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## Time and Change in Der Rosenkavalier

Alfred Kleine-Kreutzmann

Both Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss were preoccupied with the problems of artistic creation and the mode of existence of a work of art. They gave evidence of this preoccupation in their *Ariadne auf Naxos*. One of their other great themes, the notion of love as a creative and defining force, finds its expression in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. These themes are already treated in the earlier *Rosenkavalier*. Here one of the great themes is life and the individual life as a work of art and its mode of existence as a permanent entity under the onslaughts of time and change. They called their result a "comedy for music," but there is more than a touch of the romantic here that gives way in the later works to wit and to the heroic.

The fable of *Der Rosenkavalier* is very simple. A woman gives up a young lover to a younger woman who has been rescued by him from the clutches of an old lecher. In the process she affirms a way of life and builds a personality—a soul—over which time will have no total triumph. All of this is enclosed in a work which diffuses the very essence of the Vienna of the turn of this century. Both words and music fuse into a perfect whole that displays all the charms and weaknesses of the Viennese way of life. Among the strengths and weaknesses of this way of life, Hofmannsthal lists the clinging to an established way of life, almost for centuries; a need to experience everything, but in a mood of play-acting; the notion that every individual bears a part of all humanity and the ability to enter other people's thoughts to the extent of almost losing his own identity.<sup>1</sup> These are the ingredients to be found in the work over which perpetually hovers the spirit of the waltz: melancholy and sweet, self-indulgent and shrewd, daemonic and down to earth, timelessness in three-quarter time.

The Viennese know perfectly well that change must come, but they are adept at hiding its traces. The illusion of timelessness that they create is one of the particular charms of Vienna and a great source of annoyance to those who relish facing the modern pace squarely. The Viennese relish their particular illusion of timelessness, yet they are also well aware that the daemon time always lurks below the apparently stable surface, as the works of Musil, von Doderer, and Herzmanovsky Orlando show so well. And when change absolutely has to be faced, it is done with the characteristically Viennese shrug that sighs, "Oh, well!"

It is only natural that this preoccupation with change and time should also manifest itself sooner or later in opera, the favorite art form of the Viennese,

besides playing at life. Of course Gluck's *Orfeo* had already dealt with this theme, but his worldview emphasizes the inevitability of time and his form its sharpness. An aria, as an expression of experiential time, may cover a span of durational time that takes in a few seconds or several years. But even when it brings a past experience to the present and thus seems to obliterate time, the aria still calls attention to time simply by coming to an end. As the stricter form of *Orfeo* helped to distill the tragic experience of its protagonist until the relationship between experiential and durational time is summed up in "Che farò senza Euridice?," so the apparently freer form of *Rosenkavalier* helps to diffuse the difference between experiential and durational time until the end of the opera forces the audience to face the fact that there is a difference.

It is the ending that makes all the difference, for Viennese operetta had already flirted with the theme. In the second act of *Die Fledermaus*, words and music touch upon the problem of time and change. The characters express their longing for an experience that will impress the memory with such strength as to give some token expression to the longing for permanence. And it almost seems as if the slow waltz, "Bruderlein und Schwesterlein" will be that moment; but then, as if afraid of having wandered into forbidden territory, the characters frantically waltz their way back into the haven of romance. It was left to opera to deal with the problem, however gingerly and tentatively it did so at first. *Der Rosenkavalier* is one of the first of a line that extends to the very recently produced *Bommarzo*. Of all the operas which do face the problem, only *Rosenkavalier* has a secure place in the standard repertoire.

That it has been able to survive is due to the fact that it is Viennese to its core. It hides the bitter message it contains by topping it with a liberal dose of whipped cream. In his *Vienna, my Vienna*, Josef Wechsberg concurs with Hofmannsthal's observation that the Viennese like to see real life only on the stage and act their own lives out like a stage play. In many ways Vienna is still a baroque city, and the way of life unravels like a gigantic masque. Everyone has a part and tries to keep up the illusion of a perpetually *Felix Vienna*, so that changing reality is often hard to discern or enters the masque in fantastic disguise.<sup>2</sup> Hofmannsthal utilizes this setting to let some of his characters in the work begin a process of individualization and maturation that lets them see the gigantic masque of which they are a part for what it really is. He conceives these characters as being able to separate themselves from this milieu and build individual personalities—souls, in the sense of Keats' notion that each human being creates his individuality during his lifetime.

