



Why The Student Prince?

Köln, Germany

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I suppose one must always ask for the validity of playing something more-or-less forgotten and I had to confront this when I was asked a few years ago to journey to Cologne, Germany to record and perform (in concert) Sigmund Romberg's 1924 operetta, *The Student Prince*.

I knew of the TER complete recording and I had felt the job of preserving the work was done, even if one could carp about the extreme English-sounding quality of the performers, the frequently slow tempos and a sound mix that is occasionally unbalanced. The acting is of the melodramatic kind that does the libretto no favors. Nonetheless, the estimable TER Company had done the world a service and the work was "covered," as we say in America.

However, after some cajoling and deep thinking about it all, I agreed to learn it and to enter the chocolate-covered world of Old Heidelberg and the so-called musical thievery of the once-famous Sigmund Romberg.

I purchased the one and only biography (published by Yale Press), which begins with a stolen story about stealing music. As told in the preface and then again in the body of the book, Romberg is given credit for a self-effacing remark about his own musical inspiration, which, in the case of this anecdote, was the soon-to-be stolen melody from the barcarolle from Offenbach's *les Contes d'Hoffman*. What made this recounting of the story so Pirandello-like, is that both the author and the editor ascribed the story to Romberg.

The story, as told to me by Erich Wolfgang Korngold's son, Ernst, and his daughter-in-law, Helen, goes as follows: Sigmund Romberg held a house party in his Beverly Hills home. At this gala party were many composers – those refugee geniuses who had created the very sound of Hollywood. During the house tour, Korngold and (I believe) Miklos Rozsa as well as others from the former Hapsburg Empire were ushered into Romberg's huge music room, which contained an organ, a piano and literally thousands of leather-bound scores – Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and hundreds of little-known published works. Romberg's personal music collection remains one of the greatest in the world. Upon seeing these scores lining the walls, from floor to ceiling, the young assistant to one of the composers said, "Gee! Did Mr.

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Romberg write all of this music?" to which Korngold answered, "'Not yet!"

Now, that version makes sense, since Erich Korngold was perhaps the funniest of those marvelous men. "You know when you think of something you should have said to someone?," Helen Korngold once said to me. "My father-in-law said it!" No one was quicker with a witticism than EWK.

But since Romberg was perhaps the most infamous Thief of Broadway, what and why should anyone take the time to learn, perform or, indeed, listen to, *The Student Prince*?

Well, there will always be curiosity about the longest running show on Broadway in the 1920s and 1930s. It outran every show by George and Ira Gershwin – every show – and outran the greatest show of the period, Kern-Hammerstein-Ferber Show Boat of 1927. So, one might ask, what was that all about?

I write this the morning after the performance we gave of *The Student Prince* in Cologne's Philharmonic Hall. The orchestra and chorus were from the WDR (Fundfunkorchester and Rundfunkchor) and all the soloists were European – most of whom were German. For many complicated copyright reasons, they all sang in the original English text by Dorothy Donnelly. *The Student Prince* takes place in Germany, after all, and is about Germans and so their slightly inflected English was both authentic and, at the same time, curiously moving.

Here's some of what I learned:

First of all, almost no one in Germany knows of Romberg at all. (The Head of the WDR said to me at dinner last night that he had never heard a note of this beautiful music, and that he had run into the chief music critic during the interval and he admitted that not only had he never heard a note of *The Student Prince*, but he had never heard of Sigmund Romberg.) I think it important to point out that Romberg, a Hungarian Jew (Rosenberg), who studied in Vienna, came to America in 1909 and became a citizen in 1919.

And so, once again, one is amazed that this incredibly popular European-trained composer – the man who carried the Vienna "light music" tradition to New York, Hollywood and on recordings, was a non-person, whereas Franz Lehar, Robert Stolz

and others are known to everyone in Germany. (The Student Prince had a successful transfer to Berlin in 1932 – although, ironically, much of the score was replaced by music that was jazzier and more “American” – only to be closed by Hitler in 1933, for the obvious reason that Romberg was a Jew. Sixty-five years after the conclusion of World War II, Romberg’s music remains mostly unknown and one can file his name in the same section of Degenerate Music as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Waxman, Hindemith and Weill.)

