

“Time, it won’t alter matters, after all”¹

On the relation between music, libretto and stage direction in *Der Rosenkavalier* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss

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Even in the central-European heartland of the so-called director’s theatre (‘Regietheater’), from the 1970s onwards, *Der Rosenkavalier* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss was for a long time staged in a surprisingly traditional way (and, indeed, sometimes still is, even in our days): both the décor and the direction of the characters tended to conform more or less literally to the authors’ prescriptions and Alfred Roller’s production book, to which most of the first stages to perform *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1911 were obliged to adhere. Despite this basis for an authorized performance tradition, with the ‘original staging’ being raised to an integral part of a universal artwork (‘Gesamtkunstwerk’), it seems inappropriate to reject modern scenic approaches in favour of ‘fidelity to the work’ (‘Werktreue’), whether with reference to Strauss and Hofmannsthal (whose attitudes towards ‘Regietheater’ remain an a-historical, mere speculative fiction) or with regard to a binding operatic text (whose textual layers – that is, above all, libretto and score – already comprise concurrent readings in terms of philology as well as hermeneutics). On the contrary, if recent productions actually conceive the ‘whole work’ of an opera as a composite and, what is more, as the focal point of determining historical factors, they open up a deeper understanding of works of art in general, reflecting on their status as time travellers between historical geneses and present realisations. This applies all the more to *Der Rosenkavalier*, a work of art in which time and its passing are reflected upon in many ways.

Common means of modern scenic interpretation (e.g. abstract or reduced décors; shifts of original settings to some other or maybe even multiple times and places, preferably to those of the composer/librettist or the audience) are therefore no less legitimate than attempts at a historical reconstruction of ‘original’ staging practices or even a traditional ‘business as usual’ staging. But any scenic realisation, whichever of these modes is chosen, has to prove its worth with respect to the layers of meaning provided by the work itself. These layers are constituted by the opera text as a whole as well as by each of its component texts (including their potential divergences, e.g. when readings insinuated by the libretto are not seized upon by the score). Even a single structural layer may provide multiple connecting factors for staging, especially the musical one: as music may be conceived in a number of ways – as expression of emotion, choreographic illustration, topical characterisation, formal process (possibly corresponding to a dramaturgical development), recurring quasi-semantic device (‘leitmotif’), or as any combination of these – it is not always clear which facet of the music to respond to in a scenic realisation, nor how to do so. This article on *Der Rosenkavalier* explores some of the options resulting from this tangled situation typical of a plurimedial, ‘open’ (Umberto Eco) work of art. In three sections, focusing in turn on the prelude to Act I, different kinds of leitmotif structure, and one minor character (the Marschallin’s ‘little black boy’), the results of libretto and score analyses are scrutinised for possible scenic interpretations and compared with existing realisations from the different styles of staging practice.

The introduction to *Der Rosenkavalier*, a ‘prelude behind the curtain’, offers a challenge for directors (as may be expected with content that is specifically designed not to be shown on stage). While it is easy to determine a precise plot corresponding to the sequence of musical events, a literal transfer of this plot to the stage has to face music’s specific power to re-organise time perception: The visualisation of the whole night of love contained in a prelude of barely four minutes can best be managed with by the kind of time manipulation techniques common in film. On the other hand, trying to replace the implicit action of the prelude by something else proves hardly possible either, as the music is highly determining in terms of its programmatic course, depiction of characters, mood sequences and ribald illustrations, including explicit details. In comparison with Strauss’ idea of implicitly extending the plot beyond the

¹ “Die Zeit, die ändert doch nichts an den Sachen”. *Der Rosenkavalier*, Act I.

beginning of Hofmannsthal's libretto, none of the few scenic realisations even in modern productions of the *Rosenkavalier* prelude can be considered satisfactory.

The middle section of this article comprises three case studies on the relation between leitmotifs and scenic realisation. Since leitmotifs are, on the one hand (from what could be called the artisan composer's point of view), a mere technique of composition and thus ubiquitous in Strauss' operas, and as such, on the other hand (from the recipient's point of view), a reliable musical mirror of scenic action, there is usually no need for special measures in terms of stage direction in the face of leitmotif structures. By highlighting two occurrences of Octavian's leitmotif, this rule is exemplified, as well as one meaningful exception to it. However, the situation is different with another prominent leitmotif in *Der Rosenkavalier*, an emphatic eight-bar phrase that recurs at few but pivotal moments, outlining the story of the Marschallin's and Octavian's relationship by means of leitmotif links: here it might seem appropriate to make use of scenic devices in order to put additional emphasis on these moments, both connecting and specifying each of them. In a third case, it is shown how it can be up to stage direction to produce meaning where leitmotif ties do not seem to make any sense: for the famous onset of the trio in Act III, Strauss picks up a designedly trivial waltz melody of 'Mariandl' (Octavian in disguise) – a fact that continues to puzzle scholars committed to conventional leitmotif exegesis. Modern stage direction, especially, feels free to spread additional layers of meaning over works of art, and may indeed be attracted by such blank spaces as internal challenges within a work.

A work of musical theatre may justify very different scenic approaches in equal measure, as is demonstrated in the third section by the example of the Marschallin's 'little black boy'. Hofmannsthal's ambiguous conception both of this minor character in general and, in particular, of his appearance in the final scene of the opera are hardly reflected in Strauss' score; the libretto may therefore promote scenic interpretations that cannot be considered as contrary to the work, even if they clearly run counter to the music. What is more, the music on its own again suggests multiple ways of scenic realisation: even with the apparently clear-cut accompanying stage directions, the music remains unfixable both as regards its scenic function in general and in terms of its precise choreographic meaning. This is not, however, to speak in favour of a post-modern 'anything goes' in directing; as long as productions view themselves as scenic realisations of the works themselves, it is to the works' texts that meaning has to be retraceable, in musicological as well as in scenic interpretation.