

CONDUCTING PRACTICES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE FLEDERMAUS OUVERTURE

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ABSTRACT

One of the most asked for compositions in conductor auditions is the Fledermaus Overture by Johann Strauss the Son. This iconic operetta is full of beautiful melodies, dances and humor. The overture is a hallmark and is present very often in concert programs. Drawing on historical performances, conductor practices and evolving stylistic nuances, the study delves into the various approaches that have shaped the rendition of this iconic piece. Through examination of interpretative choices, the article aims to illuminate the continuum of traditions surrounding the performance of the Fledermaus Overture. The different versions of the score give already a big choice and hint to the possibilities a conductor can take for the interpretation.

Keywords: Johann Strauss the Son, Operetta, Viennese tradition, Orchestral interpretation, Conductor practices, score editions.

INTRODUCTION

The overture to "Die Fledermaus" stands as a testament to Johann Strauss the Son's mastery in capturing the spirit of Viennese operetta (Neumeyer, 2018). This article aims to explore the interpretative traditions associated with the Fledermaus Overture, shedding light on how conductors and orchestras have approached this beloved composition over time. By examining historical performances, conductor practices, and evolving stylistic nuances, this provides a comprehensive overview of the interpretative landscape surrounding this iconic overture.

Operetta

The Viennese operetta is a genre of light opera that originated in Vienna, Austria, during the 19th century. It became particularly popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and represents a delightful and accessible form of musical theater. The Viennese operetta is characterized by its engaging and humorous plots, charming melodies, danceable music, and a mix of spoken dialogue and sung passages. Johann Strauss the Son -- also called Johann Strauss II -- Franz von Suppé and Franz Lehár are among the prominent composers associated with the Viennese operetta tradition.

Key Characteristics of Viennese Operetta

Lighthearted Themes: Viennese operettas typically feature lighthearted and comedic storylines. The plots often revolve around love, mistaken identities, and social satire. The

tone is generally optimistic and celebratory, making it an entertaining and enjoyable form of musical theater.

Dance Elements: Dance plays a central role in Viennese operettas, reflecting the influence of the Viennese waltz and other popular dance forms of the time. Waltzes, polkas, and other dance rhythms are integrated into the score, contributing to the operetta's festive and rhythmic character.

Ensemble Numbers: Viennese operettas often include ensemble numbers that involve multiple characters. These ensemble pieces can be lively and intricate, with characters interacting through both singing and spoken dialogue.

Romantic Melodies: Melodic beauty is a hallmark of Viennese operettas. Composers like Johann Strauss the Son and Franz Lehár created memorable and romantic melodies that have endured over time. Arias, duets, and ensemble pieces showcase the vocal and melodic richness of the genre.

Witty Dialogue: Viennese operettas typically include spoken dialogue interspersed with musical numbers. The dialogue is often witty, providing humor and advancing the plot. This combination of spoken and sung elements contributes to the operetta's accessibility.

Societal Satire: Many Viennese operettas incorporate elements of societal satire. Composers and librettists often poke fun at the conventions and foibles of contemporary society, offering a humorous reflection on the social norms of the time.

Orchestral Color: The orchestration in Viennese operettas is vibrant and colorful. Composers utilize a wide range of instruments to create a lush and effervescent sound. The use of the orchestra enhances the operetta's theatricality and adds to its overall charm.

Popular Success: Viennese operettas achieved widespread popularity not only in Vienna but also internationally. The accessibility of the music and the universal themes addressed in the plots contributed to the genre's broad appeal.

The Viennese operetta remains a beloved and enduring form of musical entertainment, cherished for its melodic beauty, engaging storytelling, and the festive spirit it brings to the stage.

Johann Strauss the Son

Johann Strauss II, widely hailed as the “Waltz King,” stands as an iconic figure in the realm of classical music, leaving an indelible mark on the 19th-century Viennese musical landscape. Born on October 25, 1825, in Vienna, Austria, he emerged as a prolific and innovative composer, conductor, and violinist, contributing significantly to the development of the Viennese waltz and operetta (Bruton, 2019).

The son of Johann Strauss I, himself a celebrated composer and conductor, young Johann Strauss displayed prodigious musical talent from an early age. Despite initial resistance from his father, who envisioned a more traditional career for his son, the younger Strauss quickly gained popularity with his captivating compositions and charismatic conducting style. His works not only entertained but also transcended the social and cultural boundaries of his time (Bruton, 2019).

Strauss's musical genius reached its zenith during the romantic era, a period marked by profound societal and artistic transformations. His waltzes, including timeless classics such as “The Blue Danube” and “Tales from the Vienna Woods,” became synonymous with the elegance and grace of Viennese ballroom culture. Beyond the dance floor, Strauss's

operettas, such as “Die Fledermaus” and “The Gypsy Baron,” enchanted audiences with their melodic richness and comedic charm (Neumeyer, 2018).

