

*Virginia
Opera*

LEHAR'S *the*
Merry Widow

STUDY GUIDE

2004-2005 SEASON

THE MERRY WIDOW

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Premiere

First performance on December 30, 1905, at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, Austria.

Cast of Characters

Hanna Glawari	Soprano
Valencienne , wife of Baron Zeta	Soprano
Count Danilo Danilovich , legation secretary	Baritone
Camille de Rosillon , French diplomatic attaché	Tenor
Baron Mirko Zeta , Pontevedrian envoy in Paris	Baritone
Viscount Cascada	Tenor
Raoul de St. Brioche	Tenor
Njegus , Zeta's aide	spoken
Parisian and Pontevedrian aristocracy, Grisettes, musicians, servants	Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: Pontevedrian Embassy in Paris, France, 1905.

Baron Zeta is hosting a party at the Pontevedrian embassy. One of the guests, Hanna Glawari, is visiting Paris after the death of her husband. Zeta must prevent her from marrying a foreigner. If her late husband's wealth is taken out of Pontevedro, it would bankrupt the country. At the party she meets Count Danilovich. They had once wished to marry when she was poor, but were prevented by his uncle. He now scorns her money and pretends not to care about her. Zeta urges Danilo to marry Hanna to keep her money in Pontevedro. Another guest is Camille de Rosillon who is engaged in a mild flirtation with Baron Zeta's wife, Valencienne. She reminds Camille of her respectability and warns against becoming too serious.

Hanna hosts a garden party the next day. Danilo attends but remains aloof. Camille and Valencienne agree to end their flirtation but meet one last time in the garden summerhouse. Valencienne tells Camille he should marry Hanna. Zeta also plans to meet in the summerhouse with Danilo and his aide. All arrive simultaneously but Hanna is able to take Valencienne's place before she is seen by Zeta. Camille declares his love for Hanna. Hearing this makes Danilo jealous. Hanna, who is enjoying the farce, announces she will marry Camille.

Danilo forbids Hanna's marriage out of patriotic duty and but then learns that the planned marriage was just a jest. He admits his love for her and accepts her wealth gracefully. Zeta forgives his wife and all join in a salute to women and their unpredictable ways.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Act I

With the ever-present musical backdrop of a waltz theme, Baron Mirko Zeta greets his guests at an embassy function and leads them in a toast. His wife, Valenciennes, is speaking privately to a young attaché who fancies himself in love with her. She is flattered, but cautions him that she is a respectable married woman in the gentle song, “I am a dutiful wife.” Zeta is preoccupied with his concern over the arrival in Paris of the young widow, Hanna Glawari, whose now-deceased husband was the richest man in Pontevedro. He is concerned that she will marry a foreigner while she is in Paris, effectively removing her great fortune from their tiny country, creating a financial calamity.

Hanna arrives at the party fully aware of Zeta’s anxiety and soothes him by expressing her love for her homeland. Several suitors claim her attention and she leads them away. Lehar uses the entrance song to instantly characterize each of the principal roles. Hanna’s character is clearly demonstrated in her entrance aria as we immediately experience her glamour and observe her ability to handle the opposite sex. Also evident in this waltz number is the lilt and *rubato* (give and take rhythmically) expected of a performer. This practice was not notated in the score but is stylistically authentic. The next guest is Count Danilo Danilovich whose entrance aria promptly states his preference for spending his evenings with lovely ladies at the cabaret, Maxim’s. The frequent harmonic changes of the verse accompaniment certainly depict his fickleness when it comes to women. The refrain of his entrance song also makes use of *rubato*, gradually accelerating the tempo to paint the sensual dream-like quality of his favorite hangout. Danilo recoils upon hearing Hanna’s name but quickly comes face-to-face with her. They had once been in love but had been separated by Danilo’s uncle who prevented their marriage due to her unsuitability. Now Danilo is scornful of Hanna’s money and does not wish to appear interested in her.

