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### Chapter 3. German operetta in the West End and on Broadway

**Derek B. Scott**

Anyone studying the reception of German operettas in the Britain and America is bound to recognize that the productions in the West End and on Broadway of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* mark a new phase. Before *The Merry Widow*, the last German operetta to successfully hold the stage in both London and New York had been Carl Zeller's *Der Vogelhändler*.<sup>1</sup> It became *The Tyrolean* at the Casino Theatre, New York, in October 1891, and *The Bird-seller* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, four years later.<sup>2</sup> *Wiener Blut*, an operetta of 1899 based on arrangements of the music of Johann Strauss Jr., was produced on Broadway as *Vienna Life* in early 1901, but had no outing in London.<sup>3</sup> The stage works of Paul Lincke, credited as the founder of Berlin operetta, took time to travel. His ensemble song 'Glühwürmchen' from *Lysistrata* was familiar as an orchestral piece in London, but his operetta *Frau Luna*, popular in Germany, was not produced in London until 1911, and not produced at all in New York. The gaze of theatre managers at the fin-de-siècle was fixed firmly on Viennese productions.

In December 1905, Victor Léon and Leo Stein's adaptation of Henri Meilhac's *L'Attaché d'Ambassade* as *Die lustige Witwe*, set to music by Franz Lehár, opened with great success at the Theater an der Wien; in May the next year it was at the Berliner Theater, and a year later it was performed as *The Merry Widow* at Daly's Theatre, London, and the New Amsterdam Theatre, New York. The English version by Basil Hood and Adrian Ross was used for both. The London production opened on 8 June 1907 and ran for a remarkable 778 performances. The New York production

opened on 21 October that year and notched up 416 performances. The massive success of *The Merry Widow* opened up a flourishing market for Viennese operetta in these cities. This was confirmed by the huge success of Oscar Straus's *The Chocolate Soldier* in New York in 1909 and London the next year. The full potential of the market was not realized, owing to the First World War; this explains the lack of attention to Leo Fall's *Die Kaiserin* (1915), despite his earlier triumphs with *The Die Dollarprinzessin* (*Dollar Princess*), *Die geschiedene Frau* (*The Girl in the Train*), and *Der liebe Augustin* (*Princess Caprice*).

Just before the outbreak of war there was also increasing competition from revues. These shows developed out of music hall, and were basically a series of turns and sketches that related to a general theme. The revue *Hullo, Ragtime*, at the Hippodrome on 23 December 1912, was the first of the jazz flavoured revues, and it ran for 451 performances. Nevertheless, Frederic Norton's *Chu Chin Chow* and Harold Fraser-Simson's *The Maid of the Mountains* were two musical comedies of operetta-like character that became enormous wartime hits in London. The latter was given 1352 performances, while *Chu Chin Chow* ran for an astounding 2238 performances (a record unbroken in the Britain before *Les Misérables*).

Berlin operettas by Jean Gilbert and Walter Kollo had been hits in the West End during 1912–14, and after the First World War, when British and American interest in operetta began to revive, it was evident that Berlin had become the centre of its production. Most of the well-known operetta composers had turned to Berlin in the 1920s. Emmerich Kálmán was the most resistant, remaining loyal to Vienna—his great success there being *Gräfin Mariza* (1924). Sometimes the British enthusiasm for German operetta outstripped the enthusiasm in Berlin itself: Jean Gilbert's *Die Frau im Hermelin* (1919), which became *The Lady of the Rose* in translation, ran for longer

in London than it did in Berlin. It was a little less successful in New York, where it ran for 238 performances in all (beginning at the Ambassador in 1922 and transferring to the Century), but it was rare for any operetta to achieve 300 or more performances in New York (even *The Chocolate Soldier* only made it to 296). Gilbert went to New York in 1928, where he composed *The Red Robe* for the Shubert Theatre (it ran for 127 performances, then transferred to Jolson's Theatre for a further 40).

Kálmán's reception in London and New York could be unpredictable. Surprisingly, *Die Csárdásfürstin*, which had premiered at the Johann-Strauss-Theater in 1915 and went on to enjoy success at the Metropol-Theater, Berlin, failed to please. It opened at the New Amsterdam, New York, in 1917 as *The Riviera Girl*, adapted by Gary Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse, with the setting changed to Monte Carlo, and incorporating additional numbers by Jerome Kern. The London version, *The Gipsy Princess*, produced at the Prince of Wales Theatre, 26 May 1921, had Arthur Miller take charge of the book and Arthur Stanley handle the lyrics. It was no more successful than the New York version, yet audiences in Austria and Germany regarded it as one of Kálmán's finest. It is difficult to find the reason for the different reactions. Audiences in neither London nor New York found it very amusing, even if the music was liked. Perhaps the recently ended war affected its British reception. The review in the *Times* labels it, unusually, with the German word 'operette', and ends elusively 'one can only admire the courage of its producers in launching it at such a difficult moment'.<sup>4</sup> That may refer to economic conditions, or to residual ill feeling towards Germany. In the next two years the appetite for German operetta began to grow again, but *The Gipsy Princess* had to wait for its London revival in 1981 to find itself suddenly popular.

