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Thesis/Portfolio

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**TRADITIONAL OPERA IN MODERN DRESS**  
**AN OPERATIC CASE STUDY: *DER ROSENKAVALIER***

There are many things people love about opera and many reasons people produce, perform and attend operas. So many visual, aural, dramatic, intellectual and emotional elements are cooperating in this art form that there is truly something for everyone, with the exception of those who have decided for one reason or another not to like it. As artist and opera designer David Hockney mused, “I'd never understood people who said they were bored by it. They must have no ears and no eyes, and I really pity them. (Wroe)”

One of the main reasons, however, that a considerable segment of the population is not drawn to opera has to do with a perceived incomprehensibility of or inaccessibility to either the language, the musical forms or the story. Opera companies have attempted to tackle each of these issues with some success over the past several decades. Operas have been written in all major languages during every stylistic period--Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, 20th Century and beyond. Most major companies provide translations in the form of electronic supertitles projected above the stage or (in more sophisticated venues) via individual screens on the backs of the seats ahead. As is the case for all “classical” music, finding audiences that have been exposed to and given the tools to appreciate opera is a complex challenge, but one that is constantly addressed by a variety of strategies being brainstormed and implemented by opera boards worldwide. These efforts will no doubt continue.

Perhaps the most significant area where a fresh take on opera presentation can make a difference in public perception and enjoyment of the genre is in the story telling. Despite the often tangled and highly dramatic nature of the stereotypical opera plot, still the characters portrayed and the stories being told are invariably reflections of deeply ingrained cultural archetypes with resonance for contemporary audiences--that is, if these audiences can be given a way to enter into and follow the story and to care about the characters. A great service is performed by today's opera directors who bring enlightened, creative thought to the conception of new opera productions. One such director is Robert Carsen, who recently helmed a brand new take on Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* for a joint production by The Royal Opera in London and New York's Metropolitan Opera.

## THE SCORE

After his psychologically and musically weighty *Elektra* debuted in 1909, Richard Strauss determined that his next work should be a comedy, "a 'Mozart' opera," and his book writer (librettist) Hugo von Hofmannsthal agreed. "The result is a 'comedy for music' set in the Vienna of Maria Theresia's day (1720-1780) with a libretto written in a kind of "Maria Theresia" Austrian dialect freely larded with French, a language that never was. (Rickett 138)" [A note: the lead character of the Marshallin is almost certainly patterned after the mature Maria Theresa who had been depicted as a young girl at the center of Velasquez' famous painting "Las Meninas" and went on to marry into the Habsburg dynasty.]

Strauss truly wanted to make the audience "Laugh! Not just smile or grin. (Schonberg 447)" He and Hofmannsthal were trying to fill a gap that had existed in the German canon of comic opera since Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* had been an international success in 1868. *Der Rosenkavalier - Komödie für Musik* premiered in Dresden in 1911.

*Rosenkavalier* was a formal departure for Strauss and an opportunity for Hofmannsthal to showcase his wittier sensibilities. Hofmannsthal “led the composer away from the *Elektra* style into a kind of literary opera suffused with symbolism. (Schonberg 445)” As Rickett noted, *Der Rosenkavalier* “must be the only opera that can be performed as a straight play without music. (138)” This speaks to the quality of Hofmannsthal’s plotline and dialogue. Kobbé characterizes the work as “one of the finest fruits of their collaboration . . . a kind of fast-moving musical conversation, always apt to situation, full of character, a unique example of speech heightened by music . . . (1018)” Hofmannsthal let his characters’ behavior reflect the loosening moral attitudes of the Edwardian era. As Schonberg noted, *Rosenkavalier* “has a sophistication, especially in sexual matters (447).”

