

Introduction

ANASTASIA BELINA AND DEREK B. SCOTT

No musical form has acquired such a disparate collection of admirers and detractors as operetta. Nietzsche tried writing it, Turgenev wrote libretti for four and even acted in one, Stanislavski thought it was ‘artistic’ and produced it, Nemirovich-Danchenko directed and produced it, Hitchcock filmed it, Adorno scorned it although he was not entirely averse to some of Leo Fall’s and Oscar Straus’s works, Stalin and Hitler loved it, Rachmaninov admired it, Zola wanted it eradicated, Shostakovich was fascinated by it and composed one, even Mozart composed a stage work that is deemed to be its predecessor, and box offices thrived on it. Operetta was a global success, a democratic genre that was indiscriminate about whom were its patrons.

This *Companion* does not pretend to be all-embracing in its coverage of operetta. The editors were keen to place an emphasis on the production and reception of operetta in different countries and to examine its travels as an important form of cultural transfer. That said, the coverage is not all-inclusive, and, for example, it disappoints the editors that Croatia has been neglected, despite a thriving operetta culture that included composers such as Ivan Zajc and Srećko Albini. It is important, however, to be aware that specific national traditions rarely occupy centre stage in operetta, and there is much that is cosmopolitan in its music and in its networks of transcultural exchange, which reached around the world. For instance, a variety of Australian touring companies (often sharing members) visited New Zealand, India, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Yangon, Singapore and Shanghai in the 1870s. In July 1879, Howard Vernon’s Royal English Opera Company gave performances of Offenbach’s *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* and Lecocq’s *The Daughter of Madame Angot* at the Gaiety Theatre, Yokohama, Japan, and excerpts of the former were interpolated into a westernized kabuki play at the Shintomi-za theatre in Tokyo.¹

Operetta scholarship, in all its domains – historical and analytical, editing and performance – has been growing in the past dozen years. In 2015 Bettina Brandl-Risi, Ulrich Lenz, Clemens Risi and Rainer Simon edited *Kunst der Oberfläche*, a collection of essays that came out of a symposium on operetta held at the Komische Oper in Berlin.² Further evidence of new academic interest in the history of operetta and popular lyric theatre is provided by *Musical Theatre in Europe 1830–1945*

[1]

2 *Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott*

(Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), edited by Michela Niccolai and Clair Rowden. It is a wide-ranging survey of diverse forms of musical theatre in Europe, but the editors hold that operetta and its derivatives took centre stage. It contains informative chapters on Offenbach's operettas, Viennese operetta, English operetta and musical comedy, and Italian operetta, and includes case studies of operetta in Croatia, Portugal and Spain.

New research is not confined to remedying the neglect that fell over silver-age operetta, it is also focussing on major figures of the nineteenth century and reassessing their output. For example, no longer are the closing years of the career of Johann Strauss Jr seen as evidence of diminishing creative energy. The release of a world premiere recording of his last operetta *Die Göttin der Vernunft* (The Goddess of Reason) in 2011 demonstrated that it is a rich and significant work.³ What the editors of the present volume feel has been most neglected, hitherto, is the extent to which operetta became, by the second decade of the twentieth century, part of the cultural mainstream in larger cities around the world. The chapters that follow offer examples of wide-ranging operetta scholarship in the twenty-first century and expound the arguments of an international selection of academics who have taken a special interest in this genre. There already exist broad surveys of a cataloguing and descriptive nature by Mark Lubbock and Robert Letellier, which may be consulted usefully in tandem with the present book.⁴ In addition, there are condensed histories of operetta, among which those by Richard Traubner and Andrew Lamb are recommended.⁵

The editors regret that there is no chapter in this volume on Yiddish operetta. Scholarly interest has grown remarkably in recent years, but the editors searched in vain to find someone to contribute on this subject. In the early twentieth century, Yiddish theatre was very popular, especially in New York, where immigrants from eastern Europe arrived in large numbers during this period. Joseph Rumshinsky's 1923 Yiddish operetta *Di goldene Kale* (The Golden Bride), edited by Michael Ochs, was published in 2017 in the American Musicological Society's MUSA series. The score was found in the Harvard Music Library, and the orchestral parts were in a manuscript collection deposited by Rumshinsky's relatives at UCLA. In December 2015 the operetta ran for a month, performed by the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, at the Edmond J. Safra Hall, New York, and received two Drama Desk Award nominations for outstanding revival of a musical and outstanding director of a musical. It was revived again, Off-Broadway, in summer 2016.

