Performing Masculinity in Johann Strauss's 'Die Fledermaus'

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the performance and articulation of masculinity in Johann Strauss’s third operetta, Die Fledermaus. Since the operetta’s premiere at the Theater an der Wien on 5 April 1875, Die Fledermaus has become one of the most enduring works in the operetta repertory. Die Fledermaus is regularly performed in all the world’s major opera houses but, despite its popularity, there exist relatively few critical studies of this operetta, and fewer still that address the significance of gender in the piece. In this thesis I argue that as a work with an unusual number of male characters originating in later nineteenth-century Vienna — a period and place where masculinities were moulded by complex, rigid social codes and distinctions — significant new insight can be gained by approaching the work through its articulation of masculinities. The male characters in Die Fledermaus also exhibit several elements of troubled, atypical, and non-heroic forms of masculinity. The title ‘Performing Masculinities in Johann Strauss’s Die Fledermaus’ alludes to the idea that masculinity and femininity are highly mutable and individual forms of performance, conditioned by a variety of personal and societal influences.

For several decades, scholars from a variety of disciplines have examined the significance of gender in opera from many theoretical perspectives. New analyses of opera conducted under the disciplinary umbrella of feminist musicology have provided a challenging discursive illumination of the position of women in opera. More recently, interest in studying operatic masculinities has burgeoned, firstly as a response to a wider scholarly interest in critical masculinities and secondly as a recognition of the need to dissect, problematize, and even pathologize the varied manifestations of masculinity in opera. However, research investigating operatic masculinities has seldom broached the unique and specific qualities of operetta.

The primary goal of this thesis is to develop a new critical understanding of Die Fledermaus, using its depictions of masculinities to challenge generic and popular clichés about the work. An interdisciplinary approach to this project combines musical and textual analysis with cultural history and masculinity theory. My study considers a range of primary and archival sources — including historical newspapers and journals, scores and recordings of operetta, personal papers, and iconography — all of which help to illuminate cultural constructions of masculinity in late nineteenth-century Vienna, relevant to the reception of Die Fledermaus. Secondary sources from a variety of disciplines, including political and social history, medical and art history, philosophy, and literary studies, help to shape the broad historical context for the thesis, while connecting this context with the ways that Die Fledermaus articulates masculinity.

By making use of cultural products contemporary with the creation and early performances of Die Fledermaus, to make a contextual analysis of the characters’ behaviour and interactions, the thesis presents Die Fledermaus as a reflection of society; inherent in this reflection are concerns about ideal, correct, and problematic forms of masculinity. These themes are manifest in Chapter 1, which traces how the male characters contend with the conventions of manly honour and Satisfaktionsfähigkeit, two concepts critical to Viennese masculinities in the late nineteenth century. The second chapter discusses the character Orlofski, whose synthesis of Russian and Austro-German traits and types of masculinity emerges through his Langeweile and his resemblance to the Russian ‘superfluous man’ (lishniy chelovék). Chapter 3 continues the exploration of Orlofski but considers the intersection of masculinity and the travesti role, and the reception of early performers of Orlofski at the Theater an der Wien and Hofoper. The fourth chapter steps away from Vienna, turning its attention to the first performance of Die Fledermaus in London. The chapter highlights the theory that geography and culture play a crucial role in the construction of masculinities by examining the connections between Charles Hamilton Aidé’s adaptation of the operetta and the intellectual milieu of Aidé, Matthew Arnold, G. H. Lewes, and their peers. In Chapter 5, the thesis moves back to fin de siècle Vienna, when Die Fledermaus began a new life at the Hofoper, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing presented to the world in Psychopathia Sexualis his newly medicalized and pathologized view of masculinity. I suggest that viewing Die Fledermaus from the perspective of Krafft-Ebing’s texts would have given some in the Hofoper audience a new insight or justification for the behaviour of Strauss and Genée’s characters.

In sum, the thesis offers a detailed exploration of Die Fledermaus, connecting its characters’ performances or articulations of masculinity with a variety of musical, historical, and cultural contexts. The thesis illuminates new perspectives on the operatic masculinities within Die Fledermaus and contributes to the larger body of scholarship concerning masculinities in Habsburg Vienna.
Johann Strauss II, Die Fledermaus. Overture. I: "Täubchen, das entflattert ist". Together they performed Johann Strauss II’s operetta Die Fledermaus, a comedic gem brimming over with delightful melodies and champagne-induced hilarity (quite literally... in Act 2 comes the Champagne Song!). Set on New Year’s Eve 1874, Strauss’s beloved tale of a practical joke gone wild was inspired by a French vaudeville comedy. The plot revolves around a Viennese ball, featuring large amounts of deception and mistaken identity, and contains no actual bats; the title refers to a grudge one of the characters holds after being the victim, at an earlier party, of an embarrassing prank involving a bat costume. Gabriel von Eisenstein, due to spend eight days in jail for a minor offense, bids a sorrowful farewell to his wife and departs — not to jail, but to Prince Orlovsky’s ball, where he looks...