

Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*, as reported, 1913

By Peter Dundas

“ROSENKAVALIER” LAST NIGHT’S PRODUCTION AT COVENT GARDEN. ATTRACTIVE OPERA, AH Enthusiastic.

The success of Strauss’s *Rosenkavalier* in Germany is said to be even greater than that of “*Elektra*” or “*Salome*.” After hearing opera at Covent Garden last night, Mr. Thomas Beecham’s season was inaugurated with the first production in England, the reason for the popular preference is evident enough. The display of bloodshed and vile passions is exchanged for romance and comedy, not to say farce, both composer and librettist (Hugo von Hofmannsthal) having exerted their ingenuity towards the production of a brilliant commentary upon eighteenth-century manners, and customs. The whole thing is delightfully picturesque, and, from this point of view, undeniably attractive. The spectacular side of the comedy is, indeed, an outstanding feature. - And so well is it done that it is quite easy to overlook the fact that, considered dramatically, there are many weaknesses of structure. It seems that the librettist has a much better hand at characterization than construction, while the composer has been satisfied to work to his heart’s content upon the thousand and one opportunities afforded to him for pictorial musical delineation.

The story has the great merit of being very dear substance, though heavily laden with detail. The old custom was to send a silver rose to pledge love to the lady one wished to marry. Octavian undertakes the office of Rose Bearer (to adopt the paraphrase of the title employed by Mr. Alfred Kalisch in his excellent English translation of the libretto) on behalf of Baron Ochs, and duly presents the token to Sophie. The two fall in love with one another at first sight; Sophie resents the vulgar familiarity of the Baron, and refuses his hand; Octavian and the Baron fight, and the latter is wounded. This is the central

situation. In Act I. Octavian was the lover of Princess Thérèse von Werdenberg. To escape being found in her bedroom, he hastily disguised himself as her maid, thereby attracting the attention- of the amorous Baron when calling upon the Princess. The denouement consists of the discomfiture of the Baron using an assignation with the supposed maid, he is fooled and bewildered mercilessly, and the opera ends with the Princess relinquishing all her claims on Octavian's attentions, handing him over to Sophie.

It is unclear whether one should think first of the romantic or farcical side of the work. Here lies its principal defect. The chief impressions are, first, the Levee (the 'getting up') in the Princess's room in Act 1, founded upon one of the Hogarth Marriage a la Mode pictures (which has no bearing upon the story at all, by the way) and in both succeeding acts all the bustle and stir concerned with the Baron. The consequence is that the love affair between the Princess and Octavian almost seems out of place, and this makes the closing scene come rather like an anti-climax. After the Baron has made his exit, there follows a trio between the Princess, Sophie, and Octavian, in which their rather difficult mutual relations are cleared up at some length.

As to the music, much might be written of its extraordinary resourcefulness even for Strauss. That in the main head rather than heart music was, perhaps, to be expected. The composer's device of the delineation of externals is fully employed, and it seems to be inevitable, at any rate, in his hands, that this method should mean the exclusion of the expression of feeling. Consequently, there is a great amount of superficiality in the musical treatment, but it does not follow all the same: the score is devoid of aesthetic prettiness and at times "real charm". On the contrary, the amount of obvious melodiousness, owing largely to the simpler style of writing adopted so frequently, is very great. Naturally, this is for the most part confined to the music of the ladies (Octavian, it should be said, is partly written for a mezzo-soprano), although the Baron has his share in the treatment of some of his scenes in the character of the Viennese waltz. The musical characterization is pointed, but it does not always lie intrinsically in the invention, that is, the composer's wonderful sense of effect enables him to write in such a way that the singers can exert their art to the fullest extent, gesture, and vocalization alike. The work's humor is chiefly boisterous, and the accompanying music may be described as appropriate without displaying any specially marked musical joking. Generally, one had the impression that the romantic scenes were set at too great length, particularly those between Octavian and the Princess, but there is also a good

deal of explanatory matter which in the setting seems to be overly prolonged. If at times this is the librettist's fault, at others the effect of prolixity is of course due to the want of either an emotional grip or a sense of proportion in the music. With this goes, too, a failing, rare with Strauss, to build up sections sufficiently well in a manner that leads naturally to a musical climax.

...Mr. Beecham conducted with his accustomed enthusiasm and alertness, and the playing of the band had many fine moments of sonorous quality. On the stage, things were quite admirable. ...the singing was uniformly good, and in some cases notable. ...Without a doubt a fine production all around.

The reception of the work last night constituted one of the greatest ovations seen in Covent Garden for many years, the performers being recalled at least a dozen times after the second act, and again and again after the third; while Mr. Beecham also had to appear upon the stage and be cheered from all parts of the crowded house. N. C. G.

Reported in the Pall Mall Gazette, January 30, 1913

