Rosenkavalier Simulcast

Perhaps there is no better way to end the simulcast season than with Rosenkavalier, which might have one of the most satisfying endings in all of opera. The final trio is incomparable. Since its premier in 1911, Rosenkavalier has been in the standard repertoire of major opera houses around the world. However, because of its artistic demands, it is rarely produced by regional opera companies, so most of us do not often have an opportunity to see it.

Strauss had written Electra in 1908, based on a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal (HvH), and in the process of that collaboration the two creative geniuses became committed to each other. After the very German Salome and Elektra, Strauss was looking for some lighter material. He asked HvH to write a libretto as a vehicle for their entrée into the Italian and Viennese worlds of opera. It worked, brilliantly, and after Rosenkavalier the two of them had four more successful collaborations.

The fertile imagination of HvH created a story featuring the presentation of a silver rose as a vehicle for lovers to be engaged. The curtain comes up on the mature but playful Marschallin (wife of the wealthy Field Marshall, who never appears in the opera) romping in bed with her teen-aged cousin and lover, Count Octavian. He is so smitten with her that he barely makes sense with his sporadic bursts of giddy poetry and his adolescent adulations. Octavian is a trouser role, sung by a mezzo – in this case, Elīna Garanča. Their love-making is interrupted by another cousin, Baron Ochs, a dirty old man who is plotting to secure his finances by arranging his marriage to Sophie, the young daughter of a wealthy merchant. He has come to get advice from the Marschallin. Octavian has slipped into hiding, but emerges disguised as the maid, “Mariandel.” Ochs is then distracted by the attractive Mariandel, and attempts to arrange a rendezvous with “her” even as he is arranging his engagement to Sophie. The Marschallin agrees to have her cousin Octavian act as Ochs’ Rosenkavelier, who will deliver the silver rose of love to Sophie.

The rose is delivered in Act 2 and, predictably, Octavian and Sophie fall in love as soon as their eyes meet. Octavian is then committed to saving Sophie from Ochs, and devises a complicated scheme to discredit Ochs by agreeing to a rendezvous between “Mariandel” and Ochs. It works, in a very funny scene, including ghosts. At the most embarrassing moment the (continued...)

Renée Fleming will sing the Marschallin

MAY 13, 2017
police show up, Sophie’s father enters, and a flock of kids enters, claiming to be Ochs’ illegitimate children, singing “Papa, Papa!” The Marschallin also enters, graciously managing things to help the two young lovers, even as she recognizes this will be the end of her cherished affair with the boy. She was committed to loving him in the best way, and releasing him to Sophie is her generous act of love.

The final trio at the end of the scene is more accurately described as three arias woven together. Sophie is on one end of the stage, Octavian in the middle, and the Marschallin on the other end, each one singing directly out to the audience. This piece of ensemble writing has probably never been matched for the beauty and complexity of its harmony. Every intricate chord proclaims another level of musical ecstasy, and those chords keep progressing. Some of us might be scrambling to re-read “Musicophilia” by Oliver Sacks, attempting to understand how music can have this much emotional content.

The Marschallin exits, leaving the young lovers alone, and a final love duet ends the opera, but not the ecstasy. We are awash with love and music as the curtain comes down on the best of Strauss and on the simulcast season. – GP

The Tradition

This opera features the “tradition” of a man hiring a young cavalier to deliver a silver rose to a woman the man expects to become his fiancée. Here’s how it works. Let’s say, for example, you want to marry Renée. Instead of having a few dates with her, like taking her out for a nice Italian dinner at Polpette 71 on New York’s upper west side, and then to the opera, you can skip all that. Rather, you hire a handsome young man wearing a silver suit, and have him deliver a silver rose to her apartment. He would rent some of those white horses and a carriage from Central Park, and he would make the presentation in your name. Then, ten minutes later you show up to claim the prize. It’s like the rose-bearer is your opening act, and you are the main event. It is astonishingly arrogant.