Although as a play the work can stand, has stood by itself, the music heightens and accents the ambiance which Hofmannsthal has created. Over it all hovers the Viennese waltz. Primarily it functions as a contre-danse to the music of time—annihilating durational time. Although the time of the play is the Rococo, the spirit is definitely that of the nineteenth century. The fact that the waltz seems entirely appropriate to the play only emphasizes the illusion that the essentials

of Viennese life are relatively unchanging. It is this illusion which softens the impact of the shocking realization that the attractive world characterized by the waltz is nevertheless subject to change. The Viennese may try to ignore that change, but the viewer of the opera, although temporarily lured by the magic, is ultimately forced to look "mit offenen Augen."

Despite its strong appeal to audiences, *Rosenkavalier* is often subjected to vicious attacks. Aside from those who attack the personality of Strauss, some critics also attack the work as dramatically unsuccessful or as insincere. In his book, *Opera as Drama*, Joseph Kernan attacks the work on both counts. He argues that the opera is a bad one "in which everything goes depressingly right."<sup>3</sup> He lumps Puccini and Strauss together when he argues: "In the deepest sense the operas of Strauss are undramatic, for their imaginative realm is a realm of emotional cant. They are unable to match any action, however promising, with anything but the empty form of drama. And the form is always there. Alarmingly precise, alarmingly false."<sup>4</sup> In *Rosenkavalier*, however, the form arises from the fusion of words and music which perfectly expresses the mood of its era and place and a mood in the lifetime of most of its audience, however fleeting that may have been. To moan that the Viennese "have thoroughly debauched the waltz,"<sup>5</sup> as Kernan does, does not prove that this somewhat decadent product cannot be used meaningfully to explore a significant human situation.

Kernan's strictures seem to be based on a prejudice which sees opera as viable only when it moves in the realms of what Northrop Frye calls the high mimetic and the low mimetic.<sup>6</sup> Kernan seems unwilling or unable to accommodate his discussion to a work which fuses the comedy of the low mimetic with the timelessness of the romance, that takes the men forced to live in this world and grants them a part of their longing for the illusion of timelessness and does justice to both elements. *Rosenkavalier* perfectly captures the Viennese mood of the fin-de-siecle and exploits that peculiarly local phenomenon, the "*Schwebzustand* (a feeling of being suspended in space and time) so dear to the heart of the Viennese."<sup>7</sup> Although the work does give the illusion of a suspension of durational time, the passage of time is nevertheless significantly dealt with, but in a mixture of melancholy and gaiety, of reality and romance that is characteristic of the waltz.

Hofmannsthal was well aware that the world was changing, but he was also concerned with showing that the Viennese way of life was one way of coping with that change. What he said about the music is equally true of what he felt about the way of life upon which the music was commenting:

The music is filled with love and ties everything together: through it Ochs is not disgusting—it hints at what is behind him and his faun-like face and the boyish visage of Rofrano are only charming Masks, out of which looks the same eye—through it the sorrow of the Marschallin is as sweet-sounding as Sophy's childish joy, it knows only one goal, to let the joy of life pour from it, to the delight of all souls.<sup>8</sup>



The work is an attempt to express a basic unity and yet deal with the process of individuation. For Hofmannsthal this process could best be described in the context of Vienna and the cultural atmosphere of the Habsburg Monarchy which in itself is a symbol of apparent unity containing an innumerable number of differences.

