

OVERTURE TO DIE FLEDERMAUS

By JOHANN STRAUSS II

Born October 25, 1825, in Vienna;

died June 3, 1899, in Vienna

For more than half a century, Johann Strauss II served as a purveyor *par excellence* of dance music for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He, and to be totally fair, his brothers Josef and Eduard, turned out a seemingly endless supply of waltzes, polkas, quadrilles, mazurkas, marches, and the like that kept the Viennese dancing, oblivious to the fact that the Hapsburg monarchy was in its inevitable decline and that the social order with which they were so comfortable was crumbling around them.

In view of his tremendous success as a composer of dance music, it is somewhat surprising that Strauss would take a chance on the vicissitudes of the theater and try his hand at operetta; however, at the suggestion of his friend Jacques Offenbach, who was a dab-hand in that musical form, he did so. His first two attempts, *Indigo* and *Carnival in Rome*, were not overly successful; but his next one, *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat), was a masterpiece. The first performance took place on April 5, 1874, at the Theater an de Wien in Vienna and ran for sixty-eight performances. The success that it enjoyed then continues to this day.

Filled with intrigues, mistaken identities, inconvenient liaisons, and slightly risqué situations, *Die Fledermaus* is a riot of frothy tunes. The plot is as convoluted as anything in grand opera and concerns that actions that Dr. Falke takes to get even with his friend Eisenstein for an incident that had occurred several months earlier. The two had been to a fancy dress ball, Eisenstein costumed as a butterfly and Falke as a bat. After a night of heavy drinking, Eisenstein, as a practical joke, abandons Falke, leaving him sleeping beneath a tree in a woods outside the town. When he awakes the next morning, Falke, much to his embarrassment, has to walk home in broad daylight still wearing his bat costume and attracting much attention and ridicule along the way. Now he is ready for revenge.

The overture that Strauss composed for *Die Fledermaus* is of the *potpourri* variety—in other

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words, it is essentially a continuous string of tunes taken from the opera with no effort at any formal development. Strauss probably wrote it after he had completed the major portion of the three-act opera because, in it, he brings together the principal melodies of the work with an a sure hand and an absolutely inspired touch. It is little wonder that a critic writing in the *Wiener Extrablatt* in 1874 termed this curtain-raiser “the *pièce de résistance* of the third Strauss operetta.”

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-Kenneth C. Viant