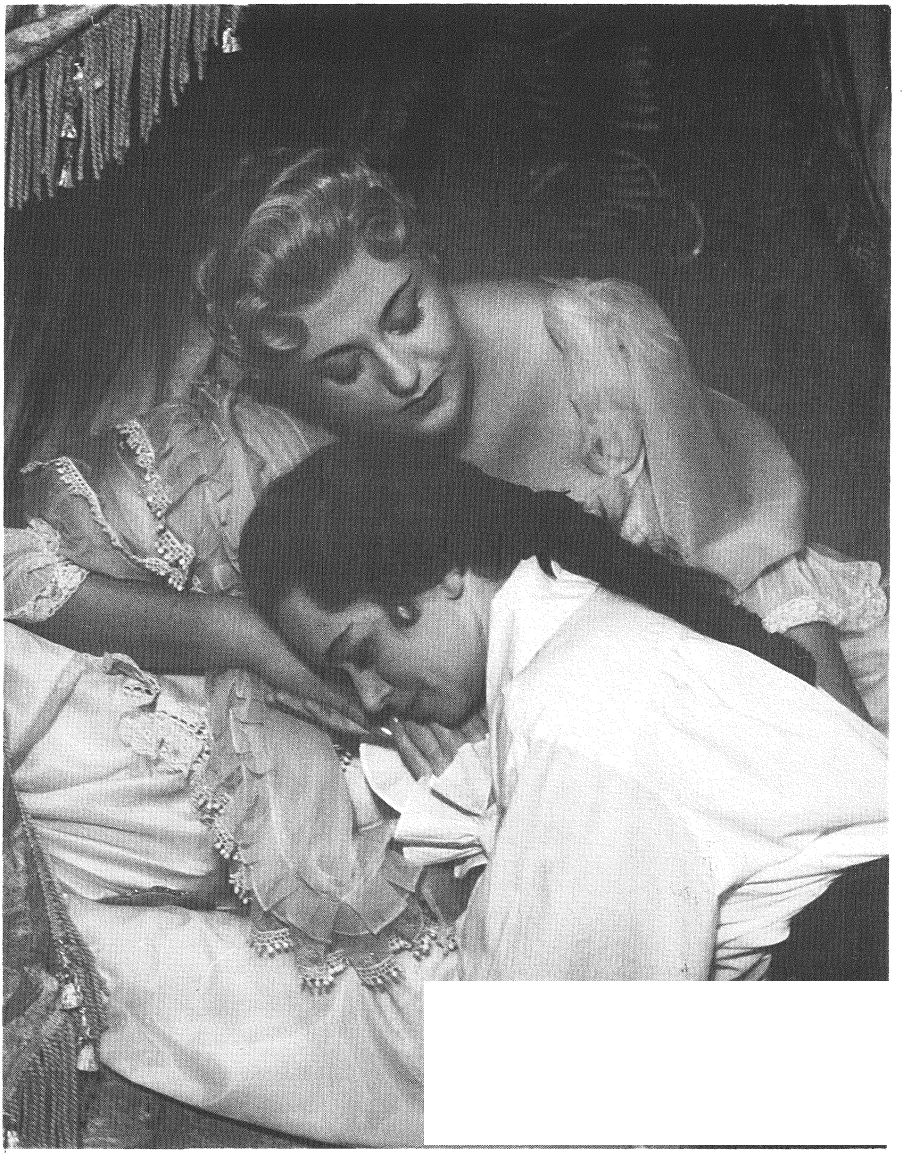
DER ROSENKAVALIER
(THE KNIGHT OF THE ROSE)
RICHARD STRAUSS

OPERA GUIDE 8

Opera Guides



Régine Crespin as the Marschallin and Elisabeth Söderström as Octavian in Carl Ebert's production, designed by Oliver Messel, at Glyndebourne, 1959. (photo: Guy Gravett)

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MARTINI

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(The Knight of the Rose)

