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Hofmannsthal as Librettist to Richard Strauss:

Some Aspects of their Collaboration

Steven Paul Scher

Until today, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's international fame rests chiefly on the handful of opera texts he wrote for Richard Strauss. The poet has been hailed as the outstanding librettist in the history of opera, who not only provided Strauss with texts ideally suited for the operatic medium, but who also succeeded in maintaining a high poetic quality unparalleled in previous libretti. Hilde Cohn's 1962 article in the German Quarterly is a recent example of such positive sentiment.¹

It may well be true that Hofmannsthal's libretti are fine lyrical dramas and that in poetic content and diction they represent a peak in the international libretto tradition. Objective analysis of the Strauss-Hofmannsthal operas as well as of the extensive correspondence between the two partners reveals,² however, that an overly positive evaluation of Hofmannsthal's contribution misrepresents the poet's actual role in the collaboration and does not sufficiently reflect his difficulties and ultimate failure to fulfill his own expectations.

Before Hofmannsthal's appearance on the operatic scene, libretto-writing was a kind of commercial profession. Composers simply ordered texts from their librettists and the texts were generally subordinated to the music. (Wagner, of course, was an exception.) The Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaboration was radically different. After the painfully negative reception of his first experiments in opera

(Guntram and Feuersnot), Strauss was happy to find an outstanding poet who was willing to work for him. Hofmannsthal, on the other hand, recognized in Strauss a musical genius of the new century, and he hoped to realize his own artistic ideals and ambitions by undertaking the attempt to write libretti of literary distinction.

Hofmannsthal's attitude throughout the collaboration was determined by his totally idealistic conception of opera as an art form in which words and music are of equal importance. It was the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, theater combined with music, that had attracted the poet. He hoped that the addition of music, action, and dance would provide a valuable supplement to his words and would enable him to successfully interpret his inner poetic world to a larger audience. At an early stage of the collaboration the poet naively confided to Strauss:

Nur gibt mir Ihre Musik dann noch etwas sehr Schönes dazu, etwas, was natürlich weit mehr ist, als Schauspieler und der Dekorationsmaler mir jemals dazugeben können.³

To the self-posed question in his Gespräch über die "Ägyptische Helena" with Walther Brecht-- "Warum ist die Oper meine Form?"--Hofmannsthal replied:

Es ist ganz sicher so: --in der Oper, das heisst natürlich besonders in meiner Oper, kann ich das Bedeutende, das worauf es ankommt, das Eigentliche, nicht aus einem Brauch, sondern aus dem rein gefühlten, tieferen Zustand der Dinge hervorgehen lassen--....auch das

Tragische in den Dingen kann dies
Drama, wie ich es intendiere, ohne
Bruch zu Erscheinung bringen.⁴

What became of all these theories in practice? How did Hofmannsthal's opera texts fulfill the requirements of a good libretto in general and in terms of the poet's self-set norms and ideals? To what extent did Strauss creatively contribute to Hofmannsthal's texts?

Unfortunately, Hofmannsthal never fully realized that poetic content is not the overriding prerequisite of a good libretto. There are several other textual qualities which are equally important and in fact indispensable in operatic practice. To mention only a few: clear and comprehensible presentation of a relatively simple plot, proper balance between the individual acts and between soloist and ensemble-scenes, presentation of lively and convincing characters, and well-placed dramatic confrontations. With the possible exception of Elektra and Rosenkavalier, Hofmannsthal's libretti show little trace of a transparent, yet sufficiently dramatic plot. Instead, the rest of the texts--Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Die Ägyptische Helena, and Arabella--often lack perspicuity, present unnecessarily complicated situations, unexplained obscurities, and undramatic events.

Hofmannsthal's correspondence with Strauss demonstrates that it was a struggle for the poet to approach his libretti from any other than a poetic-idealistic viewpoint. Ironically enough, it was Strauss, the composer, who possessed the very qualities which Hofmannsthal, the librettist, lacked: objectivity and sound theatrical sense. Looking back on twenty years

of collaboration, Hofmannsthal admitted to Strauss in 1927:

Ein primärer Dramatiker wie Schiller oder Sardou bin ich nicht, wäre ich das, dann wären Sie aus dem Wasser (oder vielleicht hätte es mich dann nie interessiert, für Musik zu schreiben und wir wären nie zusammengekommen!)...⁵

The composer was a far better opera-dramatist than the poet-librettist. With his quick, reliable theatrical instinct, Strauss immediately recognized the crucial dramaturgical flaws in the texts Hofmannsthal presented to him and never hesitated to impose his sensible criticism and practical advice upon the often reluctant poet.

