University of Birmingham
School of Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music
Taught Programmes Essay/Assignment Cover Sheet 2022-23
This must be included as the first page of all work submitted for your assessment

Required Information:

Module Title:	**Vienna: Study of a Musical City**	
Module Level (LC, LI, LH, LM)	**LI**	
Where relevant, assessment component		
Student ID (SRN)	**2332158**	
Essay/assignment title:	**Essay II**	
Confirmed Word Count:	**2537**	
Have you had an extension agreed?	**Yes** (circled)	**No**
If Yes, what is your extension deadline?	**16th January 2023**	

REMINDERS

1. Insert your **Student ID Number** in the top right-hand corner of each page and on this cover sheet. **DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME** on the assignment or in your **File Name** or on this cover sheet.

2. Assignments should be submitted electronically **by 12.00 NOON on the published deadline**. You will normally be asked to submit your assessed work via the Assignments tab on the module Canvas page. In contrast to previous academic years, there will usually be ONE submission portal for each assignment, rather than separate portals for on-time and late work.

3. You are strongly encouraged to meet the original published deadline. After this period, late work (without agreed extension) will be penalised 5 marks per working day late. There may be occasions when unforeseen circumstances mean that you need to request an extension. From 2021-22, University policy on extensions has changed. For further information on extensions in the College of Arts and Law and other support available to you, please click here for the Wellbeing Canvas page. Where work is submitted late with or without an extension, your feedback will also be delayed.

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   c) Don't submit your work at the 'last minute'. Uploads can sometimes take several minutes, particularly for rich content like Powerpoint presentations and video submissions.
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7. Standard written assessments should be submitted **as MS Word or PDF files**. Where applicable, you will be given guidance on acceptable file formats for other assessments such as audio or video assignments.

STUDENT REFLECTION ON FEEDBACK AND ASSESSMENT

As the starting point for your summative assessments, please complete this individual Student Reflection on Feedback sheet when you submit your work. This coversheet invites you to think about feedback you have received at earlier points in your course and how you have responded to it in this new piece of work. Thinking carefully about how the feedback you have received previously can help to improve your performance. It is helpful, too, for the marker to know what feedback you have had previously on similar pieces of work, and how you have tried to act on it. Knowing the range of different kinds of feedback you have had can also help us to use more those kinds that are most helpful to you.

Your marker will engage with your reflection either in a comment on what you write here, or in their feedback to you. The extent to which you have improved on previous pieces of work will **NOT** affect your mark. Your work will be marked on the basis of its own merits as a piece of academic work, **NOT** on the basis of the answers you give in the box below. Instead, your response will help us to work with you to make feedback helpful.

What feedback have you received on earlier assessments, or while preparing this assessment? • • •

How have you responded to that feedback in this assessment? • • •

What feedback on this assessment would best help you think about your next one? • • •

Vienna Essay II 2332158

Q2. How, and with what results, did musicians associated with the Wiener Moderne challenge prevailing views of gender?

In order to assess the way in which musicians challenged views relating to gender in the Wiener Moderne, the following must be established: what the "prevailing views of gender" were at this time, the manner in which female characters were portrayed, and how this was received by audiences, encompassing both the critical reception and the reaction of the general public. I will also be using examples of female musicians in Vienna at the time to compare and contrast their traits and lives against the characters in the operas that will be discussed, as well as the light in which these women are presented by historians since.

As one of the most narrative-based musical genres exemplifying modernist features, when considering musical examples, this essay will focus almost exclusively on opera. Programmatic music, and other forms that have potential to portray gendered characters, tend to be more abstract; the composer's intentions are more obscure, and the success with which these are portrayed, as well as the audience's opinions of these ideas, become more difficult to define with certainty. the narrative nature of opera provides fertile ground for such analysis therefore that is where this essay will focus, paying particular attention to the work of Richard Strauss, as his operatic works are especially interested in the depiction of women in non-traditional ways, as well as having been some of the first in modernism to do so.

