DER ROSENKAVALIER

Richard Strauss

Der Rosenkavalier (The Knight of the Rose) was the fifth opera written by Richard Strauss. It premiered in 1911, following *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909) and directly preceding *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912, revised 1916). Its librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal collaborated with Strauss on five operas, including *Elektra* and *Ariadne*. The two collaborators are regarded as one of the three most distinguished pairs of opera or operetta collaborators, along with Mozart and da Ponte and Gilbert and Sullivan.

After the shocking, bloody tragedies of his previous two operas (*Salome*, for example, was banned at the Metropolitan Opera for 27 years after a single performance in 1907) Strauss decided to write a comedy, one that was visualized as a modern version of *The Marriage of Figaro*. The cognizant music student will see little similarity between *Rosenkavalier* and *Figaro* except for a vague affinity between some of the characters. For example, the Marschallin, unhappily married and longing for her lost youth, reminds us of the Countess in Figaro and her young lover Octavian is certainly modeled after Cherubino (even though the Countess and Cherubino did not become lovers until after the conculsion of the action in *Figaro*, as we learn in the third play of Beaumarchais' Figaro trilogy, *La Mêre Coupable* or Corigliano's opera loosely based on it, *The Ghosts of Versailles*). Baron Ochs, the boorish would-be suitor of young Sophie, and Sophie herself do not have any obvious Mozartian counterparts (although a case could be made for comparing Ochs with Don Bartolo, and Sophie might make one think of Barberina, in *Figaro*, but Barberina is much less important.)

Well, I have now named the four principal characters of the opera for you. There are many, many more, but concentrate on these four, as the others are all pretty minor. Although each plays a part in the somewhat convoluted plot (another point of resemblance to *Figaro*) musically the four main characters predominate.

Another similarity between *Rosenkavalier* and *Figaro* is that both operas are quite long, performances typically running well over four hours, and so are generally generously cut. (Even so, the performance you will be seeing at the Met is scheduled to run from 7:30-11:45. *Tosca*, on the other hand, goes from 8:00-11:05, an hour and ten minutes less.) But hang in there, as the best part of the opera, musically speaking, is the final trio, sung by the Marschallin, Octavian and Sophie. It is well worth waiting four hours to hear, and I am going to preview it for you today from a wonderful video. With three people singing together, all to different words, it's hard to make sense of the words, (In New York you'll have so-called "Met titles" on the back of the seat in front of you to help you out.) But listen to the music, which is sublime.

I trust that by now you've all done your homework, and thus have a pretty good idea of the story, but let's review it anyway. The action takes place in the early years of the reign of the Hapsburg Empress Maria Theresa, who ruled from 1740-1765. The Field Marshall's wife, thus the "Marschallin" ("Mrs. Field Marshall," in German), is approaching middle age (35 in those days) and realizes that her attractiveness to the opposite sex is rapidly diminishing. (Her marriage, like all marriages among the upper-crust then, had been arranged; it was accepted that both partners were free to seek true love, or at least sexual gratification, outside the bonds of matrimony.)

And that is exactly what the Marschallin has done, taking the seventeen-year old Count Octavian Maria Ehrenreich Bonaventura Hyacinth Rofrano (to give him his full name) as her lover. (The more names, the nobler the nominee, and Octavian comes from a very noble family indeed.) The opera opens in the Marschallin's bedroom, where she and Octavian have just, evidently, spent an amorous night together. Believe it or not, it was the custom of noble ladies of that day to hold levees in their bedrooms every morning, so to prevent the many attendants from becoming suspicious, Octavian disguises himself as a girl, and becomes the Marschallin's maid Mariandel (another point of agreement with Figaro, in which Cherubino, played be a woman, disguises herself as a woman in Act II). Octavian can get away with this disguise because of his being a (presumably) beardless youth. Before going on with the plot

synopsis, let's hear a couple of motifs, one (played by the oboe) associated with the Marschallin [4] and the other with Octavian [7] This use of a musical phrase called a *leitmotiv* to designate a person, object, emotion, etc. etc. was something that Strauss had picked up from Wagner (who by no means invented it; he did utilize it to its fullest extent, however). Try to memorize these motifs as they will help you understand the subsequent action.

