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0521771218 - Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture

Camille Crittenden

Excerpt

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Introduction

The end of the nineteenth century saw a host of political, social, and artistic struggles within the Habsburg monarchy. Decisions affecting the vast, polyglot expanse of the empire were made in the crucible of Vienna, the imperial and royal seat of power. At the same time, musical life had never been richer in the capital, where performers enjoyed sumptuous new venues in the Court Opera and Musikverein, the Conservatory boasted an expanded faculty and student body, music journalism flourished, and audiences for classical music reached unprecedented proportions.¹ Vienna's fertile musical soil gave rise to a wealth of music in popular styles and genres as well as the standard repertoire heard in concert halls today. With its additional components of text and staging, operetta played a central role in solidifying a Viennese identity, even as that identity was being contested ethnically and politically. Such popular music offers valuable insights not only into the historical circumstances it often addressed, but also into the active and articulate musical life of Vienna.

Indeed, operetta became the expression of a new age in Vienna. Austria had shaken off the dust and shame of its defeat to Prussia in 1866, emerging as a newly established, dualist empire with the *Ausgleich* of 1867.² After years of absolutism and economic constraints, Viennese citizens were giddy at the prospect of growth and prosperity heralded by the reforms of Emperor Franz Joseph and the newly elected Liberal Parliament. During the *Gründerzeit*, the period of expansion and development between 1866 and 1873, Vienna saw badly needed industrialization and modernization, bringing the city up-to-date among western European capitals. Although the buildings that line the Ringstrasse today appear as eternal monuments to Vienna's past, that very past was being negotiated and created during these years.³

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Like the Ringstrasse, operetta reflected the new-found wealth and the Liberal values that created it, for the genre combined aesthetic desire for a new art form with business interest in a profitable new entertainment industry. Anyone with means to do so speculated in the Viennese stock market, and the craze for speculative investments extended to private theaters and to specific works. The theater, in fact, was one market in which all social classes could participate: arriving at the theater hours before tickets went on sale in order to be the first in line, servants often bought up blocks of tickets and then sold them at a profit. Theatrical speculation centered not on spoken stage works or on opera but on operetta and the houses in which it was performed. Operetta authors and composers negotiated with businessmen, selling off various percentages of their royalty rights to eager investors.

This book explores operetta not only as a musical genre but also as a cultural practice popular at a time when musical and social issues were hotly debated. Many who waltzed at masked balls and eagerly awaited each new operetta also influenced political events that shaped modern Europe. Since many of the stage works most successful in their own time have failed to “transcend” their historical moment, they offer insights into concerns of the age. Dreams of being memorialized by posterity did not motivate composers of popular music; they wrote for a contemporary audience, hoping for artistic, but also commercial, success. Operettas serve as cultural documents, revealing the Viennese public’s concerns, prejudices, goals, and fears at the end of the nineteenth century.

This study focuses on the works of Johann Strauss, a musician central to any understanding of nineteenth-century Viennese music or culture. During his lifetime and since his death a century ago, generations of Viennese venerated Strauss as a totem of their culture. Remembered today chiefly as the creator of the “Blue Danube Waltz” and *Die Fledermaus*, Strauss maintained a high profile in Viennese cultural life for the latter half of the nineteenth century. The social base of his audiences reached far beyond the “elite 2000,” the exclusive group of professionals, civil servants, and aristocrats

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who enjoyed access to the limited number of orchestral concerts in Vienna, such as those by the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. Moreover, representatives of the art-music world joined the average member of the listening public as ardent consumers of works by their local musical hero. Indeed, his music continued to inspire and fascinate subsequent generations of Viennese musicians: Mahler mounted the first evening performance of *Die Fledermaus* at the Court Opera; Richard Strauss readily confessed the debt he owed his predecessor for his *Rosenkavalier* waltzes;⁴ Webern became convinced of Strauss's genius through conducting his works,⁵ and he joined his colleagues Schoenberg and Berg in arranging Strauss waltzes for their Society for Private Musical Performances.⁶ The devotion and admiration shown by these eminent composers invites a more detailed investigation into the appeal of Strauss's music.