The reader will notice in the pages that follow the scanty treatment of a small number of Broadway composers, whose stage works are often called operettas, or considered akin to operettas.⁶ The reason for this apparent

3 Introduction

neglect is that they have already found a place in the *Cambridge Companion to the Musical* (Victor Herbert, pp. 31–4; Reginald de Koven, pp. 34–5; Jerome Kern, pp. 44–5; Rudolf Friml and Sigmund Romberg, pp. 48–56).⁷ That *Companion* did not, however, feature composers of musical comedy of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, and so the reader will find Sidney Jones, Ivan Caryll, Lionel Monckton and others in the present book. Nevertheless, some brief overlaps between these *Cambridge Companions* remain, which for the most part result from the inevitable disagreements that arise when deciding whether a particular piece is best served by being called an operetta or a musical.

Part of that confusion is created by the tendency of producers and theatre owners to choose a label that primarily suits their marketing strategy. Sometimes, other considerations come into play: Gilbert and Sullivan opted to use the description ‘comic opera’ because it carried stronger connotations of artistry and moral respectability than did ‘operetta’. The definitional lines of operetta are blurred, and all sorts of nuanced meaning may come into play when we are confronted with terms such as *opéra bouffe*, comic opera, operetta, musical comedy and musical play, but the crucial factor that separates all these genre descriptions from the high-status term ‘opera’ is that they denote music of the commercial theatre. With the influential stage works of Jacques Offenbach (1819–80), this music developed its own characteristic features, making it a third type of music to be distinguished from that of the concert tradition on one side, and folk music on the other. ‘Opera’ remained a high-status term until the advent of rock operas in the 1960s.

Bernard Grun claims that the label ‘operetta’ (in its French form, *opérette*) was first used for Offenbach’s *La rose de Saint-Flour*.⁸ That operetta was first performed at the Salle Lacaze, Paris, on 12 June 1856, and contained three characters only, owing to the legal restrictions under which the composer was permitted to present stage works at this time. The word ‘operetta’ was not unknown before this, but it was usually in reference to the qualities of short duration and mundane content. Schilling’s *Universal-Lexicon* of 1837 defines operetta as ‘a smaller opera that either lasts a shorter time in performance, or takes its content from ordinary life, dealing with it lightly and, instead of high-status characters, containing those easily comprehensible and easily found’.⁹ This definition is contradicted by the content and character of operettas of the second half of the nineteenth century, from *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) on. Most significantly, in Schilling’s description there is no mention of musical style, and yet, within a couple of decades, operetta would begin to be marked above all by its musical readiness to be part of the burgeoning market for entertainment music. In theatres, salons and dance halls, new

4 Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott

styles of music were developing, creating a growing schism between what was considered entertainment and what merited the designation ‘serious art’. The music of operetta was to be characterized as the aesthetic opposite of ‘serious music’; it was ‘light music’ (in the sense of lightweight or easy music). In this sense, the label ‘operetta’ bears no more relationship to the past than Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony does to Handel’s Pastoral Symphony (even though musical pastoral conventions are found in both). One of the first attempts to write a critical history of operetta was made by Erich Urban in 1903, who argues that it has its own justification, meaning and history as a genre, and recognizes that a common thread links operetta in various European countries (including Spain) to the early stage works of Offenbach.¹⁰

The Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens, which Offenbach founded in 1855, has been described as a kind of ‘experimental lab’ for French operetta, and it was an influence on theatrical entertainment in cities such as Vienna, London and St Petersburg.¹¹ A song from scene 4 of Jacques Offenbach’s early *opérette-bouffe*, *Le financier et le savetier* (1856) demonstrates the new third type of musical style that is neither folk nor classical. The song, titled ‘Fable’, has a refrain designed by both lyricist Hector Crémieux and the composer to be both simple and irritatingly memorable. However, the simplicity it possesses is not that of a rustic song or dance. Its words and its music have been carefully polished by professionals. Its very triviality is carefully constructed to be a source of fun. The style is what one might call sophisticatedly trite: the falling chromatic semitones and the play on words demonstrate this (see Example 0.1). The cobbler of this fable works in a basement; hence, the repetitions of ‘cave’ (basement or cellar) shouted by his neighbours appear to make sense; therefore, we feel both tricked and amused when we finally hear this word as the beginning of the question, ‘*qu’avez vous ?*’ (what’s up with you?)

Operetta, as a new form of urban entertainment, first flourished in Second Empire Paris. Siegfried Kracauer describes French society in this period as ‘exclusively a town product’, and argues that Paris was uniquely placed as a city in which were present ‘all the elements, material and verbal, that made operetta possible’.¹² It was a time of financial speculation and dreams of sudden fortune but also of political repression – a combination that fed a desire for high-spirited entertainment, especially among those of the bourgeoisie who were enjoying increased affluence. Kracauer identifies the new bohemians of the Second Empire as those to whom Offenbach’s operettas principally appealed. They constituted a less exclusive social stratum than those before the revolution of 1848. They were part of the bourgeoisie and had money to spend yet were keen to distance themselves

5 Introduction

Example 0.1 'Fable' from *Le financier et le savetier*, lyrics by H. Crémieux, music by J. Offenbach

Les voi - sins lui di - saient tous, Ca - ve, ca - ve, ca - ve, ca - ve,

ca - ve, ca - ve, ca - ve, ca - ve, Les voi - sins lui di - saient tous

Ca - ve, ca - ve, ca - ve, ca - ve, qu'a - vez - vous!

from staid bourgeois manners, relishing, instead, the mockery, satire, bacchanalia and frivolity of operetta.¹³

Unlike 'serious' opera, which prefers historical and mythological subject matter, operetta has often chosen to engage with the contemporary and modern. Even an apparently mythological theme does not rule out contemporary allusion. Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers*, for instance, contains a character named Public Opinion, after a phrase that had come to popularity in the 1850s, when this *opéra bouffe* was written. It also quotes *La Marseillaise* when the gods revolt against Jupiter. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, it was common for operettas to embrace or relate to features of modernity, such as trains, city restaurants, cinemas and so forth. They also related to social and moral issues linked to the development of a capitalist economy (as in Leo Fall's *Die Dollarprinzessin*).

Operetta thrived for a period of eighty years, from 1855 (the year Offenbach first leased a theatre in Paris) to 1935 (when many Jewish artists who were involved in all aspects of operetta production had either fled Nazi Germany or were no longer able to work under the Goebbels regime). The second half of the nineteenth century is often referred to as the golden age of operetta, but its glitter began to fade at the *fin de siècle*. The silver age of operetta is usually thought of as the thirty-year period that followed the revitalizing effect of the novel and immensely successful *Merry Widow* (first performed in Vienna in December 1905). The first flowering of operetta of the Offenbachian type in Vienna was seen in the stage works of Franz von Suppé (1819–95), who began as an emulator of Offenbach. Between 1858 and 1870, forty-six operettas by Offenbach were produced in Vienna.¹⁴ Johann Strauss Jr (1825–99) and Carl Millöcker (1842–99) began to lend a more Viennese character to operetta, the former leaning heavily on his own social dance music. In London, W. S. Gilbert (1836–