Strauss indeed found musical language to convey and enhance the flow of the spoken word and to match Hofmannsthal’s stylistic direction. “The prevailing texture of *Rosenkavalier* is just as elaborate in its counterpoint and modulations as that of *Elektra*--even more so in some passages, where Hofmannsthal has supplied farcical complications that exceed those of Mozart’s librettist Da Ponte. (Austin)” With a nod to the popular musical tastes of his audiences, he included “many waltzes, friendly parodies of Johann Strauss, (Rickett 142)” although these waltzes were certainly anachronistic to the 18th century setting of the action. During this first decade of the 20th century, a kind of “Anti-Wagnerianism was setting in, and *Der Rosenkavalier* . . . follows a different aesthetic. (Schonberg 447)” As Mencken observes about the score in the sensual post coital opening scene, one can “compare its first act to the most libidinous jazz ever heard on Broadway. (143)”

## MET PRODUCTIONS AND CARSEN’S REIMAGINING

In the more than 10 decades since *Der Rosenkavalier*’s Metropolitan Opera premiere in 1913, it has regularly been revived in various productions. Its last incarnation, Nathaniel

Merrill's traditional Rococo period piece mounted in 1969, was the oldest production in the Met's repertory. Among the many illustrious sopranos over the years to portray the Marschallin, the work's main female protagonist, Renée Fleming is currently considered the gold standard. Since her debut in the role in the mid 90's, it has become something of a signature--a perfect fit with her naturally regal bearing, timeless beauty and soaring crystalline top range which amply fills out Strauss' endlessly cresting waves of soprano nirvana. With the announcement of this new production came also the news that it would be Fleming's last performance of the part. Likewise, after 17 years playing the 17 year old Octavian, Latvian mezzo Elīna Garanča announced she would be taking her final bows as the young knight. Robert Carsen, who first debuted at the Met in 1997, was selected to conceive and direct this momentous new production.

Reconceptualizing works with long histories and legions of devoted fans (who may or may not want their opera served with a contemporary twist) takes a boldness and clarity of purpose that perfectly summarize Carsen's sense of mission. The director has made an excellent case for his approach in several thoughtful interviews over the years. He shared the following with New York Times critic David Stevens in 1999, just as his early "opera in modern dress" projects were receiving wide attention, "We go to the theater to see ourselves, for the emotional experience . . . The feelings and actions of the characters in, say, Mozart's 'Marriage of Figaro,' are completely modern." Carsen went on to add that the use of period costumes tends to negate that reality and make it "kind of abstract . . . We are there to learn about the people, not too much about what is going on on the stage. (Stevens)" In two subsequent *Opera News* interviews, Carsen further expounded on his overriding artistic objectives: "For me, the most crucial element is the relationship between what's on the stage and what's in the auditorium, and how you can break that barrier. (Myers 2004)" And in 2013 he stated succinctly, "My job is to get people to look and listen. I'm always wanting people to hear it in a different way, or as if they haven't heard it before—not to sing along with it in their heads. (Kellow)"

Carsen's desire to update the historical period of his stagings in order to make the story as clear as possible for contemporary audiences (who don't often have the time or ability to do exhaustive research on the context and background of historical works before coming to a performance) is admirable. He is in good company, with the likes of director Kenneth Branagh among others. Branagh has made it a practice to place Shakespeare's plays in "a period setting that attempts to set the story in a historical context that is resonant for a modern audience . . ." and this in the service of his "belief that they can be understood in direct, accessible relation to modern life (Shakespeare/Branagh xv)."

Directors who ambitiously reconceive period pieces to more clearly communicate their message usually meet with a wide range of responses. On the one hand are critical and public approbation for the insights gained through this technique. Reviewer David Stevens warmly praises Carsen's approach: "Updating operatic subjects is a tricky business and by no means always successful, but Carsen has proven to be a master at such transformations . . . All of Carsen's stagings are characterized by honesty, clarity and inexhaustible invention: for each opera he directs, he creates a singularly apt *mise-en-scène* that honors the emotional substance of its music as well as the essence of its words. (Stevens)" *Opera News* critic Paul Driscoll enthused, "I have been an admirer of Carsen's work for twenty years, ever since his wonderful staging of *Eugene Onegin* at the Met made me appreciate Tchaikovsky's opera in a completely new way."