There is a time in the life of most human beings, Hofmannsthal believed, when they see the world and existence as a unity until time and maturity intervene. This state of existence is very intimately tied in with the notion of time in *Rosenkavalier*. He speaks of a kind of existence which he calls *Praeexistenz*. In his "Letter to Lord Chandos," he describes it as a continuous kind of intoxication which "conceived the whole of existence as one great unit: the spiritual and physical worlds seemed to form no contrast, as little as did courtly and bestial conduct, art and barbarism, solitude and society . . ."9

This is a state which transcends the boundaries of time since it encompasses everything in one continuous experience. It is a state in which Hofmannsthal places adolescents, hovering on the brink of their adult personality, and those who have simply refused to grow up. In this state one participates indiscriminately in the moving existence around one or one seems to be standing back—a spectator but not a participator. At the same time there is the fear that one may be missing something, that one has to enter into a life of change and experience and judge and make distinctions in order to become a full human being. Those who do not enter life on those terms are without a fate. The price for breaking the aura of midsummer magic which surrounds the state of *Praeexistenz* is the loss of unity with the all for an identity, private and sacrosanct, capable of suffering, entering upon "die Unausprechlichkeit des Individuums."<sup>10</sup>

In "The Letter" the process seems to be working in reverse as the formerly creative speaker gives himself up to a world in which distinctions have become meaningless. He feels a loss though and appears to be frustrated by his situation. In *Rosenkavalier* there is a loss of innocence; but there is no frustration, even though there is a price of pain. The Marschallin has an answer which she accepts. She sees everything to be under the providence of God, even the terrible experience of time, and decides that it must be borne as the price of her consciousness as an individual, that indeed the manner in which she bears the experience makes all the difference.

The work does affirm an underlying unity for all existence; but in order to know this unity, men must immerse themselves in the stream of time. The personal remembrance of a perfect state before individual existence or seeing others in a state of *Praeexistenz* must serve as an assurance of a possible return to such a state. The world of the Viennese aristocracy, very reminiscent in its apparent permanence and selfish indulgence in pleasure serves as a background to show off those who remain static and those who pay the price for individuation. The masks of the players are lifted enough to show the degree of conscious participation in life by some of the characters and the hold which *Praeexistenz* still has on others. There is the chance for differentiation—role playing for an ethical purpose—and for mind-

less enjoyment of an extraordinarily pleasant present. It is the doom of some of the characters that all their desires for permanence seem to be accommodated by the illusion of permanence, whereas change does occur and those who avail themselves of the chance to become individuals ultimately achieve a permanence on a much higher level.

Time must pass and the individual must be conscious of the passage of time so that there can be one point at which he makes the decision to be human. Already in the first act, Hofmannsthal gives us a formed consciousness against which everything can be measured. Almost from the very beginning, the Marschallin is fully conscious of her identity and is aware that her personality has been formed and will remain essentially the same, even if there are outward changes which she cannot control:

How can it truly be  
that once I was little Resi  
and that someday I'll be an aged woman  
The old lady, the old Marschallin.  
"Look, there she goes, old Princess Resi!"  
How can this happen?  
Why does the Almighty do it?  
Since I always remain the same.  
And if He has to do it this way  
why does he let me watch  
with such a sharp understanding. Why doesn't  
He hide it all from me.  
That's all so deep, so secret  
And we exist (sighing) only to bear  
And in the "How"  
there lies all the difference.<sup>11</sup>

The only consolation that God grants her is that she can determine the excellence of her playing once her individualization is determined. At the beginning of the work, she was, for a few minutes at least, swept along by the passion of Octavian, she could be what he wanted her to be—Bichette, his love—but from this point on she realizes that she is the Marschallin, that this is the only role she can play well and with dignity in the milieu in which she finds herself; and she never significantly departs from this role again, thus gaining a self-assurance which invests her with a dignity which can later bring order into chaos.

Octavian cannot understand this knowledge in her, but she is able to resist the passion with which he tries to entice her again and is able to reply that one must, in this life, set a limit upon one's ambitions and yearnings: "Whoever clasps too much to himself holds nothing securely." (332) Octavian's impatient arguments evoke the plea, "Don't be like all men." (332) Octavian indignantly denies that he knows how all men behave, but he is not yet conscious of any individuality and

so he does behave like “all” men. He angrily exclaims that his “Bichette” is a changeling, but the Marschallin replies that “Bichette” is still there as a part of her and tries to convey her realization of this to him:

..... I feel  
that I have to feel the weakness of all passing things  
to the very core of my heart  
how one must not cling to anything  
how one cannot grab onto anything  
how everything runs between one's fingers  
everything dissolves for which we reach  
everything dissolves like mist and dreams. (333)

Experienced time does sooner or later have to give a reckoning to durational time:

