

[Met Performance] CID:167930
United States Premiere
Arabella {1} Metropolitan Opera House: 02/10/1955.
(United States Premiere)
(Debuts: Ralph Herbert, Matthew Farruggio, Paul Marko
Review)

Metropolitan Opera House
February 10, 1955
Benefit for the Welfare Fund
United States Premiere
In English

ARABELLA {1}
R. Strauss-Hofmannsthal

Arabella.....Eleanor Steber
Mandryka.....George London
Zdenka.....Hilde Güden
Matteo.....Brian Sullivan
Adelaide.....Blanche Thebom
Count Waldner.....Ralph Herbert [Debut]
Fortuneteller.....Thelma Votipka
Count Elemer.....Gabor Carelli
Count Dominik.....Clifford Harvuot
Count Lamoral.....Lawrence Davidson
Fiakermilli.....Roberta Peters
Welko.....Benjamin Wilkes
Djura.....Matthew Farruggio [Debut]
Jankel.....Paul Marko [Debut]
Waiter.....Rudolf Mayreder

Conductor.....Rudolf Kempe

Director.....Herbert Graf
Designer.....Rolf Gérard

Translation by John Gutman

Arabella received seven performances this season.

Production a gift of the Metropolitan Opera National Council

Review of Ronald Eyer in Musical America

Strauss's 'Arabella' Given American Premiere at Metropolitan Opera

It took Richard Strauss's "Arabella" over 21 years to reach America (it had its premiere in Dresden in 1933), but when it arrived at the Metropolitan Opera House on Feb. 10 it received red-carpet treatment, and its American debut was a brilliant social affair staged as a benefit for the Metropolitan's welfare fund.

Rudolf Bing lavished something like \$60,000 and a galaxy of his choicest singers on the production, and at the helm he had Rudolf Kempe, young German conductor, who is said to have at least 50 performances of this opera to his credit in Europe. An English version of the text was commissioned from John Gutman, and Rolf Gerard was entrusted with the execution of the three elaborate sets and the innumerable rich costumes.

What, then, is this "Arabella", which commands such pomp and circumstance for its American debut? It is a three-act Viennese opera, the last product of Strauss's collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal before the latter's death, and about as controversial a piece of music as was ever written by Strauss, no mean provider of controversial music.

The story, which revolves around a silly and rather sordid little escapade of the burlesque-house variety, need not detain us long. It concerns the two daughters of an impoverished nobleman who is trying desperately to marry off one of the girls, Arabella, to a rich man, the while the other lives disguised as a boy to ease the financial burden of maintaining two belles. A well-heeled bumpkin, Mandryka, falls in love with Arabella, and she accepts his proposal to the dismay of her other suitors, particularly Matteo who is the object of the secret affections of the other daughter, Zdenka. Zdenka, nevertheless, does all she can to promote Matteo's hopeless cause, and, after the announcement of Arabella's betrothal to Mandryka at the coachmen's ball, she even gives him a key which she says is to Arabella's bedroom. Mandryka overhears this business. A complicated series of unlikely events ensues, and the upshot is that the key was not to Arabella's bedroom but to Zdenka's, that Matteo is just as well pleased to get Zdenka, and that Arabella's love for Mandryka is as pure as the glass of water that she makes a great point of presenting to him as the curtain falls.

At first glance, "Arabella" would seem to be another, and lesser, "Rosenkavalier". In a sense it is, but there are important differences. The setting of "Arabella" is a Vienna of a later period, the people are of a less exalted social milieu and, as Hofmannsthal himself said, the atmosphere is "more ordinary, more sober, more vulgar". Hofmannsthal's adjectives describe the music, which he never heard, about as accurately as they do the book. The score clearly is the work of a tired, but a very wise and still very ingenious, old man.

Local comment has not done justice to the work. Reactions have ranged front unbridled praise to utter damnation. The judicious verdict, I suspect, lies somewhere between. The score, like the libretto, vacillates between tasteful and tasteless ideas. Exquisite moments alternate with quarter-hours of stupefying banality. There are passages of such loveliness that one is transported by their felicity-the first-act duet of the two girls, for instance, with its roots deeply planted in a quaint Yugoslavian folksong; Arabella's delightful "My Elemer!" at the end of the act, where the folksong appears again; the duet of Arabella and Mandryka in the second-act ballroom scene ending with the melting melody, "My lord and master you shall be"; the final stairway scene when Arabella presents the glass of water to her betrothed ("This evening when I'm parting from the girl that I have been"), and so on. And the orchestral texture frequently is gorgeously woven.

Besides Inspiration, Clichés

But between such gems, and sometimes in the midst of them, Strauss assaults the ear with some of his worst clichés of melodic construction, the most gauche harmonic progressions, and the tawdriest Straussian conventions of orchestration and vocal writing. There are the familiar high-soaring notes for soprano and/or strings; the obbligato horns; the "Silver Rose" ornaments and other reminiscences of earlier compositions, both symphonic and operatic; the unbelievably trite phrase-turnings and cadences, which have marred Strauss's scores before but have never come so close to destroying them. The greatest disappointment of all, perhaps, for Strauss enthusiasts is the assortment of inevitable waltz episodes, which are so lacking in melodic substance as to shame the worst hack in Tin Pan Alley.

The brilliant cast, the opulent mounting and the shrewd stage direction of Herbert Graf saved the production and kept the performance at the gala level obviously aimed at by Mr. Bing. Eleanor Steber was at the height of her best vocal style in the title role and managed the persistently high tessitura of her music with complete security. Hilde Güden was pert and pretty as the girl-boy, Zdenka, and Blanche Thebom, as the mother, shone almost as brightly as her ravishing daughters. The wholly gratuitous role of the Flakermilli, inserted apparently to give the opera a couple of flashes of coloratura pyrotechnics, involving grotesque and dangerously difficult intervallic leaps, was tossed off with aplomb by Roberta Peters.

George London scored a great personal success with his characterization of Mandryka. The part is basically foolish, and palpably hard to invest with any sense of reality, yet Mr. London was able to make it plausible and even give it a certain becoming dignity. He also sang it beautifully. Making his Metropolitan debut, Ralph Herbert contributed substantially to the proceedings with a well-trained voice of ample volume, excellent diction and sound ideas about acting in the role of the father. Brian Sullivan was handsome and rich of voice as Matteo. The lesser roles were all developed with uncommon distinction.

Mr. Gutman might have saved his labor and the opera company its money so far as any value to be derived from the English translation was concerned. Nobody except Messrs. London and Herbert were able to project the language with sufficient clarity to make themselves understood to any valuable degree. The original German would have been just as comprehensible, far more flavorful, and probably much easier to sing, particularly where difficult English vowels, like "I" and "E", on high notes were involved.

There must be a special word of praise for Mr. Kempe, who turned in a masterful performance of the opera as a whole. The intimacy of his knowledge of the score and his obvious familiarity with middle-European style in the presentation of it must have eased considerably the task of the singers. It assuredly added to the polish and sparkle of the orchestra and it achieved that peculiar sophistication combined with naivete of "court opera" which Strauss could simulate so artfully, with the aid of knowing interpreters.

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