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STYLISTIC LANDMARKS IN THE OPERETTA THE LAND OF SMILE BY FRANZ LEHÁR. STAGE DIRECTING CONCEPT

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Abstract

Austro-Hungarian composer and conductor, a leading personality in the genre of the 20th century operetta, giving this genre a new vitality, Lehár remained one of the best-known composers of the time, alongside Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauss II. His most successful operetta - The Merry Widow - has earned a prominent place in the operetta repertoire over time. The romantic operetta in 3 acts The Land of Smile premiered on October 10, 1929, at the Metropol Theater in Berlin, with tenor Richard Tauber as Sou-Chong. This performance provided a revised version of the older version of the operetta, entitled The yellow jacket, presented in 1923 in Vienna. Operetta The Land of Smile by Franz Lehár is an exceptional musical work with a rich oriental coloring with melodies and orchestras rich in meaning, breathing a very modern air with well-crafted characters, both musical and dramaturgic, being the only operetta from musical literature with a sad ending (according to my personal knowledge). In my directorial approach, I thought that the most important thing for being able to stage a show, so as to excite the audience and bring it closer to the fascinating world of the musical theater, is to listen to the music, to understand what it express, then to pass the information through the filter of your sensitivity and reason, putting the show on stage and being in your turn a creator, who translates the language of the composer and the librettist in your original way.

Keywords: Operetta; Lehár; Romanticism; tenor; performing;

1. INTRODUCTION

Vienna, at the end of the 19th century, or fine of siècle, was the ideal environment for the emergence of a new musical genre - the Viennese operetta. At this time, art, architecture, philosophy, literature have developed remarkably, an important influence having an influx of people of different cultures who came to Vienna at that time (from almost half a million people, the population of the city increased to 2 million). Industrialization came late in Austria as a result of Biedermeier conservatism (1815-1848) and neo-absolutism since the 1848 revolution.

By the 1860s, social, political and technological progress emerged in Vienna. The modernization of Vienna has increased the purchasing power of the middle class, requiring facilities, such as the presence of servants. And immigrants arriving from the Habsburg provinces to occupy such posts have



created a more diverse population from an ethnic point of view. This growing diversity among the population meant a change in the musical and theatrical setting. Although the immigrants were poor and therefore did not afford to pay the ticket to the theater, these people had an effect on the Viennese cultural climate. The comedies that were played in the Viennese dialect were now open to influences throughout the Empire and beyond. The new Viennese genre will bring together elements of the successful operetta by Jacques Offenbach (who had been touring outside of France for a few years), the Viennese Waltz and the local satirical comedy, in which overture and song were ingredients always present. By the mid-1850s, Offenbach was admired in Vienna, thanks to Johann Nestroy, director of Carltheater. Because he could not afford Offenbach to come to Vienna, Nestroy presented pirated versions of his works. Later, actor Karl Treumann took the directorate and invited the composer to direct his own creations. By the 1870s, the French had already visited Vienna. Composers such as Franz von Suppé and Carl Millöcker have already contributed to some dramatic works with occasional scuffles and incidental music. Inspired by Offenbach, they became the leading composers of the Viennese operetta, "clinging" to the taste of the Viennese. Instead of the French can-can, they wrote waltzes and poles. The Viennese operetta was more sentimental and romantic than the French one, and there was a greater appreciation for comedy and parody, whether written by a librettist or composer, or added by actors. After Offenbach, an operetta was actually a comic piece in one act. In Vienna, it was developed on a much wider scale. Any operetta from the 1860s, such as *Das Pensionat* (1860), *Supreme Flotte Bursche* (1863) and *Die Schöne Galathee* (1865) still borrowed aspects of Offenbach's tradition. In 1871, Johann Strauss's *Indigo und die Vierzig Räuber* was the first complete Viennese operetta. The subject is placed in an exotic utopia, and other operettas from the early 1870s follow suit. By the end of the 1870s, the operetta focused on Vienna, the start of which was the enormous success of the *Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss II in 1874. The audience wanted an imitation of the work that was easily accessible and a form of release from the pressures social and financial interests of a continually industrialized society. Though more people and more ideas came to the city, there were also more and more poor people who desperately wanted to work in Vienna. The more unfriendly the climate, the more the public going to the theater sought refuge in a surgical fantasy. Thus, the genre of the operetta became very popular with the audience.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Austro-Hungarian composer and conductor, a leading personality in the genre of the 20th century operetta, giving the genre a new vitality, Lehár remained one of the best-known composers of the time, alongside Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauss II. His most successful operetta - *The merry widow* - has earned a prominent place in the operetta repertoire over time.