Alternatively, there can be sometimes fierce resistance to such efforts, as evidenced by the opening night reception of this new *Rosenkavalier* in April of this year. As Patrick Stearns noted in his review even while he praised Carsen's talent, "Perhaps no current opera director is more clever or intelligent than Robert Carsen, who was greeted with a mixture of boos and cheers Thursday at the Met's new *Rosenkavalier*." There are always the staunch defenders of all things conservative such as Peter G. Davis who wrote in 1982, "*Der Rosenkavalier* [is] perhaps the only opera in the standard repertoire

safe from today's lunatic-fringe directors. There is really just one way of mounting a piece so closely bound to its historical period and so specific in its dramatic requirements." With such a myopic perception, Davis would sadly have missed the opportunity to learn anything new about the piece from this year's revival.

Often, even when the spirit of modern staging is championed, a too shocking moment or scene can provoke complaints against pushing the envelope of what is considered tasteful to see onstage. It does appear that, perhaps in the vein of today's anything goes internet sensibilities, directors feel that more is better to drive their points home. In this production, a case could definitely have been made for the need to temper what one reviewer termed "Carsen's rage for relevance. (Platt)" The crass bordello scene in Act III of this *Rosenkavalier* definitely took the opera to a solid R rating, where a PG 13 sensibility might have told the story with enough impact. *New York Times* reviewer Anthony Tommasini put it succinctly when he wrote in his review, "Mr. Carsen, whose updated production of Verdi's 'Falstaff' was a high point of recent Met seasons, wants us to consider the seedy, disturbing underside of the comic elements. He goes too far sometimes."

Carsen shared some of the insights that led him to relocate his *Rosenkavalier* to the very period during which Hofmannsthal and Strauss created it. In an interview shown during the Live in High Definition broadcast, Carsen explained that the piece "is very much about time, about the passage of time . . . The world that is being described is a world that is on the brink of disappearing forever." He also noted that the military was becoming quite important during those years. Stearns, in a supportive comment about Carsen's approach wrote, "The original 18th-century Viennese setting was brought forward to World War I — a concept that raised the dramatic stakes effectively."

Tommasini further expounded that it was "a time when the aristocratic order that had endured for centuries was about to crumble under the horrors of World War I." Indeed, Carsen's sets were inspired by architectural ideas of the Vienna Secessionists, those

turn of the century artists rebelling against and hoping to break the conservative stranglehold on artistic institutions and commerce.

One thread of Hofmannsthal's story runs consistently from the original piece through the updated pre WWI setting, and into resonance with current political events. It is the fact that Faninal, the nouveau riche merchant trying to marry his daughter into the noble class, is an arms dealer. Not one word of the libretto had to be altered for this ironic detail to fit perfectly into Carsen's directorial bent. He used these "Given Circumstances (Stanislavski)" to prompt the stark war-inspired interiors of the Faninal mansion in Act II and to embellish his story telling. Baron von Ochs appears in full military dress and his attendants are his army subordinates (a dozen supernumeraries). Writing about this production's London debut, Blanco-Bazán notes that "the goings and comings of young officers, about to exchange ballrooms for the trenches of WWI, add a dark political side to this production." This is the kind of digging, interpreting and reinventing of great classical works that keeps them alive for new generations and inspires fresh appreciation for their original genius.

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Prior to this viewing, I have never seen a full production of *Der Rosenkavalier*, although I have been familiar with its music since I sang Octavian in the ultra-beloved final trio on my college sophomore recital. I was very excited to see these great singers perform, and I expected to enjoy the day (it was a 4 and a half hour commitment). The orchestra played with the lushness required to support Strauss' complex harmonies into which are woven clear solo voices of every timbre. The opulent Act I set was a visual feast of rich burgundy brocade wall covering, magnificent oil paintings and imposing archways framing massive doors. An enormous bed and a few movable couches, chairs and small tables are the only furnishings in the Marshallin's bedroom where we find her with her lover Octavian following their night of languor.

What struck me immediately was the way I felt drawn into their story because instead of the Revolutionary Era costumes I am so used to seeing in photos of *Rosenkavalier* productions past, the characters looked like they might be in an episode of *Downton Abbey* (with which I've been fairly obsessed since its debut on PBS' *Masterpiece Theatre*). From this standpoint, these people on stage and their attitudes and actions were quite relatable. As Schonberg insightfully remarks, "In *Der Rosenkavalier* there are no Jungian archetypes, only the human condition. (447)" Carsen's thoughtful and thorough work with these extraordinarily talented singing actors showed in the very believable emotions they conveyed.

