

Program Notes

A Viennese Christmas

As we are devoting the 2006-07 season at the Waukesha Symphony to the genius of Mozart, it seems more than fitting that we stay in Vienna for the Holiday season and celebrate the Christmas and New Year's traditions of that most musical of cities. And while tonight's second half, as is our annual tradition, spends more time with sacred music of the season - with not one but two "Hallelujah" Choruses by great German composers, and the evergreen "dream sequence" from Humperdinck's lush score for *Hansel and Gretel* - on our first half we celebrate the very secular and earthy geniuses of the Johann Strauss family, and the tradition they served. Indeed, in some fashion they were even the worthy successor to Mozart; in their uncanny ability to move from joy to melancholy, from tears to laughter in a single bar, they struck an emotional chord that is both truly in the Viennese character, and universal at the Holiday season.

Whereas Leopold Mozart obsessively cultivated a musical career for his son - Wolfgang's early Epiphany motet "Exultate, jubilate" was written for a brief winter public-relations sojourn to Italy - Johann Strauss the Elder, the first of the "Waltz Kings", did everything to work in the opposite direction! But it was to no avail, and Johann Strauss II (1825-1899) not only went into music, but perfected that newly emerging popular dance form originating in the city's cafes; and by the 1840's the Strauss family orchestra was the center of attention in the ball-season of wintertime Vienna. Young Johann's "Accelerations" Waltzes of 1860 is one of his finest; as the title suggests, within the first few bars we are whisked from the humble cafe waltz to something grander, deeper, more spiritual, more joyous - no mere set of dances, this, but a symphonic poem in miniature.

Like many great composers, Johann Strauss Jr. longed to write for the stage, ever hankering for that "grand operetta" that would spread his name throughout Europe as a man to be taken seriously; and his New Year's Eve farce *Die Fledermaus* ("The Bat", 1874) is truly a success in that genre which he never equaled. The effervescent "waltz-aria" of that pesky maidservant Adele, the very musical equivalent of champagne, shows why. The man who was very much Strauss' successor in this regard, the Austro-Hungarian master Franz Lehar (1870-1948), had a similarly early and meteoric success with *The Merry Widow* (1905), which he, too, spent a lifetime trying to surpass. The haunting "Vilja-Song" is Strauss' old effervescence, tinged with a late-Romantic melancholy (think of that bottle of champagne, now aged into a riper vintage). Needless to say, both men need not have felt insecure; Strauss enjoyed both the friendship and admiration of no less than Johannes Brahms, and Lehar the camaraderie of Puccini (indeed the two so respected each other that Lehar was very seriously considered to complete the monumental opera *Turnadot* after Puccini's untimely death).

And now we come to some other members of the Strauss family. Johann's younger brother Josef Strauss (1827-1870) - or, as he was called on the streets of Vienna, "the melancholy Strauss" - is truly one of the more curious, and underrated figures of his time. Originally trained as an architect and engineer - among his achievements was a street-

cleaning machine for the City of Vienna - he was eventually persuaded by his over-worked elder brother to join the family business, and soon the two brothers were running the Strauss family orchestra on a joint basis. As a composer of waltzes and polkas Josef was by all accounts equally gifted, indeed some feel even more so; more than one critic has suspected Josef of generously "lending" some of his compositions to the sleep-starved Johann. His works often show a superior subtlety and craftsmanship, as well as a broader and deeper range of influences; shades of Liszt, Chopin and Wagner hauntingly color his scores. Had he not died far too early, due to the exhaustion brought about by his nervous personality, his voice would have been even more celebrated and unique. Still, he left us many miniature masterpieces, that hold their own with Johann's in every respect. His little gem of a slow "polka mazur"(in the style of a mazurka), *The Dragonfly*, is unforgettable in its Polish tinge of pessimism; but *Little Chatterbox* proves that he, too could revel in the lighter moments. One of his finest works, the *Delirium* Waltzes - composed, of course, for a doctors' ball - is a delicious blend of levity and drama.

Eduard Strauss (1835-1916), the youngest of the Strauss brothers, was originally trained as a diplomat, until he, too felt the lure of the podium and the lustre of Vienna's grand balls. While the least brilliant of the sons as a composer (though apparently he was, by many accounts, the finest conductor), several of his works - including my favorite, the carefree "race-track" polka *Bahn frei* ("Open Track", 1869) - reveal a timeless charm. What better way to ring in the Holidays than this; for one night, at least, we can all be Viennese.

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