Lehár's father (1838-1898) received the musical education in Sternberg, playing the horn in the Vienna Theater Orchestra and for almost 40 years he was conductor of a military fanfare and a composer of dances and marches. At the age of 12, his son, young Franz joined the Conservatory in Prague, where he studied violin with Antonín Bennewitz, also receiving advice from Antonin Dvorak. In the fall of 1888, Lehár became a violinist in the Barmen-Elberfeld Theater, then called to the army, joined the 50th Infantry Regiment with his father as a conductor, and Leo Fall, the future composer of operettas. Upon the withdrawal of his father, Franz took over as conductor, which brought him to Vienna. There he got success with *Asklepios* (1901) and *Gold und Silber* (1902), composed for Princess Pauline von Metternich.

After completing his military service, his operettas *Wiener Frauen* and *Der Rastelbinder* were staged at Theater an der Wien, the second one enjoying great success. After the failure of the following operettas, *Der Göttergatte* and *Die Juxheirat* (1904), Lehár was summoned to write *Die lustige Witwe*, a libretto for the first time to Richard Heuberger. The success of this work in Vienna and abroad was great, marking the beginning of a new era of the Viennese operetta, through the works of Lehár, Strauss, Fall and later Kálmán. Then followed a failure, *Der Mann mit den drei Frauen* (1908), but in 1909-1910, three works were composed in just three months, works of which *Der Graf von Luxemburg* and *Zigeunerliebe* have gained popularity also internationally. Lehár already composed ambitious works, both from the point of view of the chosen subject and the compositional style. After the war, the arrival of new styles of music from America seemed to fade Lehár's popularity, but a new period of success followed, with the association with tenor Richard Tauber, who sang in *Zigeunerliebe* in Salzburg in 1921 and then *Der*

Zarewitsch (1927) and *Friederike* (1928, where he played Goethe), followed by the famous *Das Land des Lächelns* (1929). The latter, which was first produced in Berlin, was a revision of an earlier work, called *Die gelbe Jacke* (1923), in which the composer introduced specifically for tenor the aria *Dein ist mein ganzes herz*.

The development of the compositional style was special for an operetta composer, and Franz Lehár's works can be divided into two creative periods: the first before the First World War and the second, which contains the works created by Tauber. The works of the first period show a true melodic wealth. Like Johann Strauss, Lehár has the talent to make songs with a special turn, full of substance, melodic rhythms and contrasting motifs, the focus of attention, of course, waltz. He used the counterpoint for melodic, rhythmic but also dramatic purposes. Another particular aspect is that they orchestrate their own scores (inherited skill and experience with the military fanfare), learning from Dvořák, Puccini and Richard Strauss. It had a special attraction in painting the local national atmosphere - for example: Slav in *Der Rastelbinder*, Balkan in *Die lustige Witwe*, Spanish in *Frasquita*, Polish in *Die blaue Mazur*, Russian in *Der Zarewitsch* and Chinese in *Das Land des Lächelns*. Being a very good violinist, he has introduced many solo violin solos to accompany the lovers of love. The prosperity of his innovations feels best in *The merry widow*, where the operetta's templates have so far been rarely used. The main characters, Hanna and Danilo, have stage effects. The weather conjuncture was a favorite because the operetta did not give up anything again after the death of Suppé, Johann Strauss II, Millöcker and Zeller. Above all, Lehár took advantage of a good text for this operetta; wigs fit perfectly into action, and the prose is balanced between reality and fantasy, with little romance and an interesting combination of situations.

In his latest creations, Lehár developed his own operetta style, destroying the barriers between the genre of the opera and the operetta: Lehár, who for many years aspired to expand the operetta to a suitable form for opera theaters, managed to fulfill this desire with his last operetta - *Giuditta* (1934). In the last years of the composer's creation, due to the growing influence of the musical theater, the genre of the operetta will lose its prominent position in the world of musical drama.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The romantic operetta in 3 acts *Das Land des Lächelns* premiered on October 10, 1929, at the Metropol Theater in Berlin, with tenor Richard Tauber as Sou-Chong. This performance provided a revised version of the older version of the operetta, entitled *Die gelbe Jacke*, presented in 1923 in Vienna.