### **Producers, theatres, and performers**

George Edwardes, known as the Guv'nor, was the person who turned Daly's into a major West End attraction. He achieved fame for this theatre, and his other theatre, the Gaiety, over a period of twenty years, from 1895 to his death in 1915. Theater writer Walter Macqueen-Pope credits Edwardes with bringing coherence to musical comedy, giving it an overall shape so that a song springs convincingly from the plot.<sup>5</sup> He also took risks with his productions, as he did in his personal life with his passion for betting on the horses. He had experimented with imported operetta in 1905 with André Messager's *The Little Michus*. Finding that Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* was well received in Austria and Germany, he paid £1,000 for the English rights, and booked the original star, Mitzi Günther, for his production.<sup>6</sup> When the latter arrived in London, he was taken aback at her size and felt obliged to reject her and pay financial compensation. To forestall other surprises, he then went to see the operetta in Vienna and noticed that leading singers tended to be larger in physique and some years older than those appearing in London's musical comedies.<sup>7</sup>

Edwardes returned to London to find that Edward Morton had made a confused job of the adaptation he had commissioned, so he persuaded Basil Hood to produce another version rapidly. Hood had been a librettist for Walter Slaughter and Arthur Sullivan, and after *The Merry Widow* worked on the adaptations of *The Dollar Princess*, *A Waltz Dream*, *The Count of Luxembourg*, and *Gipsy Love*. Responsibility for lyrics was entrusted to Adrian Ross, a Cambridge don whose real name was Arthur Ropes, but who used a pseudonym for fear of damaging his academic career. He was so successful as a lyricist, however, that he quit Cambridge in 1890 and went on to write the English lyrics for numerous German operettas.

Edwardes chose 21-year-old Lily Elsie for the widow Sonia (Hanna in the original), and American comedian Joseph Coyne for the male lead, Danilo. Neither felt that they could do justice to their roles, and both at different times tendered their resignations, Elsie because she was having technical difficulties with the song ‘Vilia’ (‘Vilja’), and Coyne because he could not sing at all. Coyne’s solution was to recite lines in rhythm (anticipating Rex Harrison’s technique in *My Fair Lady* by half a century). Edwardes loved the effect, but was worried about Lehár’s reaction, since the composer was to conduct the opening night. Sure enough, when Lehár arrived for the final rehearsals and heard Joe Coyne, he accused Edwardes of deception, and was also annoyed to discover the orchestra was smaller than agreed (28 players instead of 34).<sup>8</sup> For their part, the original librettists Léon and Stein were astonished to find someone so young playing the widow.

So, the differences between London and Vienna were several. The protagonists were younger, and the male lead was a comic actor rather than a romantic tenor. Moreover, the widow in the London production was not at all merry: ‘Miss Elsie is not *lustige*; she could not be. Gentle, appealing, charming, a little strange and remote, she is everything delightful—except “merry”’.<sup>9</sup> That was the only marked contrast with the New York production at the New Amsterdam Theatre, which otherwise followed the version at Daly’s. In New York, Ethel Jackson was not the ‘demure widow’ of Lily Elsie, wrote the critic for the *New York Times*; she understood ‘the verve and joy of the part, as well as its seductiveness’.<sup>10</sup> In the London production, comedy was provided by George Graves as Baron Popoff, who inserted humorous references to his pet hen called Hettie.<sup>11</sup> The London audience took to Coyne’s rhythmic speaking to the music, and Elsie managed to do justice to ‘Vilia’. Success was guaranteed when Elsie and Coyne danced the ‘Merry Widow Waltz’ to Lehár’s

infectious melody. Lehár, himself, changed his mind about Coyne's delivery, and grew to like it. The operetta brought a new emphasis on glamour and romance to Daly's and made major stars of Elsie and Coyne. In the UK, as in the USA, the success of the show led to merchandizing on a huge scale, including Merry Widow hats (of broad width), chocolates, beef steaks, and even a corset. It was reported that the New York production was 'likely to make an unparalleled profit of one million dollars by the end of the Broadway season'.<sup>12</sup>

When *The Merry Widow* ended its long run in 1909, Edwardes put on Leo Fall's *The Dollar Princess*, again starring Elsie and Coyne; it was a success, although not the equal of its predecessor, and ran for over a year. Perhaps Edwardes's biggest publicity coup was to secure the presence of the King and Queen at the opening night of Lehár's *The Count of Luxembourg*, in May 1911, a performance conducted by the composer.<sup>13</sup> Lehár was not entirely happy about the changes made to his operettas in London, and complained to an American reporter that no producer would think of changing a piece by Gilbert and Sullivan.<sup>14</sup> Lily Elsie's partner this time was Bertram Wallis, and the piece contained another memorable waltz routine. When the production closed, Elsie surprised Edwardes by declaring her intention to marry and quit the musical stage. He was disappointed, but his own career was nearing an end. He died in 1915 and, although it was during the First World War, Lehár managed to send a wreath to his funeral.

Mark Klaw had obtained the American rights to *The Count of Luxembourg*, after visiting London and learning of the advance bookings. He expressed his hope 'to get Miss Lily Elsie to come over and play the leading part'.<sup>15</sup> That no doubt explains why the American production was delayed until 1912, because Elsie's retirement necessitated a search for someone to play the role of Angèle. The person eventually

chosen was a relative newcomer, Ann Swinburne. It was common for American theatre managers, such as Klaw and the Shubert brothers, to visit Europe looking for successful pieces and announcing their intention to produce them.<sup>16</sup> In the UK and the USA, there was sometimes a pre-run at another city before the London or New York opening. *The Dollar Princess*, for example, was given at the Prince's Theatre, Manchester, while *The Merry Widow* was finishing its run at Daly's. This large Manchester theatre was the first home for other productions before they moved to London. In the USA, *The Chocolate Soldier* was first produced at the Lyric, Philadelphia, before moving to the Lyric, New York; and the Tremont Theatre, Boston, hosted the first performances of *The Count of Luxembourg*.

