

# Der Rosenkavalier Suite

## Richard Strauss

The fifth of Richard Strauss's operas, *Der Rosenkavalier* immediately captured the hearts of operagoers when it was unveiled, in 1911. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, its librettist, compared it to Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. The allusion was apt; along with *Le nozze di Figaro* it stands as opera's most delicate treatment of a universally sensitive subject — how youth and age do, or do not, mix in the arena of love.

At the center of the plot, set in mid-18th-century Vienna, is the Marschallin, a princess who, in the absence of her husband (a military man of some eminence), is having an affair with Octavian, an attractive young count; Strauss underscores Octavian's youth (and his barely changed voice) by assigning the role to a mezzo-soprano. The Marschallin's boorish cousin, Baron Ochs, hopes to ensnare Sophie, the lovely daughter of a nouveau riche gentleman with access to well-born circles. In an act of courtship, Octavian (disguised as a maid) is sent to offer Sophie a silver rose on behalf of Baron Ochs. But, when Octavian arrives to present the rose, he and Sophie fall in love at first sight. After various complications, the ardor of youth wins out. Ochs withdraws his bid for Sophie, realizing how ridiculously he has been behaving, and, with enormous dignity and insight, the Marschallin accepts that young Octavian is better suited to love Sophie than a woman of her own advancing years.

Hofmannsthal's libretto is itself the stuff of greatness — Strauss remarked that it practically set itself to music — but the score turned *Der Rosenkavalier* into one of opera's most enduring masterpieces. The Viennese setting is suggested by the use of local dialect and seductive waltzes. The latter is an anachronism, since the action is set about a century before the Waltz Era, but, with music like this, who can seriously complain?

The premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier* was apparently one of the great events of operatic history. No pains had been spared by director Max Reinhardt and designer Alfred Roller in creating the most magical experience imaginable, and the Dresden Court Opera scheduled no fewer than 33 full-orchestra rehearsals, totaling about 100 hours. Alas, the critics were hostile: Hofmannsthal's libretto was dismissed as humorless and Strauss's music as superficial. One is surprised to find, as late as 1924, Cecil Gray writing in *A Survey of Contemporary Music*,

The divinely innocent and virginal Mozartean muse cannot be wooed and won like an Elektra or a Salome; all we find in *Der Rosenkavalier* is a worn-out, dissipated demi-mondaine, with powdered face, rouged lips, false hair, and a hideous leer.

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## In Short

**Born:** June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany

**Died:** September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen

**Work composed:** The opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, from which this suite is extracted, was written in 1909–10, completed on September 26 of the latter year; the suite, by an unidentified arranger, dates from 1944.

**World premiere:** The opera was premiered on January 26, 1911, at the Dresden Court Opera; the suite was premiered on September 28, 1946, at the Vienna Konzerthaus-Saal, with Hans Swarowsky conducting.

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** October 5, 1944, Artur Rodziński, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 26, 2015, at Bravo! Vail, in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 24 minutes

Audiences, however, were overwhelmingly adoring, calling the performers at the premiere back to the stage for 10 curtain calls after the second act and 20 after the third. As a result, *Der Rosenkavalier* was accepted immediately as an operatic standard, and in its first year was performed more than 50 times in Dresden, as well as in productions in Nuremberg, Munich, Basel, Hamburg, Milan, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, and Amsterdam. In the century since it has never shown the slightest sign of diminishing in the affection of opera-lovers.

Strauss remained ever fond of it, partly on aesthetic grounds and partly because his royalty payments earned him a fortune. As one would expect from a commercial hit, the music was pressed to all manner of use through arrangements and transcriptions. The first orchestral suite appeared in 1911, directly on the heels of the premiere, and quite a few

others were released in ensuing decades. Strauss himself created two separate “waltz sequences” using music from his opera, the first in 1911, the second in 1944. The *Rosenkavalier* Suite played here was made by an unidentified arranger in 1944. It is widely held to be (at least in large part) the work of the conductor Artur Rodziński, who conducted the first New York Philharmonic performance that same year. Strauss approved this arrangement and it was published in 1945 by the firm of Boosey & Hawkes.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, ratchet, cymbals, bass drum, celesta, two harps, and strings.

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## Reassuring the Composer

Strauss was worried that his score for *Der Rosenkavalier*, brimful as it is with complex motivic interconnections (much in the spirit of his symphonic poems), might prove too subtle for theatergoers. When he expressed his concern to his librettist, Hofmannsthal wrote back in a spirit of complete reassurance, which would prove to be well founded:

Its blending of the grotesque with the lyrical will to a great extent correspond with your artistic individuality to produce something which will be strong enough to keep its place in the repertoire for many years, perhaps decades. ... Your fear lest the work should prove too subtle gives me no anxiety. The progress of the action is simple and intelligible enough for even the most unsophisticated public; a fat, elderly, self-satisfied suitor, favored by the lady's father, supplanted by the handsome young fellow — surely that is the *ne plus ultra* of simplicity. But the working out must be, I fancy, as I have made it — entirely free from anything trivial and conventional; the lasting success of a piece depends upon its working of the coarser and finer elements of the public, for it is the latter which creates the prestige without which no piece can live, any more than it can without popular appeal.



Alfred Roller's costume design for Octavian in the original production of *Der Rosenkavalier*