6 Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott

1911) and Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900) were at first indebted to Offenbach (and his frequent librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy), but they were also aware of what was happening in Vienna. The kiss duet from Suppé's *Die schöne Galathée* (1863), for example, pre-dates 'This Is What I'll Never Do', the kiss duet in *The Mikado* (1885). *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein* was produced at Covent Garden in 1867, but it was *Geneviève de Brabant* at Islington Philharmonic music hall in 1871 that started the Offenbach craze in London. It ran for more than a year and turned that music hall into 'the rendezvous of fashionable London'.¹⁵ The USA took to Offenbach also, and he toured there in 1876. However, it was another musician from overseas, Victor Herbert, who settled in New York in 1894 and composed a series of successful operettas that put the USA on the operetta map. His stage works leaned heavily on the Viennese style, as did those of Ludwig Engländer (who had been born in Vienna). Gustave Kerker's *The Belle of New York* (1897) had a disappointing run on Broadway but was the first operetta to score a major success in Europe (London and Berlin, especially).

La fille de Madame Angot by Charles Lecocq (1832–1918) was at the Gaiety in 1873, and transferred to the Opera Comique, and it was at the latter theatre that Gilbert and Sullivan rose to fame. French operetta remained popular in England. *Les cloches de Corneville* (1877) by Robert Planquette (1848–1903) was a favourite, and Hervé (Louis Auguste Florimond Ronger, 1825–92), who had helped to pioneer the new style of *opéra bouffe* alongside Offenbach, enjoyed his greatest success in both Paris (1883) and London (1893) with *Mam'zelle Nitouche* after Offenbach's death. As late as 1904, Messager's *Véronique* (Paris, 1898) ran for 495 performances at the Apollo. The London interest in French operetta declined rapidly, however, after the production of *The Merry Widow* in 1907. Over the next thirty years, the operetta composers who dominated the stages of Europe, North America and elsewhere around the globe were Franz Lehár (1870–1948), Oscar Straus (1870–1954), Leo Fall (1873–1925), Jean Gilbert (real name, Max Winterfeld, 1879–1942) and Emmerich Kálmán (1882–1953). The appetite in the UK and USA for operetta from the German stage meant that some exceptional French *opérettes* failed to gain an airing in the West End or on Broadway. Among these neglected operettas were Reynaldo's Hahn's *Ciboulette* (1926) and *Brummel* (1931), although Sacha Guitry's play *Mozart*, to which he supplied incidental music, was heard in both cities. It is strange that no one thought the tuneful operetta about Beau Brummel would have appealed to a London audience.

By the mid-1930s, the supply of operettas from the German stage was drying up as a direct consequence of Nazi policies. The Jewish contribution

7 Introduction

to operetta had been significant from the start (Offenbach was Jewish), and the German operetta world of the 1930s was dominated by Jewish artists, composers, lyricists and impresarios. Broadway musical theatre had been making headway in Europe from the mid-1920s, and after World War II, operetta was largely confined to nostalgic revivals. The operetta director Arthur Maria Rabenalt expressed his confused feelings about the future of operetta in 1948: 'Operetta is dead! – Is operetta dead?'¹⁶ We remain just as confused about the vitality of operetta today. The last operetta that David Ewen included in his *Book of European Light Opera*, published in 1962 was Ivor Novello's *King's Rhapsody* of 1949; he confidently announced, 'Nobody today writes operettas.'¹⁷ It would not be accurate, however, to say that qualities associated with operetta were nowhere to be found in later twentieth-century works for the West End and Broadway stages: John Snelson describes *Phantom of the Opera* as a 'witty play with genre boundaries across temporal divides, bringing together opera, operetta, and various elements of musical theatre'.¹⁸

Operettas used to be part of a theatrical production system that is still associated with theatres in the West End or on Broadway. An operetta was produced, and it ran until the audience figures declined. Then another new operetta was produced. An opera house, in contrast, announces a new season in which three or four different operas may feature. Operetta is now caught between the two systems. One theatre may be offering a single operetta night after night, and another (for instance the Volksoper in Vienna) will have an operetta season containing new productions of several operettas, each being performed on a different night.

