



Edition Ferenc Fricssay (V) – J. Strauss: Die Fledermaus

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??? (George Dorris - 1970.01.01)

Zeitung Music on Disc

Only three of Johann Strauss's fifteen operettas achieved real success, while even The Gypsy Baron and A Night in Venice lag behind the popularity of Die Fledermaus. But the others are surely worth more than an occasional hearing, so I welcome this chance to discover two more: Das Spitzentuch der Königin: (1880), his seventh, and Fürstin Ninetta (1893), his twelfth. The former, which achieved its greatest success in the United States as The Queen's Lace Handkerchie, has another of his too-frequent weak librettos, but as expected it's packed with melody and high spirits, especially in the joyous second act, only some of which turn up in the glorious waltz "Roses from the South," taken from this work.

The plot concerns a young king (a "trouser role") whose neglected queen persuades him to dismiss his autocratic minister after many tangles involving Cervantes! The performance is good, although the king's piquant song praising truffles gets a mannered reading. The notes are trilingual, but no texts. My only other complaint is that by cutting out the snippets of dialogue it would just fit on one CD.

Princess Ninetta also brims with melody, expert orchestration, and charm. The weakness of its book – the usual amorous tangles and confused identities, here set in an Italian hotel – vanishes on records as songs, ensembles, waltzes, and polkas blend into another score full of delights. The dialogue has been omitted in this performance by a stylish Swedish cast, getting it onto one disc, while the libretto is available online. Another delightful Strauss rarity is Simplicius from 1887, in a fine Zurich recording of, on EMI Classics 557009 2. Let's hope for more of these revivals, starting with The Merry War and his only opera, Ritter Pásmán, with its elaborate ballet sequence.

Die Fledermaus can also be heard in a strong performance from a Berlin 1949 broadcast. With Ferenc Fricssay leading an experienced cast including Peter Anders and the young Rita Streich, it captures the verve and melodic richness of Strauss' s irresistible score, with enough dialogue to carry the plot and "The Blue Danube" serving as the act 2 dance music. The sound is inevitably dated, but these artists indeed have the style in their veins and I'd rank this just after the classic recordings of Clement Krauss and Karajan. The notes focus on Fricssay and the occasion.

Die Blau Mazur (1920), the nineteenth of Lehár's twenty-seven operettas (not counting nine major reworkings), is set around Vienna, although the titular blue mazurka is Polish, the last dance of a ball as dawn breaks. Here the complications

start with a wedding ceremony and the usual nonsense ensues, with room for as much musical variety as possible, until the couple are reunited at the end of act 3. The score is vintage Lehár, if lacking the kind of instantly recognizable number that made *The Merry Widow* and *The Land of Smiles* lasting successes, but it has its charms and its own share of Lehár delights passed around the large cast before that final dance. All this is well handled by these forces from Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, along with substantial dialogue. The notes are also good, but no libretto.