Time, Quinquin, at bottom  
Changes nothing essential in the world.  
Time is such a peculiar thing.  
When one just exists it isn't anything at all  
But then suddenly, it is inside us too  
It pours through our faces  
in our mirrors too it pours  
and between my temples.  
And between me and you  
it pours soundlessly like an hour glass. (335)

But, she continues, one must not be afraid of time since it too is a creation of God. She concludes that in order to come to grips with the problem:

We must hold light reins  
With light heart and light hands  
Lightly hold and take, hold and release  
Those who don't are punished by Life and  
God shows them no mercy. (334)

At this point Octavian has no idea what she may mean, but for him too the process of individualization is beginning. For better or for worse, the Marschallin is the Marschallin and bears with dignity the burden time has imposed upon her and Octavian must of necessity face the problem too.

The Marschallin expresses her awareness of herself not only vis-à-vis Octavian but also in social situations. After her statement to Octavian, she becomes worthy again to hold court like an empress. At her levee, after the passionate night spent with Octavian, she complains of looking old. Moreover, it is during this moment of weakness that Baron Ochs is able to disrupt her court with his antics. Only after the Marschallin is fully resolved to be true to herself can she fully restore the social order at the end of the work.



With the figure of Baron Ochs, the elemental selfish forces of the unconscious threaten to intrude into the well-defined order of the social play. Something of the faun lurks in the Baron. His dearest wish is to assume the less respectable aspects of Jupiter, to take on a thousand forms in order to assault a thousand women, always unhindered by time and consequence:

For that, one is no pheasant and no deer  
but lord of all creation  
That one's pleasures are not ruled by  
the seasons. (310)

He never does learn that "for that" is precisely why he is not lord of all creation. He would like to live in an eternal present that consists of stalking every available female. The great danger is that his state of *Praexistenz* is so daemonic in its appeal and force that there is constant danger that others may be overwhelmed by it.

Certainly the Baron instinctively knows that his animal vitality can raise a response in others. Indeed he likes to assume that most persons of rank have around them a proof of like vitality as his illegitimate son who acts as his footman. To ensnare Octavian, the Baron would even be willing to compromise his new bride. The Baron relies on his social rank to gain his desires, but he is totally unwilling to abide by the rules of society. Eventually his blatant disregard for the social order will bring about his comeuppance.

Unlike the Baron, the two young lovers have not yet abused the state of *Praexistenz*. Sophie, because of her plebeian background, is inclined to see happiness as playing a social role; but unlike the Marschallin, she has not learned to fill a role through any experience and so she does not know the price she may be called on to pay. Her notions about love and the real world are based on what she has learned at her convent school. Octavian, on the contrary, has always been assured of a dignified social role by his birth, but by the same token he has never been asked to pay a price. But when he becomes involved with Sophie, the social order becomes for him too a means for finding himself.

At their first meeting, the lovers taste all the joys of *Praexistenz* at its most attractive—they are both young and in love with love. This is the most blissful moment of their existence:

..... Time and Eternity  
in one blessed moment,  
which I will never forget until my death. (346)

Sophie's rhapsodic words acknowledge that the actual moment must pass and that it can only be recaptured in her memory. Octavian echoes her words. But they are both not really consciously aware that the physical moment may be very short indeed. Then the Baron Ochs enters, and they are forced to see what "love"



that is only self-indulgence is like. They are forced to realize that their rhapsodic burst cannot be sustained against the Baron's singleminded lust. Sophie had found in their love an echo "vom hochheiligen Paradies"; but since they can't live in this moment, they must meet his daemonic intervention. Sophie refuses to marry the Baron and Octavian wounds him when he becomes insistent. The blood that flows in the duel is the first indication to the Baron that he too may have to pay a price for his mode of existence. He does not learn, however, for as soon as the wound is bandaged, he is planning another assignation. But for Sophie, Octavian is no longer merely an attractive representative of the class to which she aspires and a personification of "love" but a definite individual whose inherent worth will save her. For Octavian, Sophie is not another personification of "love" but his love. For both, these recognitions are the first steps out of the state of *Praeexistenz*.

