

The Shadow of the Empress: Fairy-Tale Opera and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy. By Larry Wolff. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023. 435 pp.

“Sometimes I get up in the middle of the night and leave the clocks all, all stand. But you do not have to be afraid of her either. She too is the creature of the Father who created us all.” These words about time are sung by the *Marchallin* in *Der Rosenkavalier*, the 1911 opera by Richard Strauss and the Viennese poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal. They seemingly represent the lamentations of a middle-aged woman over the passing of time, but they can be also understood as the dilemmas of the Habsburg regime, which had to recognize and adapt to the necessities posed by political and social modernity. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the character in the opera is called Marie Thérèse, the name of the most popular Habsburg ruler. The next major collaborative work by Strauss and Hofmannsthal, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, was written and composed during World War I. It is less often discussed than *Rosenkavalier*, although it is full of similar subtleties. It is a welcome development, then, that *Die Frau ohne Schatten* is in the center of Larry Wolff’s remarkable work, which provides a total intellectual history of this fairytale opera.

For Wolff, who has published several landmark monographs on Central European history in recent decades, this work was evidently a “passion project,” not only because it was his “pandemic book” but also because of the homage the work pays to the author’s grandparents, who were born in the Habsburg Empire. In a similar manner as in some of his other works, *Die Frau ohne Schatten* is only the “small place” where Wolff studies his “bigger questions:” twentieth-century Vienna and the ways in which the perception of cultural modernity changed as a result of the war. In parallel, we follow the life story of the empress, who had to leave the political scene in the very same year as the fairytale empress walked onto the stage for the first time: Zita, wife of Austrian Emperor and Hungarian King Karl.

The book consists of three parts. The first discusses the two main stories from the turn of the century up to World War I. The second presents the period of the war, and the third examines the afterlife of the opera and Zita’s long widowhood. The structure of the book has an exciting dramatical character, as the different stories run parallel and even the plot of the opera is explored gradually. In all three parts, Wolff provides his readers with meticulous analyses of the opera’s different social, cultural, and political contexts, as well as

a profound reading of the opera's complex symbolism and musical language. The refinement of the contextualization is, in my view, the greatest merit of the book, which is comparable to Moritz Csáky's masterpiece on Viennese operetta.

Wolff follows the creative process of Strauss and Hofmannsthal through their letters, which suggest that Hofmannsthal was the more erratic of the two, while Strauss comes off as more serene. In the letters written in the first days of the war and the crises leading up to it, one finds few if any allusions to the contemporary events. However, the plot of the opera takes discernibly darker turns. During the war, Strauss' perception of his creative path changed. He declared that *Die Frau ohne Schatten* would be the last romantic opera he would write, as in the face of European Armageddon, one had to break from the Wagnerian tradition which had dominated his musical language until then. This shows already in the opera itself, as during the dramatic climax, when the fairytale emperor turns into stone, the empress loses her ability to sing and expresses the terror she feels in spoken words. Additionally, Wolff situates the opera in its musical context: Mozart's *The Magic Flute* was clearly a constant reference point for the creators, as was Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*, but several other standard works of Austrian and German music are also mentioned. Here, perhaps, it might have been worth putting slightly more emphasis on the connection to Wagner's *Parsifal*, as compassion is a key element in the empress' journey to becoming human, just as it was crucial for the *reine Tor*.

Wolff also shows how contemporary experiences of the Habsburg Empire made their way into the plot of the opera. The treason of the Nurse, for instance, is reminiscent of the infamous case of the officer Alfred Redl, who was a spy for the Russian Army, and the chaotic human world of the opera into which the empress and the nurse descend in the first act can be interpreted as analogous to Vienna's chaotic *fin-de-siècle* mass politics as well as the prevailing circumstances in Galicia, where Hofmannsthal was stationed as a soldier. Wolff also contemplates what might come to mind for the first audiences immediately after the war while listening to parts of the opera such as the chorus of unborn children or the gorgeous third act duet of the separated wife and husband. His splendid analyses of the music are illustrated by extracts from the score, which are of tremendous use to the reader (provided he or she can read sheet music).

The section titled "Postwar" presents in detail the different casts and conductors performing the opera over the course of the century. Readers who are passionate admirers of twentieth-century conductors and opera singers (as this reviewer is) will greatly appreciate this part. The postwar life of the real-life

empress is also presented in detail. During the interwar period, Zita still held on to the prospect of Habsburg restoration, which became definitively impossible with the *Anschluss*. However, the one-time empress eventually found another passion with the prospect of the sainthood of her late husband. The process of Zita's own sainthood is where her life story collides with that of the author, as Wolff was asked to participate in the process of her beatification as a scholar of Zita's life in North America. There is also a symbolic collision of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and Zita's death. The Viennese Boys Choir sang at the funeral of the late empress in Vienna. The choir also sang in Sir Georg Solti's luminous recording of the work, which was made during the same period.

The Shadow of the Empress is an entrancing read. Wolff's intimate knowledge and genuine love of culture are impressive and captivating, and he shows a passionate devotion to his subject that is rivaled only by such outstanding scholars and cultural historians as Carl E. Schorske or Moritz Csáky. This "pandemic book" is also itself an example of how true scholarship can prevail in times of crisis.

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