Richard Strauss

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An Introduction to 'Der Rosenkavalier'

Derrick Puffett

In Iris Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince*, the narrator goes to a performance of *Der Rosenkavalier*. 'The curtain suddenly fled away to reveal an enormous double bed surrounded by a cavern of looped-up blood-red hangings . . . two girls were lying in a close embrace. (At least I suppose one of them was enacting a young man.) Then they began to sing . . . The two women were conversing in pure sound, their voices circling, replying, blending, creating a trembling silver cage of an almost obscene sweetness . . . these were not words but the highest coinage of human speech melted down, become pure song, something vilely almost murderously gorgeous . . . I was definitely going to be sick.'

Any newcomer to *Der Rosenkavalier* may experience some — one hopes, not all! — of these sensations. In the novel, it is true, they are not produced exclusively by the music; but Murdoch's language — 'an almost obscene sweetness . . . vilely almost murderously gorgeous' — captures the work's immense physical power, its ability to attract and repel. What *is* it, this astonishing mixture of sentimentality and voluptuousness, of coarse good humour and tender naivety, of manners 'wholly Viennese' (Hofmannsthal) and emotions familiar to us all? After an orchestral prelude which is probably music's most graphic depiction of lovemaking — Strauss tried to surpass it in *Arabella*, but there the music is not so good — he gives us not only Octavian and the Marschallin but Ochs, Sophie, Faninal, an Italian intriguer and his

Anne Evans (the Marschallin) and Josephine Barstow (Octavian). (photo: John Garner)

accomplice (not to mention Ochs's lackeys, ancestors of Macheath's thugs in *The Threepenny Opera*, the Three Noble Orphans, waiters, musicians and pantomime trapdoors. All in music ranging from pastiche rococo (Ochs's first entry) to pastiche Expressionism (his humiliation) and taking in, between the two extremes, the various types of music associated with Octavian, Sophie and the Marschallin.

First some cold facts. Strauss met Hofmannsthal in 1900; but their collaboration did not begin until five years later, when the poet approached the composer with the idea of turning his play *Elektra* into an opera. As they worked together, Strauss's respect for Hofmannsthal grew: 'We were born for one another', he wrote. Even before the *Elektra* première, which took place on January 25, 1909, they were discussing future projects. At that time Hofmannsthal was preoccupied with French literature of the 17th and 18th centuries; also with the characters of Mozart's *Figaro*. Then on February 11 he sent Strauss the 'scenario for an opera, full of burlesque situations and characters, with lively action, pellucid almost like a pantomime . . . It contains two big parts, one for baritone and another for a graceful girl dressed up as a man, à la Farrar[1] or Mary Garden[2]. Period: the old Vienna under the Empress Maria Theresa.'

This was the nucleus of *Der Rosenkavalier* (or *Ochs von Lerchenau*, as they came to think of it: the title was changed only four months before the première). Work advanced rapidly, and soon Hofmannsthal suggested: 'Do try and think of an old-fashioned Viennese waltz, sweet and yet saucy, which must pervade the whole of the last act'. The last act, as we know, was the one that gave Strauss the most problems; for whereas he was able to compose the music for the first two almost concurrently with the writing of the text (with some reshaping in the case of the second, it is true), he received the words for Act Three over a much longer period and thus had a correspondingly less secure grasp of the total shape. One reason for the delay was that Hofmannsthal was worrying about the character of the Marschallin. As she increased in importance, the work lost some of its intended lightness, and so (to paraphrase Norman Del Mar, author of the standard English study of Strauss) the 'Pantomime with opportunities even for a short ballet' turned into a 'gay, cheerful, but profoundly psychological drama'. Once Strauss had the full text, however, composition proceeded swiftly. The première, a brilliant success, took place on January 26, 1911 at the Dresden Court Opera.