Fritzi Massary was the leading female operetta star of the 1920s in Berlin, and Richard Tauber the leading male star. The romantic leads were generally supplemented by a pair of characters, the male usually comic, and the female a mischievous coquette or cheeky soubrette. Massary and Tauber were not often seen together; the former was famed for roles in operettas by Leo Fall (*Der liebe Augustin*, and *Madame Pompadour*) and the latter for being Lehár's favourite tenor. Tauber was engaged to sing the lead in *The Land of Smiles* at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, which opened on 8 May 1931. He sang lyrics mainly in German but spoke dialogue in English. On the opening night, at which Lehár was present (his first visit to London since 1907), Tauber took many curtain calls, and then sang 'You Are My Heart's Delight' in English.<sup>17</sup> This was the song 'Dein ist mein ganzes Herz', a new number specially composed by Lehár for the London production. The *Times* reviewer was not happy with Tauber mixing German and English in the songs: 'When for the sake of his audience, he moves from German to English, the delicacy and precision of his singing falter and he relies on methods of attack that are appropriate to artists not of



his quality; but when he uses his own language he is a singer of exceptional power and discretion.<sup>18</sup> The message was clear: he was cheapening himself and his artistry by playing to the gallery. As it happened, an inflamed throat began to affect him from the second night. He took a week off, but by 26 May it was clear that he needed to withdraw from the cast.<sup>19</sup> The operetta was to have a run of just 71 nights. In September 1933, Tauber was back in the UK in a revival of *Lilac Time* at the Aldwych. A few years later, in 1937, he was in a production of Lehár's *Paganini* at the Lyceum, managing, according to one reviewer, to solve the 'difficulty of resemblance' between himself and Paganini 'by converting the hero into a portly flirt'.<sup>20</sup> Tauber was engaged for *Yours Is My Heart*, the New York version of *Das Land des Lächelns* at the Shubert Theatre, in September 1946.

The most important theatres for musical comedy and operetta in London were the Gaiety (the new Gaiety from 1903), Daly's (built 1893), the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (the present building dates back to 1812), and the Empire (1884). The theatres that promoted this type of entertainment in New York were of more recent build, such as the New Amsterdam (1903), the Century (1909) and the Shubert (1913), although the Casino Theatre had been built specifically for operetta back in 1882. A large portion of the audience were reasonably well off. In London, music hall and variety presented a cheaper option than operetta. However, before the First World War, most West End theatres offered a range of prices between 6d to 10s 6d (children being generally admitted at half price). The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, was an exception, where prices ranged from 2s 6d to 1 guinea. In the 1920s, some theatres were attempting to raise prices, but this was met with many complaints. In April 1922, it was reported that the price of stalls at the Empire was to be reduced to half-a-guinea (10s. 6d.), because the manager, Edward Laurillard, claimed he had received

many letters ‘from music-lovers declaring that they could not afford to pay 12s. 6d. or 14s. 6d.’<sup>21</sup>

### **Adapting operetta for the London and New York stage**

Edwardes believed in ‘improving’ the originals. He claimed, ‘It is in presenting a play that the English theatre can outrival the Continent’. He considered the British *Merry Widow* ‘much superior’ to the Viennese original. Of the *Dollar Princess*, he boasted that he ‘bought it [and] altered it’.<sup>22</sup> Basil Hood, who wrote the book (the libretto), and Adrian Ross was responsible for the lyrics. Hood gave it a new Californian Act 3, and wrote a comedy role for W. H. Berry.<sup>23</sup> The changes accorded with the taste of the British audience, because the operetta achieved 428 consecutive London performances, compared to 117 over a period of six years in Vienna. Gaiety star George Grossmith Jr. wrote the libretto of the New York production and set Act 3 in London, thus alerting us to the differing directions in which British and American audiences looked for stimulating stage locations (the original location was Canada).

Another important British lyricist was Harry Graham, who began writing lyrics for musical comedies during the First World War, and enjoyed his biggest success with *The Maid of the Mountains*. He was fluent in French and German, and made the English adaptations of *Madame Pompadour*, *The Lady of the Rose*, *Katja the Dancer*, *The Land of Smiles*, *Casanova*, *White Horse Inn*, and *Viktoria and Her Hussar*.

In the USA, significant librettists and lyricists were Harold Atteridge, who created the New York version of *The Last Waltz* and worked on over 20 shows for the Shuberts; the brothers Harry B. Smith (*Countess Maritza*) and Robert B. Smith (*Gipsy Love*); the actor and producer Dorothy Donnelly (*Blossom Time*), who often collaborated with Sigmund Romberg; and Stanislaus Stange, who spent his early life

in Liverpool before emigrating to the USA in 1881, and whose adaptation of *Der tapfere Soldat* as *The Chocolate Solder* was performed in both New York and London.

