

Ohio Light Opera: Franz Lehar's *The Merry Widow*

by Daniel Hathaway



Despite its humble origin as a hasty replacement for a failed Viennese lyrical theater project, Franz Lehar's 1905 lyrical theater piece *The Merry Widow* quickly rose to prominence, racking up its 400th performance as early as April 4, 1907 while igniting a brisk demand

for merch in the form of Merry Widow corsets, hats, and cigars.



With its popular story line featuring aristocrats keeping up appearances while staring down financial ruin, international intrigues involving fictitious principalities, mismatched romances needing to be sorted out, and brief excursions into the demimonde of society's less respectable institutions, *TMR* wasted few opportunities to become the quintessential Viennese operetta.

Ohio Light Opera stage director Steven Daigle, who created a new performance edition combining OLO founder James Stewart's and some other versions for his third time directing the title, told me in an interview that his attraction to the genre "is the art form, the sentimental aspect, the pathos. I like the humor, but I also like the romance in it."

There's plenty of that romance to be had, even among the originally unwilling, including some of the spicy variety as represented by the widow Hannah Glawari — whose character in Austrian German is not just “merry” but “lustige.” And the denizens of Maxim's, the renowned Parisian watering-hole, provide the reticent Count Danilo with a glittering second family in the persons of the *grisettes* — Lola, Dodo, Cloclo, Jou-Jou, Frou-Frou, and Margot (played coyly by Madeleine Christopher, Lydia Dunlap, Shannon Dunning, Camryn Finn, Amia Korman, and Natalia Turchin.)



Lehár's music is so sophisticated that legions of opera singers including Kirsten Flagstad, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Joan Sutherland, Roberta Peters, Frederica von Stade, and Susan Graham have added *Vilja* to their repertory — just as many entrepreneurs have folded *The Merry Widow* seamlessly into their opera seasons.

Soprano Melanie Athans, who just earned her master's in voice at the San Francisco Conservatory and is making her OLO debut, made a perfect choice for the role of Hannah, and a fine match-up with New Orleans baritone Nathaniel Richard as Count Danilo Danilowitsch. The two brought abundant operatic credentials to OLO's production.

The whole company sang like a well-tuned choral society under the baton of Michael Borowitz, who drew equally distinguished playing from the OLO Orchestra. *Vilja* was ravishing, and the ear never tired of the *Merry Widow Waltz*.



Daniel Hobbs' scenic design was colorful and lively without looking cartoonish, Michelle Souza's costume designs suggested early 20th-century diplomatic styles but not too slavishly, and Rachel Lauren's lighting design helped neatly transfer the action to Maxine's without creating a third act or moving a lot of furniture.

Finally, Spencer Reese's choreography moved many bodies meaningfully on the stage, making that playing area both more intimate and more spacious than it actually was.

Photos by Matt Dilyard.

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