

A NIGHT AT THE OPERETTA...

Or rather, today, an afternoon at the operetta – more specifically, a Viennese operetta, and the afternoon is all the better, for when the afternoon is over, we may imagine ourselves heading to the Hotel Sacher Wien, for tea and its world-renowned Sacher-torte (chocolate cake, which may be purchased online at torte@sacher.com.) The Hotel was founded in 1876 by the son of the famous chef who invented the torte and it is situated opposite the opera house in Vienna. Catering to the aristocracy of Europe, I’m sure it saw many waltz-filled evenings to the compositions of Strauss, Lehár and others.

According to the Harvard Dictionary of Music (4th ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003) the operetta as a genre is “an essentially popular form of entertainment, made up of spoken dialogue, song, and dance, whose tone may range from sentimental comedy, through satire and parody, to outright farce.” Gilbert and Sullivan would be the best English-language practitioners to come to mind.

Operetta began in mid-nineteenth century Paris with Jacques Offenbach (whose *Contes d’Hoffman*, not an operetta, will be simulcast at the end of the month) and the success of his works in Vienna inspired such composers as Franz von Suppé and Johann Strauss the Younger. Strauss wrote about 16 operettas, among which is the highly popular *Die Fledermaus (The Bat)*, staged by the Met last year. He was followed by Franz Lehár (1870-1948), whose *The Merry Widow (Die Lustige Witwe)* premiered on December 30, 1905.

(Continued Over)

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Lehár had an up-and-down career. He was of Czech and Hungarian descent, the son of a military bandmaster. He began as a violinist in various military bands and ensembles and composed an unsuccessful opera in 1896. Turning to operetta in 1902, he achieved moderate popularity, but *The Merry Widow* became an international sensation, garnering him fame and enormous financial reward. He followed it with several works which also became international hits and then he was overtaken by rival composers, whose operettas began to command the stage.

In the mid-1920's, he hitched his wagon to a leading Austrian tenor, Richard Tauber, and their conjoined stars reached their apogee in 1929, with *Das Land des Lachelns* (*The Land of Smiles*). In 1930 this work was given over 200 productions. It's most famous number, 'Dein ist mein ganzes Herz' ('You are my heart's delight') is a tenor recital favorite and can be found on compact disc (*Wein, du Stadt meiner Traume* {*Vienna, City of my Dreams*}, Julius Rudel, Conductor, EMI Classics, 1989, re-issue, 2004). The disc features many other Viennese operetta gems by Lehár, Kálmán, Fall, the Strausses, *et al*, and they are beautifully sung by Plácido Domingo in his prime. It is a lovely way to enjoy the wit, verve and gorgeous melody of a lost age.