Soon the Marschallin's boorish country-bumpkin Baron Och enters. He explains that he has arranged a marriage with Sophie, the rich daughter of a certain Herr Faninal. This Faninal is not of the same station in life as Ochs, who is a member of he *ancien regime*,which is to say the hereditary nobility. Herr F. is one of the lesser nobility, elevated because of some particular service to the crown (usually pecuniary in nature). Normally the Baron would not consider marrying beneath his station, but is willing to make an exception because Herr F. is one of the richest men in Vienna. It seems that it is the custom of the nobility to make a pre-nuptial gift of a silver rose to intended brides and further, the rose must be delivered, not by the prospective bridegroom but by a suitably chosen young noble, who is thereby designated the "The knight of the rose," in German "der Rosenkavalier." The Marschellin gets the bright idea of nominating young Octavian to undertake this task and Ochs, aware of Octavian's exalted rank agrees enthusiastically. He of course is not aware that the maid Mariandel is actually Octavian in disguise. In fact he begins to lust after Mariandel, and immediately makes plans for her seduction. Ochs is an out-and-out lecher, besides being a boor. In the words of the musicologist Ernest Newman, compared to Ochs "…Cassanova was an amateur and Don Giovanni a mere debutant." Ochs' infatuation with Mariandel will turn out to be a crucial element of the plot.

In the meantime, the Marschallin's bedroom has been filling up with the disparate individuals commonly found at a noblewoman's levee. These include, *inter alia*, an Italian opera singer and his flautist accompanist performing an aria from a baroque opera; various servants consulting on the household tasks of the day (such as the dinner menu); her attorney; her milliner; an animal dealer with dogs and a monkey for sale; a penniless noble widow requesting financial aid; and, most importantly two Italian crooks, Valzacchi and

Annina, there to sell whatever illegal services they can. (Annina will turn out later to play an important role in giving Ochs his come-uppance.) All the while the Countess is sipping on her chocolate. (In those days coffee was not drunk so early in the day. Recall in *Così fan tutte* how Despina brings morning chocolate to the sisters Fiordiligi and Dorabella, all the while complaining that there is none for her, although she surreptitiously takes a sip. Chocolate was a beverage for the rich.) This levee scene, which appears idiotic today, is a fair representation of what noblewomen's levees were like in the 18th–century Vienna, with enough touches thrown in to remind us that *Rosenkavalier* is indeed a comic opera, but with true dramatic pathos intermingled with the comedy. (In this way it resembles romantic comedies like *The Marriage of Figaro* or Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* more than a pure farce like Rossini's *Barber of Seville* or Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*.)

The first act ends with the Marschallin dismissing Octavian as she is preparing to attend Mass, a daily ritual for noblewomen (who as we have seen, generally had a great deal to confess). By the way, in case anyone was wondering where the Field Marshall was during all this hanky-panky, he is off hunting in the wilds of Croatia (reminding us of the Count's hunting expedition in Act II of *Figaro*). The Marschallin suddenly regrets Octavian's departure, and tries to recall him with the cry "I did not even kiss him." She then succumbs to a fit of melancholy, clearly exhibiting that the theme of the opera, despite its comic character, is really the profound despair of its protagonist, the Marschellin, at the passage of time. This is very Proustian; in fact, Marcel Proust began writing *À la recherche du temps perdu* in 1909, two years before the premiere of *Rosenkavalier* and began its publication in 1913, two years after. The next motif [9] is a variation of the earlier motif associated with the Marschellin [4], modified to indicate the melancholy mixed in with her happiness (in her relationship with Octavian).

Act II is the "Presentation of the Rose" scene. It takes place in the home of Sophie's father, Herr Faninal. Octavian arrives in an elegant coach with the rose in a special case. The rules of the day require that neither the prospective groom nor the father of the bride be present at the presentation, so Ochs and Herr F. retire. The doors

open, and Octavian appears, dressed in white and silver, bearing the rose in his right hand. The silver rose theme [12] is heard. He goes to Sophie, presents the rose, with a short speech, and in true operatic tradition the two young people fall in love at first sight. Sophie's rapturous emotion is represented, typically, by Strauss in a leitmotiv beginning with an upward leap (a Major sixth, in this case) followed by descending triplets. [13] Sophie, incidentally, is 15 years old, the same age as Butterfly.

