made stronger and more convincing by the clash of cymbals.

Although introduced in pleasant, triumphant-sounding arias, reminding Menelaus of the past produces negative consequences. After "*Zweite Brautnacht*," Menelaus becomes confused again as to who the real Helen is, and after "*Bei jener Nacht,"* Menelaus reminds her of the cup from which Paris and his brothers drank. She does not deny that she has been with Paris and others, but she tells him to forget about all the other men, suggesting that the past does not matter and that he ought to focus on the present, their reunification and reignited passion. When he then retorts that too many have tasted her fruit, she responds that they always want more. Once more she does not deny her infidelity, but rather flaunts it as a way of accentuating her always-enticing beauty.

Throughout the opera, Helen uses words of agency and manipulation to remind Menelaus of their happy times and help him to forget distressing incidents. She reminds him that she chose him out of 30 suitors and that she belongs to him now (Act One, Scene One), and that he still desires her and must forget all the evils that have happened (Act One, Scene Four). Later she decides that deception and absolute forgetting are not the correct approach: remembrance (of certain things, at least) is their key to a happy life. The opera comes full circle when Helen reprises "*Bei jener Nacht*" yet again in Act 2 Scene 4. She hands Menelaus the potion of remembrance while re-prompting the same pleasant memories—these are the events he should remember as his memory is reinstated. Fritz (146) affirms:

> There is only one place where an exact text is repeated in the libretto, Helena's aria "Bei jener Nacht"…Strauss repeats the same music, since it is important that Menelas recognizes the aria as having been sung to him before…Strauss here uses the music to make the allusions of the text obvious.

Helen constantly utilizes her voice to direct other characters, moving between the larger themes of remembrance and forgetting, but always enticing Menelaus to be nearer to her (and, just barely, fending off other men—Altair, Da-ud).[22]

Why would Strauss and von Hofmannsthal want to write an opera about forgetting and remembrance? Germany in 1928 is still reeling from a tremendous defeat in World War I.[23] It has recently established the Weimar Republic, which, according to Kater, Strauss "detested," as he had been "brought up in the diehard conservative monarchist tradition" (203). The country is a mere five years away from the usurping of control by the Nazis and the Third Reich. Many scholars over the past decades have debated whether Strauss sympathized with the Nazi cause or was even himself a Nazi, since he was appointed by Goebbels himself to be president of the Reich Music Chamber, a division of the propaganda ministry.[24] But there are clear signs that he was not a Nazi sympathizer, at least not in relation to the Nazi view of Jews—Strauss' main collaborators, Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig were both Jewish, as well as Strauss' own daughter-in-law.

Nevertheless, there are parts of the Third Reich that may have appealed to Strauss. Strauss seemingly worked with the Nazis solely to provide benefits to musicians, composers especially. He fought for longer copyright laws and the artists' rights to royalties. Evidence has indeed shown Strauss to be nationalistic,[25] and this is where connections can be made to *Die Ägyptische Helena*. I stated earlier that Strauss and Hofmannsthal were working from a

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[22] Strauss and Hofmannsthal were both familiar with the episode in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* (see Hofmannsthal 1928, 207), where Helen mixes up a potion of forgetfulness for Menelaus, Telemachus, and the others (lines 219-234). This potion is also rather unsuccessful, as Menelaus begins to recount Helen's role in nearly ruining the ploy of the Trojan Horse.
[23] See Tambling 198 for a concise summary of German history and politics in 1918-1933.
[24] See Tambling (195), explaining why Goebbels appointed Strauss.
[25] Potter 101.

viewpoint of selective sentimentality, taken from Tambling's "culture of sentimentality," associating a longing for the past with fascism. I do not believe Strauss and Hofmannsthal were commenting upon fascism in the opera, but the attitude of sentimentality applies to the opera. I suggest that the composer and his librettist want the audience to remember the glorious past of Germany in order to remember their nationalism and German pride. At the same time they must overlook some of the ill memories, such as World War I[26] and the chaos of the Weimar Republic. A letter written by Strauss in 1924 states: "I cannot bear the tragedy of the present time. I want to create joy. I need it."[27] For Strauss, creating joy means looking to the past and remembering Germany's earlier magnificence, while disregarding the more recent troubles.

