

D. The Merry Widow

The final hour of the class will present excerpts from *Die Lustige Witwe* (The Merry Widow) by **Franz Lehár**, written in 1905 but very much repeating the ingredients of *Die Fledermaus* three decades earlier.

We will attempt to at least sketch the outlines of the story. The title character **Hanna Glawari**, who has been left fabulously rich on her husband's death, is visiting Paris from the fictional Balkan country of Pontevedro. Afraid that she may fall for the charm of a French suitor, the Pontevedrian ambassador **Baron Zeta** tries to get her married to his attaché, **Count Danilo**. He does not realize that these two have a history, or that while sufficient spark remains to make them flirt, Danilo refuses to commit his love. And Zeta absolutely does not know that his young wife **Valencienne** is teetering on the brink of an affair with a young French count, **Camille de Rosillon**.

Lehár: *The Merry Widow*, excerpts (Metropolitan Opera, 2015; d. Bartlett Sher; c. Sir Andrew Davis; Renée Fleming, *Hanna*; Kelli O'Hara, *Valencienne*; Alek Schrader, *Camille*; Nathan Gunn, *Danilo*; Sir Thomas Allen, *Zeta*)

William Schwenk **Gilbert** (1836–1911, *English dramatist*), Franz **Lehár** (1870–1948, *Austrian composer*), Jacques **Offenbach** (1819–80, *German-French composer*), Johann **Strauss II** (1825–99, *Austrian composer*), Sir Arthur Seymour **Sullivan** (1842–1900, *English composer*)

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The Birth of Broadway



1. European Visitors

February 18, 2025

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IN 1907, A SHOW REACHED BROADWAY FROM EUROPE that ran for an unprecedented 417 performances. This was *The Merry Widow*, the English translation of a 1905 operetta in the Viennese style by Franz Lehár. Within years, American composers were trying their hands at the new style, and younger emigrants from Eastern Europe were coming over to write American works that nonetheless reflected this style with which they had grown up.

The term *operetta* generally refers to a type of light opera that was popular in Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Its plots are always comic or romantic, and often both. There is generally more dialogue than even operas with spoken text, and for many of the roles acting skill is more important than a classically-trained voice. Spectacle and dance also play an important part, especially in Viennese operettas, which are steeped in mystery and wish-fulfilment and the magic of the waltz. *rb.*

A. La vie Parisienne

The father of European operetta was undoubtedly **Jacques Offenbach**, a German who spent his entire adult life in France. Most of his 100+ operettas are one-act farces with a small cast, and something of this quality remains in full-length works such as *La vie Parisienne* (1866, The Parisian Life), each of whose acts is virtually an episode on its own. There is very little romance or genuine feeling, but Offenbach excels at snappy numbers and ensembles guaranteed to ring the curtain down.

Offenbach: *La vie Parisienne*, Acts I and V (Paris 2022, d. Christian Lacroix; c. Romain Dumas; Éric Huchet, *the Brazilian*)

B. HMS Pinafore

Pinafore (1878) was the first American success of the writing team of **Gilbert and Sullivan**, although it was presented in unofficial pirated productions whose ubiquity quite reduced the impact of the official production which came over several months too late. The plot is a satire on the Victorian (and American?) custom of appointing people to administrative posts who have no experience whatever in the field. So **Sir Joseph Porter KGB**, the First Lord of the Admiralty, is a political hack who has never actually set foot on a ship—until he visits the *Pinafore* with his retinue of womenfolk, and tries to impose the decorum of a Victorian drawing-room.

Sullivan: *HMS Pinafore*, Sir Joseph's entrance and Act II trio (Stratford Ontario, 1981; d. Leon Major; c. Paul Starkman; Eric Donkin, *Sir Joseph*; Katherine Terrell, *Josphine*; Michael Burgess, *Captain Corcoran*)

C. Die Fledermaus

Die Fledermaus (1874, The Bat) by **Johann Strauss II** virtually defines the genre of Viennese operetta, and its Act II finale at the party thrown by **Prince Orlofsky** manages to condense all the major elements into a single stretch of music: an upbeat song in the Offenbach manner, a slow ensemble dripping with nostalgia, a bunch of plot points, a vigorous closing number, and of course that famous waltz.

Strauss: *Die Fledermaus*, Act II finale (Vienna State Opera 1972; d. Otto Schenk; c. Karl Böhm; Wolfgang Windgassen, *Orlofsky*; Eberhard Waechter, *Eisenstein*; Heinz Holecsek, *Falke*)