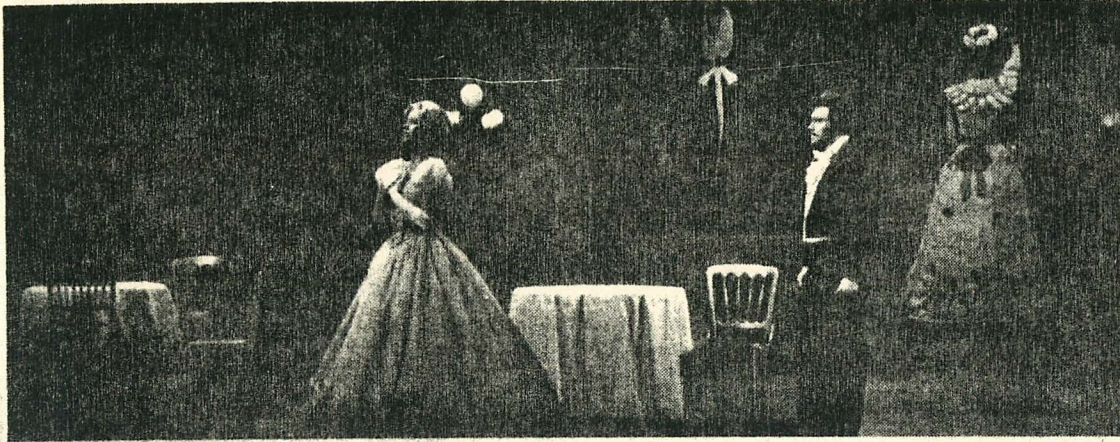


Radical Escapism



Photo/Tony Romano

Arabella

ARABELLA

Lyric Opera of Chicago

By Kyle Gann

Incredibly enough, Richard Strauss, one of the great romantic masters of the century previous to ours, died a mere 35 years ago. The musical world has not dealt kindly with his late music, and especially his operas. In 1958, the normally reserved *Baker's Biographical Dictionary* stated flatly that "the true creative period of Strauss ended for his stage works in 1911, with *Der Rosenkavalier*," and thus negated with one stroke, Wotan-like, the last 10 of his 15 operas. Only in the last few years have American opera houses begun trying to reverse this premature judgment, and Chicago's Lyric is making a particularly strong bid in Strauss's favor this season with its first productions of both *Arabella* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

For all its high-blown, post-Wagnerian grandeur, *Arabella* is a light, comedic story, and really less

an opera than an operetta written for extremely sophisticated listeners. The story concerns two daughters of a ne'er-do-well gambler, Arabella and Zdenka, the latter of whom (logically enough, as opera goes) is dressed as a boy because the parents cannot afford to keep her stylishly as a young lady, and are putting all their money into sprucing up Arabella in hopes of a propitious marriage that will end their financial troubles. Arabella's father introduces her to Mandryka, the nephew of an old friend, and the two succumb to mutual love at first note. In the meantime another suitor, Matteo, the object of Arabella's indifference, is secretly loved by Zdenka, who tricks him into a compromising rendezvous by means of a love note alleged to be from Arabella. Discovery of the deception causes Matteo to realize that he loves Zdenka, even though he previously thought her a boy. The sole complication is that Mandryka overhears Zdenka's deception of Matteo and, believing that his Arabella intends to be unfaithful, challenges Matteo to a

duel—a quite welcome mix-up, or else the third act would have consisted of a rather large cast standing around with little to do besides moon at each other.

The plot may be light and anachronistic, but the music was technically state of the art for its time. *Arabella's* peculiar blend of Viennese joie de vivre and decadent, posttonal harmony could not have been achieved prior to World War I, and yet the work in no way expresses the disillusioned world that was postwar Europe, and refers to it only by negation. *Arabella* is an aesthetician's touchstone, a work plucked out of history and cast into a stylistic never-never land. The music is tonal, but in an extremely fluid way that appropriates the mannerisms of Wagner's idiom and renders them harmless and without urgency—much the same transformation that Stravinsky effected on Mozart and Pergolesi.