The third act shows what happens when life is lived solely on the praexistential level. Octavian has arranged an elaborately staged farce to discredit the Baron. Disguised as a chambermaid, he plays a mock love scene with the Baron that parodies his own affair with the Marschallin and cruelly repeats his own interplay with Ochs in Act I (when as chambermaid he befuddled the Baron) and the interplay between Ochs and Sophie in Act II. When the confusion and noise reach their height, the law intervenes. Not one of the participants in the farce can satisfactorily explain himself to the police. All of the weaknesses of *Praeexistenz* are laid bare at this point. The hard-headed policeman demands proof of identity and nobody is able to satisfy him. The situation needs the presence of the Marschallin to restore dignity and order to the proceedings. Only when she is present can the Baron's full ludicrousness and dangerousness be recognized and defeated. He retires defeated, yet with all the grandezza of one who is not aware of having done wrong. The young lovers are forced to question themselves and their purposes before recapturing, but again only for a short time, their original passion. In a great trio, the three figures who come closest to capturing their own identity and therefore true love, give voice to their innermost feelings. The Marschallin who has committed herself to knowledge and "light reins" frees Octavian in a loving gesture. The two young people can't quite recover the mood of their innocent first meeting; responsibility and perhaps even guilt for their actions intrude. After the Marschallin has given her assent with a simple and resigned "Ja, Ja," she sweeps out and Octavian and Sophie melt for the moment into a passionate embrace, but the little blackamoor servant who trips onto the scene to pick up the Marschallin's handkerchief reminds them and the audience that this too must end.

Strauss' music echoes and reinforces the action of the libretto. Over the whole work hovers the paradox of the illusion of the timelessness of three-quarter time. It literally seems to sweep in circles and kill durational time, but actually it points out its tyranny. The structure of the music is used to underscore the development of the characters' personality. Ultimately only the Baron, who is the least free,

is characterized by the form of the waltz. The innocence of the young people is expressed in freer rhapsodic strains, and the Marschallin's great scenes are overwhelming flows of melody. Finally, the great trio at the end of the third act is a fugue. Paradoxically this, the strictest of musical forms, is used to give the fullest assertion of individuality and the greatest freedom from the state of *Praeexistenz*.<sup>12</sup>

It is true that at first the work appeals primarily to the senses. But it does so in a typically Viennese way which means that in its own way it ultimately, perhaps reluctantly, does get down to the reality of things. If the somewhat leisurely appearing way it permits its characters to come to grips with life seems somewhat slow to those that require an uncompromisingly direct approach, it is nevertheless very attractive. If it smacks very much of the dreams of late spring and of summer, it does acknowledge that the sadness of autumn and winter are just around the corner. Nor does it demand that everyone look life into the face out of the corner of the eyes, but only pleads tolerance and understanding for those who do.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>George R. Marek, *Richard Strauss, The Life of a Non-Hero*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), pp. 167-168.

<sup>2</sup>(New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), pp. 12-15.

<sup>3</sup>(New York: Random House, 1956), p. 263.

<sup>4</sup>Kernan, p. 264.

<sup>5</sup>Kernan, p. 261.

<sup>6</sup>*Anatomy of Criticism*, (New York: Antheneum, 1965), pp. 33-34.

<sup>7</sup>Wechsberg, pp. 255-256.

<sup>8</sup>As quoted in Wilhelm Tentner and Anton Wurz, *Reclam's Opern und Operettenführer*. (Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam Jun., 1966), p. 454. Translation is mine.

<sup>9</sup>*Selected Prose*, tr. Mary Hottinger and Tania and Stern. Bollingen Series XXXIII (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), p. 132.

<sup>10</sup>For Hofmannstahl's general notions see Werner Metzler *Ursprung und Muse von Hofmannstahl's Mystik*, (Munich: Bergstadtverlag, 1956) for Rosenkavalier see Ewald Rosch, *Die Komodien Hofmannsthal's*, (Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 2nd ed., 1968), pp. 36-61.

<sup>11</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Lustspiele I*, (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer Verlag, 1947), p. 330. Translations are all mine—all references are to this edition.

<sup>12</sup>One of the best analyses of the music of *Rosenkavalier* is to be found in William Mann's *Richard Strauss, A Critical Study of the Operas*, (New York: Oxford University Press, (1966), pp. 95-144.

