

Thesis of the DLA Doctoral Dissertation

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The Role of the Oboe and Its Auxiliary Instruments  
in the Operas of Richard Strauss

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## **I. Background of the Research**

My interest in the subject arose from my own professional experience: during the preparation and practice for my diploma concert and the performance of Richard Strauss's Oboe Concerto, I noticed the composer's rich and multifaceted treatment of the oboe's timbre and expressive potential. The work contains a variety of contrasting characters, the authentic performance of which, in my view, is aided by a deeper understanding of his operas. Studying the characters, motifs and emotions associated with them in his operas directly enriches the interpretation of the Oboe Concerto as well.

As an orchestral musician, I had the opportunity to participate in performances of Richard Strauss's symphonic poems and operas. I have always felt that the oboe and its auxiliary instruments occupy a special place in his works. His orchestrations are highly individual, particularly with regard to the newly developed low-pitched oboe, the heckelphone, which lends a new colour to the wind section. Although the idea of the instrument – a bridge between the cor anglais and the bassoon – originated with Wagner, it was under Strauss's guidance that it achieved its final form. It became important for me to study in more depth the special tasks assigned to the oboe family and their effects on nuances of timbre, and to examine the changes of atmosphere achieved through his distinctive use of orchestration.

I set myself the task of exploring Strauss's operatic characters more closely by analysing in detail the interweaving of text and melody, with special attention to the development of dramaturgy in the oboe parts. My goal was to understand the role of the oboe family within the orchestra, especially in the woodwind section. With the knowledge gained, I aim to enrich my own interpretations of Richard Strauss and to inspire future oboists to consciously incorporate these insights into their performances.

## **II. Sources**

My primary sources were András Batta's *Richard Strauss Szemtől Szemben* and Matthew Boyden's *Richard Strauss*, as well as a detailed study of the scores and parts, which I specify below. At the start of my thesis the conversations and score-analyses I had with conductors János Kovács, Balázs Kocsár, and Gábor Káli were also helpful, as were recordings I listened to and compared, although due to their large number it is impossible to list them all precisely.

Precise listing of the sources mentioned above:

Batta, András: Richard Strauss Szemtől Szemben. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1984.

Boyden, Matthew: Richard Strauss. Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 2004.

Strauss, Richard: Ariadné Naxosz szigetén, op. 60. Mineola: Dover Publications (reprint edition, score), 1993.

Strauss, Richard: Der Rosenkavalier, op. 59. Boosey & Hawkes, 1943 (score).

Strauss, Richard: Elektra, op. 58. Berlin: Adolph Fürstner, 1916 (score).

Strauss, Richard: Oboe Concerto. Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 2020 (parts).

### **III. Methods of the Research**

I began my work with a detailed study of Richard Strauss's life. I sought references in his career and personal history that could provide valuable information for interpreting the selected works. I consider it important to understand the composer's personal experiences and biography, which often find reflection in his compositions.

In writing my dissertation, I approached the selected works from several perspectives. I continuously compared the oboe parts and the full scores with the librettos, while regularly playing the musical material. As a starting point for my analysis, I chose melodies of special importance for the oboe parts. I paid particular attention to how Strauss shaped these motifs in line with the dramaturgy: whether he consistently linked them to the same character or used them to express an emotional state.

In cases where Strauss deviated from established patterns, I sought explanations for what might have justified the change and what effects it produced in terms of mood and character depiction. In my investigations I also took into account the surrounding orchestration, with particular attention to how the oboe part fits into the orchestral texture. I observed what instructions Strauss gave to the oboist and to the other musicians, and how these contributed to the completeness of the dramatic expression.

In examining the use of auxiliary instruments, I compared the full orchestral score of *Elektra* with the reduced version, while constantly confronting the differences with the sounding material. I aimed to formulate how the various orchestrations affect the atmosphere of the work. In addition, I analysed harmonies and harmonic progressions in which the oboe and its family have a special significance. I studied how the colour of chords changes when the composer builds with various auxiliary instruments, and how the same harmonies sound when, in the absence of these instruments, they are replaced by others.

I observed the role of the oboe from a chamber-music perspective within the wind parts. I demonstrated how Strauss uses the instrument's capabilities to portray different characters. Through my orchestral work I had the opportunity to test how differing instructions on tempo, dynamics or articulation alter the same motif, and what role the oboe part plays in the work as a whole.

In my research I sought not only to examine the oboe part in isolation, but also to understand its role in Strauss's dramaturgy and orchestration. The analyses helped to reveal how and what role the oboe plays in a chord or within the woodwind section, when and as part of which instrumental group its timbre carries meaning, and how the oboe and its auxiliary instruments become an important tool for colouring the orchestral sound and depicting characters.

#### **IV. Results of the Research**

My research has confirmed that in Richard Strauss's operas the oboe and its auxiliary instruments assume an independent dramaturgical role. Their musical material consistently relates to the characters' utterances, becoming vehicles of emotional expression. Strauss shapes these by modifying his instructions – the rhythm, tempo, articulation and dynamics of thematic heads – to reflect changes of state brought about by the action. Closely intertwined with the text, their highlighted appearances in the musical texture become expressive devices of emotion and content, while their use in various ensembles makes them painters of moods and colours.

Overall, it can be stated that the oboe parts in Strauss's operas represent not only a technical challenge but also an interpretative opportunity for performers. Conscious use of their underlying meaning can enrich oboists' playing style and support them in performing works such as the Oboe Concerto. I believe that understanding the tasks assigned by Strauss to the oboe and its family, following his precise instructions and fulfilling the technical demands together lead to significant artistic growth for the performer.

#### **V. Documentation of Activities Related to the Dissertation Topic**

Der Rosenkavalier:

6, 17, 20 October 2013, Conductor: Stefan Soltész

12 October 2013, Conductor: János Kovács

5, 10 June 2014, Conductor: Jun Märkl

Elektra:

19, 22, 24, 28 May 2011, Conductor: János Kovács

11 June 2014, Conductor: Stefan Soltész

29 April; 7, 14, 20 May 2023, Conductor: Balázs Kocsár

Ariadne auf Naxos:

17, 23 June 2023, Conductor: Péter Halász

25 June 2023, Conductor: Michael Boder