

WAYNE HEISLER JR, *THE BALLET COLLABORATIONS OF RICHARD STRAUSS*, Eastman Studies in Music, 64 (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), ISBN 978-1-58046-321-8, xi + 345pp, £50

In taking leave of [Strauss] I suggest that he should come with us to the Ball at the Ecole Normale; he makes a face, and says that he prefers to go to the 'Federball,' to the feather ball, in other words his bed. 'Nevertheless, you must be fond of dancing?' – 'Me? Oh, of course.' – And with his big, gawky body he essays an entrechat in the middle of the drawing room. (1)

At first glance, Wayne Heisler's use of Romain Rolland's amusing anecdote from 1900 as an epigraph to the introduction to his thought-provoking and highly engaging study of Richard Strauss's ballet collaborations adverts to the common tendency to overlook (or to be simply unaware of) the presence of the latter in the composer's *oeuvre*. These include the unfinished *Die Insel Kythere* (The Isle of Cythera, 1900), inspired by paintings by artists of the French rococo, including Watteau; *Josephslegende* (The Legend of Joseph, 1914), written for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; the 1923 *Ballettsoirée* with dances by Heinrich Krölller and music by Couperin arranged for orchestra by Strauss; *Schlagobers* (Whipped Cream, 1924), a 'Comic Viennese Ballet' choreographed by Krölller; and *Verklungene Feste: Tanzvisionen aus Zwei Jahrhunderten* (Faded Celebrations: Dance Vision from Two Centuries, 1941), premiered in Munich with dances by the dancer-choreographer team Pia and Pino Mlakar. As Heisler makes clear, ballet and dance thus figured at critical junctures in the composer's life: in the 1890s as he tried to find his feet (literally) as a burgeoning opera composer; in the run-up to the First World War amidst Europe's rapidly-changing musical and wider artistic climate; during the uncertainty of the Weimar era; and in the composer's own twilight in the dark years of National Socialism. Filling a large lacuna in Strauss studies, Heisler's monograph simultaneously plugs a similar hole in twentieth-century dance scholarship, making it a truly interdisciplinary work.

While the author's enterprise would seem inherently revisionist at base, he avowedly (and explicitly) steers clear of such an agenda from the outset. As he outlines in his introduction ('Richard Strauss, Dance, and Ballet'), revisionism in Strauss research over the past twenty years or so has centred on revealing modernist and proto-postmodernist strategies for the express reason of rehabilitating this often maligned composer, particularly the music after *Der Rosenkavalier* (1910). For Heisler, though, such pioneering efforts to rescue Strauss from 'the progressive/reactionary dichotomy of modernism' have tended to elevate the 'bad' to the 'good' in a bid to mark Strauss out as a misread progressive (5). As such, the author rejects the binary opposition represented by the 'totalizing tendencies' of both the traditional and more recent "'alternative modernist'" paradigms for Strauss by highlighting how the ballet collaborations flag up the composer's uncertain stance toward both progressive and

conservative facets of the wider artistic milieu in which he moved and worked (5). Typically mercurial, even posthumously, Strauss's music and aesthetic continue to defy neat categorization, unlike those of contemporaries such as Schoenberg or Stravinsky; or, as Heisler puts it: 'clear-cut modernism can be a bore. Strauss epitomizes the true messiness of the twentieth century.' (5).

This book is split into five chapters each devoted to a ballet, each chapter in turn painting the associated distinct musical, choreographic, artistic, historical and cultural backdrop against which each work appeared. Strauss's uneven interest and work rate in the medium of ballet is reflected in the overall division of the book into two broad thematic categories detailing, on the one hand, his early development as a ballet composer from 1895 to 1914 and, on the other, his mature preoccupation with the aesthetic premises of ballet as an art form in the interwar years and beyond (1919–41). By taking such an approach, the author deftly foregrounds Strauss's steady turn from a forward-looking, parodistic concept of classical dance in the years up to World War I to his belated obsession with the conceits of romantic ballet during the tumult of World War II.