The Bat

“Die Fledermaus” is one of the most famous and enduring operettas composed by Johann Strauss II. The title translates from German to “The Bat.” It premiered on April 5, 1874, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, and it has since become a staple of the operetta repertoire.

Plot summary

The operetta is set in Vienna during the 19th century and revolves around a comedic and farcical plot. The story begins with Gabriel von Eisenstein being sentenced to a brief prison term for insulting a public official. However, instead of going directly to jail, Eisenstein decides to attend a lavish party hosted by Prince Orlofsky, a Russian nobleman, before serving his sentence. Unbeknownst to him, his wife, Rosalinde, is also planning to attend the same party in disguise. The plot thickens as various characters, including Eisenstein's friend Dr. Falke, a notary named Frank, and Rosalinde's former lover Alfred, become entangled in a series of mistaken identities, flirtations, and humorous situations at the party. The bat symbolizes the confusion and chaos that ensue, as characters don disguises and the boundaries between reality and illusion blur. As the operetta progresses, secrets are revealed, and the characters find themselves in increasingly amusing and compromising situations. The storyline is infused with the spirit of Viennese comedy and satire, making it a lighthearted and entertaining work.

Memorable Music

“Die Fledermaus” is celebrated for its memorable and melodic music, including the famous overture, which is frequently performed in concert settings. The operetta features charming waltzes, lively polkas, and delightful ensemble numbers. The score captures the elegance and vivacity of the Viennese ballroom culture, contributing to the enduring popularity of the work.

Legacy

“Die Fledermaus” has achieved widespread acclaim and continues to be performed by opera companies and musical theaters around the world. Its timeless appeal lies in the combination of Strauss's sparkling music and the operetta's comedic and relatable storyline. The work is a quintessential example of the Viennese operetta tradition and remains a favorite among audiences for its wit, humor, and musical brilliance.

The Overture

1. Introduction:

- The overture begins with a bold and dramatic introduction. It sets the stage for the festivities to come, creating anticipation and excitement.
- The use of powerful orchestral chords and fanfare-like motifs establishes a celebratory atmosphere.

2. Main Themes:

- The overture features several of the main themes that will appear throughout the operetta. These include melodies associated with specific characters and key situations in the plot.
- Strauss skillfully weaves these themes together, providing a musical preview of the operetta's melodic richness.

3. Waltz Section:

- True to Strauss's style, the overture includes a lively waltz section. This showcases the composer's mastery of the Viennese waltz, a dance form central to the operetta.
- The waltz section is characterized by its flowing triple meter and graceful melodies, evoking the elegance of the ballroom.

4. Contrast and Variety:

- Strauss introduces contrasts in dynamics, tempo, and orchestration to keep the overture engaging and dynamic.
- There are moments of playful staccato passages and contrasting legato phrases, adding variety to the overall texture.

5. Buildup and Climax:

- The overture builds in intensity, leading to a climactic section. This heightened moment serves to captivate the audience's attention and create a sense of drama.
- The buildup involves increased orchestral activity, intricate counterpoint, and the use of crescendos.

6. Recapitulation and Coda:

- Following the climax, the overture revisits earlier themes, providing a sense of resolution and completeness.
- The coda, or concluding section, features a brilliant and fast-paced finale, leaving a lasting impression on the listener.

7. Instrumentation:

- Strauss employs a diverse orchestration, utilizing the full range of instruments to create a rich and colorful sound.
- Sections of the orchestra are highlighted, including the strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion, contributing to the overall brilliance of the overture.

8. Orchestral Flourishes:

- Throughout the overture, Strauss incorporates virtuosic passages for different instruments, showcasing the technical prowess of the orchestra.
- These flourishes add to the festive and celebratory nature of the music.

9. Stand-Alone Appeal:

- The overture is crafted with such brilliance that it can be appreciated independently of the operetta. It has become a popular choice for orchestral concerts and is frequently performed in isolation.

In summary, the structure of the overture to “Die Fledermaus” reflects Strauss's ability to create a captivating and well-balanced musical introduction. It effectively encapsulates the operetta's themes, sets the tone for the upcoming performance, and stands as a testament to Strauss's genius in composing engaging and delightful orchestral works.

