Strauss's 'Arabella' at Covent Garden
Author(s): John S. Weissmann
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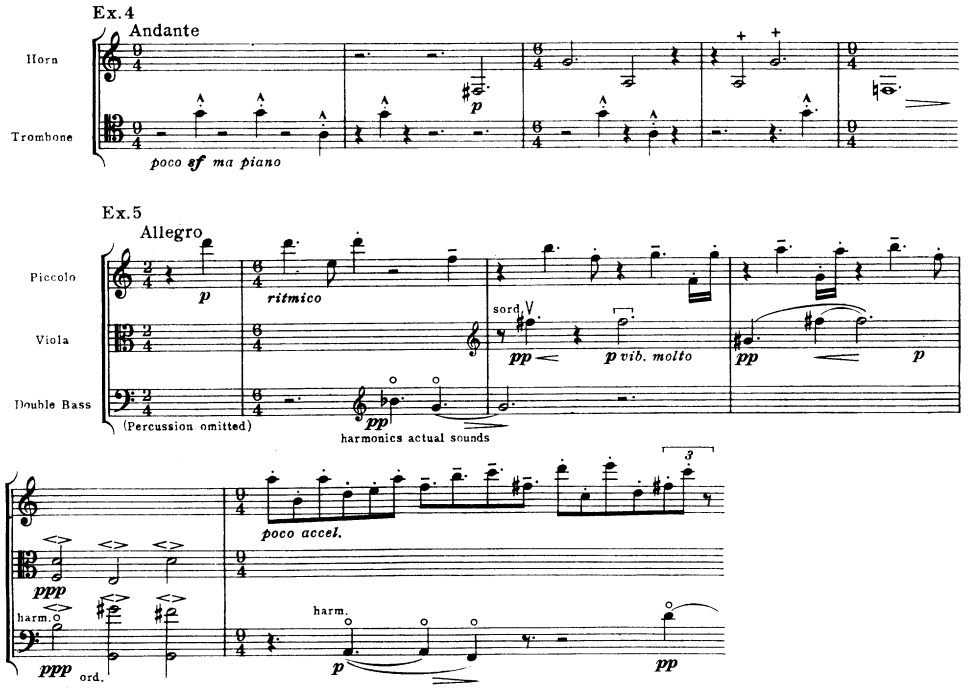
of the opening bars of the Miserere (Ex.4) into those of the succeeding Coranto (Ex.5) are merely obvious and straightforward instances of a process which can



be followed through almost every bar of the work. Each dance remains a self-contained whole, and yet each is united one to another by a wealth of thematic cross-reference.

Whatever position it may eventually occupy in Maxwell Davies's creative development, *Shakespeare Music* shows the composer working skilfully and confidently with all his favourite technical devices, and producing out of these music of an attractiveness, a fluency and individuality that will long outlive the actual occasion which brought it into being.

Strauss's *Arabella* at Covent Garden

reviewed by John S. Weissmann

The view commonly held, both far and (especially) near, that *Arabella* is but an aborted copy of *Der Rosenkavalier* probably owes its survival to the work's creators themselves, misread as their correspondence must have been. Covent Garden's superb production shows it to be entirely false, especially as regards the opera's supposedly weakest point—its music.

Nevertheless *Der Rosenkavalier* makes a convenient *point d'appui* to consider *Arabella*. Beyond the superficial similarities in the various characters and situations we have a fairly clear identity of milieu, for both stories are set in Vienna—though a socially and economically up and coming Vienna in the former, and a Vienna of fading splendours in the latter. And what some have seen as a weakening of vitality in Strauss's music may well be the reflection of this decline in social ethos and power of Vienna, consciously willed by the

composer. The parallel with *Der Rosenkavalier* might even be read as revealing an instinctively Marxist aesthetics lying dormant in Strauss's approach.

