**A Note from the Guest Editors**

Que le lecteur ne se scandalise pas de cette gravité dans le frivole

Charles Baudelaire

Operetta! Flowing champagne, ceaseless waltzing, risqué *couplets*, Graustarkian uniforms and glittering ball gowns, romancing and dancing! Gaiety and light-heartedness, sentiment and *Schmalz*.

Richard Traubner

What does it mean to take operetta seriously? To scrutinize the diminutive, lowering suffix (the “etta” or “ette,” the “bouffe,” the perennial grey aria of the “comique”) that continues so often to separate it from a mainstream of twenty-first-century opera studies? To acknowledge and engage with not only operetta’s proximity to opera but also its differences from it; or even to approach operetta on its own terms—and this is a radical gesture—with opera consigned self-consciously to the margins? To what extent is it possible to weigh operetta’s intellectual impact and to excavate its significant footprint in historical grand narratives while making sense of its supposedly characteristic levity and kitsch? The latter term has been a frequent point of contention in reception theory, as something never transcending the “horizon of expectations” assumed to be typical of an audience lacking hauteur or sophistication.[[1]](#endnote-1) That is to say: we must contend with the fact that, for as long as it has existed, operetta has been understood by the vast majority of its producers, consumers, and critics as a type of musical theatre that is merely, “basically entertaining”.[[2]](#endnote-2)

These are some of the questions underpinning this special issue on “operetta.” It is the first dedicated wholly to the genre in the history of *Opera Quarterly*—a journal that aspires to be “the definitive publication for anyone *serious* about opera” (our italics). We might note that even when dealing with opera—certainly most Italian and much French opera—seriousness has become de rigueur only since the theoretical turns and disciplinary upheavals of the later twentieth century. But although such developments repositioned opera somewhere close to musicology’s inner sanctum—a newly emerged “opera studies” seemed for a time to constitute a disciplinary vanguard—operetta has remained out in the cold. Thus, nearly thirty-five years after its first appearance, Richard Traubner’s *Operetta: A Theatrical History* remains the standard English-language account of the genre. We take its very beginning as our second epigraph: opening lines in which Traubner reproduces a venerable image of operetta as naughty-but-nice, champagne-fuelled frivolity. Traubner’s project was, as he put it, to “resurrect appreciation” for so many forgotten operettas; but he also bemoaned the fact that what he calls the genre’s “commercial unpretentiousness” has “given operetta a bad name in the highest circles of musical art,” where it is considered “unworthy of serious recognition.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

That Traubner produced a history of the genre at all in such circumstances was already to approach operetta with almost unprecedentedly earnest scholarly intent. And things had barely changed, he suggested since the operetta librettist Alfred Grünwald had begun writing (though never finished) a *History of Operetta* in 1938. In it, Grünwald thundered that:

Serious writers on music, the “superior” critics, all those music esthetes who prowl about the sacred halls of music with dead-earnest faces as self-appointed guardians of the sacred Forms and Traditions, look upon operetta as something highly distasteful. They never gave it much attention, whenever possible they have tried to stifle it by a conspiracy of silence, and if they do speak of it they are always careful to express their great disdain…[[4]](#endnote-4)

One might ponder the political undertow of such words produced by an Austrian exile in France and then the United States in the late 1930s. Yet a still stranger friction emerges if one considers that what was and remains one of the most influential books ever published on operetta had appeared in German, English, and French the previous year, in early summer 1937—a book which took operetta so seriously that it sought to sketch the entire “biography of a city” via the genre’s early career in Second Empire Paris. That book was, of course, Siegfried Kracauer’s *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*; its author no “music esthete,” but a writer of unequivocal significance.[[5]](#endnote-5) Kracauer’s tome, and the damning criticism it attracted from his Frankfurt-School colleagues, is far removed from the “conspiracy of silence” to which Grünwald points. Instead, potential anxieties about operetta’s comparatively small stocks of cultural capital are foregrounded from the start, signaled loud and clear. Kracauer’s epigraph—and we have borrowed it as one of our own—is from Charles Baudelaire’s 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life”: “Let the reader not be shocked by this gravity amidst the frivolous.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

