

**Ohio Light Opera:
Lehár's *The Mock Marriage* (July 14)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Before Austrian composer Franz Lehár hit the Viennese operetta bull's eye with *The Merry Widow*, he composed a less well-known show, *The Mock Marriage* (*Die Juxheirat*), whose complicated plot, set in America in 1904, gives a nod to such contemporary societal issues as gender identity and the empowerment of women.

After running for 39 performances, *Die Juxheirat* was sidelined and forgotten until the show was revived for an Austrian music festival in 2016. And in February 2019, OLO

director Steven Daigle staged the English version for the University of Southern California Opera Theatre.

Set among the mansions and high society of Newport, Rhode Island at the turn of the 20th century, the story turns around Selma, Baroness von Willfort, a wealthy widow whose experience with marriage has soured her on men. She has joined some of her equally angry friends to create an organization called WHAM (for “Women Hating All Men.”)

Strongly invested in his daughter's remarrying, Selma's billionaire father puts a complicated farce in motion which includes such elements as cross-dressing. Wisely avoiding too deep a dive into the details, Daigle said in a preview article for the USC production, “It's a complicated plot in which she



thinks she is marrying a woman, as a joke, when she is really marrying a man. It does make sense. Everything is tied together in the third act.”



What immediately strikes the listener is the sophistication of Lehár’s writing, and particularly his colorful orchestration, brought to life by the excellent OLO Orchestra at Freedlander Theatre in Wooster on July 14. Cast and orchestra were skillfully led by Michael Borowitz, who rejoined the company this season after a dozen years away. The score is rich with different musical forms — polkas, waltzes — and with references both in the book and the score to the music of Wagner, Victor Herbert, and — not so charitably — rival operetta composer Sigmund Romberg.



Strong performances by WHAM members Miss Phoebe (Joelle LaChance), Miss Edith (Sadie Spivey), and Miss Euphrasia (Michelle Pedersen) — women you don’t want to cross arguments with — added humor and spice to the story. Jonathan Heller made a splash as the speed demon motorist Philly Kaps (“ninety-one miles an hour”).

If anything could use some tinkering, it's the non-stop choreography of ensemble numbers. Lehár's score is rich with dance music, but not every song needs to set the actors in motion every time!

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 20, 2022.

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