

Class 10: Der Rosenkavalier

A. Presentation

1. Title Slide 1 (website title)
2. Section title A (Strauss posters)

Der Rosenkavalier (The Rose-Bearer, 1911) is without doubt the best known opera by **Richard Strauss** (1864–1949). He wrote it directly after *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), two radically modern one-act works whose violent **Expressionism** marked the composer as a voice of the new century. Compared to those, *Der Rosenkavalier*, in three expansive acts, is a genial return to the past. Although set in the mid-18th century, its musical language is the Waltz, as though Richard Strauss were channelling mid-19th century world of his no-relation-namesake Johann.

3. Elina Garanca as Octavian

The title character is **Count Octavian Rofrano**, a handsome young man of noble birth. He is probably in his later teens, but Strauss casts him, like **Cherubino** in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, as a **mezzo-soprano** in pants. This has given trouble to some people in previous classes, especially as the opera opens with him in bed with a woman, **the Marschallin**, but you have to accept it; is it really so different from Shakespeare giving his female parts to boys? This one, Elina Garanca at the Met, is more than usually convincing.

4. Solti DVD cover

The production I have chosen to show is a relatively old one, from the **Royal Opera House in 1985**. But there are no good stills available, so I am turning to more recent productions for non-video images. I admit to choosing the London production because I used to have a crush on **Anne Howells**, who plays the title role; I still use the aftershave she give me as a first-night present (though not of course the same bottle). Anyway here goes. I won't give you the very opening. The orchestra plays an extremely graphic description of their love-making, then the curtain rises on a lot of pillow-talk. I'll pick it up instead when they are out of bed, and the Marschallin's little Black servant has brought in their chocolate. It is also one of the clearest examples of the composer's use of the waltz. The Marschallin is **Kiri te Kanawa**.

5. Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*, breakfast scene
6. Renée Fleming and Alice Coote

This idyllic scene is interrupted by the arrival of **Baron Ochs von Lerchnau**, a boorish distant relative. He is about to become engaged to Sophie von Faninal, the teenage daughter of a *nouveau-riche* merchant,

recently ennobled. Ochs asks the Marschallin to nominate a young man to serve as Rosenkavalier, in the engagement ceremony—supposedly traditional, but in fact invented by Strauss’s librettist, **Hugo von Hofmannstahl** (1874–1929).

7. Two depictions of Baron Ochs

I should have said that, in order to hide when Ochs comes in, Octavian slips into a closet, and emerges a while later as the Marschallin’s supposed chambermaid, **Mariandel**— a nice reversal of the Shakespeare trope of comic heroines disguising themselves as the boys they are. Ochs’s immediate lust for this pretty young thing makes it immediately clear that he is interested in Sophie Faninal only for her dowry; for his other needs, any young woman will do.

8. Lisa Davidsen as the Marschallin

Octavian is the leading character in the opera, with by far the most to sing, but the role that most sopranos aspire to is the **Marschallin**, even though she doesn’t appear in the second Act, and only in the latter part of Act Three. This is because the study of a fortyish woman, not old, but conscious of her aging, has a dimension that is rather rare in opera. Married to a much older man—a Field Marshall, hence her title, though she herself is a princess—she has to look elsewhere for romance. It is pretty clear that Octavian is only the most recent of many young lovers over the decades. She knows she cannot keep him, but she wants the best for him too. So, half aware of what may happen when he meets someone of his own age, it is Octavian she recommends as the Rosenkavalier. I had a choice in this class between featuring Octavian’s relationship with the Marschallin or the new one with Sophie. I couldn’t do both; young love won out.

9. Erin Morley and Elina Garanca

So the stage is set for the first of my two featured scenes, the **Presentation of the Rose** that opens Act Two. Note how Strauss builds the excitement by having Sophie’s companion narrate events in the street outside. Then the *coup-de-théâtre* of Octavian’s entrance. Then the silvery shimmer that Strauss casts over the entire scene with those almost random chords on the celesta. Listen for the way Sophie’s voice rises high and blooms up there on a couple of magical occasions; the first is where she discovers that the artificial silver rose has real perfume on it. I’ll continue through the rather awkward conversation between the two young people as they wait for Ochs to arrive, then his utter boorishness when he does come. Given the context of this course, I want you to think about how the magic of the scene has as much to do with Strauss’s pacing as with any individual moment in it.

10. Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*, opening of Act II

What did you think of Strauss’s pacing? Are there any other points you wish to comment on?

B. Outcome

11. Section title B (list of events)

My other featured scene is the last 18 minutes of the opera. As this pulls together threads from earlier in the opera, it may be helpful to list them. (1) After witnessing a lot more boorish behavior from Ochs, Octavian asks Sophie if she really wants to marry him, then challenges him on her behalf. (2) He gives Ochs a flesh wound in the duel; the latter makes a federal case out of it. (3) Octavian then uses an Italian go-between to send Ochs a letter from “Mariandel” agreeing to a date that evening. (4) He sets this up, however, as a honey trap, arranging for them to be interrupted by tradesmen wanting their bills paid, bastard children seeking support, the chief of police and so on. (5) He also arranges for the Marschallin and Faninal to be called; Ochs (**Aage Haugland**) bluffs it out for a while, then beats a retreat. I have just time to illustrate parts of this with two short clips, played back to back. First, the ending of Act II, in which the Italian go-between, Annina, presents “Mariandel’s” letter. Wounded or not, the thought that he is going to score makes Ochs feel pretty good about himself, and the act ends with him singing his favorite waltz. Then a very short clip of Octavian playing the role of Mariandel to the hilt.

12. Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*, end of Act II

13. Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*, Act III, Mariandel

14. Act III at the Met

Ochs leaves, as I said, leaving the three main characters alone on the stage; this is the scene from the Met. The Marschallin had reassured the Police Chief by explaining that the whole thing was “a Viennese masquerade, and nothing more.” But now Sophie mulls over these words, wondering if she too had been merely a prop in the Viennese masquerade. The Marschallin reassures her with a few words, and sends her back to Octavian. But he is torn between his loyalty to the Marschallin and his new feeling for Sophie. And the Marschallin, in her turn, realizes that she must take the final step in the process that she had set in motion when she suggested Octavian as the Rosenkavalier, and allow him to move on to someone his own age. Emotionally, it is an enormously complex situation that would defeat even the greatest playwright, but music can cut through to the core. So we have the famous trio. The duet between Octavian that follows, beautiful as it is, now seems inevitable. But Strauss and Hofmannsthal leave the last unspoken word to the Marschallin’s little page boy, come back to look for a handkerchief that she had dropped.

15. Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*, Act III, trio and duet

16. Class title 2 (How it all Began)