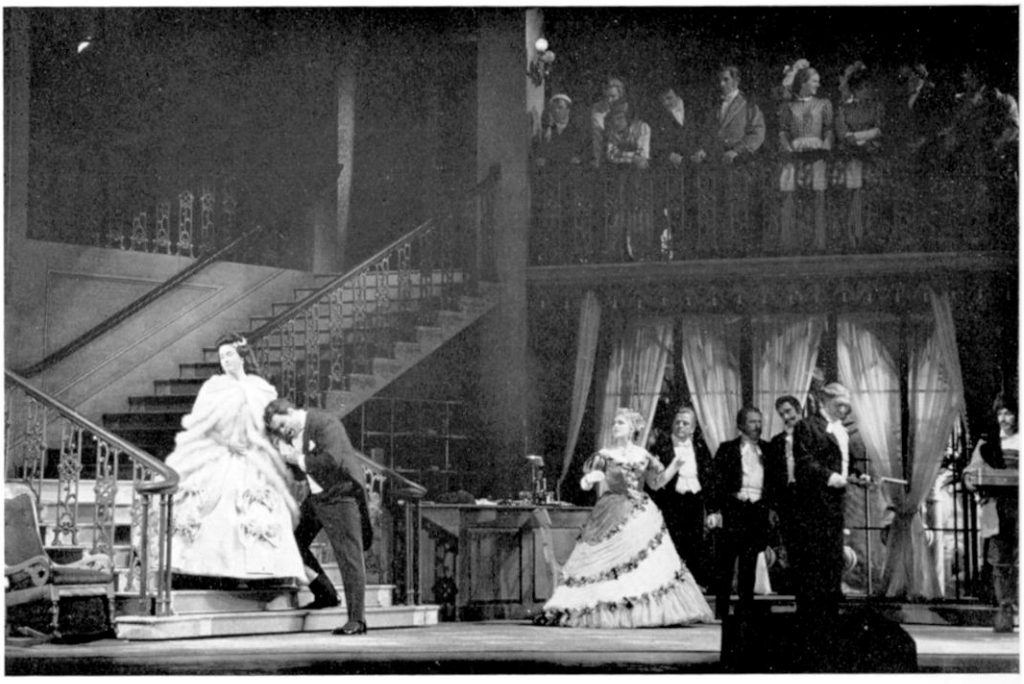
Whether or not it is less virile in invention, *Arabella* is certainly far subtler. Even one hearing reveals the score's infinitely more delicate organization. The level of tonal volume for instance, only rarely rises to such heights as in *Der Rosenkavalier*, the main example being the representation of the physical love enveloping Zdenka and Matteo, in the prelude of the third act. Although related to that of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the entrancingly beautiful sound of *Arabella* is infinitely more civilized—think of 'Aber der Richtige' in the first act and the duets of Arabella and Mandryka in the second and third acts.

Another definite step forward in comparison with *Der Rosenkavalier* is the 'Konversationston' style of vocal writing which first appears in the earlier opera, is already more polished here, and attains its ultimate refinement in *Capriccio*, where the strain of jovial vulgarity still present in *Arabella* (in Waldner's part) disappears completely. There is hardly any similarity between Ochs's explosive high spirits in *Der Rosenkavalier* and the outbursts of wild joy, redolent of a supposed 'Slav' temperament, in *Arabella*. The much more limpid and feather-weight orchestral sound, too, might be regarded as a stylistic advance on *Der Rosenkavalier* (again looking forward to *Capriccio*).

One interesting feature of *Arabella* provides an odd counterpart to the waltzes in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Mandryka (in spite of his famous Hungarian "Teschek"), is supposed to hail from Slovenia or thereabouts, somewhere from the South Eastern provinces of the Austrian Empire: this is indicated by the attire and name of his servants for instance, and by his reference to forests and bears. But musical comment on the work has so far paid little attention to Strauss's use of Southern Slav 'Volksweisen', acknowledged by the composer himself. He does not quote any actual folk tunes, but, as he is careful to indicate in the score, composed his own ("*nach* einer südslawischen Volksweise" and "einer südslawischen Volksweise *nachgebildet*") and uses them far more significantly than for the mere creation of atmosphere. They do that too, but they also have something important to say about Arabella's and Mandryka's feelings towards each other. They are introduced at decisive dramatic and psychological moments in the story, and are always allowed to assert their significance quite clearly—for instance in Arabella's monologue or at the first meeting of Arabella and Mandryka.

Apart from these 'direct' statements of the 'Volksweisen' there are other folk-inspired passages that seem to have escaped general attention. One is the snappy dotted-rhythm element which first claims attention in Mandryka's narrative in the first act, and attains prominence in the second. It gives a fiery, typically 'Slavic' flavour to the hero's character and actions. Its contrapuntal transformations and combinations in the music of the whole act, treated with superb though unobtrusive skill, reveal with remarkable clarity the emotional and psychological states of mind of both protagonists.

The same subtlety is evident in many smaller touches and seemingly subordinate incidents. The fluttery woodwind figure at the opening for instance, of the Fortune-teller's shuffling of cards, reappears briefly but significantly when Mandryka is introduced to Arabella, and the whole opera is full of such delicate moments and cross-references, which will tell their tale fully only at repeated hearings.



Two scenes from Strauss's *Arabella* at Covent Garden (designer Peter Rice)