Chapter one ('Strauss en route to *Die Insel Kythere* (The Isle of Cythera, 1900)') assays the little-known ballets that came across Strauss's desk around 1895 from a host of *fin-de-siècle* German literary figures such as Richard Dehmel, Frank Wedekind and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. For Strauss and his contemporaries, ballet at the end of the nineteenth century was a tired form ripe for a degree of renewal that had broader resonance for culture at large. The prospective (and, in some cases, unfinished) ballet projects that Strauss was preoccupied with at this time reflected contemporary *Jugendstil* sensibilities, such as an interest in the ornamental and symbolic rather than the metaphysical properties of dance. But, as Heisler argues, Strauss's anti-romantic stance was further heightened by a parallel turn toward pre-romantic musical procedures, particularly those of the eighteenth century. For Strauss, then, dance was of a piece with that species of the backward glance where pastiche and irony go hand in hand; that the minuet and gavotte which first figured in sketches for *Die Insel Kythere* (again, 1900) were later used in *Ariadne auf Naxos* (first version, 1912) further heightens the compelling link between Strauss's turn-of-the-century retrospectivism and wider post-First-World-War neoclassicism. But rather than situating Strauss within the remit of neoclassicism or any of its associated subcategories, Heisler instead highlights the composer's immersion in the philosophy of Nietzsche in the late 1890s as the immediate impulse for Strauss's anti-romantic, anti-metaphysical outlook. Consistent with Nietzsche's view of dance 'as physicality, as metaphor, as symbol' (20), Strauss sought in it an antidote to the inflated pretensions of late nineteenth-century romanticism—with the attendant level of sardonic commentary that such a journey from the present to an imagined past can imply. As the epigraph that opens Heisler's book and this

review of it implies, there was obviously more to the knowingly gawky *entrechat* that Strauss performed for an amused Rolland than met the eye.

The second chapter (*Josephslegende* (The Legend of Joseph, 1914), Léonide Massine, and the Music Box Dancer') surveys the often fraught relations between various members of the collaborative team behind this ballet-pantomime through the prism of the problems that arose regarding the representation of its central character. Strauss scholars have long been aware of the fact that the composer was completely at odds with Hofmannsthal's and Kessler's metaphysical envisioning of this 'dancer-dreamer', but the true significance of Strauss's use of sketched music from the abandoned *Kythere* project in *Josephslegende* for Joseph's solo dances in which he searches for and finds God has been largely overlooked, until now. Through his investigation of the sketches, score and reception of *Josephslegende*, Heisler uncovers the basic parodistic impulse behind Strauss's recycling; how the composer's return to *Kythere* via the 'Round Dance of the Rose-Pickers' was deliberate in light of the pseudo-pastoral milieu of the earlier project and his covert intention ironically to undercut Hofmannsthal's and Kessler's metaphysical posturing. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the added allusions of mechanical music (in particular, musical box) engendered by such borrowings, Heisler argues persuasively that Strauss sought to debunk the belief 'that dance or music could offer transcendence, or even an unproblematic representation of it.' (51).

In the second part of this book (chapters 3–5), the author changes tack by shifting the focus from Strauss's engagement with the music of the past and its effects on his concept of dance and his early ballet collaborations onto the cultural-political stimuli and consequences of his post-First-World-War works in the genre. Chapters three and four concentrate on the 1920s, in particular the period in which Strauss served as co-director of the Vienna Staatsoper (1919–24). Pursuing his self-set goal of reform and modernization of the ballet, Strauss coaxed dancer-choreographer Heinrich Krölller to the Austrian capital where the latter staged a series of ballets with music chosen, supervised, arranged and/or composed by Strauss. In chapter three ('The Strauss-Heinrich Krölller *Ballettsoirée* (1923) and Interwar Cultural Politics'), the author sheds light on their first collaboration, comprising four *tableaux* featuring the composer's orchestral arrangements of a set of pieces from François Couperin's *Pièces de clavecin*, as well as music selected by Strauss from works by Maurice Ravel, Jean-Phillipe Rameau and Johann Strauss the Younger. Heisler shows how this evening-length ballet extravaganza stood as an early postwar bid on the part of the fledgling Austrian Republic to reassert its cultural identity by celebrating its cosmopolitan past. As an enterprise it was, of course, steeped in nostalgia and an altogether fitting one for Strauss, whose own aesthetic politics had become intensified in the wake of the lost War. By the 1920s, the opportunities offered by ballet (and by dance in general) for

cultural rejuvenation had taken on a restorative hue for this honorary Viennese composer.

However, as chapter four ('Kitsch and *Schlagobers* (Whipped Cream, 1924)') attests, Strauss was not quite finished yet with enlisting dance in the service of mordant critique à la *Kythere*. As was the case with the earlier project, Strauss authored the scenario for *Schlagobers* himself (also completing newly-composed music to Kröller's choreography), which details a failed revolution by proletarian *pâtisserie* against the ruling sweetmeats in a confectioner's shop. As Heisler points out, Vienna's postwar population was not duped by Strauss's apparent tomfoolery; indeed, 'they recognized in large part a not-so-subtle social, political, and cultural manifesto.' (134). To add insult to injury, *Schlagobers*—which soon earned the moniker the 'billionaire's ballet' ('Milliardenballett')—would live up to its name by the time of its 1924 premiere, with inflation swelling the already excessive performance costs to a breathtaking four billion Kronen (147).¹ Interweaving (as in previous chapters) discussion of the work's choreography, staging, score and reception, Heisler explores how contemporary criticism rehashed time-worn debates over Strauss, kitsch and cultural degeneration, concluding that the composer's supreme exercise in 'bad taste' was wholly premeditated and proof that the 'high' and the 'low' coexisted comfortably (naturally, even) in Strauss's aesthetic—despite, and/or probably encouraged by, the discomfiture of his contemporaries.