The illustrious West End entrepreneur and producer George Edwardes always trusted the theatre-going public. Cameron Mackintosh showed the same kind of trust when he decided to transfer *Les Misérables* to the Palace Theatre, after largely hostile critical reviews, because the public was demanding tickets. A change in the mid-1980s, initiated by the success of *Phantom of the Opera*, was the desire to see the same production in one city as in another, but, in the period this book deals with, productions could vary from city to city, and even their titles changed. To give two examples, Leo Fall's *Der liebe Augustin* became *Princess Caprice* in London, and Eduard Künneke's *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* became *Caroline* in New York. Another change in the 1980s was prompted by tourism. In London, tourists were accounting for 44 per cent of West End ticket sales,¹⁹ yet many of them were far from fluent in English, so wordy scenes were going to pass over their heads.

Franchising became common in big musical productions in the later twentieth century. It meant that a product was offered under the brand of

8 Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott

an existing company, for example, a Really Useful Group production of a Lloyd Webber musical. However, this model can be seen emerging with the London production of *White Horse Inn* at the Coliseum in 1931. It was basically the same production that had been given at the Großes Schauspielhaus, Berlin, in 1930, and it varied little when it went to New York in 1936, even if there was a new version of the book and lyrics. In all three cities, there was a huge auditorium to fill (New York's Center Theater held around 3,500), and Erik Charell and Ernst Stein were asked to oversee the spectacle in each theatre.

In many ways, musicals such as *Phantom* and *Les Misérables* resemble operettas, but not in one crucial way, that of singing style. In operetta, the singing style is predominantly operatic. Despite the occasional prioritizing of acting over singing that Gilbert and Sullivan gave to comic male roles, and despite a few exceptions in the twentieth century, such as *Die Dreigroschenoper*, operetta calls for the same kind of singer as in opera. The only difference is that the singer is also expected to act and dance skilfully. In musical theatre, the operatic voice is a style, and one of six 'voice qualities' that form part of the training system devised by voice coach Jo Estill. For her, 'opera' was something that came in inverted commas, like vocal 'twang' and 'belting'. In opera and operetta, in contrast, there was a perception that good singing could only be done one way, rather than there being an acceptance that singers might position their vocal chords in several ways so as to create different musical effects. Operetta tended to follow operatic decisions about what vocal techniques were legitimate. The falsetto voice (another of Estill's types) was, for example, used sparingly in opera, and the very designation 'falsetto' implies that it is a 'false' voice.

The second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary* of 2001 comments, 'Today operetta is scarcely to be found in the commercial theatre and, apart from a few works that have been accepted into the operatic repertoire, it has become increasingly of interest to a specialist audience'.²⁰ The 200,000 people who visit the Seefestspiele Mörbisch each year offer a clear indication, however, that the audience for operetta is not small. It may also be argued that opera, itself, attracts a 'specialist audience'. It is puzzling why some opera companies (Opera North and English National Opera (ENO) in the UK being notable examples) are readier to perform a Broadway musical than an operetta, when the singing style demanded by an operetta is usually much closer to operatic vocal technique. Asked about operetta style by a journalist in 2007, the legendary operetta diva Marta Eggerth, aged 94, commented, 'Technically, there is no difference between opera and operetta ... Either you can sing it or you cannot sing it'. The real distinguishing characteristic of operetta, she claimed, lies elsewhere,

9 Introduction

beyond the style and way of singing: ‘Operetta is really a very erotic thing. Today, there is no erotic. On the beach the bikini, two little leaves over the breasts: there it is. That is not sex. Sexiness is something which is not shown right away.’ The same applies to operetta: ‘this not knowing but suspecting, kind of teasing one another – that makes it interesting, sexy, but funny at the same time. This is my whole principle of what makes operetta’.²¹

Noël Coward remarked on the capacity of popular tunes to ‘probe the memory more swiftly than anything else’²² – and that is no doubt why, when operetta productions waned, the genre held a strong nostalgic appeal to an ageing audience. This was especially the case in Austria and Germany. Operetta became permeated with nostalgia after World War II. Sentiment would overtake works in which frivolity, vulgarity and caricature had once predominated, such as in *Im weißen Rössl*. An attempt to get closer to Erik Charell’s conception of this revue operetta was given an enthusiastic reception at the Bar jeder Vernunft, Berlin, in 1994. The cobwebs blown away, another admired production took place in Basel in 2005.