THE STUDY

The primary material for this study are the different versions of the full score. These versions are the manuscript (M) from 1874, the first edition published by August Cranz (AC) probably in 1890, the Breitkopf und Härtel (B&H) edition from 1910 and the Ernst Eulenburg (EE) edition from 1968. The Breitkopf und Härtel edition has been republished in 1983. E. F. Kalmus has published reprints of the August Cranz and the Breitkopf und Härtel editions. All these Editions can be found on www.imslp.org. The Ernst Eulenburg edition from 1968 is a revised version by Hans Swarowsky and the old version of the Ernst Eulenburg can be found on website of the New York Philharmonic Archive. This old edition is out of print and can not be found anymore otherwise. It contains the most liberties which are based neither on the manuscript nor the first edition by August Cranz.

The proposed secondary material for the comparison of interpretations include audio and video recordings of performances of the "Fledermaus Overture" spanning several decades, compared to the different editions of the score. Additionally, archival documents, conductor interviews, and scholarly writings on Johann Strauss II and Viennese operetta traditions contribute to the contextual understanding of interpretative choices.

RESULTS

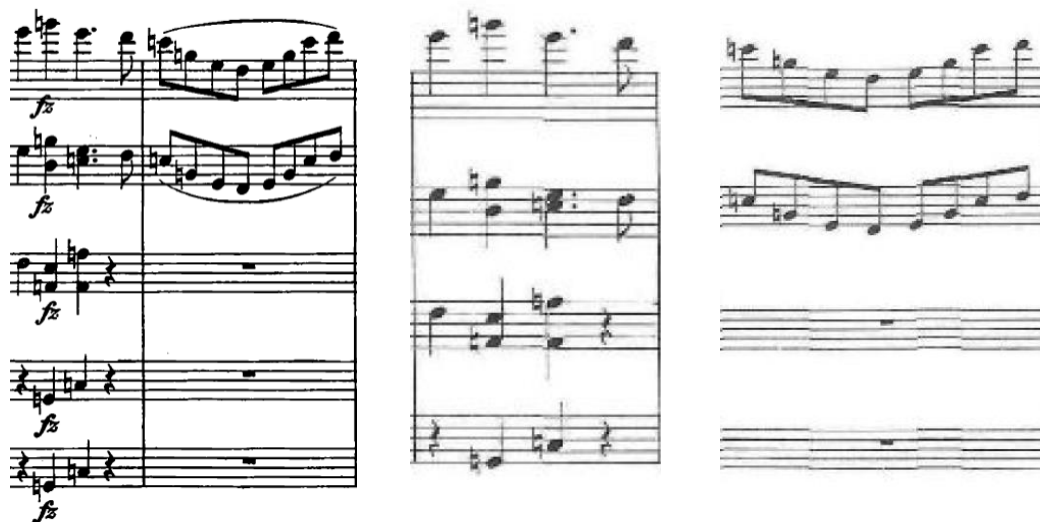
Dynamics and articulation

In the 1st and 3rd bars, different versions are evident. The Violoncello and double bass feature accents on all three beats in B&H and M, while only on the 1st beat in AC, and no accents are present in EE (ex. 1).



Ex. 1: 3rd bar B&H, M, AC, EE

In AC and B&H, a *forzato* appears on the 2nd quarter note in bars 5 and 7. This element is absent in M and EE. Additionally, there is a *legato* bow marked in the woodwinds and violins in bar 6 in AC and B&H. However, the violins lack the *legato* bow in M and EE (ex. 2).



Ex. 2: Bars 6 – 7 in B&H and EE

Upon closer examination, a comprehensive tally reveals a total of 25 distinctions in dynamics and articulation, encompassing the aforementioned examples. Some differences are distinctly conspicuous and carry significant impact. A case in point is the variation in bars 80 as follows: while M and EE lack any indication of a crescendo, CA and B&H explicitly feature a crescendo marking (ex. 3).



Ex. 3: bars 79 -82 in B&H and EE

In the sequence spanning bars 130 to 133, the dynamics in CA and B&H exhibit a pattern of piano, forte, piano, forte per bar. In contrast, the EE edition features two consecutive bars marked forte, followed by two bars designated as piano (ex. 4).

Ex. 4: bars 130 – 133 in B&H and EE (in EE forte is valid from bar 126 already)

Music material

Several discrepancies in pitches and rhythms are observed across different editions of the musical score:

1. In bar 7, the first tone varies between editions. While M, B&H, and EE indicate a “d,” AC specifies an “e” as the initial tone of that bar.
2. Bar 70 features conflicting second tones. B&A/AC designates a “d,” while M/EE notates a “c#.”
3. The final three eighth notes in Bar 121 differ between editions. M/B&A/EE denote “g, b, d,” whereas AC specifies “g, b, c#.”
4. Bar 121 also introduces a discrepancy in playing technique. The double bass plays the same notes *pizzicato*, while the cello is *arco* in M, B&H, and EE, and both instruments are *arco* in AC.
5. In bar 210, the manuscript designates a solo for the Violoncello without a tutti following. EE retains the solo but clarifies that it was intended as soli. B&H and AC omit the solo indication.
6. Bar 276 presents sixteenth notes for the double bass, while the Violoncello has sixteenth notes and eighth notes.
7. Bar 304 exhibits two different versions for violoncellos: a half note “e” or eighth note “e,” eighth rest, eighth note “e,” eighth rest in [specific editions].
8. In bar 333, the 2nd trombone plays a conflicting pitch. B&H/AC indicates a “g#,” while EE specifies an “f#.” The manuscript is ambiguous, allowing for interpretation as either a “g#” or an “f#.”