The fifth and final chapter ('Verstrauster Couperin, Verklingender Strauss, *Verklungene Feste: Tanzvisionen aus Zwei Jahrhunderten* (Bygone Celebrations: Dance Visions from Two Centuries, 1941)') leads on naturally from the author's discussion of the 1923 *Ballettsoirée* in chapter three. The evocatively-entitled *Verklungene Feste* was an extended version of the Couperin tableau from the 1923 work, incorporating extra arrangements of Couperin's *Pièces* set to dances originally notated by Raoul Auger Feuillet (1700), realized anew by Pia and Pino Mlakar. With the Mlakars and the con-

¹ The spend on *Schlagobers* was truly astronomical, especially in comparison with other productions at the Staatsoper at this time, in this case, under Alfred Roller. 1924 saw the premiere of Marco Frank's opera *Das Bildnis der Madonna* (Portrait of the Madonna), estimated at 100 million Kronen (as compared with the sum of more than two billion Kronen that the planned premiere of *Schlagobers* would have cost by the time it was officially rejected by the Staatsoper management in March 1923). While a new staging of Wagner's *Rienzi* amounted to 200 million and Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* rang in at 400 million Kronen, these were small beer in comparison with both the projected and the eventual expenditure on *Schlagobers*. Susanne Rode-Breymann, *Die Wiener Staatsoper in den Zwischenkriegsjahren: Ihr Beitrag zum zeitgenössischen Musiktheater*, Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek Schriftreihe zur Musik, 10 (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1994), 80, cited on p. 147 of Heisler's book.

ductor and then-director of the Munich Opera, Clemens Krauss, on board, Strauss's final completed ballet collaboration presented an allegorical history of dance by charting the switch from baroque courtly entertainment through nineteenth-century pantomimic *ballet d'action* to romantic ballet. As far as Strauss was concerned, the clock stopped here in terms of dance (i.e. around 1830, the year in which romantic ballet 'first came into existence', according to Lynn Garafola;² not for nothing is *Verklungene Feste* set in a lavish Parisian residence 'in 1830'—a fact that also reflected Strauss's fascination with the period of the French Restoration). At least from the time of *Josephslegende* (1914), the composer had evidenced his growing distaste for the overly-pantomimic cast of 'modern' dance and, by the 1930s, would have no truck with *Ausdruckstanz* ('expressive dance'), the principal dance style in Germany at that time that was soon co-opted as a conduit for aesthetic policy in the Third Reich. Having served ignominiously as President of the Reichsmusikkammer from 1933 to 1935, and in light of his ensuing fall-from-grace both domestically and internationally (albeit for opposing reasons), Strauss's conservatism in this regard was perhaps fuelled as much by political expediency as by nostalgia.

Heisler's linkage of *Verklungene Feste* with *Capriccio* (1942), Strauss's final opera, is instructive; much as the latter stands as meta-opera (opera about opera), *Verklungene Feste* is, in a sense, meta-ballet. But its significance for Strauss runs deeper still. In a letter of 12 December 1940 to Krauss, Strauss remarked that the 'real essence of dance' was 'freedom from the earth's gravity' (*Befreiung von der Erdschwere*).³ What the composer referred to here was the phenomenon of ballerinas in a romantic-era ballet dancing *en pointe* (at the tips of their toes) as if in flight—as seen at the climax of *Verklungene Feste*. In typically Nietzschean fashion, the aged Strauss saw in the physicality of dance (and, in particular, romantic ballet) the potential for transcendence from earthly, mortal and—in the context of Nazi-era Munich—temporal concerns. But, as Heisler makes clear, Strauss also recognized the ultimate futility of such escapism, thus in no way negating a ballet aesthetic in operation since *Kythere*. As the author sums up, *Verklungene Feste* can thus be viewed as the composer's 'autumnal mediation on composing, music arranging, pastiche, and the conceit of dance and music as transcendent art forms.' (9)

² See Lynn Garafola, *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet* (Hanover NH and London: University Press of New England, 1997), 1–10, quoted in Heisler, 175.

³ *Richard Strauss, Clemens Krauss Briefwechsel: Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Günther Brosche, Institut für Österreichische Musikdokumentation, 20 (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1997), 379, quoted in Heisler, 1 (Heisler's translation).

Extensively illustrated with an abundant mixture of pictorial and music examples, Heisler's book exemplifies the depth of its author's meticulous research and is a valuable addition to musicological literature on Strauss and to emergent dance-musicology.

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