In my directorial approach, I thought that the most important thing to be able to stage a show so as to excite the public and bring it closer to the fascinating world of the musical theater is to listen to the music, to understand what they express, then to pass the information through the filter of your sensitivity and reason, putting the show on stage and being in turn a creator who translates the language of the composer and the librettist in the original way.

4. FINDINGS

Thus, during the Overture, on Mi's theme, to bring the audience into the atmosphere of Asia, I created an exciting projection with a yellow dragon flying over scenic Chinese landscapes - the dragon will become a visual leitmotiv of the show, which is painted on the back of Sou-Chong's yellow coat, and will also appear at the end of the operetta as a projection. Upon completion of the Overture, the curtain opens for a moment of ballet, deployed in the Lichtenfels Marshal Hall. The choir will stand on two sides, forming a V with the tip leading to the main entrance to the salon, and Lichtenfels, the General and Mrs. Hardeg are centrally disposed to watch the choreographic moment. I sprinkled the three of them with comic moments in which the General is slapped by a young man and the Marshal praises his own qualities, laughing at the General. After Gustav's entry, followed by four soldiers, Lisa's entrance would be held, dressed in a vintage horse-riding suit, an entry that would be emphasized by diminishing proscenium light and activating a "follow-up" light on the protagonist. After the soloist's first sentence, two soldiers lift her on their shoulders and carry her on the celebration in front of the guests, then leave her down, continue to emphatically. Another comic element appears through the presence of the cocked servant who will have several entries: the first one is the one in which Lisa brings to her a golden statuette representing the Buddha, received in gift from the Prince of Sou-Chong. While Gustav and Lichtenfels discuss the exotic gift received by Lisa, she places the statue on the piano.

The servant who called on the guests to drink a cup of champagne in the adjoining salon appears again. At this moment, I made a projection on one of the side walls of the stage, where the servant awaits the blue saloon in the invitations that enter in turn, realizing a beautiful continuity of action on the stage with the one in the salon, would not be visible to the public. Lisa stays alone on the stage with a single spot of light on her and starts singing the piano and her voice with an inspirational Asian song. When it's over, the light turns on suddenly. Gustav, who in the dark approaches the piano and listens to the song of Lisa, when the light comes on stage, nudes in with the Buddha statuette. The following dialogue begins with a tense moment in which Lisa rejects Gustav's marriage request, but the atmosphere then turns into a warm, friendly one that persists in the duet of the two. For the action not to be static, the two characters use the whole scene, including the stairs in the center, where the entrance to the drawing room is.

The Sou-Chong character was also crafted with proper makeup and hairstyle, the interpreter having a long-haired brunette wig in the queue. On the introduction of the aria, Sou-Chong stares in the salon, and when he sees the Buddha's statue, he kisses affectionately. I preferred for this first aria not to suggest too many movements to the performer. Lisa will come to an end, dressed in a golden prom dress, with growing emotions at the sight of the Prince. At the duet of tea, I created an atmosphere close to the Prince's world - the two sit down, on two cushions brought by the mourning servant. The two serve the tea in an intimate blue light. To push the action that tends to be static, Lisa sheds the hot tea on Sou-Chong's hand, then bandages his hand with great care. At the end, the two get up and want to kiss, but they are interrupted by the background noise and retreating to another room. Lichtenfels enters, followed by four very noisy faces and Mrs. Hardeg. In order to get what they want, that is, the encounter with the Prince, the girls assail the Marshal with "sacrifices," meaning kisses. The prince enters the salon and makes furrows among the excited faces, then explains, through an area, how love is to him in the country. She gives a treat to each one, giving her a blooming branch of apple, taken from an orchestral instructor, another makes statements or the other admiring her lips, her face failing to hear his words.

But the prince is thinking about Lisa and does not pay attention to the girls who, at the end of the area, are fighting. Another element that colors the action is the Chinese servant of Sou-Chong, a bold man, dressed in a black kimono, who makes long prayers to the Prince and tells him that he has been appointed prime minister and must return to China. Towards the end of the act, Sou Chong and Lisa remain lonely and sing one of the most beautiful duets in the operetta. The composer highlighted dramatically the action and the intensity of the feelings of the two through a modern-day music with a quasi-parallel vocal, with chromatic motifs and themes that express the difference between the two worlds and also the destiny that will finally separate. After the theme of destiny, I chose to move the action closer to the audience, to the extrapuntin of the stage and to the "language" of the audience. The two lovers carry a dialogue ending with a hug on a musical piece that reaches the climax, and then, when Sou-Chong resumes the theme of apple blossoms, the two return to the stage, watched by a light spot, each on a different side of the extrapuntin, then meet in the middle of the stage. On this background, I designed images of blooming apple trees, bathed by the sun's rays. The circle that the two do, starting from the base of the proscenio up to the middle of the scene, can signify the desire to approach the two lovers, despite the differences between their worlds, and the yin and yang circles, black and white, the symbol of the contrasts that attract. At the end of the duet, the room is bathed by starlight, projected across the stage mirror and side walls.