This viewpoint may have stemmed from Strauss' aforementioned conservative upbringing, as well as Hofmannsthal, who was active in the conservative revolution in 1920s Germany. Hofmannsthal wrote an article about this emerging "Revolution from the Right,"[28] where he asserts (341):

> Here the isolated, titanically searching ego, abandoned to his own devices, breaks through to supreme community by uniting in itself that which for centuries has split a people lacking in the common bond of a culture…The process of which I am speaking is nothing other than a conservative revolution of a scope unknown to European history. Its goal is form, a new German reality in which the entire nation participates.

Hofmannsthal appreciated how individuals, by realizing their common culture, unite and create a community. The Germans may be disillusioned and confused about their own current political

[26] An excellent suggestion from Ruby Blondell: Perhaps World War I for Germany is similar to the Trojan War for the characters of *Die Ägyptische Helena,* in that both wars are terrible experiences that people are desperately trying to forget, while seeking to remember better, more peaceful times before the war. See also Brilliante 2010, who believes Menelaus in his quest for the truth is Hofmannsthal's portrait of the "western man," just returning from World War I and disillusioned from the experience.

[27] Tambling 198.

[28] This is the title given to the chapter devoted to Hofmannsthal's and others' conservative writings in the *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*.

situation, but if they remember their cultural heritage, they have the bond by which they can strengthen their country. The better word for describing this movement was not "conservative," according to Arthur Moeller Van Den Bruck, writer of 1923's *Das Dritte Reich*, but "nationalist." He states (333):

> This nationalist will desires to conserve all that in Germany is worth conserving…The nationalist's dreams are of the future. He is a conservative because he knows there can be no future that does not have its roots in the past. He is also a politician because he knows that past and future can only be secure if the nation is secure in the present.

In order for Germany to be secure now and in the future, it must know and remember its past and strive to conserve those ideas. Similarly, Menelaus and Helen share a past, both culturally and domestically, and it is up to Menelaus to reconcile and unite the opposed forces within himself, those of good and bad memories, which are dictating his current moves.

This belief system extended to the musical world as well. Many past and present, German and non-German scholars have believed that music and German identity were inextricably linked, particularly in the Weimar Republic.[29] Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (20) write that there was a "nationalist phase" among German composers in the period from 1914 to 1945, whereas in the periods before and since, engagement in German political nationalism among composers was more the exception than the rule. At this time more than ever, music was Germany's most important cultural commodity and a distinguishing feature of the German nation: "It was only logical that understanding Germany's musical past and present could lead to a deeper understanding of the German character and help define the German nation" (Potter and Applegate 22). Strauss, in creating traditional German operatic music, compels the audience to recognize and appreciate not only the characteristics of the musical

[29] See, e.g., Applegate 1992; Vaget 2002: 160; Campbell 2002: 128.

genre but also the characteristics of a past Germany, which was, like Helen, strong, beautiful, and determined. Thus Aithra's restoration of Helen's beauty corresponds to Strauss' attempted reestablishment of Germany as a glorious nation in the minds of the audience, in an effort to reawaken their nationalism and pride, just as Aithra wants to elicit Menelaus' restored pride in having Helen once again. Applegate and Potter (21) observe:

> World War I marked a crisis in German identity that deeply influenced the discourse on German music, while condoning attempts to exploit music for political aims. Military defeat and modernization created a longing for a lost national pride and a nostalgia for simpler times…Music, by virtue of its "community-building powers" (*gemeinschaftsbildende Kraft der Musik*), was widely promoted as holding the key to healing the wounds of a fractured society and promoting feelings of camaraderie.

The music in this scene and throughout the opera echoes Aithra's magic—it has the power to captivate and transform, to revive feelings and memories (good and bad) about the past, and to draw the audience together in the spirit of past pride.

Even though Strauss employed music to write about historical and/or political Germany, it seems he also used it to critique German music. Strauss may have employed references within *Die Ägyptische Helena* to Germany's past glories in music—Wagner and 19th century opera—in order to comment on the shifting experience of music in Germany in the 1920s. He knew that the times were changing; opera houses were suffering in the late 1920s. Konold argues that this occurred because the "financially leading classes had become more economical with their cultural expenditure, owing to the increasingly uncertain economic situation."[30] Opera as a genre was changing, with new pieces by composers such as Kurt Weill altering perceptions of what opera should be, but even classical music had moved in a new direction.

[30] Konold 28. See also Gilliam 1992: 261 and Levi 2000: 138.