Then Ochs entered and began to explain his plan to marry for his bride's family fortune. From his crass, overbearing behavior (flirting shamelessly with Octavian disguised as a maiden) and his vile words (he states at one point, according to the English translation, "If I like it, I'll have it.") I knew that this was not the typical portrayal of this character. He is often played as older and more bumbling. Here was a deliberate choice to make Ochs less dim-witted but more sinister. One audience member remarked to me at the first intermission, "I hate what they are doing with the staging: all the pawing and grabbing." And yet, it was this very entitled, debaucherous attitude that brought home the important fact that Ochs is not a silly fool, he is a dangerous and wicked one, the likes of which our society is still needing to confront and reeducate. The point is even more strongly hammered home in Act II when he meets Sophie for the first time and makes comments about her like he is purchasing livestock.

Renée Fleming was radiant and poised from start to finish in this exceptional performance. Knowing that it was her final Marshallin, after a career-long affection for this character, brought an even more melancholy realization to the character's musings about the passing of time and the fear of aging. This is a time in my own experience when I can relate to this kind of bittersweet reflection. Although Schonberg penned

these thoughts about Strauss' librettist more than 40 years ago, they concisely and elegantly speak to this production of *Rosenkavalier* and its effects on me, "People do not die for love in Hofmannsthal's world. They face the inevitable, surrender with what grace they can summon up, and then look around for life's next episode. (448)"

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Austin, W.W. "IX: Contemporaries in Germany." *Music in the 20th Century*. London: Dent, 1966. 134-49. Print. 20 May 2017.

Blanco-Bazán, Agustín. "Robert Carsen's The Rosenkavalier at the Royal Opera House." Review. *Plays to See: International Theatre Reviews* 20 Dec. 2016. Web. 25 May 2017. He makes a valid point that I am still pondering: "At the very end, the sight of a drunken page of the Marschallin and soldiers advancing defiantly towards the front stage aims at reinforcing a political message pathetically out of place in a work where love, hope and loss are exposed through a delicate balance of humour, tenderness and vulnerability."

"Carsen, Fleming and Garanca on Der Rosenkavalier." Interview. *YouTube*. The Metropolitan Opera, 5 May 2016. Web. 25 May 2017.

Clements, Andrew. "Der Rosenkavalier Review – Big Guns and Young Lovers Overcome Stage Obstacles." Review. *The Guardian* [London]. *theguardian.com*. 18 Dec. 2016. Web. 25 May 2017. Clements brings a perspective worth considering: that this production "does little to illuminate what the opera is actually about, which is a wry take on growing up and growing older, set at a time when class conventions and pretensions defined the parameters of how such things should be managed. Carsen offers little on that, except to play down the comedy and introduce some distractions – having dancing couples waltzing away behind Octavian and Sophie during their duet in

the second act, one of the score's truly rapturous moments, for instance, is unforgivable." I too wondered whether the row of silent couples needed to be there.

Da Fonseca-Wollheim, Corinna. "Believe in Eternity, or at Least 100 Years: Der Rosenkavalier at the Metropolitan Opera." *The New York Times*. 27 Nov. 2013. Web. 30 May 2017.

Davis, Peter G. "The Met's Impossible Dream." *New York* 4 Oct. 1982: 88. *Books.google.com*. Web. 2 June 2017.

Driscoll, F. Paul. "Robert Carsen: Director/Designer." *Opera News* 81.10 (2017). *Operanews.com*. Metropolitan Opera. Web. 31 May 2017. "Carsen urges his fellow artists to explore what lies within the work at hand in order to engage audiences in a compelling way." On previous productions: "The Carsen portfolio encompasses a *Falstaff* buoyed by the brightly colored middle-class optimism of 1950s Windsor; an *Alcina* charged with the soignée eroticism of *Last Year at Marienbad*; and an *Orfeo ed Euridice* that burned with the unforgiving heat of the Greek sun."

Kellow, Brian. "The Carsen Show." *Opera News* 78. 6 (2013). *Operanews.com*. Metropolitan Opera. Interview-Web. 2 June 2017.