Rarely did Hofmannsthal show an awareness of the mechanics of the theater. Strauss' confusion about the ending of Elektra demonstrates this weakness:

... ich verstehe am Schluss immer noch nicht den szenischen Vorgang... Chrysothemis läuft hinaus. Wo hinaus?... Warum? Orest ist doch in der Mitte des Hauses!... Bitte beantworten Sie mir recht genau diese Fragen. Das Szenarium war mir nach der Lektüre niemals ganz klar.⁶

While working on the second act of Rosenkavalier, the composer recognized that the basic dramatic development of the entire comedy was in danger and requested reconsideration and total reconstruction of this act. Luckily, Hofmannsthal complied.

To assimilate the composer's severe criticism and authoritative suggestions was not an easy

process for the proud and sensitive Hofmannsthal. After all, he was to follow detailed instructions from a "Nicht-Dichter", a "Nicht-Librettist",⁷ whose advice he considered "Fremdkörper in meiner Phantasie."⁸

As a musician and a man of the theater, Strauss knew the demands that music makes of words. Again and again he warned the poet that in opera music invariably tends to prevail, but Hofmannsthal could never fully accept a subordinate position for his poetry.

An ardent advocate of what he designated as "die mythologische Oper" and "Märchenoper", Hofmannsthal wrote Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Ägyptische Helena, and Frau ohne Schatten. While the poet was particularly proud of the rich symbolism and philosophical and psychological substance of these texts, Strauss immediately recognized the incomprehensibility of their basic message and anticipated their negative reception. Instead of radically altering the texts themselves, Hofmannsthal planned to enlighten his audience with an explanatory program before performances of Frau ohne Schatten,⁹ and wrote the famous "Helene-Aufsatz"¹⁰ in which he clarified the intricate and often phantasmagorical plot of that opera. In the case of Ariadne he wrote a special letter explaining the ideas and symbols in detail.¹¹ The poet thought that by making himself understood to his composer he would consequently be understood by his audience. The impracticability of such an approach was implied by Strauss in his answer:

Der Autor sieht ins Stück Dinge hinein,
die der nüchterne Zuschauer nicht sieht...
Das Symbol muss doch von selber lebendig

aus der Handlung herausspringen, darf nicht nachträglich mühsam herausgedeutelt werden.¹²

To ensure that at least the essence of the plots would be understood, throughout the correspondence Strauss advocated the occasional application of spoken dialogue instead of accompanied recitatives. Hofmannsthal's refusal (even after much dispute) to approve of unaccompanied dialogue passages led to one of the gravest defects of Die Ägyptische Helena. In Arabella, Strauss finally did employ spoken dialogue in the dramatically climactic passages, though without Hofmannsthal's consent; the opera was not performed until 1933, four years after the poet's death.

The Strauss-Hofmannsthal correspondence yields ample documentation for each of the points I have been able to discuss only briefly. Even these few examples show, however, that Hofmannsthal's contribution as a librettist was far from exemplary. I believe, therefore, that the widely accepted view of Hofmannsthal as the ideal librettist should be reconsidered and reevaluated.

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F o o t n o t e s

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3. Briefwechsel, p. 516.
4. Walther Brecht, "Gespräch über 'die Ägyptische Helena'", in: Helmut Fiechtner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Wien, 1949), p. 339.
5. Briefwechsel, op. cit., p. 516.
6. Ibid., pp. 31-32.
7. Ibid., p. 569.
8. Ibid., p. 58.
9. Cf. Briefwechsel, p.256.
10. Hugo von Hofmannsthal: "Die Ägyptische Helena" (1928), in: Hofmannsthal, Ausgewählte Werke, Hrsg. Rudolf Hirsch (Frankfurt am Main, 1957), II, pp. 756-770.
11. Cf. Briefwechsel, pp. 113-116.
12. Briefwechsel, p. 117.