A formal friendship

Henrietta Bredin

On 22 March 1899 Count Harry Kessler, a German diplomat, scholar and director of the Cranach-Presse in Weimar, met with the writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal in Berlin and noted in his diary:

> Hofmannsthal complains that he can never come up with subjects for plays. I should look for them in memoirs, etc and send them to him. About the lack of success of his plays he is not at all discouraged. He hopes still to earn money, and lots of money, in the theatre.

Six days later they lunched with the composer Richard Strauss and his wife, Pauline. At this point neither Strauss nor von Hofmannsthal was enjoying a substantial measure of public success but this was to change. Within three years Strauss had composed *Salome*, based on the play by Oscar Wilde, and Hofmannsthal had agreed to make a libretto for him from his own play, *Elektra*, based on Sophocles. The two men, Strauss ten years the older, established a remarkable creative partnership – a collaboration conducted chiefly by written correspondence – while Kessler, as it turned out, was sidelined.

Hofmannsthal's request for ideas from Kessler was trumped by Strauss, who – in his first letter about *Elektra*, in March 1906 – requested 'first refusal' on 'anything composable' by Hofmannsthal and added: 'Your manner has so much in common with mine; we were born for one another and are certain to do fine things together if you remain faithful to me.' Their writing and composing may have had traits in common but their personalities differed widely. Strauss was practical, confident, even-tempered and theatrically astute, while Hofmannsthal was introverted and insecure, prone to depression and a sort of nervous arrogance. After the premiere of *Elektra* in 1909, Hofmannsthal wrote to Kessler saying:

> I hope I shall be able to exert a certain influence over him. In this unusual relationship it is my duty to guide him in a sense. I have more understanding of art than he has, or perhaps it is a question of a more elevated, a better taste. He may well be my superior in energy or actual talent, but that is beside the point.

Many years later, Strauss wrote that Hofmannsthal had 'educated my often not wholly unexceptionable taste' but he underestimated himself – he was widely read and knowledgeable about art and music.

The two shared a tendency to artistic ruthlessness, each recognising that the other possessed skills and qualities that would enhance their own creative output. Less than a month after the first performance of *Elektra*, Hofmannsthal was writing to Strauss:

> I have spent three quiet afternoons drafting the full and entirely original scenario for an opera, full of burlesque situations and characters, with lively action, pellucid almost like a pantomime. There are opportunities in it for lyrical passages, for fun and humour, even for a small ballet. I find the scenario enchanting and Count Kessler, with whom I discussed it, is delighted with it. It contains two big parts, one for baritone and one for a graceful girl dressed up as a man. Period: the old Vienna under Empress Maria Theresa.

The scenario was not exactly 'entirely original' and Kessler's contribution was rather more extensive than a simple discussion. He had come up with the original idea, inspired by an operetta he had seen in Paris, *L'Ingénu libertin*, by Louis Artus and Claude Terrasse, and he worked with Hofmannsthal for three to four days to devise an outline that, as he wrote in his diary, was 'worked out in detail, situation for situation, and almost gesture for gesture. Only the words are still missing which the characters will speak … Hofmannsthal said that this drafting of a scenario with another gives him the same security as if the scenario came from someone else's play.'

After this session of hard graft, Hofmannsthal forged ahead on his own, although Kessler was still sufficiently part of the team to be present when Strauss played through much of the opera in February 1910, during which 'Frau Strauss danced and sang to the waltz with raised skirts' and after which they all went to a performance of *Elektra*, conducted by Strauss, and – evincing remarkable stamina – enjoyed a late supper afterwards. Pauline Strauss, a volatile character, became less cheerful as the evening advanced, interrupting Kessler mid-anecdote to object to him 'telling a tedious story so slowly'.

Although Strauss was delighted with the first scene of the *Rosenkavalier* libretto, telling Hofmannsthal that he was 'Da Ponte and Scribe rolled into one', and that the text would 'set itself to music like oil and melted butter', he had plenty of criticisms and constructive suggestions to make as the writing continued. Hofmannsthal was gracious in response, taking the comments in good part and recognising that Strauss's dramaturgical instincts were acute, but it didn't stop him complaining to Kessler that Strauss had 'a frightful bent towards triviality and kitsch' and that 'vulgarity rises in him as easily as groundwater'. Over the years to follow their respect and affection for one another increased but they remained formal, their letters invariably opening with 'Dear Dr Strauss' and 'Dear Herr von Hofmannsthal', never 'Richard' or 'Hugo'.

Top: Hugo von Hofmannsthal c.1900

Above: Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss, silhouette by Bithorn

The choice of an eighteenth-century setting, of 'old Vienna under Empress Maria Theresa', was crucial. It was a time of considerable political change, of revolution and unrest, with clear parallels to their own time, the early twentieth century, only a few years before the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and the great conflict and upheaval of the First World War. Imperial Vienna was a place where rank and class were scrupulously observed, where Baron Ochs, however oafish a character, could only contemplate marriage to a woman of his own class but where money talked and the nouveau-riche Faninal was able to make his daughter Sophie acceptable in society by buying himself a title. The different personalities in the opera are all drawn with sharp nuance and understanding – Viennese audiences had no trouble in finding a distinct contemporary resonance in the portrayal of an impoverished aristocrat from the provinces or an upwardly mobile businessman. Strauss and Hofmannsthal set out to emulate Mozart and Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro* and the social tensions underlying that comedy were just as evident in 1911. That extraordinary alchemy that can occur when words and music balance and augment one another brings with it an empathy for the predicaments in which the characters find themselves – the Marschallin painfully aware of the passing of time, Octavian knocked sideways by the onslaught of love at first sight, Sophie humiliated and appalled by Ochs's behaviour.

It was a choice that certainly appealed to German and Austrian audiences, who found both the setting and the fact that the opera was announced as a comedy, a great draw. The premiere in Dresden on 26 January 1911 was the social event of the season – there were 50 performances there that year, and 37 in Vienna. By the end of 1911 the opera had also been staged in Berlin, Milan and Rome, and Thomas Beecham conducted the British premiere at Covent Garden in 1913. Although *Der Rosenkavalier* didn't provoke quite the mania for associated products as Lehár's *The Merry Widow* had done in 1905 – hats, hairstyles, perfumes, parasols – the first performances were hugely popular. Special train services were run to allow people to attend from all over Austria and Germany, Octavian's costume for the Presentation of the Silver Rose – a purely invented ritual – was copied by numerous people at that year's Munich carnival, there were Rosenkavalier cigarettes and Rosenkavalier champagne.

The music was a deliberate turning away by Strauss from the soundworld of his previous two operas, *Salome* and *Elektra*, which had shocked and thrilled with their decadent harmonies and brutal dissonance. With *Der Rosenkavalier* he was seen by some to have retreated into a sort of reactionary luxuriance, a wallowing in Mozartian nostalgia, even a harking back to an earlier Strauss – Johann – and his *Die Fledermaus*. However, with his brilliantly acute theatrical instinct he knew exactly what he was doing – the waltz rhythms that suffuse *Der Rosenkavalier* are intoxicating but they are definitely not eighteenth-century. They are brilliantly anachronistic and thoroughly of their time, the uneasy early years of the twentieth century.