Ideas on gender in Vienna during the *fin-de-siècle* were complex; in the political context of both a right-wing mayor at the time — Karl Lüger, an antisemite who, ironically, recognised the power of women to sway the votes of their husbands and sons, but refused to address the idea of giving women themselves the right to vote (O'Neill 2022) — and the aftermath of Otto Weininger's famous treatise *Geschlecht und*

Charakter highlighting the ineptitude of women in "men's roles" (Chandler 2010; Weininger 2015 [1903]), women were not thought of as capable of having careers in the same way as of men. It was, in fact, these frequent attacks on women's rights that led to the formation of activist groups, as it seemed that the state of these rights were regressing as opposed to progressing. The battle for and against equality was fierce on both sides — which made for a very charged political climate in which to present controversial artwork.

A direct comparison of the presentation of women in opera to some of the female artists that are known of from the time will be made in the course of this essay; contrasting these new ideas about gender roles and sex-related predisposition with the reality of the lives of women, in particular, composers, is essential to quantifying the differences.

There was a trend of female protagonists in Wiener Moderne opera, beginning in the early twentieth century. Firstly, the movement of modernism in music, particularly opera, was only just coming into its own - Strauss was one of the earliest composers to present this to a mainstream audience, and Vienna, due to its sociopolitical climate at the time, took time to fully embrace the genre. Secondly, it is important to clarify that, despite Richard Strauss's German origins, he was heavily influential on the musical life of Vienna in the early 20th century; from his first visit in 1895, the city had a growing fondness for both his conducting and composing expertise. This relationship between Strauss and Vienna only prospered as he became more integrated with Viennese composers at the time, including Alexander Zemlinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, with whom he presented concerts as part of Musikverein (Jones 2016). Strauss later even became the principal conductor of the Vienna State Opera in 1919 (Ross 2010), further displaying the public attitude towards him as an honorary Viennese.

The first example of Strauss' work to discuss is *Salome* (1905). The themes Strauss was portraying through his music were initially very controversial - *Salome* was, in its first instance, rejected by the Viennese Court Opera (Ross 2008), the Austrian premiere of the opera instead relegated to Graz. This was for a significant reason: *Salome* is now regarded as a massive musical turning point in Western

classical history, due to its extremes of bitonality, dissonant harmony, disjunct melody-writing and, most critically, its subject matter (Puffett 1989). Discussing biblical figures, thrusting shocking sins such as violent suicide, incest, and necrophilia upon them, was naturally something the State Opera considered blasphemous, as they were so out-of-line with the views held by the upper class, in particular those relating to women. Female characters in these operas manipulated, seduced, and otherwise disempowered male characters: they had more power than they had ever had.

One can see this in *Salome* through the eponymous character. As the protagonist, the world of the opera is naturally built and structured around her, in some cases to a ridiculous point — one example of this being the guard who desires her at the beginning of the play, but dramatically kills himself at the sight of Salome expressing romantic feelings for Jochanaan. Suicide is not a new theme to opera (Stack 2002), but the treatment of it in *Salome* strays outrageously from the norm. The guard's death is sudden, unexpected and explicit, illustrating the concept of 'épater la bourgeoisie' (the aim of composers to shock their audiences and insoforth impress them) that became relatively common among modernists (Attfield 2022). This depiction channels a common trope in opera of acting irrationally in the name of love (McGrail 2007), but transforms it into something else entirely through both its extremely graphic nature and the indifference of Salome.

The character archetype of Salome could be defined as *'femme fatale'*:

> an attractive and seductive woman, *esp.* one who is likely to cause risk to or the downfall of anyone who becomes involved with her (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.)