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Four months later, on May 18, Mahler died (he had been brought back ill from New York without having heard the new opera). Strauss wrote to Hofmannsthal: 'Mahler's death has been a great shock to me'. At around the same time he wrote in his diary: 'I want to call my *Alpine Symphony* the "Antichrist", for it portrays moral purification through one's own strength, freedom through work, and worship of eternal, glorious nature!'

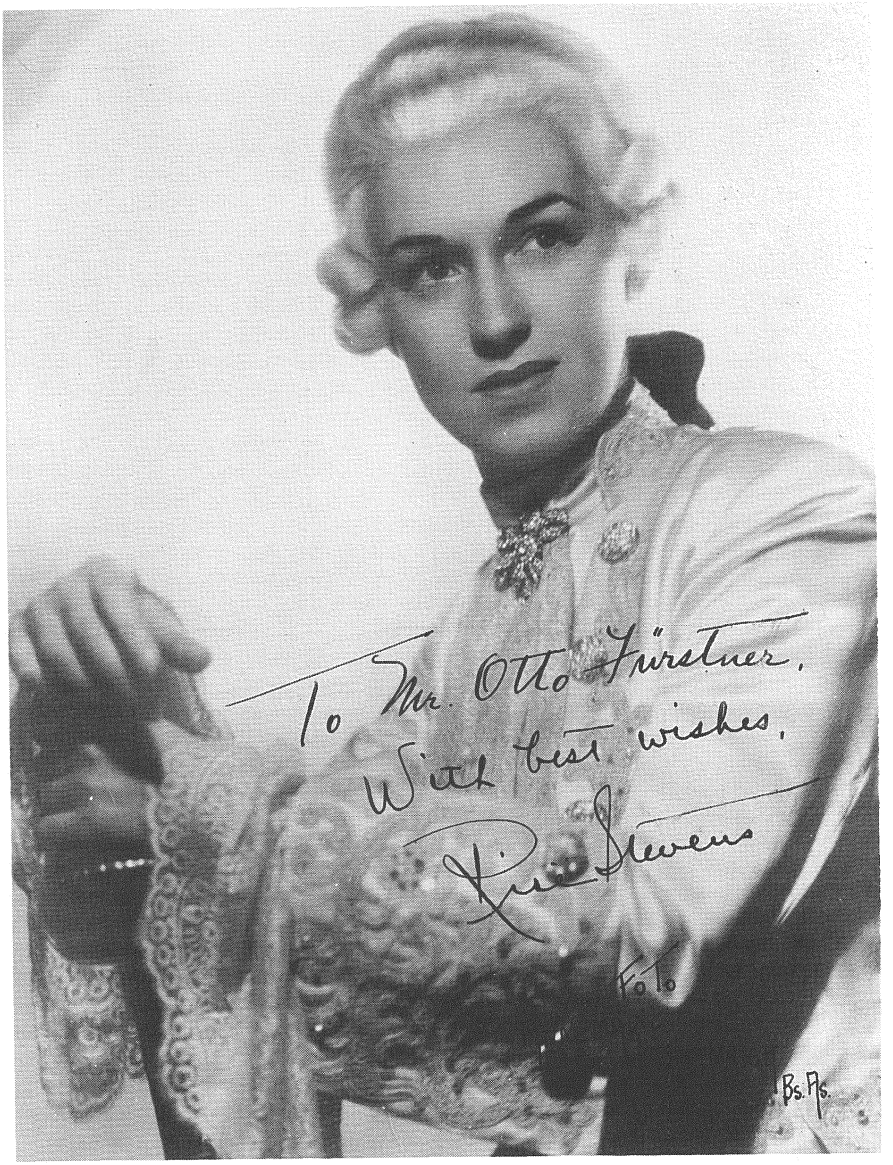
What do these remarks mean? That Strauss had been reading Nietzsche, to be sure, but what else? They sound unlike Strauss, somehow; more like

1. Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967), American soprano who made her début at the Berlin Court Opera in 1901.
2. Mary Garden (1874-1967), Scottish soprano who created the rôle of Mélisande in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Paris in 1902.