Championing Strauss as founding father of Viennese operetta has a history almost concurrent with his productions; however, the reasons for Strauss's popularity lie not only in his music but also in the intersection of his career with Viennese musical life and imperial politics. Strauss had been hailed as Vienna's musical ambassador since composing the "Blue Danube Waltz," which premiered during the 1867 World Exhibition in Paris. At this time Offenbach's operettas attracted audiences nightly to Viennese suburban stages. When Strauss began composing operettas a few years later, Vienna greeted his works as their answer to Offenbach, proof to the European community that, despite military losses, Austria still led the cultural world. Strauss's family history and his use of waltzes in his stage works affirmed and celebrated an "essential" Austrian character.

Yet it was not Strauss's musical talents alone that linked his name so inextricably with Viennese operetta, for some of Carl Millöcker's and Franz von Suppé's works were better known and more commercially successful than Strauss's. What Strauss enjoyed, and his colleagues did not, was a close relationship with the social and institutional structures that shaped musical opinion. Highly regarded by the creators and arbiters of art music of his time, Strauss counted as friends and tarock partners such luminaries as Eduard Hanslick,

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Johannes Brahms, Hans Richter, Ludwig Bösendorfer, and many other pillars of the Viennese musical establishment.⁷ When Hanslick included reviews of Strauss operettas along with those of new concert music or operas in the *Neue Freie Presse*, he bestowed an institutional endorsement on Strauss's music unavailable to other composers of popular music.

These facts should not imply that Strauss's music was interchangeable with that of his operetta colleagues or that the sole difference between them was their social connections. On the contrary, part of the reason Strauss's music found such acclaim in art-music circles was because it, more than the music of his contemporaries, conformed to the criteria of value used to judge art music. By praising Strauss's melodic invention or tasteful instrumentation, Hanslick and Brahms inscribed their critical standards into a genre for many of whose listeners these subtleties were unimportant. The skill necessary for Strauss's achievement, composing music that was sophisticated and elegant yet simple and accessible, has been underestimated. For these reasons, Strauss presents a compelling selection of works to study within the wider context of Viennese operetta and musical life.

This book is organized in two parts; the first (chapters 1 and 2) offers an overview of the sites and circumstances of Viennese operetta. Chapter 1 examines the beginnings of the genre and its roots in Offenbach and in Viennese theatrical and musical traditions, exploring the significance of operetta for Viennese public life and the nature of that public. Chapter 2 discusses the figures most involved in the production of operetta, for these composers, performers, librettists, and directors not only were artistically indispensable but directly contributed to public perception of countless topics, from public policy and religious toleration to fashion and courtship.

The second and larger part of the book examines Strauss and his operettas in a series of case studies. Chapter 3 explores the delicate line he walked between reflecting and creating the Viennese self-image. The Strauss family's music accompanied Vienna's defeats and celebrations throughout the nineteenth century, holding an unprece-

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dented prominence in the city's cultural life. The Viennese used Strauss as a means of representing their city to themselves and to the world, a practice that has continued throughout the twentieth century. Chapter 4 discusses in detail the elements of Strauss's distinctive musical style: prominent violins, refined instrumentation, engaging rhythm, and melodic emphasis on the sixth scale degree (*la*). The circumstances of Strauss's momentous decision to begin composing for the theater, as well as a discussion of *Indigo und die vierzig Räuber*, his first completed effort and the first full-length Viennese operetta, are also of interest here. Strauss grounded this work in local concerns and events, and he used the waltz to represent the Viennese spirit in a variety of settings, often invoking nostalgia for an idealized pre-industrial *Vormärz*.

The nostalgic yearning for a more prosperous time also permeates Strauss's most successful stage work, *Die Fledermaus*, the topic of chapter 5. This work deserves its widespread recognition and admiration, for not only did it fulfill contemporary desires under the pressure of contemporary economic circumstances but it is also the most tightly constructed work of Strauss's long career, filled with elegant melodies and brilliant instrumentation. In it, Strauss weaves a rich web of allusions to his musical forbears and contemporary musical practices. Precisely because this work is so popular, it has become emblematic of Viennese operetta in general. Nonetheless, it departs significantly from the works that preceded and followed it. Its contemporary salon setting and champagne choruses came into vogue again in the twentieth century, but nineteenth-century operetta was far more often set in distant times and places, such as Italy, medieval Germany, or a fictional island.