Kobbé, Gustav, and George Henry Hubert Lascelles Harewood. "Der Rosenkavalier." *The New Kobbé's Complete Opera Book*. New York: Putnam's, 1979. 1008-1018. Print.

Lister, Linda. "The Straussian Soprano." *Journal of Singing* 55.5 (1999): 15-19. *Nats.org*. National Association of Teachers of Singing. Web. 31 May 2017. Interesting article which covers other Strauss heroines: Arabella, Ariadne. "With the shared interest of his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Strauss fostered his affinity for the female psyche." Worth another essay.

Myers, Eric. "Face to Face: Robert Carsen and Frank Corsaro." *Opera News* 68. 8 (2004). Operanews.com. Metropolitan Opera. Interview-Web. 1 June 2017. Carsen reflected on connecting to the essence of the characters, "The *story* of the opera is not really what the opera is about, so you have to go way beyond and say, 'What is going on here?'"

Platt, Russell. "'Der Rosenkavalier,' in Its Era of Composition." *Newyorker.com*. The New Yorker, 17 Apr. 2017. Web. 25 May 2017. This statement gets to the heart of my artistic preoccupation: "This week, a new production of the work by the director Robert Carsen arrives at the Metropolitan Opera, allowing audiences to consider both the piece and its era with a heightened level of clarity."

Platt, Russell. "Savor Renée Fleming in 'Der Rosenkavalier,' at the Met." *Newyorker.com*. The New Yorker, 14 Apr. 2017. Web. 27 May 2017.

Rickett, Richard. "The Two Richards Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss." *Music and Musicians in Vienna*. Vienna: Prachner, 1973. 131-40. Print. 20 May 2017.

Schonberg, Harold C. "Romanticism's Long Coda: Richard Strauss." *The Lives of the Great Composers*. London: Futura Publications, 1975. 445-48. Print. 20 May 2017.

Shakespeare, William, and Kenneth Branagh. *Hamlet*. New York: Norton, 1996. Print. Screenplay with Introduction and Production Diary. 28 April 2017

Stearns, David Patrick. "The Met's New Rosenkavalier: Hello Robert Carsen, Goodbye (maybe) to Renee Fleming." Review. *ArtsJournalblogs*. 17 Apr. 2017. Web. 25 May 2017.

Stevens, David. "Robert Carsen:Opera's Master of the Modern." Ed. International Herald Tribune. *New York Times* [New York] 6 July 1999: n. pag. *Nytimes.com*. Web. 31 May 2017.

Tommasini, Anthony. "Review: Renée Fleming's Poignant Farewell to 'Der Rosenkavalier'." *Newyorktimes.com*. The New York Times, 14 Apr. 2017. Web. 25 May 2017. One of Carsen's objectives in this production: ". . . to reveal the absurdities of aristocratic pretense." And creative choices to reach this objective: "Mr. Carsen drives home the specific way that Faninal (the sturdy baritone Markus Brück) has made his fortune. The reception room of his city palace is dominated by two huge cannons on wheels. His lackeys carry pistols and rifles."

Wroe, Nicholas. "The Rake's Progress: When Hockney Met Hogarth." *theguardian.com*. 2 Aug. 2010. Web. 20 May 2017.

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*Der Rosenkavalier; The Metropolitan Opera*. By Richard Strauss. Dir. Robert Carsen. Perf. Renée Fleming; Erin Morley; Elīna Garanča; Matthew Polenzani; Markus Brück; Günther Groissböck. Viewed in HD Fairfield Quick Center, New York. 18 May 2017. Performance. Final HD broadcast of the Met's 2016-17 season and final performance for Fleming and Garanča in these signature roles. This new production is appropriately grand and stylish. The female leads' performances were spot on, brilliantly acted and breathtakingly sung. Groissböck was a revelation as a younger, more menacing Ochs than is often portrayed. Weigle's conducting and the orchestra's fine playing illuminated the textures and breadth of Strauss' score. The staging brought new understandings about the social commentary in von Hoffmannsthal's libretto. I was impacted and moved in unexpected ways. A triumph of talent and creative effort.