

# British Theatre Guide

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## Elektra

Richard Strauss, libretto Hugo von Hofmansthal

Salzburg Festival

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It's been so often stated, especially during recent times, that no other way of watching a performance can equal the satisfaction of seeing it live in the theatre. I fancy, however, that this fine recording may prove the exception.

Much attention was given at the time to the fact that the opera could be staged at all, in August 2020, as part of the Salzburg Festival, and with no visible concessions on stage or in the huge orchestra to anti-COVID requirements.

Critics flocked, welcomed the initiative, but, while praising much of the production, tended to the conclusion that it lacked overall impact. That may, I feel, have been a consequence of the venue, the extraordinary Felsenreitschule, carved into the Salzburg mountainside, with a huge stage, almost twice the width of the vast orchestra pit.

After a new spoken prologue by Klytämnestra justifying the backstory of her murder of husband Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenie, Małgorzata Szczęśniak's set opens up to reveal a stepped pool, a symbolic vessel for the attempted washing away of sins, with showers behind. It's an environment as chilly and sterile as the school swimming baths of my youth, and in which we are invited to judge the main protagonists.

There is therefore none of the usual sense of claustrophobia in which these three women act out their obsessions: guilt-driven Klytämnestra, the half-demented Elektra determined to avenge her father, and sister Chrysothemis who just wants to get out of this madhouse.

But by cutting in on the action, through close-ups, and astute switches of view to background action when necessary, the video intensifies the drama. That said, it demurely looks away when a naked maid is sacrificed in a ritual of augury for the superstitious Klytämnestra.

The sound engineering and camera work may also benefit Ausrine Stundyte as Elektra. The Lithuanian soprano does not have the shattering volume of some predecessors in the role, most notably for her meeting with Orestes, but the voice is broad, her intonation instantly pin-precise, and the top notes secure and shiny. She is a fine actress too, not overly dramatic in her gestures, but with the twitchy nervousness and wide, staring eyes of one just beyond the brink of madness.

Asmik Grigorian is a canny, no-nonsense, complex Chrysothemis, trying to dissuade her sister from matricide, but the one left to clean up the bodies afterwards. Her voice has a pure clean-cutting edge, complemented by the warm tones of mama, mezzo Tanja Ariane Baumgartner as a Valium-popping Klytämnestra, in an all-black Cruella hairdo and dressed as something between an ageing vamp and a cult priestess in blood-red silk that wouldn't show the splatters.

Orest is usually the bold, returning avenger. Not so much so in director Krzysztof Warlikowski's view of things. For baritone Derek Welton evinces greater credibility as an uncertain, timorous Orest, whose hesitant homecoming is matched by the reaction of an edgy Elektra who is just not up to a brotherly hug.

Finally, we meet Aegisth in the person of Michael Luarenz, Klytämnestra's lover and potentially cause of much of the trouble, and here not above suspicion of a little extra-relationship relationship with Elektra.

As the blood flows, as the ghost of Agamemnon looks on impassively, as Chrysothemis sings of love and her sister suffers a fatal seizure, instead of the usual frenetic dance unto death, flies descend upon the streaks of gore and multiply into a swarm around the head of the fleeing Orest, in video designer Kamil Polak's horrifying projection.

Conductor Franz Welser-Möst and the Vienna Philharmonic avoid such histrionics, handling the dynamics of orchestra and singers superbly and bringing out the colours in the mammoth score. There is a heckelphone and two basset horns in there somewhere, which those with a full score or keener hearing than mine may pick out.

Richard Strauss and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal were founding fathers of the Salzburg Festival 100 years ago. I think they would have been pleased.

**Reviewer:** [Colin Davison](#)