Mahler — the Mahler of the letters or the Third Symphony. And freedom from what? Strauss had met Mahler in 1887, when both were in their twenties. From then until Mahler left for America (1907) their work brought them into occasional contact with each other. According to Del Mar, Strauss's opinion of Mahler was typical of the time: 'That's really no composer at all. Just a very great conductor.' But his music suggests otherwise. In the early tone poems, notably *Don Quixote*, there are passages which may well have influenced Mahler, but after about 1900 the influence seems to be going the other way. Two Strauss works in particular, *Symphonia Domestica* and the *Alpine Symphony* (the latter not finished till 1915), suggest a musical obsession with Mahler; apart from the many cross-references, they were his last and longest tone poems and the only two to be called 'symphony'. Surely with two such near-contemporaries, both composer-conductors working in related fields of instrumental music, there must have been feelings of rivalry? Can one not detect in Strauss's diary entry, written in reaction to Mahler's death, even some spirit of relief?

Even during Mahler's lifetime, however, Strauss had, so it seems, tried to free himself from the other's influence, mainly by moving out of their common field: in opera Mahler could influence him only as a conductor. There is little Mahler in *Salome* or *Elektra*; on the contrary, Strauss's imagination seems to be burning more brightly than ever. But between *Elektra* and the *Alpine Symphony* comes *Rosenkavalier*. The opera is less obviously affected by Mahler than the symphonies, as we should expect. But there are two passages — and they are two of the most famous — which seem to me profoundly Mahlerian: the passage in which the Marschallin describes how she gets up at night and stops the clocks (harp harmonics, a favourite Mahlerian sonority), and the passage concerning her Uncle Greifenklau. It is interesting that both passages serve to suggest a dimension beyond the immediate dramatic context. The idea of 'time standing still' was to become a preoccupation, almost a cliché, with the composers of the next generation, composers such as Berg and Schreker; their works show they remembered this passage musically, too. And the whole point about Uncle Greifenklau, the sick old man whom the Marschallin visits, is that he never appears in person: he is used to evoke a whole world of social interaction, a world which by its very nature cannot be represented on stage. The string theme, half-lamenting, half-aspiring ('one eye wet, one dry!' as Strauss told a singer), which accompanies the Marschallin at this moment is intensely Mahlerian: one wonders whether Uncle Greifenklau was not also Director of the Vienna Court Opera.

Now why all this Mahlerising? Because I want to get closer to what *Rosenkavalier* is, and one way of doing this is by showing what it is not. For whatever else it is, it is not a 'staged tone poem' — a cliché often applied to *Salome* and *Elektra*. This cliché seems to go back to Ernest Newman, but survives in all sorts of places, even the *New Grove*, which goes so far as to call *Salome* 'a tone poem with vocal interludes'. It is misleading, on the one hand because it means ignoring the drama, on the other because it implies a false idea of what the tone poem had become. 'Symphonic writing', after Mahler, means a breakdown of the music into motifs, a constant variation of these motifs and an aural explanation of how these things are done, the last being provided through the orchestration — which thus becomes a more essential part of the composition than ever before. The orchestration in fact *is* the composition. Now as soon as we compare Mahler and Strauss in any detail we see that they are not really similar at all (and so not strictly comparable). It is



Risë Stevens as Octavian — a much admired interpretation for many years at the Metropolitan from 1938. (Covent Garden Archives)

largely a matter of texture. Whereas Strauss — for instance in the 'Uncle Greifenklau' section — tends to be homophonic (melody plus chordal accompaniment), in Mahler the texture is often so fragmented that it is hard to tell what 'melody' and 'accompaniment' mean. Their attitudes are symbolised in their respective treatments of the waltz: whereas Mahler builds it up, distorts it and makes it more complex, Strauss simplifies it, purifies it and indeed gives it back something of its pre-Mahlerian character. (This is perhaps too great a generalisation for *Rosenkavalier*, where one finds every possible kind of waltz, from the most sublimated — the Trio! — to the most vulgarised.)

