

OPERA EXPLAINED

An Introduction to...

J. STRAUSS Jr

Die Fledermaus

written by
Thomson Smillie

narrated by
David Timson

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All written by Thomson Smillie and narrated by David Timson

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Johann Strauss, Jr (1825–1899): *Die Fledermaus*

The word ‘opera’ is Latin and means ‘the works’; it represents a synthesis of all the other arts: drama, vocal and orchestral music, dance, light and design. Consequently, it delivers an emotional impact which none of the others can match. The only one of the arts whose origins can be precisely dated, it was ‘invented’ in Italy in 1597 as part of the Renaissance – the rebirth of interest in classical values. As an art form it is truly international, crossing all linguistic and cultural barriers, and it is probably the only one whose audience continues to expand, not in spite of, but because of developments in entertainment technology.

From its early origins in Italy opera spread across Europe, establishing individual and distinctive schools in a number of countries. France had an early and long-standing love affair with it – hence the term *grand opéra*, referring to the massive five-act creations that graced the Paris Opéra in the nineteenth century. Germany had an excellent school from as early as Mozart’s time, and opera perhaps reached its highest achievement with the mighty music dramas of Richard Wagner. Russia, Great Britain, and the Americas have also made their contributions.

But in the popular imagination opera remains an Italian concept – and no wonder. From its earliest years Italians dominated the art: Cavalli and Monteverdi were among the first to establish its forms; there was a golden age, called the *bel canto*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Bellini, Donizetti, and

Rossini ruled supreme; Giuseppe Verdi was probably the most revered artist in history; and, for many, Puccini represents in every sense the last word in this beloved genre.

Although the twentieth century has not been as lavishly endowed with opera composers, it can still boast a few, including Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, and Benjamin Britten – and, maybe most significantly in the long run, those errant step-children of opera, the Broadway musical and the Lloyd Webber spectacular.

Die Fledermaus

To the question ‘Is there any such thing as great light music?’ we can answer with a resounding cry of ‘Yes! *Die Fledermaus!*’ Johann Strauss II created a work which is remarkable in the way it immortalises an era. Nostalgia for lost empires is potent stuff, and we find it in the writings of the Dark Ages after the Fall of Rome as well as in the popularity of Merchant Ivory films. The Austro-Hungarian Empire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the decaying stump of the once-mighty Holy Roman Empire. In Voltaire’s famous remark this was not in the least holy, not very Roman, and never really an empire, despite which it gave rise to an especially potent brand of nostalgia. That nostalgia is distilled into its purest form as a waltz, the hypnotic dance in three-time which began life as the last word in daring (partners facing each other in highly unsuitable physical proximity) and ended up as a symbol of lost innocence.

The Strauss family became the ‘Waltz Kings’, and papa, the first Johann Strauss, was a hugely popular bandmaster and composer – the *Radetzky March* is his best-known piece. It was his son Johann II, however, who created in the ‘Blue Danube’ Waltz and the *Emperor Waltz* alternative national anthems of the Austrian people. When later in his career he turned to writing for the theatre – which, it is said, was in response to the success of Offenbach’s operettas – he composed a

melodic masterpiece in *Die Fledermaus*, as well as other creditable works, like *The Gypsy Baron*.

The quality of *Die Fledermaus* is clear from just a few seconds of the overture. Composers agree that the first few bars of an opera create an indelible impression, often producing the expectation of success or failure. The beginning of *Die Fledermaus* reminds us of the explosive uncorking of champagne bottles – and quite right too, as the benign influence of bubbly will be as decisive in shaping the action as is Chianti in *The Elixir of Love*, or Brangaene’s potion in *Tristan und Isolde*, or Albert Herring’s spiked lemonade, or... you can see the point.

The celebrated *Fledermaus* waltz, with its swirling, downward-rushing melody, suggests a sort of half-inebriated gaiety, and the *accelerando* trio, appearing first in the overture, hints at one reason why *Die Fledermaus* enjoys such universal admiration among both newcomers to opera and seasoned experts. Strauss had a genius for using conventions of grander opera – like the so-called ‘Rossini *crescendo*’ – to incredible comic effect. Later in the opera we shall hear great concerted ensembles, big set arias, melodrama (speaking over music), even a *travesti* role (a woman in trousers playing a man’s part). All the trimmings of grandeur but applied to a story which is as light and frothy as the cream on a slice of *sachertorte*.

Before the action the hero Eisenstein had publicly embarrassed Dr Falke (The Bat of the title). By tricking a disguised Eisenstein into wooing his own wife, also disguised, Falke is able to return the embarrassment and secure ‘The Bat’s Revenge’, which is the unofficial subtitle of the piece. Strauss’s score will exploit every opportunity for gaiety, pathos, high comedy, and, above all, sweet nostalgia. Nostalgia, the cynics may say, is not what it used to be, but as long as *Die Fledermaus* is performed, it is.

Thomson Smillie

Thomson Smillie began his career in the early days of Scottish Opera and has been artistic director of the Wexford International Festival, general manager of the Opera Company of Boston, and general director of Kentucky Opera. He now makes a career as a writer, speech-writer, and public speaker. He has a strong belief that people mature into a love of opera and travels the world encouraging a love of the art form. His other passions are travel, languages, and friendships. He has written several other titles in the Naxos 'Opera Explained' series.



David Timson studied acting and singing at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has performed in modern and classic plays throughout the UK and abroad, including *Wild Honey* for Alan Ayckbourn, *Hamlet*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Seagull*. Among his many television appearances have been roles in *Nelson's Column* and *Swallows and Amazons*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has recorded, to date, five volumes of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and directed *Twelfth Night* as well as playing Feste. On Naxos, he takes the part of the Narrator in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*.



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OPERA EXPLAINED

This series introduces, in words and music, the plot and background of major operas. Using the principal themes and arias, taken from the Naxos recording of the complete work, Thomson Smillie is informative yet entertaining, enabling the listener to get more from this remarkable art form.

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