Baron Zeta has noticed Danilo and Hanna together and seizes the moment, telling Danilo that it is his patriotic duty to marry Hanna thereby keeping her great fortune in Pontevedro. The dancing has begun and a ladies’ choice is announced. Hanna’s suitors are hovering close by, hoping for an invitation, but Hanna chooses Danilo who at first makes the excuse that he can’t dance and then offers to sell his dance with Hanna for 10,000 francs. Her other suitors are discouraged by the amount and walk away. Left alone, Danilo acquiesces to dance with Hanna who refuses him in exasperation. Danilo ends up dancing without a partner. Musically the action of Act I culminates with the ballroom dance number that closes the act. Lehar crafts a perfectly sculptured melody combined with a bit of chromaticism and syncopation. The ensemble number is introduced by Danilo and is then repeated by the full orchestra and chorus.

Act II

The following day Hanna hosts a party where the guests are treated to authentic Pontevedrian singing and dancing. The accompanying music takes the form of a spirited Polonaise and then a nationalistic dance called the *kolo*. Hanna entertains the group with the ballad of “Vilja,” a woodland sprite who falls in love with a mortal man. “Vilja” is probably the most famous melody of the operetta. Beginning on a pianissimo (ppp) then soaring to a high

“G” on the repeat of the sprite’s name, there is an enchanting, bewitching feel to the melodic line.

Hanna tells Baron Zeta that she intends to engage a troop of dancing girls to entertain Danilo in the style of Maxim’s cabaret. This buoys his hope that something of a romantic nature will develop between Hanna and Danilo. Danilo arrives at the party but seems oblivious to Hanna’s apparent interest. Zeta asks Danilo and Njegus, his aide, to meet him at the summerhouse in the garden at eight o’clock and then joins with some other men from the party to ponder the unpredictability of women. Hanna continues to probe Danilo’s possible interest in her. They walk away leaving Valencienne and Camille to talk privately about the future of their flirtation. They sing a little duet that contains harmonic progressions reminiscent of Puccini and Debussy. Valencienne feels their infatuation should come to an end and that Camille should propose marriage to Hanna. Camille is dismayed but agrees to one last meeting in the summerhouse.

Njegus sees the pair go into the summerhouse and retrieves Valencienne just as her husband arrives. Hanna takes her place in the summerhouse with Camille but Zeta, however, is still suspicious of what he thinks he saw. In the meantime Camille is playing out his part in the pretense thereby convincing Danilo that Hanna is having a romance with Camille. He sounds so credible that Valencienne believes it as well and is dismayed by Camille fickleness. Hanna knows that none of this is true but is enjoying herself so much that she expands on the joke and announces that she is going to marry Camille. Danilo pretends to be unaffected by the news but ultimately can not contain his frustrated anger. He draws himself up in righteous indignation to tell the story of a princess who made a ruin of her life simply because she wanted to spite her lover. That said, he stomps off, looking for solace in the delights of Maxim’s. Musically, Lehár brings Act II to a close with a brilliant central act finale modeled after the Italian opera buffa. Mozart and Rossini brought this form to perfection and Lehár skillfully follows their lead.

Act III

It is later that same night and Njegus has assisted Hanna in converting her parlor into the very image of Maxim’s cabaret, including the Grisettes with whom Valencienne has volunteered to appear. Danilo comes in and joins in the rousing chorus as Lolo, Dodo, Joujou, Froufrou, Cloclo and Margot lavish attention on him. He receives a telegram from Pontevedro verifying the country’s financial collapse if Hanna’s money is removed from the Pontevedrian treasury. Out of patriotism Danilo officially prohibits Hanna’s marriage with Camille. Hanna reveals that the marriage plans were fabricated and Danilo reacts joyfully, admitting his love for her.

In the meantime Baron Zeta has determined that Valencienne really was the woman he saw in the summerhouse and states that he will divorce her. Then he promptly asks Hanna to marry him. Hanna states that her dead husband’s will stipulated that she would lose her money if she remarried. Danilo is excited by the prospect that Hanna’s money will not be an issue and he states that he wants to marry her. But Hanna continues to say that the reason she will lose the money if she remarries is because the money will become the property of her new husband. Danilo realizes that if he wants Hanna he must accept the money, and in doing so he can also save his country. He surrenders quickly, embracing his fate with happiness. Baron Zeta forgives

his wife when he reads the inscription on her fan which states, "I am a respectable wife." All join in praise of the captivating mystery of womankind.