As an epigraph, its meaning seems clear: a wry gesture from Kracauer towards the critical sacrilege his book promises with its elevation of operetta to the status of political bellwether. In Baudelaire’s essay, however, the exhortation appears in a section dedicated to the figure of the dandy—a type who, Baudelaire insists, “can never be vulgar” and who, above all, abhors the trivial.[[7]](#endnote-7) In its original context, it not frivolousness that Baudelaire seeks to defend, but the dandy’s rare and misplaced *seriousness*, his insistence on “heroism amid decadence”. Indeed, the epigraphed exhortation runs on curiously, uncited by Kracauer: “let him rather recall that there is a grandeur in all follies, an energy in all excess.” Here, then, is dialectical thinking avant la lettre. Baudelaire’s dandy as hero is enlisted to defend Kracauer’s operetta as political biography; gravity is found precisely where one least expects it.

So what of frivolity? Once again: is it possible to take operetta seriously without simply arguing that it is, after all, serious?

Each of the four authors of the essays in this issue engages to some extent with this challenge, and each returns to grapple anew with Kracauer’s own mission to read operetta constructively in relation to the historical moment and political circumstances of its production or reception. For Tobias Becker, that larger historical context is always already center-stage: his essay “Globalizing Operetta Before the First World War” seeks to uncover the genre’s contribution to the history of globalization by tracing both the mechanics of its international import and export and the ways in which a fundamentally international mindset was embedded in the plots of operettas themselves. As such, Becker’s project builds explicitly on Kracauer’s conviction that Offenbach’s music was “an international phenomenon in an age of international development.” But he looks beyond Offenbach and Paris to focus on the early international careers of two German-language works—Franz Léhar’s *Die lustige Witwe* (Vienna, 1905) and Jean Gilbert’s *Die keusche Susanne* (Berlin, 1910)—to support his bold claim that European operetta was “the most global operatic genre” by the end of the nineteenth century. His account should astonish: the circulation of operetta as a cultural marker, as a badge representing exile and expatriation, as a signifier of cultural identity, shows us the extent to which operetta far outpaced opera as global phenomenon. This is one aspect of understanding the vast circuits through which European musical culture began to infiltrate every continent of the globe around the turn of the twentieth century.

Micaela Baranello addresses the complex, contested relations between opera and operetta in her “‘Operettendämmerung’: *Die lustigen Nibelungen* and the Failures of Wagnerian Operetta.” Kracauer once again acts as an important catalyst here: as Baranello reads his writing on Offenbach, “satiric operetta’s unmasking of Wagnerian hypnosis gave it a kind of high cultural credibility.” Yet her article pushes back against such an apparently neat alignment of operetta with political critique through a sustained attempt to scrutinize the process by which such cultural capital was subsequently lost. The “twilight of operetta” of her title refers to a familiar song, sung by many a bard in the first decades of the twentieth century, when composers working in Vienna turned away from satire and forged a more overtly sentimental form of operetta. As she puts it, “that operetta fell in aesthetic value as it rose in international popularity is rarely in question.” What’s more, as Baranello makes clear, this development also coincided with a turn away from parody of Wagner by operetta composers towards direct emulation of his music—and thus an aesthetic step in the direction of opera itself. In these circumstances, Berlin offered the possibility of renewal for operetta, away from Vienna. Through close attention to aspects of Oscar Straus’s Wagner parody *Die lustigen Nibelungen* (Berlin, 1904) and Léhar’s more sincerely Wagner-influenced post-*Witwe* operettas, Baranello examines both the genre’s changing place in a larger music-theatrical hierarchy and the ways in which it was embedded in two specific urban environments in the early twentieth century.

One contribution, “Offenbach, Kracauer, and Ethical Frivolity” shares Becker’s and Baranello’s concern with operetta produced in German-speaking cities, but moves further into the twentieth century, to the early operetta sound films of the 1930s. Once again, Kracauer looms large: Carolyn Abbate (one of this issue’s co-editors) takes as her launch pad the transformation of his phrase “two forms of paradise” into “two types of frivolity” in the standard English translation of his Offenbach book. Like Baranello, Abbate urges us to look beyond operetta’s oft-noted capacity to act as a vehicle for progressive political satire; she points out, moreover, that operetta “has perennially demanded recuperation” via both its identification with progressive politics, on the one hand, and its technical finesse, on the other. As part of her inquiry into the modus operandi of such rescue operations, and as an alternative stance towards the genre, approached via its “afterburn” on film, Abbate seeks ways to “make peace with [operetta’s] impermanence and insouciance,” attempting to locate and respond to operetta’s strain of what she terms “ethical frivolity.” The essay follows paths leading across familiar historical narratives—the emergence of sound film, the political landscape of early 1930s Germany, a diva behaving badly—only to refuse at each junction any claim for operetta’s rightful accumulation of value-by-association in favor of a renewed attention to operetta’s production of wonder.