This tradition is not, in fact, a tradition, and never has been. A thorough search of German myths and legends suggests that its origins are in the creative brain of the librettist – Hugo von Hofmannsthal. However, this fact does not diminish in any way this wonderful imaginary ceremony, which to this day remains in that category of things that ought to be true even if they are not. – GP

(continued)

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Likewise, Strauss demonstrates his ability to write Viennese waltz music, in the form of an aria by the lecherous Baron Ochs. Note that Strauss makes another sharp point by giving this lovely Viennese waltz a definitely inglorious setting. The music is not being waltzed. Rather, it is sung drearily by the bloated Ochs while flopped in a chair nursing a wound, singing about how fortunate any woman would be to spend a night with him. – GP

Demonstrations

When Rosenkavalier premiered in Dresden in 1911, Strauss was fully aware of the public preference for things Italian and Viennese. As if to demonstrate his ability to feed Italian to his German audience, he wrote in a part for an Italian tenor in the first act. The character has no name other than the “Italian tenor” and he appears only once, to amuse the Marschallin. He sings a lovely little strophic aria, in Italian. Strauss was apparently making a statement that the role of the Italian tenor serves only one purpose – to relieve the boredom of an undiscriminating audience.

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Hugo von Hofmannsthal (HvH) and Richard Strauss found each other during their work on *Elektra*, after which Strauss wrote to him, “I would ask you urgently to give me first refusal with anything composable that you write. Your manner has so much in common with mine; we were born for one another and are certain to do fine things together if you remain faithful to me.” The value of their collaboration was established in *Elektra* with its innovative point of view, and its blood-curdling and compelling music drama. With *Rosenkavalier* they proved their brilliant alliance could do great things. They followed it with *Ariadne auf Naxos*, to be staged as a play that had two operas built into it as entertainments – one comic opera and one serious opera – to be performed simultaneously. This took a little work, but eventually it was revised so that it could be performed successfully. They followed *Ariadne* with *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, another example of the wildly imaginative HvH, in which mythology and folklore are woven into a woman’s search for a shadow. Full of symbolism (especially about fertility), this opera is quite dense, with overlaying meanings, but remains a remarkably satisfying music drama. Then came their *Die Aegyptische Helena*, a fabrication about Helen of Troy and Menelaus being shipwrecked on a beach in Egypt. Strauss had hoped for a more light-hearted libretto, along the lines of Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène*, but as HvH worked on it, the story became darker and more symbolic. He had Menelaus plotting to kill her because her fateful beauty had caused too many problems. Finally, HvH and Strauss wrote *Arabella*, an attempt to return to the Viennese comedy style of *Rosenkavalier*. It uses a lot of waltz music, along with Slavonic dances. This was their final success. A few days after this opera was completed, HvH died, the final drama to seal this remarkably fertile collaboration. – GP

**Bowing, But Not Out**

In the April 5 *New York Times*, in Charles McGrath’s article, “The Diva Departs: Renée Fleming’s Farewell to Opera,” he asserted that, like the Marschallin, who knew when it was time to bow out, Ms. Fleming had chosen the May 13 simulcast of *Rosenkavalier* as her farewell to the opera stage. However, a few days later, at the Opera News Awards at the Plaza Grand Ballroom, she announced from the stage that she was “coming out of retirement,” which drew a good laugh, because the word was already out that she disagreed with how she had been characterized in the *Times* article. Then, just to drive the point home, while interviewing Peter Gelb at the *Eugene Onegin* simulcast intermission feature on April 22, she and Gelb both stated with absolute clarity that we may look forward to seeing Fleming in future roles at the Met.

Therefore, McGrath’s alternative facts notwithstanding, the Diva is not bowing out. – GP

**Production**

*Der Rosenkavalier*, by Richard Strauss
Saturday, May 13, 2017, 12:30 – 4:42 p.m.
Note early start time
Two Intermissions

A Robert Carson Production
Conductor: Sebastian Weigle
Marschallin: Renée Fleming
Octavian: Elīna Garanča
Sophie: Erin Morley
The Italian Tenor: Matthew Polenzani
Faninal: Marcus Brück
Baron Ochs: Gunther Groissböck