All these qualities are apparent in Salome; these were quite contrary to what was expected of a woman at the time of performance and, crucially, even of any protagonist. Even tragic anti-heroes previously popularised in operas such as *Rigoletto* (Verdi 1960) are seen as having acted justifiably - in Rigoletto's case, this was through the logical reasoning that his intentions were good and only to protect his daughter, yet he still gets his comeuppance in the form of his own daughter's death. But Salome is given no redemption; her character is portrayed from the very beginning as unempathetic, of malicious motive, and

ultimately as a trap to ensnare men in, very much playing into the *femme fatale* trope. Due to the irredeemable nature of this archetype, it is a common trope for a *femme fatale* to die at the end of their work, restoring some sense of moral balance to the world or as retribution for their misdeeds - we see this exemplified in other works such as *Carmen* by Bizet, as explored by Macdonald, though much earlier in the development of the trope:

> French opera never produced another *femme* as *fatale* as Carmen, although her capacity to seduce and bewitch her lovers may be traced in some of Massenet's exotic heroines [...] Strauss's Salome and Berg's Lulu may be seen as distant degenerate descendants of Bizet's temptress. (Macdonald 2002)

Astonishingly, *Salome* was a roaring success with its first audiences (Ross 2008). Despite all its controversialist motifs and what an immense change it was from the other operas performed at the time, *Salome*'s premiere in Germany led to an influx of other performances all over Europe. However, due to how far it strayed from the popular ideas of Western Classical tradition at the time, this being late Romanticism, the critical reception of the opera was furiously disapproving. It was described as "the blood-curdling emanation from the despot of din" and a "horrific, revolting and a bawdy affair" (Bennett 1937). This brings into question whether the opera was a success precisely due to its controversial nature.

Elektra (Strauss 1916 [1906]) was written several years after *Salome*, but is another example of Strauss's modernist operas portraying women in an unusual light. Despite the source material of *Elektra* implying a sexual relationship between Elektra and her father (Aeschylus ca. 500 BCE), interestingly, Strauss writes the opera in exclusion of this detail, having based the libretto on Hoffmannsthal's play (Gilliam 1991). Strauss's logic may have been that he wished not to create a character so rich in power due to her sexuality and seductive power in the same way he had in Salome, so as not to exhibit all of the same themes, despite the remaining commonalities between the characters. Fundamentally though, this leads to some core differences between the characters of Salome and Elektra: though both operas are named for their (anti)-heroines and present them as powerful figures, both characters also die at the end of

the opera as retribution for their actions, as mentioned above; while Elektra is potrayed as powerful, this is not for her ability to weaponise her sexuality, as in the case of Salome, but her sheer will for vengeance.

The reception of *Elektra* was similarly divided in the way of *Salome* - Strauss had pushed compositional features such as atonality and harmony choice even further into modernist technique than he had with *Salome*, meaning audience reception was split more evenly between traditionalists and modernists (Gilliam 1991). While much of the criticism of *Elektra* was justified as critics not being fond of Strauss's musical decisions and the modernist aesthetic as a whole (Gilliam 1991), it is curious that the opera did not perform as well as *Salome*. A cynic may point out that this could be due to the lack of sexual appeal of Elektra herself to the operatic audience at this time; though she is a strong-willed, captivating protagonist in the same way as Salome, she is often presented in performance as ragged, pale and dishevelled, with none of the charm or powers of seduction of Salome (Böhm 1981).

It is important to examine the success of women from this era - considering the ways in which Strauss's heroines rejected the contemporary role of womanhood and how audiences responded to this, it is hypocritical to see how when women did this in real life (in far less radical and dramatic ways) they were vehemently challenged, ignored and/or insulted as incapable, the following being just a few examples of this.

Despite the prolific compositional output of Elizabeth Gyring (including a full-length opera and countless other works for a plethora of ensembles and soloists) for example, her works are currently little-known and not well-distributed or documented (Washington State University Libraries n.d.). There is little to no record that her works were performed at the time of writing and her name has been lost to time.