There is now a shift in the way operetta is being perceived. In Vienna, controversy greeted Birgit Meyer’s production of Kálmán’s *Gräfin Mariza* at the Volksoper in 2006. Meyer responded by arguing that those who rejected new interpretations were no longer attending operetta performances but that younger audiences were receptive to new ideas.²³ In 2004 the production of Kálmán’s *Die Herzogin von Chicago*, directed by Dominik Wilgenbus at the Volksoper, was another example of changes in interpretation. Instead of focussing on its historical status in the Third Reich as *entartete Musik* (decadent music), it was re-envisioned as a critique of the global reach of twenty-first-century American capitalism.²⁴

In 2014, Volker Klotz brought lengthy theatrical experience as critic and dramaturg to a book on the ways and means of reviving operetta.²⁵ In Berlin, the person who deserves a lot of credit for reimagining operetta is Barrie Kosky, Intendant of the Komische Oper. He was voted Director of the Year in 2016 by *Opernwelt* magazine, and it is certain that the recent innovative productions of operetta played a major role in that award. During the Operetta Festival held 23 January to 8 February 2015 (which included a three-day symposium on operetta), the production of Paul Abraham’s *Ball im Savoy* (1932) was a sensation. Kosky showed there were new ways to treat works like this and let their spirit live. They do not need to be either treated as sentimental kitsch or be subjected to some doom-laden Regietheater interpretation (Canadian Opera Company’s *Die Fledermaus* in 2012 acquired a Nazi Act 3, drained of the slightest trace of

10 Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott

comedy). Nevertheless, despite an acknowledgement that Kosky has brought wonderful high energy, excitement and sexiness to operetta, he has been criticized for a failure to construct a 'conceptual framework making broader claims about the work's meaning or reception history'.²⁶ Nevertheless, Kosky did end the evening performances of *Ball im Savoy* with a striking gesture. The cast sang 'Goodnight' from Abraham's *Viktoria und ihr Husar* (1930), a song that could not fail to conjure up the painful circumstances of the Jewish composer's destroyed career and exile from Berlin. Not least among Kosky's achievements has been his ability to stimulate the interest of young people in operetta, and their presence in the Komische Oper's audience is unmistakable. This reveals how misguided and out of touch is the notion that operetta is a nostalgic genre for the elderly.

Is any of this likely to encourage writers and composers to return to operetta? To the surprise of many, a new operetta caused something of a sensation in Los Angeles in 2006. It was *The Beastly Bombing* by Julian Nitzberg (libretto) and Roger Neill (music). Nitzberg knew that operetta was exactly the theatre form he was looking for when he saw a performance of *The Pirates of Penzance*; he explained:

I happen to hate modern show music ... Operetta is the only format that could allow us to write 8 minute songs with many different parts and musical themes. Operetta allows for sophisticated patter songs and wordy, witty lyrics.²⁷

Neill and Nitzberg chose uncompromising subject matter, which included white supremacists, Al Qaeda terrorists, a paedophile priest and a gay Jesus. They wanted their work to be political but not dull or didactic. What they aimed for was 'cyanide wrapped in chocolate', and operetta helped them achieve what might be described as the first successful post-9/11 comedy.

In soliciting the chapters that follow, the editors sought broad accounts of operetta in different countries but also wanted the *Companion* to reveal how operetta spread across borders, to become in the twentieth century – along with the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley – part of a global entertainment industry. That is why dance-band songs and operetta were both targets for Theodor Adorno's vituperative criticism.

The structure of the *Companion* proved a challenge, and no amount of juggling around of themes and topics furnished a division into parts as convincing or logical as the simple chronological design that was finally chosen. That said, this is not a chronological history of operetta but, rather, a study of recurring themes in the development of operetta, such as urban environments, cosmopolitanism, cultural transfer, business practices and theatrical professionalism. The three parts: 'Early Centres of Operetta',