In her essay “The Diva: Fates of an Archetypal Figure in Operetta,” Ethel Matala de Mazza is concerned with multiple mythic figures that have populated accounts of the genre: Helen of Troy; the frivolous (yet, in terms of mastery and technique, virtuosic) operetta diva; that diva’s representation in operetta from Offenbach to the 1930s. But she also, crucially, asks what is at stake in the changing relationship between aesthetic portrayals of this figure, and the real lives of the singers thus caricatured or immortalized in works that enshrined them. Matala de Mazza situates Offenbach’s *La belle Hélène* (1864, libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy) against French theatrical traditions in which female emotional intensity (both as portrayed, and as performed) produces the satisfying illusion that genuine anguish has been on display. Meilhac, Halévy, and Offenbach instead present Helen of Troy’s anguish about infidelity as self-consciously artificial on *her* part, and thus “the feminine tragedy becomes a comedy involving collisions between incompatible wishes.” That Helen was created by Hortense Schneider—with her astonishing voice and louche reputation—only helped the artifice along, preventing the audience from seeing past the performer to the character. Matala de Mazza traces this slippage between mythic female characters and the women who represented them onstage through later European operettas, ending with Germany in the 1930s; there, she reveals how Oscar Straus’s *Eine Frau, die weiß was sie will* (Berlin, 1932)—sensing the political winds—enables the diva in the plot, and the singer who portrayed her, to take their leave of the stage in ways that appear, at least, unforced.

Ditlev Rindom’s review of Karen Henson’s *Operatic Acts*, which also appears in this issue, addresses Henson’s concern (with regard to opera) for a closely related symbiosis: between libretto portraits, compositional decisions, and the singers for whom operatic roles were written, at a historical moment—decades long—shared by most of the essays here collected. One singer whose career she explores, Célestine Galli-Marié, crossed between opera and operetta, having created (very famously) Carmen in Bizet’s opera, yet also (far less famously) the trouser role of Vendredi (Man Friday) in Offenbach’s *Robinson Crusoé* (Paris, 1867). Her sister, Paola Marié, was an operetta singer who became famous in America during the “opera-bouffe invasion in New York” in the years leading up to World War I.[[8]](#endnote-8) It thus seems fitting that we end with this reminder that opera and operetta were themselves in cross-circulation.

One of the mid-twentieth century’s great film directors, Max Ophüls, was well aware that operetta contained multitudes. Consider his masterwork, *Madame de …* (1953, *The Earrings of Madame de …*). We are, once again, in operetta world. Belle-Epoque Paris. A glamorous, flighty, unsatisfied wife, her aristocratic husband—a faintly ridiculous military general with gold braid and medals—and the seductive foreigner, in the form of an Italian baron. Champagne, waltzes, balls, jewels: the conventional accoutrements are all present and correct. Yet, with unnerving suddenness, things take a fatal turn. We are reminded that behind operetta’s giddy divas and their self-conscious artifices were performers and producers who were at times in despair, and that behind operetta’s merry officers and their glittering uniforms lay real wars, real guns, and real death. Ophüls’ film encapsulates what the essays in this special issue each, in their own way, suggest: that operetta, perhaps uniquely among all sung theater genres, spins between opposites in a way that forbids inertia of the mind.

*Carolyn Abbate and Flora Willson*

1. On “horizon of expectations,” the term made famous in reception theory by Hans Robert Jauss, see his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); on Jauss and kitsch, see Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1984, 2003), 64-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), x. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted and translated in Traubner, *Operetta*, xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In her foreword to the 2002 Zone Books edition, Gertrude Koch even suggests that we should read Kracauer’s book as a “novel,” constructed from the same source material about nineteenth-century Paris that Walter Benjamin presents raw and fragmentary, “without any text of his own,” in his *Passagen-Werk*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Rudolf Aronson, *Theatrical and Musical Memoirs* (New York: McBride, Nast and Company, 1913), 219-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)