

THE MERRY WIDOW

Historical Background

A masterpiece of operetta literature, *The Merry Widow* has cast an enduring spell over the public since its premiere on December 30, 1905. Written at a time when operettas were past their zenith and beginning to wane in popularity, *The Merry Widow* breathed new life into the genre and began a new era for the Viennese style waltz-operetta. Operetta as a musical form can trace its beginnings back to the Italian opera buffa, the French opéra comique and the German singspiel. It generally contained comedy, lighter subject matter, music, dancing, and most importantly, spoken dialogue. Operetta developed into distinct national styles, such as French (Offenbach), Viennese (Strauss) and English (Gilbert and Sullivan).

Early in 1905, the librettists Victor Leon and Leo Stein had adapted a successful comedy by Henri Meilhac titled, *L'attaché d'ambassade*, and had asked the composer Richard Heuberger to compose the music. After Heuberger had completed most of the score, the librettists decided that the music did not achieve the appropriate Balkan atmosphere they were seeking and asked Franz Lehár to read the libretto. Lehár was excited by this opportunity, accepted the commission, and began composing almost immediately.

The finished work had proceeded well into the rehearsal period when Lehár was presented with a seemingly insurmountable problem. The two managers of the Theater an der Wien, Wallner and Karczag, took a dislike to the music and wanted to cancel the production. Lehár was completely astonished and Victor Leon, one of the two librettists, engaged a lawyer to force the theater management to fulfill their contract. The theater staff and the actors wanted the operetta to go on and volunteered their free time to rehearse. Victor Leon had the task of finding scenery and costumes for the production. The day before the dress rehearsal Lehár was able to have his only rehearsal with the orchestra and the cast worked late into the night. The dress rehearsal itself was not auspicious. Despite all the setbacks the premiere was a triumph. The audience was wildly enthusiastic and demanded numerous curtain calls. Triumph in Vienna was rapidly followed by its wide popularity throughout the world. At one point in Buenos Aires, Argentina, *The Merry Widow* was being presented simultaneously in five different theaters in five different languages.

The only place *The Merry Widow* ever created a note of discord was in the Balkans. The setting of the operetta is the Paris embassy of a small fictitious country called Pontevedro. In actuality, Pontevedro was a thinly-veiled representation of Montenegro, one of the Balkan states. Students in Croatia marched in protest and assailed the cast because they felt the operetta made light of the southern Slavs and their legations abroad. Several years later, when a film version was produced, the exiled Crown Prince of Montenegro (whose name coincidentally was the same as the leading male character, Danilo), voiced great displeasure that his namesake character appeared inebriated in uniform!

The continuing appeal of *The Merry Widow* lies in its music. Lehár's beautiful melodies have never become timeworn and seem fresh each time they are heard. His orchestral coloring shows a musical sophistication reminiscent of Puccini, Debussy and Richard Strauss. Lehár was even said to have suffered from "puccinitis" because of his close friendship with Puccini and his admiration for Puccini's music. The leading characters in *The Merry Widow* have innovative entrance numbers in which the orchestra brilliantly portrays the atmosphere of the scene as well as underlying aspects of their personalities. Throughout the work there is a level of eroticism implicit in the music which previously had never been experienced in operetta. With his talent for tender lyricism and swaying musical phrasing plus his technical knowledge of serious music Lehár was able to place the operetta into the opera house. It rapidly climbed into the ranks of the standard opera repertory. With his musical output of some thirty operettas, some with serious subjects, Lehár gave the operetta genre one final crown of glory before it made way for the development of the American musical that was to follow later in the twentieth century.

--Virginia Opera