Tempo and timing

1. In all scores, the time signature is 4/4 or common time (C), but the manuscript features a scratched *alla breve*. While some performers opt for an *allegretto* interpretation in *alla breve*, none of the score editions officially include *alla breve*.
2. Bar 74 is marked *meno mosso* in B&H/AC. In M/EE, there is no tempo marking, and it retains the previous *Allegretto* indication.
3. In bar 102, there is a *poco rit.* (*poco ritardando*) in M, altered in AC at bar 99 or 100, and in EE at bar 104 where the *allegretto* is reintroduced. None of these variations appear in B&H.

4. Bar 122 is designated Tempo di Valse in M and B&H. In EE and AC, the additional instruction “not too fast” (“nicht zu schnell”) is included.
5. Bar 201 features the tempo marking Andante con moto in B&H/AC, whereas only Andante is indicated in M/EE.
6. Bar 227 includes the tempo marking Allegro molto moderato in B&H/AC, while M/EE only specify Allegro molto.
7. In bar 336, there is a fermata on the first beat in B&H/AC. M/EE do not include a fermata at that point.

DISCUSSION

Depending on the edition of the full score used by the conductor and the orchestral material employed by the orchestra, there are three distinct paths for the source of interpretation:

1. The original version from the manuscript in 1784. This is predominantly utilized in the Ernst Eulenburg urtext edition from 1968.
2. The first published edition of the full score by August Cranz. The Breitkopf & Härtel edition is primarily based on this historical source.
3. A third possible is the combination of the above two paths. As there lies 6 years between the premiere in 1874 and the first published score, many performances of Johann Strauss the Son himself has lead to the changes in the August Cranz edition. But these changes happened gradually over these period, where the operetta was performed a lot.

A fourth path emerges in the realm of recordings and performances. The ever evolving taste in beauty and esthetics, has brought more changes to the performance of the Fledermaus Overture, which are not based on the score, but rather on the surrounding elements. Deviating from the written versions, the tones played instead in bar 121 are: g, d, b, drawing inspiration from bar 119 as performed by the 1st violins, flute, and clarinet. Another instance occurs in the upbeat to bar 210, unnoted in any edition but derived from the oboe melody in bar 201/202. This attests to conductors and orchestras embracing more interpretative liberties than suggested by standard editions.

Furthermore, many liberties are taken in tempi and timing of tempo markings. Even extra ritardandi, fermatas and caesuras are added. The delay in the last two eighth notes of bars 82 and 90 are observed. Additionally, caesuras are often applied between bars 125, 126, and 319, 320, marked by double bars in all editions and a thick blue line in the manuscript. This unusual detail might provide a plausible explanation.

The choice of interpretation path significantly influences the performance, reflecting the conductor's preference, historical context, and orchestral traditions. This interpretative variability underscores the dynamic relationship among conductor, orchestra, and musical score. It emphasizes the liberties taken in shaping the Fledermaus Overture's character, illustrating that the creative process extends beyond the printed page. These nuanced approaches contribute to the diversity observed in both recorded renditions and live performances, thereby enriching Johann Strauss II's enduring musical legacy.

CONCLUSION:

The conclusions drawn from this study provide insights into the enduring traditions surrounding the interpretation of the "Fledermaus Overture." The existence of multiple editions introduces two distinct starting points for interpretation. One approach stems from the Ernst Eulenburg Urtext edition, rooted in the manuscript. The alternative starting point is grounded in the first published score by August Cranz, serving as the foundation for the Breitkopf&Härtel edition.

The operetta inherently incorporates satirical elements in the plot, dialogues, and even the music itself. As a result, some traditions remain unwritten, existing as pure musical jokes at the liberty of the interpreter.

By comprehending the historical context and evolving practices, this research contributes to a richer understanding and appreciation of the cultural and stylistic influences that mold performances of this iconic composition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to express his gratitude to Prof. Dr. Mihai Popean and the Faculty of Music and Theatre Timișoara for their support and valuable insights during the research process.

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