So the work is not a tone poem. It is not, except for a few, rather untypical passages, music drama either — to the extent that 'music drama' is equated with late Wagner. True, it has leitmotifs, but they are nearly all melodic; there is none of the density, none of the rapid succession of textures and tone-colours, that we find in late Wagner, where 'motif' means harmony or timbre as often as it means melodic line. And the 'highlights' of the opera, its 'great moments' — the Marschallin's monologue, the Presentation of the Silver Rose, the Trio — are pure lyricism. Strauss loved the sound of the soprano voice, and here we hear it again and again — solo, *à 2* and *à 3*. Hofmannsthal, who came out with all sorts of criticisms of the work after it was complete (he made the present point in 1928), thought that 'the life of the whole thing is centred on the orchestra'. But though the orchestra often has the tune, the tune is more lyrical than is customary in Wagner, and as likely as not it will already have been heard in a vocal part. Again it is a matter of texture. The texture of *Rosenkavalier* — of its 'highlights', anyway — is closer to Mozart, or Verdi, or Tchaikovsky, than it is to Wagner; and if one looks for a passage in which the orchestra is given its head — as in the *Feuersnot* love scene, or Elektra's last waltz, or Daphne's transformation — the closest one gets is the Trio, where the voices are used as extra stops on a vast organ, everything doubling everything else. In *Rosenkavalier*, ultimately, the voice dominates.

Is it number opera, then? No, because it is still continuous. Operetta? Hardly. What *Rosenkavalier* is, if it can be tied down so specifically, is a hybrid of all these things: number opera for the set pieces, music drama for the transitions, operetta for quite extended sections (notably the end of Act Two and the beginning of Act Three). At some points it even breaks down into accompanied speech. Texture, pace, tone are constantly changing — sometimes with a bump, as on the third-act entry of the Marschallin — but these very changes, which make the work so hard to define, are also part of its fascination.

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Now we have a better idea of what it is, we can look at some of the critical orthodoxies surrounding it. The most uncritical of these critical views, indeed the most banal of all banalities about Strauss, is that it constitutes a 'retreat' from the discoveries of *Salome* and *Elektra*. This view must be seen in its historical context. It originated with Schoenberg and his followers, who regarded Strauss as having deserted the modernist cause at a crucial time. It would be a distortion of Schoenberg's views to say he thought there was only one way for music to go (i.e. his way); but that is the assumption underlying the hostility to *Rosenkavalier*. If we look at *Salome* and *Elektra* more carefully, we find that the 'modernism' is largely surface, the instant response to a poetic

idea. Wherever the texture is continuous — as in Salome's Dance, or the *Elektra* Recognition Scene, or the whole waltz-finale — it is as simple, and the harmony often as diatonic, as anything in *Rosenkavalier*. We think of *Salome* and *Elektra* as 'modern' works, with little islands of vocal beauty amid the chromatic turmoil. But we can also think of them (and it becomes easier to do so as the years go by) as giant puff pastries with occasional ventures into modernism. If we do, *Rosenkavalier* emerges as part of a continuous process, a process of purification which had begun long before the *Alpine Symphony*. 'Purification' here means self-discovery, deciding what one can do best, freeing oneself of unwanted influences. There is a letter from Strauss to Hofmannsthal (1916) in which he writes: 'I feel downright called upon to become the Offenbach of the 20th century . . . Sentimentality and parody are the sensations to which my talent responds most forcefully and productively'. If we think back to the tone poems we realise this was true all along: *Don Juan, Don Quixote* and *Till* are the most successful. In the operatic field, *Feuersnot* (but musically it is uneven), then nothing till *Rosenkavalier, Ariadne*, etc. From this point of view *Salome* and *Elektra* — and, looking ahead, even such a work as *Die Frau ohne Schatten* — appear as marvellous distractions, diversions from what Strauss was really best suited to do.