Basil Hood explained the problems an adapter faced:

I may say that the difficulties one meets with in this class of dramatic work come chiefly as a natural consequence of the difference in taste or point of view of Continental and English audiences; that, from the English point of view, the Viennese libretto generally lacks comic characters and situations, the construction and dialogue seem to us a little rough or crude, and the third act [...] is to our taste as a rule so trivial in subject and treatment that it is necessary to construct and write an entirely new act, or to cut it away altogether, as we have done in ‘Luxembourg’.<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes it was necessary to ‘tone down’ an operetta for British and American audiences. Fall’s *Die geschiedene Frau* became *The Girl on the Train* to avoid announcing that she was a divorced woman (in Paris the title was unhesitatingly given as *La Divorcée*). The *Times* reviewer imagines that ‘the anonymous adapter [the lyrics only are credited to Adrian Ross] had some difficulty in reducing the flavour of his original to the standard of respectability required in the Strand’.<sup>25</sup> The *New York Times* review informs the reader: ‘Reports from Germany tell us that ‘Die Geschiedene Frau’—literally ‘The Divorced Wife’—was very, very naughty indeed in its original version’. The writer then adds: ‘The courtroom scene, even in English, is a bit daring’.<sup>26</sup> That may be due to the input of its American adapter Harry B. Smith. The British were, of course, more prone to embarrassment about daringness than the Americans, an example being the twinge of awkwardness in the *Times*

review of Fall's *Madame Pompadour*, when it informs the reader coyly that the eponymous character is 'a distinctly naughty young lady'.<sup>27</sup>

There was a liking for more songs in British and American productions. Lehár shows his amenability or, perhaps, business sense, by being willing to compose new numbers for *Gipsy Love* in London in 1912. Leo Fall and his brother Richard added extra numbers to *The Dollar Princess*. In New York, Jerome Kern supplied two extra numbers. Leo Fall composed four new numbers for *Princess Caprice*. Sigmund Romberg and Al Goodman provided additional numbers for Kálmán's *Countess Maritza* in New York. Romberg also added additional songs to Gilbert's *The Lady in Ermine*, which, as *The Lady of the Rose* in London, had already been given an extra song by Leslie Stuart. The New York critic Alexander Woollcott, remarks wryly of Fall's *The Rose of Stamboul* that upon the original score 'there seems to have fallen on Sigmund Romberg, a local composer, and now the piece is adorned at intervals with songs that Vienna has yet to hear'.<sup>28</sup>

It was not always clear what extra contributions had been written and by whom. An unwary critic of the Daly's revival of *A Waltz Dream* in 1911 remarks that he does not find the music as alluring as in 1908, and 'the most individual and attractive things of all are in the third act, where we come to Princess Helena's last song and its delightful introduction'. This song, 'I Chose a Man to Wed', was actually one of the extra songs composed by Hamish MacCunn (who conducted the performance) as part of a re-written Act 3.<sup>29</sup>

An American reviewer of Fall's *Lieber Augustin* in 1913 is more cautious. He praises the 'succession of very delightful melodies', but adds:

It is getting to be a habit to praise Mr. Leo Fall's music, and in some respects a bad habit, since a counter-claimant for a 'song-hit' is reasonably sure to bob

up before many hours pass. Wherefore the announcement that Mr Leo Fall's music in this piece is entirely charming and appealing must be taken to include any others who may have assisted.<sup>30</sup>

Another critic suspects, on hearing the New York adaptation of *The Last Waltz*, that some of the numbers are not by Oscar Straus: 'There are several interpolated numbers, unidentified except by internal evidence. You suspect "Charming Ladies" and "A Baby in Love" of having been baptized in the East River rather than the blue Danube'.<sup>31</sup>

### **Operetta vs. musical comedy**

Continental operetta moved into a marketplace dominated by musical comedy, a genre that appealed to those who were tired of comic opera plots and enjoyed, instead, a loose mixture of humour and romance. Edwardes was a trendsetter with his shows at the Gaiety and the enormously popular *The Geisha* (Sidney Jones) at Daly's in 1896. British musical theatre had its own character at the time of the *Merry Widow* success and retained much of that distinctiveness in later shows, such as Lionel Monckton's *The Arcadians*. Broadway was dominated in the early years of the twentieth century by British fare and the operettas of New York resident Victor Herbert, although Jerome Kern, Rudolf Friml, and Sigmund Romberg soon appeared on the scene. In general, critics regarded operettas from continental Europe as superior to British and American musical comedy, and the battle of genres plays itself out in many reviews.

*The Merry Widow* was greeted in New York as 'the greatest kind of a relief from the American musical comedy', and in London as a 'genuine light opera' that is 'not overlaid (yet) by buffoonery'.<sup>32</sup> The implication is that it might soon acquire buffoonery to make it more appealing to the musical comedy audience. The urge to

liven up an operetta with a comic routine was found in both cities. The production of Straus's *A Waltz Dream* in New York had an interpolated number in the second act that, to the reviewer, 'savoured of cheap American musical comedy', and had been 'lugged in by the heels to provide a few moments of cheap comedy'.<sup>33</sup> Crude humour was not the only problem with musical comedy. What had helped it appeal initially was the absence of a complex or ludicrous opera plot, but this lack of attention to plot came to be seen as a lack of attention to form. A London critic offers *A Waltz Dream* as an instructive model: 'The shapely, tuneful light opera of Vienna is ... better than our own gross and formless "musical comedy"; and *A Waltz Dream* is an example which the clever, but idle or, perhaps, hampered makers of English musical pieces might well take to heart'. The music 'is not dropped in here and there to relieve the tedium of a senseless plot'.<sup>34</sup>