Historical Background

A masterpiece of operetta literature, *The Merry Widow* has cast an enduring spell over the public since its premiere on December 30, 1905. Written at a time when operettas were past their zenith and beginning to wane in popularity, *The Merry Widow* breathed new life into the genre and began a new era for the Viennese style waltz-operetta. Operetta as a musical form can trace its beginnings back to the Italian opera buffa, the French opéra comique and the German singspiel. It generally contained comedy, lighter subject matter, music, dancing, and most importantly, spoken dialogue. Operetta developed into distinct national styles, such as French (Offenbach), Viennese (Strauss) and English (Gilbert and Sullivan).

Early in 1905, the librettists Victor Leon and Leo Stein had adapted a successful comedy by Henri Meilhac titled, *L'attaché d'ambassade*, and had asked the composer Richard Heuberger to compose the music. After Heuberger had completed most of the score, the librettists decided that the music did not achieve the appropriate Balkan atmosphere they were seeking and asked Franz Lehár to read the libretto. Lehár was excited by this opportunity, accepted the commission, and began composing almost immediately.

The finished work had proceeded well into the rehearsal period when Lehár was presented with a seemingly insurmountable problem. The two managers of the Theater an der Wien, Wallner and Karczag, took a dislike to the music and wanted to cancel the production. Lehár was completely astonished and Victor Leon, one of the two librettists, engaged a lawyer to force the theater management to fulfill their contract. The theater staff and the actors wanted the operetta to go on and volunteered their free time to rehearse. Victor Leon had the task of finding scenery and costumes for the production. The day before the dress rehearsal Lehár was able to have his only rehearsal with the orchestra and the cast worked late into the night. The dress rehearsal itself was not auspicious. Despite all the setbacks the premiere was a triumph. The audience was wildly enthusiastic and demanded numerous curtain calls. Triumph in Vienna was rapidly followed by its wide popularity throughout the world. At one point in Buenos Aires, Argentina, *The Merry Widow* was being presented simultaneously in five different theaters in five different languages.

The only place *The Merry Widow* ever created a note of discord was in the Balkans. The setting of the operetta is the Paris embassy of a small fictitious country called Pontevedro. In actuality, Pontevedro was a thinly-veiled representation of Montenegro, one of the Balkan states. Students in Croatia marched in protest and assailed the cast because they felt the operetta made light of the southern Slavs and their legations abroad. Several years later, when a film version was produced, the exiled Crown Prince of Montenegro (whose name coincidentally was the same as the leading male character, Danilo), voiced great displeasure that his namesake character appeared inebriated in uniform!

The continuing appeal of *The Merry Widow* lies in its music. Lehár's beautiful melodies have never become timeworn and seem fresh each time they are heard. His orchestral coloring shows a musical sophistication reminiscent of Puccini, Debussy and Richard Strauss. Lehár was even said to have suffered from "puccinitis" because of his close friendship with Puccini and his

admiration for Puccini's music. The leading characters in *The Merry Widow* have innovative entrance numbers in which the orchestra brilliantly portrays the atmosphere of the scene as well as underlying aspects of their personalities. Throughout the work there is a level of eroticism implicit in the music which previously had never been experienced in operetta. With his talent for tender lyricism and swaying musical phrasing plus his technical knowledge of serious music Lehár was able to place the operetta into the opera house. It rapidly climbed into the ranks of the standard opera repertory. With his musical output of some thirty operettas, some with serious subjects, Lehár gave the operetta genre one final crown of glory before it made way for the development of the American musical that was to follow later in the twentieth century.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss some differences/similarities between opera and operetta.
2. What role does comedy play in this type of musical theater?
3. Is it necessary for operettas to be light-hearted?
4. Are there values implicit in the plot of *The Merry Widow* that reflect the values of the larger society of the time?
5. Are those values still valid today?
6. Do you consider *The Merry Widow* a timeless classic, able to be relevant to audiences of other generations?
7. Can you identify a particular dance rhythm associated with the Viennese-style operetta? How does this dance rhythm contribute to the overall success of the music? Is it effective or repetitious?
8. Discuss the elements of the operetta that made it the forerunner of the American "Broadway" musical.

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