Given the response last night – the cheering and the rhythmic applause – it was a new old friend for the audience, someone they had never heard of but somehow inherently knew. And yes, occasionally there are two or three bars that sound like we are going into something from *die Fledermaus*, or (equally unknown, but for different reasons) *Naughty Marietta*, but really: The question of style and thievery is more of a discussion point than anything else. Does anyone today agree that Bach was stealing from Buxtehude? And if so, do we care? Remember the old saw: “Liszt invented the ‘Tristan chord?’” – Yes, but Wagner wrote *Tristan*. End of discussion.)

So, for over two hours, a German audience (about 1500 people) heard waltzes and marches and love songs and some dramatic underscoring – and genius, I should say. Maybe this is another example of Andrew Lloyd Webber (bad) versus Stephen Sondheim (good) that pervades all critical assessment of Broadway. When I was a boy, it was *West Side Story* versus *The Music Man* – the latter having won all the awards and the former, which closed rather precipitously and then re-opened months later, doing pretty good business but whose real legitimacy came with the creation of its movie version. (I should say, having conducted both shows 50 years later, that both shows are perfect and together they are a complete picture of America – rural and urban -- and both are extraordinary achievements, in the case of *The Music Man* a single genius wrote it all and, in the case of *West Side Story*, a single genius gathered and shaped the genius and talents of a group of men to create a work that appears to be by one man. *The Music Man* is about two adult liars who trip over their lies and, as adults, find truth, vulnerability and true love. *West Side* is about kids who know nothing about love and kill each other in a dirty and dangerous nighttime. *West Side* tries to teach us something about race hatred, hoping – in the original staging, at least - that we leave the theatre better citizens. *The Music Man* just tells us about how truly silly and funny we are when we pretend.

But, if *The Student Prince* has enough music in it to warm our hearts, make us smile, make us clap like children finding some perfect present under the tree, is that all? Well, no. And here is where I get serious.

I believe the success of *The Student Prince* has much to do with the impact of World War I. I think J.J. Shubert knew that when he hired Romberg to put music to the 1901 German play, *Alt Heidelberg*, which had been successfully mounted (in German!) in Milwaukee and then (also in German) in New York

within a year of its premiere in Germany. The Shuberts owned the stage rights to the play, but there would have been no chance to create a musical version of this play during the war years. William A. Everett points out in his biography of Romberg, that during the war years no opera by Wagner was heard at the Metropolitan Opera.

However, we Americans know (at least subliminally) that music for us (at least “classically” formed music) is a German import. It was the Moravians from the German-speaking world who brought European music to America. Not the Pilgrims! Not the other Protestants! They banned music from their service and generally frowned on it, because music can change the way one behaves, and it is better not to behave at all than risk the potential evils of music in the air. And so, these German-speaking, music-loving Christians came to America, and brought Haydn with them. They brought composers and instruments and made music not only part of their service but part of their community, teaching it and their language to their African servants, for example. When Benjamin Franklin wanted to hear Haydn’s *Creation* (*die Schöpfung*), he journeyed from Philadelphia to the Moravian community in Pennsylvania to hear it. There would have been no institution in America’s capital city to perform it.

And so, the world of symphony, opera, and music theater in America has a fundamental basis that is German. And America could not live long without its German music. By 1920, less than a year after the Treaty of Versailles changed the maps and the very structure of Imperial Europe, the Metropolitan mounted *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*. Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House held a Wagner Festival and Wagner’s son, Siegfried, came to New York to conduct concerts to raise money for the Bayreuth Festival. (Now that’s a concert most of us would have liked to have heard: Three generations of DNA: Siegfried’s own music, the music of his father, Richard, and the music of his grandfather, Franz Liszt.)