Rosenkavalier, where sentimentality and parody are of the essence, puts him back on course: for 'retreat' read 'advance'! After *Ariadne* there is the *Bourgeois gentilhomme* music, *Arabella, Capriccio* and the late instrumental works. Finally come the *Four Last Songs*, in which sentimentality is 'raised to the level of great art'. The question here is not whether sentimentality and parody are worthy concerns in themselves, merely whether they were right for Strauss. Surely the works prove they were. If we take the Schoenbergian line we end up saying that everything Strauss wrote after *Elektra* constitutes a 40-year decline, followed by the inexplicable miracle of the *Four Last Songs*. This is not very helpful. If on the other hand we view his work as a continuous process of purification, a discovering of opportunities to use those particular resources with which he was so well endowed (in this context we could almost call them 'gifts'), then there is no problem. The 'simplicities' of *Rosenkavalier* — the clear textures, the diatonic harmonies, the vocal domination, the sheer *enjoyability* of the thing — these are all part of a progress to the late songs.

Rosenkavalier has, nevertheless, been abused pretty consistently over the years, though not by the general public. 'All we find . . . is a worn-out, dissipated *demi-mondaine*, with powdered face, rouged lips, false hair, and a hideous leer. Strauss's music has lost her chastity' (Cecil Gray, writing in 1924). 'Strauss's most cynical, most rambling and most repetitious work in proportion to its length' (William Austin, 1966). Times have changed, but not the tone. Here it seems more profitable to see what the two authors of the work had to say about it after its success. Hofmannsthal was always making criticisms. In a single letter of 1916 he faults Strauss's treatment of a chorus in Act Two, his music for the servants at the end of Act One, and the Baron's final exit. Twelve years later he dismisses the whole libretto ('the one engaging character, the Marschallin, disappears for an act and a half and is only dragged in with difficulty at the end; the *buffo* a garrulous and repulsive fellow; the third act most superficially tacked on to the second', etc.); and three weeks before his death he refers to the 'weakish third act'. In more positive mood, however, he recognised its 'charm', that 'special *brio*' which results from 'the concentration of colourful contrasts and incidents in each separate act' — Act Two being cited as an example. Strauss of course loved the work; but he

Richard Mayr who created the role of Ochs in Vienna (but not in Dresden). Strauss once told him that he imagined him all the time in the role. Mayr asked whether that was really a compliment or an insult! Ernest Newman described his performance at Covent Garden in 1924, 'His smile and whistle during Annina's reading of the letter said more than a page of words could have done.'

recognised its longueurs, and made cuts when he performed it. He saw clearly that 'apart from the misunderstood waltz [it had been attacked as anachronistic], the success of *Rosenkavalier* was in the entry of the Rose Bearer, the end of Act One, and the Trio!' (letter to Hofmannsthal of 1928). Both seemed to regard the work as their most successful collaboration.

What is interesting here is that, while both men understood perfectly where the work succeeded, they were less clear about where it went wrong. Hofmannsthal's remarks still bear traces of those confusions which caused the problems in the first place. Audiences are not unduly bothered by the chorus in Act Two, and the servants in Act One are a positive delight. The Baron's exit is bad, but this is the fault of the libretto as much as the music. The third act is indeed weak (Hofmannsthal's changing conception of the Marschallin was a factor here), but is the second very much better? Hofmannsthal cites it for its 'concentration', but it can seem ramshackle. Putting all these points together one sees the emergence of a pattern: that of a strong first act (ending with a reflective monologue), a weaker second and a recovery in the third. This pattern reproduces itself in *Die Frau ohne Schatten, Arabella* and *Die Liebe der Danae*; and since the last is not to a Hofmannsthal text one must look for the explanation in Strauss. Perhaps it is simply that, being primarily a lyrical composer, he excels in music of exposition and reflection rather than in music of development and elaboration: had he written the *Ring, Das Rheingold* would have been musically superior to *Die Walküre*. He has a strong sense of climax,