Along with many of his artistic colleagues, Strauss represented Viennese identity in contrast to some ethnic Other, frequently a minority of the Habsburg empire. This procedure was a timely topic, for increased industrialization and economic expansion brought members of the empire's eastern lands to Vienna, creating tension among the various ethnicities vying for employment, if not leadership, in the capital. Chapter 6 includes a discussion of ways in which

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Der Zigeunerbaron thematizes these cultural and political struggles for power and recognition, using dichotomies between urban and rural, sophisticated and coarse, powerful and marginalized, for plot, character, and musical representation.

The final chapter addresses a topic few discussions of late nineteenth-century music can escape, the influence of Richard Wagner. Just as many opera composers felt compelled to imitate or to address in some way the phenomenon of Wagner's music, operetta composers also modified their musical style to accommodate audiences accustomed to the orchestral and vocal styles of Bayreuth. Obvious Wagnerian influences in Strauss's oeuvre limit themselves to two works, the operetta *Simplicius* and his only opera, *Ritter Pásmán*. The title character in the first work resembles Parsifal, and despite Strauss's high hopes for the work, critics derided its combination of comic and serious elements. *Ritter Pásmán* also borrows heavily from Wagner (specifically, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Die Meistersinger*) and was equally unsuccessful. Although these works failed to win a lasting place in the operatic repertoire, their failure suggests much about the expectations of Viennese audiences and about Strauss's own artistic goals and limitations.

Viennese operetta has enjoyed only a minimal presence in musical scholarship, yet Strauss's stage works prove a remarkably useful corpus for examining many aspects of nineteenth-century life. His composing and conducting careers touched the planes of high art and popular culture in both concert and stage music, an achievement no other musical figure of his time could claim. Moreover, his music continues to attract audiences in Vienna and throughout the world. Aside from musical reasons for evaluating his works more closely, their topicality provides an untapped resource for the cultural historian studying urbanization, anti-Semitism, ethnic relations, and a wealth of further issues relevant to the Vienna of Strauss's day – and our own.

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I | The birth of a genre

At the end of the nineteenth century, Vienna provided an ideal environment for the creation of a new musical genre, the Viennese operetta. Following the conservatism of the Biedermeier period (1815–48) and the neo-absolutism that prevailed after the revolutions of 1848, Vienna opened itself in the 1850s and 1860s to the political, social, and technological advances already underway in the rest of western Europe. Growing industrial development made manufacturing jobs in the city more plentiful and more economically rewarding than agricultural careers in the country. Modernization also increased the size and spending power of the bourgeoisie, who now required service amenities and household staffs to demonstrate their affluence. Immigrants from Habsburg provinces streamed into Vienna in search of employment, creating a more ethnically diverse population than the city had ever known. Within a few decades Vienna grew from a small imperial capital of 500,000 to an important gateway between east and west of almost 2 million residents. The rapid economic expansion and changes in the profile of Vienna's population encouraged, if not required, a new means of musico-dramatic expression.

Despite explosive population growth and intense industrialization, the seat of the Habsburg empire provided an image of calm stability in the figure of Franz Joseph. His coronation in 1848 marked the beginning of a 68-year reign, an unprecedented tenure among modern European nations. As ruler over a geographically immense and multi-lingual empire, he faced increasing obstacles to peaceful rule as various ethnic groups lobbied for autonomy. But the political undercurrents of nationalism and irredentism that eventually threatened to tear the empire apart from within were only just beginning in the last third of the century.

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Aside from the temporary effects of a stock market crash in 1873, the city thrived economically with rapid growth in industry, banking, and the railroad.¹ Civic building projects such as channeling the Vienna River, widening streets, and building new roads, bridges, and schools, were all undertaken during the *Gründerzeit* of the 1860s and later. Construction boomed along the newly established Ringstrasse, where monumental public buildings were erected in the Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque styles in a project of beautification unparalleled in Austria's history. Expansive apartment buildings, both owned and inhabited by Vienna's elite, shared the prime real estate. The chief purpose of these buildings was not utilitarian but rather symbolic, for in them the Liberal bourgeoisie saw reflected their own economic power and cultural sophistication.²

The destruction of the city wall in 1857 granted the private *Vorstadt* theaters a new lease on life.³ As the *Vorstadt* districts became incorporated into the city, their theaters attracted a larger urban audience. Business barons, eager to speculate on theaters and productions, plowed money into both, bringing financial support as well as a willingness to risk novelty. The star system that had developed in concert and theater life in the nineteenth century, exemplified by performers like Franz Liszt, Adeline Patti, and Sarah Bernhardt, finally reached the private theaters as well. Once bastions of ensemble performance, *Vorstadt* theaters would pay extraordinary sums by the end of the century to secure popular performers for their houses. All these economic circumstances and artistic trends directly affected the development of Viennese operetta.