The second act opens with a brief prelude that has suggested a sunrise, so I designed a sun rising from the left on the curtain and set it to the right throughout the music. At the opening of the curtain, we are in the throne room of Sou Chong Palace. Thondup, his uncle, is seated on the right side of the throne, the choirs come two behind the scenes and worship the throne, and the choirs come out of the room, all of them in the V, open to the public. Sou-Chong's entry is made from the back of the room, on the tongue, with a large pump: the interpreter is preceded by two Chinese lanterns and lights the way, while two others wear a yellow coat. The Prince stops in front of Thondup, with his back to the audience and kneeling, to receive the high distinction. After the choir withdraws through the hall, the Prince and Thondup remain alone and have a quiet conversation, but after being interrupted by little Mi dressed in a European tennis suit, Thondup remembers the old traditions that the Prince is obliged to have four wives. But Eunuc, a very colorful masked character who will have many comic moments, announces the arrival of Lisa. For the two main interpreters, I opted for the existing costumes to be restored from scratch, and in Sou-Chong I added the yellow ceremonial coat with the head of the dragon on my back, whose design

totally belongs to me. At this point, Lisa wears a red velvet dress with a train in the 1900s style, and as an accessory she has a real-life picture medal that she gives to Sou-Chong. There is a love duet built on the waltz rhythm, for which we have chosen as a light design for red shades that fit very well in color with the decor, but also with the costumes of the performers, made on yellow-golden shades and red. The two lovers are doubled by a pair of dancers dressed and styled in the same way as the soloists, who at one point interact with them, exchanging partners. The two couples are watched with two spots of light, and the projection with the stars and the full moon creates a night-life enchanting.

Little Mi resumes traditional clothing and will sing a first aria, accompanied by ballet dancers, who will present a traditional fan dance. Gustav will make his entrance from behind the auditorium on the audience podium, making a very comical moment with Eunucus. For these three characters, we have benefited from experienced interpreters, to whom I have given more freedom in shaping characters. Thus, the young little Mi - Gustav managed to capture the attention of the public through the delicacy and gentleness of the spoken dialogues, but also of the ones played, helped by the highly expressive and exotic music of the composer.

The difference of age and mentality was highlighted in the dialogue that followed the duet between Gustav and Mi, a dialogue between the unbroken Thondup and Sou Chong. The Prince wants to change the old traditions, being motivated by the love for Lisa, which he expresses through the most famous page of this operetta - "You are my love". In all solo moments I tried to annoy little action so that the audience did not get bored, but managed to get in the best atmosphere of the love story. Thus, in order to create an atmosphere that best suits the text of the area, two ballet dancers will be introduced to the stage by a canopy bed, on which Lisa sleeps. Sou-Chong sings softly to his ear, and at the end of the area, he sits beside her, and the two dancers return, pulling the bed behind. The happiness of the two lovers will not last long. Lisa finds out from Gustav and then confirms to the Prince that he is forced to marry four women. The young woman will express her pain and longing for the country in a very short but convincing area. I chose to use only a light spot on the interpreter to focus public attention on the feelings expressed at that time.

