

Arabella's Big Day

Strauss' nostalgic valentine to Vienna is steeped in beauty

Arabella came to life late in Germany's Weimar years, that troubled, exciting gap between the Great War and Hitler's ascent. But *Arabella's* roots spring from an earlier time, whose formalities and graces the opera's creators refused to abandon. The composer Richard Strauss and the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal kept their distance from the cabarets of Weimar Berlin and Munich, from jazz and the jazz-inspired concert music of Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith, the theater of Bertolt Brecht, the films of Fritz Lang, the paintings of George Grosz, and prints of Käthe Kollwitz. Strauss and Hofmannsthal emerged from a different era. In *Arabella*, they recreated that era and preserved it.

Most of *Arabella's* first German audiences embraced the opera not as anachronism but as confirmation that past cultural glories still prevailed, and in it they saw a reassuring example of "German art," a term the Nazis appropriated and befouled by defining it racially and provincially. German it may be, yet *Arabella* belongs to the world and bears no national insignia. And while Hitler and Goebbels approved of the opera, the date of its premiere reveals not its affinity with the Führer's cultural vision, but its distance. *Arabella* was first seen on July 1, 1933, seven months after Hitler assumed the chancellorship. Politician and composer worked simultaneously toward opposite ends. Hitler the demagogue sensed the electorate's yearning for a return to better days, and he harnessed that inclination for his purposes. Strauss the artist, who knew his audience, harnessed the same inclination and used it for something life-affirming: *Arabella*.

Elektra, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the first three of Strauss and Hofmannsthal's six collaborations, support the conventional wisdom that theirs was a partnership on a par with Mozart and Da Ponte's, and that claim might still hold true had they produced nothing but *Rosenkavalier*, their hit of 1911. But two operas of the interwar years proved less successful. *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919) all but sinks under the weight of the librettist's ponderous philosophizing. *Die ägyptische Helena* (1928), plagued by obscurity, fared worse (perhaps understandably; among its roles is one for a singing shellfish). *Helena* never managed to capture even the grudging respect that *Die Frau* has achieved. Strauss, always a hard-headed artist and

For this production of *Arabella*, director Tim Albery has transported the action from the original 1860 to 1910. Pictured here is Act II's ball scene, as staged by Minnesota Opera in 2013.

weary of Hofmannsthal's loftier pretensions, grew eager to sink his teeth into a libretto peopled by flesh-and-blood characters. In September 1927, having almost finished orchestrating *Helena*, he asked Hofmannsthal for something new to set and made his wishes clear: "It may even be a second *Rosenkavalier* if you can't think of anything better."

At first the writer demurred. But then he recalled a comedy abandoned two years earlier. *Der Fiaker als Graf* (*The Carriage Driver as Count*), Hofmannsthal claimed, exhibited "the *Rosenkavalier* style, but lighter still." And another work from his past sprang to mind: "Lucidor," a short story from 1910. Fusing these earlier creations, he conceived *Arabella*. In his comedy Hofmannsthal found the setting for Act II, the grand carnival-season ball mounted by the city's carriage drivers. His short story provided a plot.

In "Lucidor," a destitute Viennese widow hopes for a brilliant marriage for her elder daughter, Arabella. Bankruptcy stacks the nuptial cards against daughters, and this mother has two. So she disguises the younger (Lucile) as a boy (Lucidor), hoping this ruse will keep eyes focused on Arabella. As things unfold, Lucidor/Lucile acts as matchmaker between Arabella and the earnest suitor Wladimir. Arabella wants no part of him; Lucile does. As Lucidor, she convinces Wladimir that Arabella craves an assignation. Awaiting him in a pitch-dark room, Lucile assumes her sister's identity and sleeps with him. Afterward, the unwitting Wladimir fails to grasp why the real Arabella remains so indifferent. Perhaps sensing the absurd plot he had fashioned, Hofmannsthal failed to resolve its complications.

His plot needed Strauss. As he intertwined his play and his story, Hofmannsthal crafted a genuinely elegant libretto, yet the story's greatest weakness remains. The Lucile of "Lucidor" has become *Arabella's* Zdenka, and Wladimir is now Matteo. Just as the earlier

pair, Zdenka and Matteo end up together with the lights out, leaving us to wonder how dark a room must be to conceal a bedmate's identity, or to what degree a lover must trick himself to believe he has scored a longed-for triumph. One of music's tasks is to make us accept the improbable. Strauss so diverts our attention that he all but paves over the gorgeous libretto's gaping hole.

In a happier world, Strauss might not have needed to exercise his musical legerdemain, for by the summer of 1929 Hofmannsthal was already reworking the text. On July 14, Strauss finished reading the revised Act I. Delighted, he telegraphed congratulations to Hofmannsthal, unaware that he was addressing a man bewildered by grief. The day before, the poet's 25-year-old son, Franz, had committed suicide. Strauss' message arrived on July 15, but not before Hofmannsthal, preparing to leave for the funeral, suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died in his wife's arms. He was 54.

For Strauss, Hofmannsthal's death spelled more than the end of a two-decade partnership. As he read the *Arabella* libretto to the soprano Elisabeth Schumann and her husband, the conductor Karl Alwin, Strauss broke down. He was 65 years old and bereft of the collaborator with whom he had shared his biggest theatrical triumphs. Without Hofmannsthal, Strauss believed his opera career finished and feared his time had passed.