The conviction that musical comedy is beset by artificiality, surfaces in a number of reviews. The production of Jean Gilbert's *The Lady in Ermine* in New York in 1922 is welcomed as 'genuinely musical and dramatic', but irritates the reviewer in those spots 'where it has been obviously touched up for what is conceived to be a popular taste for musical comedies which are neither musical nor comic'.<sup>35</sup> The notion that musical comedy falls below the artistic standards of operetta and does not require particularly skilful performers is illustrated clearly in the review of Eduard Künneke's *Love's Awakening* given in London in 1922: 'The difference between *Love's Awakening* and a musical comedy may be gauged from the fact that, whereas in the latter the songs seem to occur in an incongruous way, at the Empire last night it was the intermittent conversation that seemed incongruous.' The critic sums up: 'here was a real light opera with real music and performed with real ability by real singers. It was a bold experiment to break away from the present musical comedy tradition by

reverting to a tradition that was older still'.<sup>36</sup> *Love's Awakening* was an attempt to raise artistic standards by Edward Laurillard, the manager of the Empire Theatre. His published announcement that, on the first night, he would present the piano score and book of lyrics to every member of the audience gives an idea of the cultural capital of those he expected to attend the production.<sup>37</sup> It was, indeed, considered an artistic success, but only ran for 36 performances.

By the end of the decade, there was evidence of a growing concern, however, that operetta composers, who had become swept up in a fashion for historical themes, were becoming *too* earnest. The London reviewer of *Frederica*, performed at the Palace Theatre in 1930, is unconvinced by Lehár's artistic aims in this operetta based on the early life of Goethe, and argues that the composer's artistic ambitiousness 'has led to nothing more than pretentiousness.' He adds significantly, 'It is only in one or two lighter numbers written for the *soubrette* that the music sounds happy and at ease'.<sup>38</sup> This is the usual put-down for any form of popular music that dares to show artistic aspirations. It can be found in the previous century in Hanslick's criticism of Strauss Jr.'s concert waltzes and, in the later twentieth century, it reappeared in the critical reception of 'progressive rock'. Not every composer was travelling the same aspirational path as Lehár, of course, and, even in 1932, Benatzky's *Casanova* (with music taken from Johann Strauss, Jr.) was condemned for being 'as thin a story as has ever dragged a musical comedy across Europe'.<sup>39</sup>

This is not to say that the plots of operettas were never criticized, although sometimes the adaptation could be held responsible for weaknesses. Within half a dozen years of the triumph of *The Merry Widow*, British and American critics were beginning to complain about the many plots involving 'petty Courts and showy

uniforms’, or ‘tottering principalities, the elimination of which would probably prove fatal to the librettist’s inspiration’.<sup>40</sup>

### **The music of the operettas**

Above all, it was the romantic melodies and rich textures of the music that attracted British and American audiences. Yet there were different expectations of operatic productions, as Oscar Straus pointed out to a journalist:

Your choruses are much bigger, and the ladies, I must admit, are much younger; and, too, you have many more songs than we are content with.

Because of this I have had to compose five new numbers for London.<sup>41</sup>

At the first, waltzes were the favourite numbers. The biggest hits of *The Merry Widow*, *A Waltz Dream* (Straus’s *Ein Waltzertraum*), and *The Chocolate Soldier* had all been waltzes: ‘Lippen schweigen’ (‘Though I Say Not’), ‘Leise, ganz leise’ (Like an Enthralling Magic), and ‘Mein Held’ (‘My Hero’) respectively. Creators of British musical comedy took note of this, and, in some cases, took the musical notes. ‘Love Will Find a Way’, the hit waltz in Fraser-Simson’s *Maid of the Mountains*, bases itself on the *Merry Widow* waltz by doubling each of the first few notes of Lehár’s melody.

[INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1]

[CAPTION] ‘Lippen schweigen’

[INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 2]

[CAPTION] ‘Love Will Find a Way’]



Contemporary critics praised the tunefulness of Austrian and German operettas, but they also, especially when listening to Lehár, appreciated the skill with which they were orchestrated. Reviews in the *Times* spoke of the ‘grace and vivacity’ of the orchestration of *The Count of Luxembourg*, and the care taken with the orchestration of *Gipsy Love*.<sup>42</sup> A critic in the *New York Times*, however, was unhappy at Leo Fall’s orchestration in *The Girl in the Train*, accusing him of being too influenced by Wagner. He likened the opening to that of the second act of *Die Walküre*, and complained of an excess of percussion and trombones, although sometimes ‘dear old Vienna calls him away from Bayreuth, and he bursts into a spontaneous waltz rhythm’.<sup>43</sup>

There was evidence that the waltz song may have been losing its fascination in the 1920s. The *Times* critic remarked that José Collins ‘sings the inevitable waltz song’ in Straus’s *The Last Waltz* ‘with consummate ease’. The word ‘inevitable’ may have been a sign of growing fatigue with the waltz, or indicate stylistic predictability in this kind of operetta. Some composers were already looking to America for musical inspiration—Künneke being one of the first. Ironically, a decade earlier, a New York critic had praised *The Chocolate Soldier* for containing a variety of music that had ‘everything, fortunately, but rag-time’.<sup>44</sup> As late as 1921, one critic thought that the time for jazz had passed, and greeted the production of the Schubert pasticcio *Blossom Time* with the words: ‘After jazz, what? They tried a new answer on Broadway last evening when “Blossom Time” was produced at the Ambassador’.<sup>45</sup>

Künneke was a versatile composer, and in *Der Vetter von Dingsda* (1921), produced in London as *The Cousin from Nowhere* (1923), he covered a gamut of styles from the Viennese waltz (‘Strahlender Mond’) to ragtime (‘Überleg’ Dir’s’ and ‘Mann, o Mann’), tango (‘Weißt du noch?’) and foxtrot (‘Batavia’). Also present is

the Schubertian lyricism that had proved so appealing in the adaptations of Berté's *Das Dreimäderlhaus*. The biggest hit of the operetta was 'Ich bin nur ein armer Wandergesell' (in London becoming 'I'm Only a Strolling Vagabond'). The middle section of this song could easily be exchanged with bars 9–12 of 'Das Wandern ist der Müllers Lust' from Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin*, such is the stylistic affinity.

[INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 3]:

[CAPTION] 'Ich bin nu rein armer Wandergesell'

[INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 4]:

[CAPTION] 'Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust'

The *Times* critic noted that it was described as a 'new musical comedy' and that it had two peculiarities:

One is that it does not possess the conventional 'chorus' of men and women who fill the stage at frequent and unexpected moments in the usual production of this type. Secondly, although both the original 'book' and the music are by Continental writers and a Continental composer, in its present form it closely resembles English light opera.<sup>46</sup>

A sentence or two later, a more definite statement is advanced: 'It is really a "light opera", and an excellent example of its kind'. Conferring the label 'light opera' on a stage work always implied its superiority over musical comedy. Its stars, Walter Williams (the stranger), Helen Gilliland (Julia) and Cicely Debenham (Wilhelmine) are praised, and the audience was clearly appreciative: 'The piece obtained an enthusiastic reception'. Although the operetta contained no choruses, it did include complicated ensemble work, as in the Finale of Act 2. After a run of more than a

hundred performances in London, Edward Laurillard announced his intention to send out two touring companies with the piece.<sup>47</sup> A sign of the changing times, however, is that Walter Williams did not join the tour: instead, he accepted a part that had become available in the jazzy revue *Brighter London* featuring Paul Whiteman and his orchestra at the Hippodrome (this revue ran for 593 performances).

A reviewer of the New York adaptation of Künneke's operetta as *Caroline* (1923) informs readers:

Enthusiastic Americans resident in Berlin early in 1921 frantically called the attention of American theatrical managers to 'Der Vetter aus Dingsda', a musical show playing at the Theatre am Nollendorf Platz. In view of so much smoke, the managers came, one by one, and delivered their verdict: 'A great show, but impossible for America. The singing cast it calls for would ruin any production financially'. But finally there came a bolder one, and it was as a result of his visit that the Shuberts last night presented 'Caroline' at the Ambassador.

The critic laments the quality of the book: 'Last night's audience, however, seemed not so much disturbed by the poorness of the book, and it is safe to assume that future audiences will also refuse to be bothered by it'.<sup>48</sup> His reasoning was that the musical score was too beautiful to suffer in competition with the text.

Künneke spent 1924–25 in New York, and by the time he came to compose *Traumland* (1941), his music was influenced extensively by American styles, including the new swing style. He was not the first to recognize the appeal of American music. Lehár had included a cakewalk into *Die lustige Witwe* back in 1905, although not of the syncopated variety. In his later operetta, *Paganini*, however, one London critic was beginning to detect a vulgar American influence in Lehár's music,

syncopation or no. He accused Lehár of writing ‘music in two kinds’ in this piece, part Viennese and part American, commenting that Tauber’s song ‘Girls Were Made to Love and Kiss’ would give less pleasure than some other numbers to the conservative members of the audience: ‘there is a moan in it from across the Atlantic that will not compensate them for the rhythm of Vienna’. Then, allowing us to recognize that the ‘conservative’ are those in the expensive seats (those with both money and good taste), the critic continues: ‘but the circles and gallery at the Lyceum could not have too much of it and Herr Tauber was tumultuously invited to ‘plug’ it again and again’.<sup>49</sup> Note the term ‘plug’, which was associated with the brash commercial marketing of New York’s Tin Pan Alley. Yet this operetta contained nothing like the mixture of American and Latin American styles heard in Paul Ábrahám’s *Ball at the Savoy* at Drury Lane in 1933. Ábrahám was the subject of a newspaper article that year headed ‘Berlin’s Stage Looks Toward America’. It was both a reference to the composer’s interest in American music, and to his having chosen an American theme for his 1931 operetta *Die Blume von Hawaii*.<sup>50</sup> Ábrahám’s eclecticism was seen by some in a negative light: an American reviewer of the première of *Ball im Savoy* at the Große Schauspielhaus, Berlin, announces that Ábrahám is ‘at the moment the most popular operetta composer of Central Europe’, but recognizes a difficulty in identifying a characteristic Ábrahám song: ‘He flits from style to style without leaving a mark’.<sup>51</sup>

### **Spectacle and costume**

On easily forgotten attraction of operetta is costume. It was noted in the *Times* that Lily Elsie, as the merry widow, made ‘an unusually beautiful picture in Parisian and Marsovian dresses’, and in *The Count of Luxembourg* at Daly’s, the ‘accessories in

dresses and wearers of dresses were as sumptuous as ever'.<sup>52</sup> The *Play Pictorial* was a periodical sure to carry a number of photographs of the costumes worn in the various productions, and gave a detailed description of the gown worn by Lily Elsie on her entry as the bride:

This was in Miss Lily Elsie's favourite blue. Most elaborately embroidered in silver and white, the lower part was a cascade of silver bugle fringes and little crescents of pink and blue flowers peeping in and out around the hem of the skirt. There seemed to be two or three transparent skirts, the overdress, just giving a tantalizing glimpse where it opened at the side.<sup>53</sup>

Sometimes a cynical eyebrow was raised: of the lavish production of *A Waltz Dream*, the *Times* reviewer declared, 'At no Court in the world, least of all that of a German prince, do they wear so many spangles'.<sup>54</sup>

