

***Rosenkavalier* at Carnegie with the Bavarians: A Night to Remember**

By Fred Cohn, *Musical America*

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Der Rosenkavalier in concert runs the risk of turning into a kind of gargantuan tone poem. With Richard Strauss's huge orchestra placed on stage, the singers could easily find themselves overwhelmed, their work seemingly secondary to the clamor behind them. It was the great achievement of the March 29 Carnegie Hall performance by the Bavarian State Opera, in its first visit to the U.S., that despite the concert setting, the cast had the opportunity to present *Rosenkavalier* not as an orchestral showpiece with vocal obligato but as a bona fide opera, the brilliant invention of both Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. This was due to the singers' prowess, to the stunning playing of the orchestra (100 strong), and most of all to the guiding hand of the Staatsoper's music director, Kirill Petrenko.

The cast, to be sure, was working under some disadvantages. The performance was vaguely semi-staged: the singers made entrances and exits, and moved around a bit the front of the concert platform. They had recently completed a run of the opera, in Otto Schenk's venerable production [reviewed [here](#)], and they undoubtedly brought with them insights they had gained on home base. But here, without recourse to costumes, props, or scenery, they seemed more or less forced to improvise a gestural vocabulary. Non-singing characters went unseen: the retinue that greets the Marschallin at her morning levee was significantly underpopulated; her page Mohammed was here reduced to his accompanying orchestral motif. The young trouser-role nobleman Octavian (Angela Brower) was not allowed his changes in and out of drag; even the silver rose of the title had been left behind in Munich. While most of the singers wore clothing that vaguely hinted at the roles they played (Brower, appropriately, in slacks), Hanna-Elisabeth Müller, as Sophie, sported a spangly strapless concert gown quite unsuitable for a young girl fresh out of the convent.



Adrienne Pieczonka as the Marschallin in Der Rosenkavalier, conducted by Kirill Petrenko

But *Rosenkavalier* nonetheless took hold as a piece of music drama, since the performers were

so thoroughly imbued with the theatrical sense of the piece. The unerring rightness of the orchestral balance made the singing seem like conversation: You were aware of the characters interacting with each other, rather than of singers pumping out sound over the orchestral onslaught.

As always in a good *Rosenkavalier*, the performance centered on the Marschallin, the worldly-wise aristocrat whose wistful acceptance of the passage of time constitutes the work's central dramatic arc. Adrienne Pieczonka's soprano was exactly right for the role, combining a lyric freshness that conveyed a still-formidable desirability with a vocal weight that made tangible the chasm of experience between the princess and both her lover Octavian and his naïve new conquest, Sophie. Her Marschallin was surely melancholy, but bore no self-pity: this was a woman who truly understood that "today or tomorrow" she would have to relinquish her beloved to a younger woman.

Brower was an ideal Octavian, the poise in her singing suggesting the cavalier's ardor; her unblemished tone indicating that, for all his sexual experience, this was still an adolescent boy. I was less taken with Müller. Her voice was brightly and strongly produced, in its upper reaches easily riding over the orchestra. But just like her sexpot garb, the aggressiveness in both tone and interpretive approach was ill matched to the role of Sophie.

Peter Rose had a triumph as the appalling Baron Ochs. I had heard him sing the role 13 years ago at the Met; he may have brought a bit less voice to it now, but more than compensated through the kind of nuance that comes from years of experience. He made his effects less through stentorian power than through sharply etched delivery of Von Hofmannsthal's text, the sympathetic orchestral frame letting every detail tell. This was not a revisionist Ochs, like the intriguingly virile portrayal that Günther Groissböck has offered at the Met, but instead a classic, flesh-crawling portrait of middle-aged lechery, the baron's thuggish treatment of young Sophie seeming especially horrifying in light of today's #metoo awareness.

Markus Eiche's Faninal was an hilarious portrait of affronted bourgeois dignity. The Italian singer's brief but luscious aria fell to the great Lawrence Brownlee, his lyric tenor more beautiful and complex than ever. Among the smaller roles, Peter Lobert as the police commissioner was a particular standout, his warm, solid bass a testament to the public servant's probity.

Petrenko's reading was fast and propulsive. At some moments I found myself wanting a bit more rubato, a bit more "give." (I wondered if Brownlee, during his aria, might have wished for the same.) But the whole performance pulsed with an energy both comic and erotic, and each of the three long acts seem to fly by in an instant. The whole was so cohesive that the climactic chord of the sublime final trio registered as the work's absolute climax, dissipating the tension of all that had gone before, and letting the concluding duet, with its depiction of dreamy-eyed young love, occupy a realm of transcendent, if evanescent, bliss. When, after the final chord, the audience leapt to its feet en masse, it was a tribute not just to a sterling performance, but to the enduring appeal of Strauss's and Von Hofmannsthal's invention.

Photo by Stefan Cohen