Just then Ochs and Herr F. enter, and the Baron expresses his admiration of Sophie in much the same terms that a buyer at a horse-auction might express his admiration of an animal. Sophie is of course disgusted, and eventually announces that she refuses to marry Ochs. Her father is distraught, as he has been counting on the marriage to promote him to the true nobility (or at least to give him a foot in the door) and announces that if Sophie continues to refuse she will spend the rest of her life in a convent. Any of you familiar with other operas involving fathers and daughter, such as *Roméo et Juliette* or *Rigoletto*, will not be surprised at the fact that in earlier times fathers actually *owned* their daughters who, in some cases, could even be put to death for defying him. (Those of you who traveled to London last year to see *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* will recall Scene 3, Act I in which Giulietta refuses to flee with Romeo, citing her filial duty to her father.)

After everyone else has left the room, Sophie and Octavian confess their love for each other, and actually kiss. Soon Ochs returns, trying to lead Sophie from the room, whereupon Octavian draws his sword and wounds Ochs in the arm. Soon a free-for all comic scene ensues, with Ochs howling in pain, his servants rushing around to try to assist him, Octavian continuing to brandish his sword, etc. After everyone else, including Octavian, finally leaves, the Italian crook Annina enters with a letter for Ochs supposed to be from Mariandel (remember, Octavian disguised as the Marshallin's maid) inviting him to a tryst the following evening. This is just an example of a case where a knowledge of the lietmotiven is important. The delivery of the letter is accompanied by Octavian's motif heard earlier [7] telling the audience who actually sent the letter.

Act III takes place in a private room in an inn, where Ochs has arranged his tryst with the supposed Mariandel. After a brilliant orchestral introduction, the curtain rises. The action is mostly in the form of a burlesque, with various characters coming and going as Ochs tries to seduce Mariandel, plying her with wine which she always refuses. Weird things happen—faces appear at trapdoors, characters appear in blind windows, offstage music permeates the scene, and so on. Finally Annina (remember her) appears, dressed in mourning, claiming Ochs as her husband, and four young children, all under ten who rush at him shrieking "Papa!" Ochs, in a rage, flings open the window and calls for the police, who appear. They demand Ochs produce some sort of I.D. to prove he is really whom he claims to be. They also ask who the girl with him is, and Ochs lies, claiming that she is his fiancée Sophie Faninal. At this point Sophie's father enters, Sophie arrives and, for some unknown reason, so does the Marschallin. The upshot is that Ochs leaves in disgrace, Octavian reveals himself by divesting Mariandel's clothing, and Herr F., realizing that Octavian is as much a catch as the Baron, gives his consent to his marriage with Sophie.

The stage is now left to Sophie, Octavian and the Marschallin who sing the beautiful trio mentioned earlier. [19] In this the Marschallin (regretfully) bows out of Octavian's life, realizing that his happiness is to be found with a wife of his own age. Octavian and Sophie (who has no idea of the previous relationship between her now fiancé and the Marschallin) express their thanks to her, and their love for each other. The trio changes into a love duet as the Marschellin leaves, escorted be Herr F. Then the two young people also withdraw, leaving an empty stage. At that point a little servant boy comes onto the stage carrying a candle, looking for something. He finally discovers it--Sophie's handkerchief, which she had dropped. The picks up the handkerchief, turns around, runs off the stage, and the curtain falls (finally!).

One final comment about the love duet, which consists of beautiful melody interspersed with ugly dissonance. Why has Strauss introduced the dissonance? I think he is telling us that young love will not last, either because one of the partners finds another object of his/her affection of perhaps for a deeper reason, the Proustian passage of time. Erda, in Scene 4 of *Das Rheingold*, in urging Wotan

to give the Ring to the giants tells him “Alles was ist, endet.” (All that is, ends.) Is that perhaps what Strauss is telling us with his harsh dissonances? You decide for yourself.