Strauss claimed that he could represent a fork in music, and in fact, characterization is about all there is to the music of *Arabella*.

There are no hummable melodies, not a shred of music that would survive the succeeding half dozen bars. Each generically Straussian measure efficiently characterizes the moment it accompanies and then rushes on to the next moment with neither result nor residue; always heroic, nowhere memorable. As Adorno put it, Strauss "was the first composer to adopt the gesture of the idealized big industrialist. He does not need to scrimp; his means are highly expendable." Here is film music reduced to its quintessence, though refined to a much greater degree of subtlety and complexity than the more visually engaging film medium would ever allow.

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Delightful, entertaining, perfectly crafted, and occasionally beautiful, *Arabella* is also utterly lacking in passion or conviction. Not one of the characters is made heroic enough to act as a center (much less match the music), and the work rings hollow. The entire plot comprises a transparent deception and a temporary misunderstanding, and contains in three and a half hours less real tension than your average *Andy Griffith* rerun. As act three opens, it is difficult to be more than indifferent as to whether Arabella and Mandryka

are reunited. The final scene, in which Mandryka is left alone as the rest of the cast disappears up the great staircase, is very touching, but only for visual reasons, not for dramatic nor even musical ones.

The fact is that in 1930s Germany there were more pressing problems at hand than what mishaps befell lovers under an extinct social code. A radical escapist, Strauss turned his back on European disillusionment and growing German discontent, and ignored the issues that his colleagues—Schönberg, Berg, Webern, Eisler, Weill, Hartmann—considered urgent. As an inevitable result, *Arabella*, for all its sumptuousness, sounds insincere, and displays more than a tinge of the apathy of which Strauss complained in the letters written to von Hofmannsthal during its composition.

Nevertheless, *Arabella's* facade is impregnable. Strauss had worried that its quick, conversational style would render the words unintelligible, but this style certainly lends a natural immediacy to the acting that few operas possess. As a very artificial kind of literary construction (John Barth might be an apt comparison), it is consistently brilliant, and delights the eye, ear, and mind simultaneously: escapism without guilt. But as a record of deeply experienced human feelings, it is to *Wozzeck* as the local civic center is to the Taj Mahal. It does not delight the heart.

An opera that is simultaneously light, heroic, and decadent makes difficult casting demands, and Lyric has met these well. Still, its title notwithstanding, *Arabella* is not really the one-character opera that the Lyric has made it by casting the fabulous Kiri Te Kanawa in

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Curry, on the other hand, is offering a concert on ice—a program of ice ballets he and several well-known dance choreographers (including Twyla Tharp, Jean-Pierre Bonnefous, Lar Lubovitch, Laura Dean, Eliot Feld, and Peter Martins) have created. Curry has concentrated his attention on dance patterns performed on ice, rather than on the razzmatazz of more usual ice shows.

The question is, does Curry's idea of making ice skating an art form comparable to dance work? More often than not, it does. Put 16 accomplished skaters on ice with great music, and you have the pleasure of watching effortless, seamless movement. But precisely

because Curry tries to create an art form that combines the styles and techniques of dance with skating, it also fails.

For example, Twyla Tharp's solo for Curry, set to music of Tommaso Albinoni, was neither thrilling dance nor breathtaking figure skating. Sure, one could recognize some of Tharp's trademark gimmickry in the slouches and tongue-in-cheek humor, but ice is not Tharp's medium, and despite Curry's elegance on ice, the piece was not an inspiring theatrical work. It was too careful.

Glides, the opening work for eight skaters to Glazunov's *The Seasons*, was much more successful. The music swept Curry's dance

pattern along lyrically, and it was a lovely introduction to the program. The skaters' arms and lifted legs were wonderful examples of elegant dance and skating style.