Johannes Müller-Hermann was another modernist composer who made large compositional and pedagogical contributions to Viennese musical culture in the early 20th century through her position as a tutor at the New Vienna Conservatory. Yet, these have been mostly forgotten, this generally attributed to the Nazi ideologies in Europe that followed (BBC n.d.). Despite the fact her work, 'Sonata for Cello and

Pianoforte', was showcased in the 1920s, the only reception on record was scathingly critical of her work, dismissing it purely because of her sex (Bechert 1923).

A further example is the composer Alma Mahler-Werfel. She was able to publish some works with the support of her husband, Gustav Mahler, towards the end of their marriage, but for much of their relationship her compositional and artistic output was restricted (Hilmes 2015). Mahler-Werfel was an interesting case due to her complex relationship with Mahler, which seems to be her only notable feature to many scholars despite her own compositional output; yet, a harsh judgement seems to have been cast upon her within the academic community. Many of the articles and materials published since Mahler-Werfel's death regard her as unfaithful, vain, and accuse her of providing unreliable historical accounts (Le Grange 1995) — these conclusions all drawn from her diaries, letters, and other people's first-hand accounts of her.

Curiously, the way Mahler-Werfel has been characterised by scholars and the media since her death aligns with some elements of the femme fatale persona assigned to these early modernist opera protagonists; the sense of cold calculation, potency, and slyness in the way she is portrayed, as well as the method by which she is constantly described as an accomplished seductress (Downing 2015), ties in with these portrayals, for example the character of Salome. Now, naturally academic consideration of sources requires a critical eye in order to ascertain the most accurate series of events, however it is frustrating, if not surprising, that many of the sources consulted in the course of this research are interwoven with misogyny, exemplified particularly in Volume 2 of Le Grange's biography of Gustav Mahler (1995) and Beaumont's *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife* (2004). In recent times there has been some recognition of the manipulation of her image in the academic community seems to be coming about in recent years (Newman 2022), but the resounding opinion of Mahler-Werfel is overwhelmingly negative.

In her lifetime, Mahler-Werfel herself certainly challenged prevailing views of gender in Vienna by endeavouring to have her compositional career, and was very prominent in the cultural scene of Vienna due to family ties and artist friends (Hilmes 2015), but ultimately her own accounts of her life have been discredited and reframed into a story that would put her first husband, Mahler, in a more honourable light.

Her works have seen a small revival since her time in Vienna among her increased popularity in the United States, where she moved before World War II, but still remain distant from the repute of Mahler's. Between the villification of Alma Mahler-Werfel, the lack of any record of Elizabeth Gyring in the public sphere and the discrimination against Johanna Müller-Hermann, these circumstances show the utter lack of recognition attributed to female modernist composers, and in Alma's case, the attempt to discredit her, at the time of the operas discussed, despite the subject matter putting power into women's hands (albeit in an arguably misguided, misogynistic way).

Considering the exceptionally positive audience response to *Salome* for example, it is fair to say that modernists such as Strauss were successful in challenging contemporary views of gender - whether audiences directly approved of the juxtaposition of women's portrayal to their real-life rights or not, they did not oppose these operas purely for their their displays of powerful women. As shown from the reception of the 1937 New York production of *Salome* (Bennett 1937) which had a much more positive critical reception as well as public, the progressiveness of societal views on gender at the time of performance play a massive part in how well-received it is.

Another factor to consider is how much the idea of shock factor played into modernist composers' creative decision-making. As previously referred to under the phrase 'épater la bourgeoisie', this was a fairly common practice during the modernist movement. Based on this, one can ascertain that these musicians were not necessarily 'progressive' for their time or in holding of these beliefs, so much as looking to produce the most shocking and unexpected events for their audiences.

A further point of discussion is the way that deeply misogynistic attitudes at the time may have played into these portrayals; while there was an empowering aspect to these displays of *femme fatales*, it cannot be denied that these still show incredible prejudice by dictating a woman's worth and power by her sexuality. McGrail (2007) writes about this phenomenon, referring to it as a "misogynist male fantasy", throwing away any hopes of feminist progress as a result of these pieces.

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