Formally, the genre evolved from a confluence of several traditions, the most direct of which were Offenbach's operettas and spoken Viennese stage works. Offenbach achieved enormous popularity in Vienna during the late 1850s and 1860s, and his operettas provided a natural point of departure for Viennese composers hoping to make the genre their own. Further influences came from contemporary popular music, *Volkslieder* and *Schrammelmusik*, but the farces (*Possen*), folk plays (*Volksstücke*), and comedies (*Lustspiele*) of

Ferdinand Raimund, Johann Nestroy, and Ludwig Anzengruber provided an important narrative model. These dramatic works – performed in the same theaters as operetta and by the same actors – featured incidental music by Franz von Suppé, Carl Millöcker, and Adolf Müller, Jr., all of whom became leading operetta composers. Although Suppé and others had written one-act operettas in the 1860s, it was not until 1871, with Johann Strauss’s *Indigo und die vierzig Räuber*, that the first full-length Viennese operetta emerged.

As the genre increased in popularity, music and theater critics devoted more attention not only to specific works but also to broader aesthetic issues. While opera had long received careful critical scrutiny, journalists soon began reporting on operetta as well; Eduard Hanslick, the unrivalled *éminence grise* among Viennese music critics, paid close attention to musical developments in the *Vorstadt* theaters. Hanslick gained a reputation in his own day for barely restrained pedantry, but he was not alone among Viennese journalists in his concern for generic categorization. Strauss’s *Simplicius* (1887) aroused much speculation and consternation when it was advertised without a defining rubric; several newspapers noted the lack of a descriptive term like “opera,” “operetta,” or “folk opera,” and suggested that it might be a transitional work for the composer, leading him from the *Vorstadt* theater into the Court Opera.⁴ Strauss had labeled his previous work, *Der Zigeunerbaron* [*The Gypsy Baron*, 1885], a “comic opera,” but although it departed from his previous operetta style, it was clearly intended for performance at the Theater an der Wien. He may have hoped this label would gain the work entry into the Court Opera some day, despite its more modest origins. Only a few years later Hanslick lamented that “the concept ‘opera’ is so broad and so liberal that it encompasses every kind of the most beautiful and most dramatic music.”⁵

As broad as the concept “opera” may have become by the 1890s, operetta had always defined itself against the established genre in several ways. The table below compares traits associated with each genre.

Operetta	Opera
Performed in private suburban theaters, away from political centers of power	Performed in Court theaters, subvented and endorsed by monarchy and government, in physical proximity to the Court
Improvisatory tradition continues	Performers adhere to original text
Authority lies with the performer	Authority lies with the composer
Popular music	Art music
Entertainment available to wide social spectrum	Audience composed largely of aristocrats, civil servants, upper bourgeoisie
Plot could be “lascivious,” not held to high moral standards, censors more lenient	Proper moral stance must be maintained; here censors were most strict
Women participated in management (Geistinger, Gallmeyer, von Schönerer)	Women involved only as performers
Cross-dressing popular, titillation seeing women in pants	Except for breeches roles, women’s bodies remained “appropriately” clothed
Local appeal	International appeal
Value placed on simple melody	Complex melodic, harmonic, and timbral manipulation expected

In some cases, operetta composers deliberately aimed to differentiate their work from opera, while others strove to emulate the high-art genre, hoping that one day their work would be suitable for performance at the Court Opera.

How, then, did the Viennese operetta come to exist as an identifiable genre? Genre theorists have offered various explanations for this process. Frederic Jameson, for one, has argued that “*pure* textual exemplifications of a single genre do not exist; and this not merely because pure manifestations of anything are rare, but . . . because texts always come into being at the intersection of several genres and emerge from the tensions in the latter’s multiple force