The changing state of German music can be tied to the observation of Pamela Potter quoted earlier regarding "perceived threats to tonality." In twentieth century Germany there were radical developments in music theory and composition, which, for many listeners, were shocking and often received negatively.[31] The German composer most commonly associated with atonality and twelve-tone technique is Arnold Schoenberg, along with his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern, commonly referred to as the leaders of the Second Viennese School (Auner 244). The principles of atonality wholly contradict Strauss' compositional style in *Die Ägyptische Helena*, where melodies and recurring leitmotifs embody the essence of the opera. Like his hero Wagner, Strauss chooses specific keys and melodies for certain characters and intentionally returns to them over and over again.[32]

Strauss must have seen the younger Schoenberg and his "modern" ideas as a threat to classical music and to traditional forms of composition, as he "professed that the new music was completely alien to him."[33] List (64) writes:

> Highly honored by those who were shocked and frightened by the younger generation, Strauss was pointed out as an example of a composer who could write in the "modern" idiom and still not break the traditional system. The sexagenarian suddenly became the great white hope of German music and a bulwark against the barbarians of dissonance.

Strauss' early work was too considered shocking and revolutionary, perhaps seen most clearly in *Elektra* (1909). But now, nearly twenty years later, though he is still regarded by some as

[31] See Fritz 21.
[32] Agawu 61: "In Strauss, passages of extended tonality function in the 'classical' sense in which Schoenberg defined the phenomenon—they emerge in response to specific extramusical stimuli, they have the effect of interpolations, and they are temporary enrichments of the harmony."
[33] List 1945: 64.

"modern," he has rebelled against himself and published more traditional music in opposition to the new generation.

List's remark also shows that the atonal composers alarmed general audiences as well as established musicians. Auner (232) argues that it was undeniable that many performances of works by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern were met with incomprehension and even hostility, while List notes (in reference to Schoenberg's opera *Die Glückliche Hand*): "The work was greeted by the majority of the audience with disrespectful howling." Audiences were horrified and appalled by the compositions of the Second Viennese School, and they were meant to be: "Through their writings, well-publicized concert scandals, and the first performances in the 1920s of many of their 'expressionistic' works, the three had come to represent a rejection of the past and a deliberate spurning of the audience" (Auner 229). Opposition to modern extremists was even more pervasive in opera. According to Rockwell (184), opera's importance in the Weimar Republic derived from its centrality to German cultural life and to the Germans' self-image as citizens of a cultured nation, and that anyone who had tried to reform or update or modernize German opera, or its performance, could be easily accused of "subverting the very soul of the fatherland." Strauss, on the other hand, champions German tradition by representing the embracing of the past in *Die Ägyptische Helena*. This may be why he found such favor with the Nazis, whereas Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School did not.[34]

Even if Strauss found popular music at that time to be "decadent," he did try, nevertheless, to appeal to the public with his melodies, though not always successfully. One critic wrote: "The composer is evidently inspired by the wish to please the public as much as

[34] Konold 1980, p. 57: "With the economic depression towards the end of the 1920s a situation arose in cultural policy in which all phenomena of modernity were harshly contested…the modern, the non-conformist was also speedily pitched into the same boiling pot as the political Left." See also Tambling 196.

possible. But there is in Strauss' music an excess of sweetness. We must not doubt his sincerity, but we doubt his self-criticism" (Weissman 657; cf. A.K. 619). To Weissman, Strauss has distanced himself so far from unmelodious compositions and atonality that he has created music that is too melodic and kitschy.[35] Perhaps in trying to appeal to the audience, the opera has lost too much of the status of high art. Weissman (657) continues: "The Straussian and the Wagnerian elements of the score are seasoned by the composer with his well-known cleverness, but the sauce which is destined to sweeten this composition has a bad taste."

Whether or not Strauss was successful does not matter here. More important is the fact that he made a conscious choice to include elements of Wagner and of his own earlier works. He sought to remind the audience members about the past achievements of Germany, particularly in music and opera, while inspiring them to forget more recent troublesome developments in politics, history, and musical culture. In doing so, he reinforces musically the theme of the libretto in *Die Ägyptische Helena*: remembrance. Once Menelaus drinks the potion of remembrance, he is compelled to accept Helen for who she is, remembering and appreciating her good characteristics, while dismissing his anger and frustration at her negative qualities. Thus the reconciliation within the opera is completed. Unfortunately for Strauss and Hofmannsthal, *Die Ägyptische Helena,* even with its noble intentions, soured many audience members because of its overly complex plot and text. Ultimately, an opera that was meant to be about remembrance became one that many people wanted to forget.

[35] See Tambling 1996 for a discussion of Strauss and his kitsch.

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