The ceremony of the wedding will follow, to which I wanted to bring the originality notes through the pompous entrance of the brides in the hall, on the podium, covered by two long white veils, held by ballerinas and also by the traditional ceremony of tea, which is held at every wedding in China. Sou-Chong serves each bride with a cup of tea, unveiling at the same time its head covered by a small veil hat and putting on its arm a red veil, the imperial color. When all the brides received the cup of tea, I wanted a very dramatic moment in which Lisa would interrupt the ceremony. Thus, the performer will quickly enter the stage, and will throw her suitcase to the ground. Slowly, slowly, we move away from the world of the operetta. Sou-Chong makes everybody come out. Lisa asks the Prince to explain to her why he married 4 wives, but he tells that her husband has the right to kill her wife if she does not listen. At this point, Lisa falls on her knees on a grand cassa blow, and the light goes off suddenly, only two spots remain on the soloists, one red Lisa and one white Sou-Chong. The abyss between the two worlds deepens even more when Lisa revolts and ends the relationship. The music is very dramatic, and the vocalities of the two roles also turn. After leaving Lisa, Sou-Chong hits the gong on the stage, orders the young man not to leave the palace and then collapses to his knees, asking for the mercy of the gods on a very sad melody, which will also sing in the end operetta. After the words "it's over," I found in music the motivation of a feeling of rebellion that includes Sou-Chong, who will furiously take off his yellow coat and throw it to the ground. The prince, with tears in her eyes, notices the neck medallion with the face of the face, the musical motive of the orchestra that remembers the aria *You are my love* and at that moment falls on his knees and sings for the second time this aria .

The curtain will close on the last accords in the orchestra and will begin the prelude of the 3rd act, which I wanted a ballet, with the pair of dancers that doubled the two lovers at the beginning of the second act. The orchestra resumes the theme of love, and the ballet dancers dance on the gangway and on the proscenio, as close as possible to the audience, as a reminder of the beautiful moments spent between the two. During this time, behind the curtain, the sets will change for the third act. Marshal Lichtenfels will make his appearance again, and the moments of prose will prevail: little Mi and Gustav express love for each other, then the young Viennese and the marshal will have to do with Thondup, and Lisa asks Little Mi to help he could leave the palace, along with Gustl. But, after the cunning Thondup shows where he can run without being seen, Sou-Chong comes in his way. Here is the last dialogue between the

two lovers. Operetta *Land of smile* is full of contrasts, and comic moments alternate very quickly with tragic moments. It may be very difficult to maintain the seriousness of action on the stage and, at the same time, the public's attention to the two main characters and not to the other comic characters by their nature. In this dialogue, I felt that the public relaxed too much and did not react to the sadness of the two lovers, so at the following performances with this show, I decided to modify some of the replies in the text just to give a bigger gravity of the moment.

The lust of home contains Lisa's heart and makes her no longer impressed by Sou-Chong's last attempt to keep her near him. Gustav will be on the scene, and Sou-Chong asks him to take care of Lisa. The theme of love is repeated, and Gustav leads Lisa to the podium where a group of ballerinas, which I have placed in the shape of a ship where Lisa's father is already, will lead the three back to Europe. The boat moves away from the shore on the flute solo that echoes the theme of the apple blossom. Lisa once again looks back to Sou-Chong and disappears into the dark. The prince will stay on stage with her sister, urging her not to cry, but to smile, even if she feels a great pain in her soul. On the words - "*to know how to laugh and to look happy*" - a small screen from the canvas will unfold in front of the two screens, which I designed Sou-Chong, a prince who accepts his fate, a prince whom he his coat is swallowed, the coat is personified in the last scene, and the dragon will eventually appear on the character's coat, a symbol of tradition that encompasses Sou-Chong, a tradition that stood in the way of happiness.

Through this projection, I wanted to show the incompatibility between the two worlds, the impossibility of detachment from tradition, and, at the same time, the cyclical character of the operetta, because the last theme of the orchestra will be that of the smile, a theme with which the Overture, the theme of his destiny or the yellow coat - thus making a connection with the original title of the operetta at the premiere of 1923: *Die gelbe Jacke - Yellow Coat*.

5. CONCLUSION

Operetta *Land of smile* by Franz Lehár is an exceptional musical work with a rich oriental coloring with melodies and orchestras rich in meaning, breathing a very modern air with well-crafted characters, both musical and dramaturgic, being the only operetta from musical literature with sad ending (according to my personal knowledge). Also, the modernity of the subject has to be taken into consideration - the operetta premiered in 1923 under the name of *Yellow Coat* and in 1929 under the current name, and the operetta's action takes place in Vienna and China in 1912. The name of "operetta" improper, because this work goes beyond the boundaries of the genre, and is very close to the genre of the opera, the dramatic situation, the operatic vocalism of the two main characters - Lisa and Sou-Chong and the tragedy of the love story - the eternal incompatibility of the two worlds of which the two characters belong. But as we know, Franz Lehár wanted to make the classical genre of the operetta closer to that of the opera in the last period of creation, especially through *The Land of Smile* (1929) and *Giuditta* (1934).

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