Spectacle and costume continued to be an attraction in the 1920s, but one of the most lavish productions of all was in the next decade. Ralph Benatzky's *Im weißen Rössl* (*White Horse Inn*) was chosen for the reopening of the London Coliseum on 8 April 1931. Although the spectacle was admired, the music was described flippantly as having 'a jolly ring, moving generally to the hearty thumping of beer mugs on tables'.<sup>55</sup> The dresses for this production were designed by Professor Ernst Stern, and a eulogy appeared on the *Times* 'London Fashions' page:

The greatest dress spectacle of all is *White Horse Inn*, in which the unending change of scene provides a wonderful grouping of colours .... In this production constant use is made of greens, reds, yellows, and blues, and also of brown, a colour not much in favour with producers but which is introduced with excellent effect in the skirts of the women and the suits of the men.<sup>56</sup>

It took several years for *White Horse Inn* to reach New York, but on 1 October 1936 it opened at the Center Theatre ‘in a beautiful style that should endear it to the hearts of all good showgoers. For the geni of American spectacle making have done one of their handsomest jobs on this international holiday to music’. It involved ‘mountain scenery and hotel architecture, costumes beautiful and varied enough to bankrupt a designer’s imagination, choruses that can do anything from the hornpipe to a resounding slapdance, grand processions with royalty loitering before the commoners, a steamboat, a yacht, a char-à-banc, four real cows and a great deal more of the same’. The cows had been distinctly unreal in the London production. The songs, by Benatzky and others were characterized without condescension as, ‘for the most part, simple things which are well-bred and daintily imposing’. The director Erik Charell, who was also partly responsible for the libretto, was praised for ‘the general spirit of good humor that keeps ‘White Horse Inn’ a congenial tavern’.<sup>57</sup> A report three days later claimed that the second night’s gross taking at the Center Theatre was \$7,240, ‘a sum which smacks of success’.<sup>58</sup>

Not every theatre critic was bowled over by spectacle. After describing the London production of Ábrahám’s *Ball at the Savoy* ‘a spectacle’, the reviewer explains his meaning as follows: ‘Bits of the stage and bits of the chorus keep on going up and down’. The costumes are treated to equally sardonic comment: ‘its dresses are, not beautiful, but an entertainment in themselves’.<sup>59</sup>

## **Conclusion**

German operetta began to fall into a decline that became more and more inevitable after it was required from late in 1933 to conform to the Goebbels regime.<sup>60</sup> Kálmán, Straus, Gilbert, and Ábrahám all left Germany to avoid Nazi persecution. Ábrahám

went first to Vienna, then Budapest, then Paris, then Cuba, then New York. Benatzky and Stolz, neither of whom were Jewish, left of their own accord. Those who were not themselves under any immediate threat were not unaffected: Künneke was to find that the producer of his operetta *Liselott* (1932) had been murdered in 1933.<sup>61</sup> Operetta did continue in the 'Third Reich' era, the most successful being perhaps Fred Raymond's *Maske in Blau* (1937), but it did not travel to Britain and America the way such productions had done in the past. There were additional reasons for waning enthusiasm in those countries, at first it was the popularity of musicals and revues, but in the 1930s there was also a growing interest in sound film and film musicals. To add to this, there were many other leisure-time pursuits to distract the erstwhile operetta lover: social dancing and dance bands, for instance, and radio and records. Finally, the music of operetta was beginning to sound like that of another era, as syncopated popular styles from America established a position of dominance.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Produced at the Theater an der Wien, Vienna, 10 January 1891, and the Friedrich-Wilhelmstädtisches Theater, Berlin, 20 February 1891.

<sup>2</sup> The opening nights of the two productions were 5 October 1891 and 17 June 1895.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Léon's and Leo Stein's *Wiener Blut* (Carltheater, Vienna, 26 October 1899), using Adolph Müller Jr's arrangements of the music of Johann Strauss Jr., was produced in New York as *Vienna Life* at the Broadway Theatre, 23 January 1901.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Gipsy Princess', *The Times*, 27 May 1921.

<sup>5</sup> See W. Macqueen-Pope, *Carriages at Eleven: The Story of the Edwardian Theatre* (London: Hutchinson, 1947), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Hyman, *The Gaiety Years*, 146.

- <sup>7</sup> See the treatment of this encounter in chapter one above, [000-000].
- <sup>8</sup> Hyman, *The Gaiety Years*, 150–1.
- <sup>9</sup> ‘Daly’s Theatre’, *The Times*, 10 June 1907.
- <sup>10</sup> “‘The Merry Widow’ Proves Captivating’, *The New York Times*, 22 October 1907.
- <sup>11</sup> Baron Popoff, the Marsovian Ambassador in Paris was, in the original, Baron Zeta of Pontevedrin.
- <sup>12</sup> “‘The Merry Widow’ Making a Million’, *New York Times*, 22 December 1907.
- <sup>13</sup> See Stefan Frey’s chapter in this volume for an account of this premiere, [000-000]. For additional material on how this operetta had been adapted by Hood, reduced from three acts to two, see chapters one and five, [000-000].
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 251.
- <sup>15</sup> ‘Marc Klaw Back, Has Opera and Play’, *The New York Times*, 5 July 1911. Klaw claimed that the advance bookings at Daly’s for this piece amounted to \$200,000. The play he brought back, also, was Paul Knobloch’s *Kismet*.
- <sup>16</sup> ‘The plays and players obtained by J. J. Shubert on his recent trip to Europe were announced yesterday. Mr. Shubert visited London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna’. ‘J.J. Shubert Gets Lehar’s Operettas’, *The New York Times*, 6 August 1923.
- <sup>17</sup> ‘Lehar Operetta in London’, *The New York Times*, 9 May 1931.
- <sup>18</sup> ‘Drury Lane’, *Times*, 9 May 1931.
- <sup>19</sup> ‘Herr Tauber and “The Land of Smiles”’, *The Times*, 27 May 1931. The *New York Times* reported that he was being paid a weekly salary the equivalent of \$5,000. ‘Tauber Loses Voice Again’, 26 May 1931.
- <sup>20</sup> ‘Lyceum Theatre’, *The Times*, 21 May 1937.
- <sup>21</sup> ‘Half-Guinea Stalls’, *The Times*, 28 April 1922.



- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 287
- <sup>23</sup> His given name was William, but he was always billed as ‘W.H.’
- <sup>24</sup> Basil Hood, ‘My Dear Mr Findon’, *Play Pictorial*.
- <sup>25</sup> ‘Vaudeville Theatre’, *The Times*, 6 June 1910.
- <sup>26</sup> “‘Girl in the Train’ Is Rather Daring’, *The New York Times*, 4 October 1910.
- <sup>27</sup> ‘Madame Pompadour’, *The Times*, 21 December 1923.
- <sup>28</sup> Alexander Woollcott, ‘The Play’, *The New York Times*, 8 March 1922.
- <sup>29</sup> These songs appear in the Metzler edition of c. 1920 and its Cramer-Chappell reprint of c. 1934.
- <sup>30</sup> “‘Lieber Augustin’ Delights at Casino’, *The New York Times*, 7 September 1913.
- <sup>31</sup> Alexander Woollcott, ‘The Play’, *The New York Times*, 11 May 1921.
- <sup>32</sup> “‘The Merry Widow’ Proves Captivating’, *The Times*, 9 June 1907; ‘Daly’s Theatre’, *Times*, 10 June 1907.
- <sup>33</sup> “‘Waltz Dream’ Wins Applause’, *The New York Times*, 28 January 1908.
- <sup>34</sup> ‘Hicks Theatre’, *The Times*, 9 March 1908.
- <sup>35</sup> “‘Lady in Ermine’ Romantic’, *The New York Times*, 3 October 1922.
- <sup>36</sup> ‘A New Light Opera’, *The Times*, 20 April 1922.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Times*, 13 April 1922.
- <sup>38</sup> ‘Palace Theatre’, *The Times*, 10 September 1930.
- <sup>39</sup> ‘The Coliseum’, *The Times*, 25 May 1932.
- <sup>40</sup> ‘Shaftesbury Theatre’, *Times*, 13 May 1912; “‘Lieber Augustin’ Delights at Casino’, *New York Times*, 7 Sep. 1913. These comments appear in reviews of Fall’s *Der liebe Augustin*, given in London as *Princess Caprice*, and in New York as *Lieber Augustin*.

- <sup>41</sup> Anonymous journalist quoted in Traubner, *Operetta*, 279.
- <sup>42</sup> ‘The King and Queen at Daly’s Theatre’, *The Times*, 22 May 1911 and ‘Daly’s Theatre’, *The Times*, 3 June 1912.
- <sup>43</sup> “‘Girl in the Train’ Is Rather Daring’, *The New York Times*.
- <sup>44</sup> ‘This Time the Joke is on Bernard Shaw’, *The New York Times*, 14 September 1909.
- <sup>45</sup> ‘Franz Schubert in a Play’, *The New York Times*, 30 September 1921.
- <sup>46</sup> ‘The Cousin from Nowhere’, *The Times*, 26 February 1923.
- <sup>47</sup> ‘The Theatres’, *The Times*, 24 May 1923.
- <sup>48</sup> “‘Caroline’ Is Tuneful’, *The New York Times*, 1 February 1923.
- <sup>49</sup> ‘Lyceum Theatre’, *The Times*, 21 May 1937.
- <sup>50</sup> C. Hooper Trask, ‘More about the Drama and Its Manifestations: Berlin’s Stage Looks Toward America’, *The New York Times*, 4 October 1931.
- <sup>51</sup> C. Hooper Trask, ‘Berlin Bursts into Song’, *The New York Times*, 19 February 1933.
- <sup>52</sup> ‘Daly’s Theatre’, *The Times*, 10 June 1907; ‘The King and Queen at Daly’s Theatre’, *The Times*.
- <sup>53</sup> Rita Detmold, ‘Frocks and Frills’, *The Play Pictorial*, 18/108, 1911.
- <sup>54</sup> ‘Hicks Theatre’, 8.
- <sup>55</sup> ‘The Coliseum’, 9 April 1931.
- <sup>56</sup> ‘London Fashions: Dress on Stage’, *The Times*, 24 April 1931.
- <sup>57</sup> Brooks Atkinson, ‘The Play: “White Horse Inn”, an Elaborate Musical Show, Opens the Season in Rockefeller City’, *The New York Times*, 2 October 1936.
- <sup>58</sup> ‘News of the Stage’, *The New York Times*, 5 October 1936.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Drury Lane’, *The Times*, 9 Sep. 1933. The operetta was set in the Savoy Hotel at Nice, rather than the Savoy, London.

<sup>60</sup> For a full discussion of this theme see chapter fourteen in this collection, [000-000].

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Lamb, *150 Years of Popular Musical Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 228.