Ironically, Laura Dean's *Burn* was one of the most successful applications of dance to ice. Dean's spinning patterns fit brilliantly into ice-dancing technique, as did Bonnefous's romantic pas de deux for Catherine Foulkes and Mark Hominuke in *Meditation*.

The skating was beautiful throughout, but the program was so determinedly artistic that it didn't take sufficient advantage of the stunning possibilities of skating. That Curry and his dancers are totally at home on the ice was

evident in every number, but the program was too bland. David Santee's solo, the *Russian Sailor's Dance*, was the sole showstopper of the evening. It was the only work that satisfied the audience's demand for high-voltage entertainment; Santee's spins, leaps, and speed brought them to their feet. The program could have used more pyrotechnics of this sort. Even in ballet, it's dances like the high-flying *Don Quixote* variations that bring the house down, and Curry should have balanced his program to give the public some drama and humor. They would have brightened the performance. Clowning around on ice may be too vulgar for Curry, but it's great fun and

generates a warm response from the public.

The costumes, most by Anne C. de Velder, were stunning; Jennifer Tipton's lighting was subtle and entrancing, as usual. The accompanying symphony orchestra, conducted by Charles Barker, gave the program a generous touch of class. For that matter, the entire program was a very classy one. It just lacked that soupçon of excitement.

Of course, at the Olympics, the element of competition heightens the viewer's tension and attention. A concert is not a competition, but it could have done with more tension, more high-flying partnering, and less emphasis on self-conscious art.

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the title role. In addition to her marvelously silken voice, she is an actress, and in defiance of the broad theatrical strokes that opera requires, succeeded admirably in the difficult task of making Arabella a multidimensional character—at once flirtatious, cynical, sad, and self-contradictory. By husbanding her tremendous vocal and dramatic power, Ms. Te Kanawa took virtual control of the production with effective understatement.

For silkeness of tone, the prima

donna was closely approached (save in her high register) by Barbara Daniels as Zdenka, though her acting was a little wooden and awkward, and she ultimately had little control over what is really the opera's only active role. Artur Korn as Count Waldner, Arabella's feckless father, was the strongest of the male singers, and had a welcome comic edge to his acting. He managed to make warm and believable a character that could easily have elicited little sympathy. Like Zdenka, Gordon Greer's Matteo sang well, but was a little too dull and underplayed to justify his importance in the action. The one notice-

able miscasting, though it is no reflection on his talent, was of the suave, oversophisticated Ingvar Wixell as the simple country fellow Mandryka, whose disillusionment with Arabella was robbed of its intended pathos. All things considered, he acquitted himself quite admirably, though predictably his voice was neither full nor piercing enough to compete in duets with Kiri Te Kanawa.

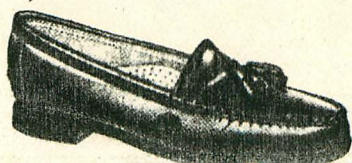
Orchestral playing, under the baton of John Pritchard, was rhythmically sharp and well focused throughout. The score is complexly contrapuntal, often with four or more highly gestural lines being

played at once, and these came off with crystalline clarity—though the orchestration is so deft that in this respect I suspect that the thing plays itself to some extent. If I underestimate, Mr. Pritchard, my apologies. The sets, from the Covent Garden production originated in 1965, are lavish, and so subtle that they are even more spectacular than they appear at first glance—a real delight to the eye from beginning to end. The sparse choreography was done by Paul Mejia of the Chicago City Ballet, and for once it was a pleasure to see an opera unembarrassed by its dance scenes. If this majestic prod-

uction as a whole has a fault, it is that it is too clean, and ignores the undercurrent of seediness that marks the actual circumstances of Count Waldner's family. Then, the identical complaint can be made of the music, and Strauss's letters of the time show that he was not unaware of the problem.

Whether history will ultimately be kind to Strauss's anachronistic brand of escapism remains to be seen. But the Lyric's lush, charming production of *Arabella*, though far from settling the question, at least makes it clear that the prejudiced pronouncement in *Baker's* simply misstated the case.

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