

# Richard Strauss, *Arabella*, and His Musical Homeland

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Born into a musical family, Richard Strauss (1864–1949) wrote two orchestral tone poems which established him as a German composer of note, and 15 operas, at least



Strauss, portrait by [Fritz Erler](#), 1898

half of which are still in the repertoire. As an indication of his versatility, wit and scope, they are variously designated as drama (*Salome*, 1905), tragedy (*Electra*, 1909), comedy for music (*Der Rosenkavalier*, 1911), opera, (*Ariadne auf Naxos*, 1913; *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, 1919), bourgeois comedy (*Intermezzo*, 1924), lyric comedy (*Arabella*, 1935), comic opera (*Die Schweigsame Frau*,

1935), bucolic comedy (*Daphne*, 1938), Conversation Piece for Music (*Capriccio*, 1942), and 'cheerful mythology,' (*Da Liebe der Danae*, 1944).



Arabella bringing the cup of water to Mandryka

He also wrote instrumental music and lieder, and was acknowledged as one of the great conductors of his time. As the opera titles testify, he had a penchant for female protagonists and wrote beautifully for the female voice.

*Arabella* was written at the beginning of the Third Reich. After the Nazi takeover, Strauss wrote, "I made music under the Kaiser and under Ebert [German President, 1919–1925] – I'll survive under this one as well." (As quoted in Ashley, Tim,

Richard Strauss, Phaidon Press, Ltd., London, 1999, p. 159).

*Arabella* is Strauss' most romantic opera, and, although initial critical response was restrained, it has become one of his best-loved ones after *Der Rosenkavalier*. Hugo von Hofmannsthal was his librettist of long standing, about whom the composer said that they 'were born for each other.'

As for Arabella, she is the daughter of a noble but impoverished family, so hard up that they pass off her younger sister Zdenko as a boy to avoid the expense of introducing her to society, (A great piece of comic satire, I think, or did anyone actually do this?). On the day of the Carnevale ball, Arabella must decide among her three well-heeled suitors, none of whom she loves, in order to fulfill her duty to rescue the family fortunes. But Von Homannsthal evidently had a soft spot for the idea of love at first sight: enter a tall, dark stranger, whom Arabella has glimpsed on the street outside the window. He is Mandryka, a nobleman, who has traveled from Croatia to woo her, having seen the picture sent to his family. At the end of Act I they declare their love.

Of course, in Act II complications arise, deceptions are practiced, and misunderstandings intrude. But love at first sight must have its way, and, just as in *Rosenkavalier*, it does. In the final scene, Arabella brings Mandryka a cup of water, thereby declaring their engagement according to the custom of his country.

When the Nazis took power, Strauss continued his musical career in collaboration with the Nazi regime. He was finally dismissed when Goebbels moved to more stringent anti-Semitic measures. The composer had worked with a Jewish librettist, Stefan Zweig, and protested when his name was omitted from the program; the family were also secretly protecting Strauss' Jewish daughter-in-law, daughter of a close Jewish friend, Emmanuel von Grab; Strauss' son, Franz, was a Nazi party member.





Arabella and her sister, Zdenko

After the war, in October, 1945, Strauss and his wife, Pauline, were able to move to Switzerland with the help of friends. They were elderly, food was scarce, and they were unable to heat their villa in Garmisch. Strauss wrote in his diary, "From May onwards, the most terrible period of human history came to an end, the twelve-year reign of bestiality, ignorance and anti-culture under the greatest criminals, during which Germany's 2,000 years of cultural evolution met its doom." It is noteworthy that his emphasis is on the harm to *culture*.



Erin Wall as Arabella and Tomasz Konieczny as Mandryka in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Arabella*, 2017.

photo: Michael Cooper.

In Switzerland, the Strausses discovered how badly his reputation had suffered by his cooperation with the Nazis. His finances were also dire – his royalties had been frozen, and anyone who could get hands on any of his manuscripts was selling them or holding them for collateral. Still, he refused a lucrative film offer for the rights to *Salome* or *Electra*, because there was no guarantee that the operas would not be cut or left unaltered. The situation was alleviated by work in England, organized by his champion there, Sir Thomas

Beecham, at the beginning of a resumption of cultural relations among England, Austria and Germany. Strauss then returned to Switzerland, reunited with his wife, who was not in good health. He continued to compose, and in time his thoughts turned to approaching death, with a beautiful song cycle, *Vier letzte lieder* (*Four Last Songs*). In May, 1949, his name having finally been cleared by the de-Nazification tribunal of the occupying powers, they returned to Garmisch. Although he had some final, poignant, musical engagements, his health was failing and he died in his sleep in September. So many attended his funeral that it was held outside.

Although early in his life Strauss expressed conservative political ideas, it seems clear that his over-riding concern was his music. Later, he told a friend, "The only purpose of life is to make art possible..." (Opus cited, p. 204.)

It was this, not political convictions or anti-Semitism, that motivated his behavior. But he never denounced the regime publicly. Furthermore, he was tactless, not to say painfully insensitive: he was heard to remark, "The Nazis were criminals. I have always known that. Imagine, they closed the theatres and my operas could not be given." (Opus cited, p. 203.) Although callous, he again makes clear what his priority is. He never considered leaving Germany before the war, and he returned there to die. There his music began, flourished, and was loved. It was his musical homeland.





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