In the twilight of the Weimar Republic, demand for Strauss' music had ebbed. New York critic W.J. Henderson, for instance, reviewing the Met premiere of *Die ägyptische Helena*, summed up the opera as "the voice of an elderly man babbling his reminiscences." A generation purged of its romanticism by the blood of the Great War and, in the war's aftermath, the German economic disaster, favored a leaner, astringent music more in synch with the times than the lush melodies and lavish orchestral extravaganzas of



trademark Strauss. And Weimar's cosmopolitan spirit welcomed the artistic contributions of other cultures, embracing what we now call *diversity* to confirm the richness of a world beyond Germany's borders. Some, including the National Socialists, found all this threatening. To them, the future lay in the greatness of the past.

For the aging composer about to set Hofmannsthal's *Arabella* libretto, the desire to look backward sprang less from political motivation than from personal need. As biographer Matthew Boyden notes, "The year 1931 was marred for Strauss by the perpetuation of Germany's economic and spiritual suffering, and during the first six months he succumbed to a bout of irresistible nostalgia which manifested itself, for the most part, in his work on *Arabella*." Luckily for Strauss, his nostalgia matched that of his audience. *Arabella* became, according to Boyden, Germany's most frequently performed new opera between 1933 and 1945.

If the opera breathes nostalgia, the 1860s Vienna of the story's original setting was nevertheless a city entering a new era, renouncing its past and assuming the look that distinguishes it to this day. In 1857, Emperor Franz Joseph ordered demolition of the ancient city walls and embarked on what would become a 50-year project, construction of the great Ringstrasse boulevard and the grand buildings that line it. What a setting for the story of an ingenue who steps out of childhood and into her future!

The music is vintage Strauss, and while stripped of the composer's characteristically opulent orchestration, the sound is anything but spare. ("Glowing, picturesque," author Michael Kennedy calls the score, "like chamber music in its clarity and luminosity.") Think of *Arabella* as a waltz, its gentle stabs of humor evoking the essence of an idealized Vienna and capturing the sureness and uncertainty of young love. This is an opera populated by grown-ups: people, not types. Here, unlike *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and *Die ägyptische Helena*, Hofmannsthal has jettisoned symbols in favor of hearts and minds.

The affection Strauss brought to this opera seems to have embarrassed him. Perhaps to anticipate critics, he suggested it was a piece of schmaltz. The soprano who created the title role, Viorica Ursuleac, recalled how Strauss conducted the opera. He rushed the duets "*Aber der Richtige*" and "*Und du wirst mein Gebieter sein*," and charged through the final scene. "Such sentimentality!" he would mutter. Make of that what you will.

The action unfolds on Shrove Tuesday, the day Arabella leaves childhood behind and commits her life to the dashing Mandryka. But



Arabella librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal died four years before the opera's premiere on July 1, 1933.

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New Zealand soprano Kiri Te Kanawa in the title role of the Company's 1980 production.

RON SCHERL / SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

the opera ends as Ash Wednesday dawns, as Arabella forgives Mandryka his boorish jealousy, denying herself the luxury of hurt feelings just as the faithful forgo comforts for Lent. Demonstrating a compassion whose spirit the music captures, she embraces her lover's humanity, and her own. She grows up.

Motifs woven through the orchestral texture deepen the characterizations and advance the action. Strauss is said to have based some of his themes on Croatian folk songs, an homage to his male lead, Mandryka. The quondam Zdenka has created by forging love letters to Matteo is represented early on by a waltz-like, minor-chord figure that rises and falls, pulled in two directions. At the end of Act I, now wavering between minor and major modes, this figure becomes almost danceable, still tense but hinting at a happy resolution. The theme announcing Arabella's determination to marry for love, to wait for the Right One, *der Richtige*, is introduced in full in Arabella and Zdenka's Act I duet, in the six-tone setting of the words, "*Aber der Richtige*" ("The one who's right for me"). This theme, sometimes varied, is heard throughout. With Arabella and Mandryka alone at the end, after a passing recollection of the "quondam" waltz and a fanfare that inserts a sly reference to Mendelssohn's wedding march, *der Richtige* brings down the final curtain.

Mandryka's love theme is signature Strauss, a soaring, eight-tone line, at the fourth tone rising above its otherwise closely spaced intervals, then descending. Its fullest form first appears in Act I, in Mandryka's "*So gib das Mädel mir zur Frau*" ("So give the girl to me as wife"). A theme associated with Arabella's maturity begins with three descending tones, heard in the brief orchestral prelude to Act II (where it is

followed immediately by Mandryka's "*Es ist ein Engel*"—this is an angel—as Arabella descends the staircase at the ball). This theme returns to open the glorious introduction to the final scene. Here the angel descends another staircase. Step by deliberate step, Arabella approaches Mandryka, to forgive him and affirm their bond.

Savor the characters: Arabella's bumbling parents, a well-meaning sister who almost derails the perfect match, the men who believe themselves God's gift to Arabella, and Mandryka, smart enough to admit his stupidity and convinced it has cost him his dreams. Arabella won't allow that. This may be her big day, but it is also his. Throughout, and in its happy ending, *Arabella* does more than recapture the past. It inoculates us with beauty. It neutralizes time. 🌻

Larry Rothe is author of *Music for a City, Music for the World* and co-author of *For the Love of Music*.