And so, the Shuberts found a way to get the approvals necessary and they hired Dorothy Donnelly to write the libretto and Sigmund Romberg to compose the score. And it ran and it ran and it outran everything around it. But, again, what is it for us?

In the run up to World War I, violence had become the fashion: we can see it everywhere in the art and music of the time. One can easily trace the line in classical music and opera. Before the 1850s, violent acts were never “described” in music, though operas were full of dramatic stories. – that is, until the moment in *das Rheingold* in which Fafner bludgeons his brother Fasolt to death. The violent timpani rhythms tell a bloody and violent story, far more awful than any staging could ever depict. This tiny moment (20 seconds) within the enormous edifice of the Ring remained more or less unique until Richard Strauss composed his *Tod und Verklärung*, and then brought overt violence to the stage with his *Salome*, and the dance of death of *Elektra*. Puccini had brought this to the opera house just before Strauss, with the truly grizzly musical depiction of the torture (off stage) of Cavaradossi

in his 1900 opera, *Tosca*. Even the pacific Debussy composed a ballet, *Khamma*, in 1912, in which the title character is struck by lightning and dies before our eyes. And the culmination of this classical music march to the scaffold known as World War I, is Stravinsky's ultimate provocation: *le Sacre du Printemps*. Commercial composers are frequently called to account because they write for the mob, but that was exactly what Stravinsky – under the clever leadership of Serge Diaghilev – was doing.

Diaghilev knew a good thing when, in 1909, he produced the work that catapulted his fledgling *Ballets Russes* to fame: Fokine's sexually primal and violently virile choreography to an old chestnut, the "Polovtsian Dances" from *Prince Igor*. Significantly enough, the stage setting and the costumes were by one Nicholas Roehrig. The half-naked men had mud smeared on their bodies and the French audience erupted with mock-shock and passionate interest, storming the stage entrance after the dance was done – even though there was still another ballet in the program that night. One can almost see Diaghilev wanting to keep this good thing going, and sure enough, it was Roehrig who created the story of *Sacre*, his so-called *Pictures from Ancient Russia*, and, instead of an old warhorse as its score, Stravinsky was invited to create something new and profoundly violent. That Nijinsky brought his mad genius into the mix made history and an oft-told scandal. Yes: but we should also remember, that after the riot at the *Theatre du Champs-Elysees*, a concert performance of *Sacre* within a month of its premiere was a triumph with the young men in the audience – these same young men who thirsted for "victory" and a great war to remove the weak from the earth. A powerful new world would emerge, and, I suspect, most of those men who cheered the *Rite of Spring* at that concert were to be counted among the 15 million dead in the war that ensued a few months later.

So, again: Why *The Student Prince*?

Today, I believe it is valid to look at Stravinsky's third ballet not as the door opening to new music, but rather as the end of a process. It was the nadir, or the apex, of a use of violence that would not, in general, happen again in classical music until, yes, and the next world war. Stravinsky never again employed the crushing powers of music to incite or support tribal and warlike behavior. After the war's end, he composed the little anti-war piece, *L'histoire du soldat*, and then almost apologetically hid behind classical composers of the past through reference and gentle distortion, until he ended up trying desperately to find the *Fountain of Youth* in those last, and to me, at least, sad little 12-tone works like "*The Owl and the Pussycat*." Stravinsky's musical world would definitely not end with a bang.

When *The Student Prince* came to Broadway in 1924, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was gone. The Ottoman Empire was gone. New countries, with strange-sounding names, like Iraq and Iran, had been created. European borders had been shifted. And, as I said, 15 million were dead. Another 20 million were wounded. And *The Student Prince* brought back a world that imagined a time before the bloodthirsty mob brought us to a place of

emotional rubble. America was now, and for the next century, leading the way with a new music that everyone was dancing to. The waltz was really and most sincerely dead.

But there is and was a desire to imagine a simpler time – as if any time were ever simpler – and for those in their twenties in the 1920s, as well as their parents, the music Romberg created, simultaneously new and old, said "It can be again, if only here in this darkened theatre and only for a few hours. But, it can be."