Synopsis

Vienna, 1860

Act I A drawing room in a Vienna Hotel

Act II Foyer to a public ballroom

Act III A lobby in the hotel

Act I

In the Waldners' hotel suite, Countess Adelaide von Waldner consults a fortune teller about the family's financial crisis. The cards predict a rich marriage for their beautiful daughter Arabella, which would get the family out of debt, but the fortune teller sees danger from a second daughter. Adelaide admits that their "son," "Zdenko," who has been warding off creditors at the door, is in fact a girl, Zdenka, who has been brought up as a boy to save the family the ruinous expense of introducing two daughters into society. Adelaide and the fortune teller leave and Zdenka, alone, laments the family's situation. She fears they will have to leave Vienna and she will never see Matteo again, a young lieutenant and one of her sister's suitors with whom Zdenka has fallen in love. To keep him happy, she has been writing him love letters in Arabella's hand. Suddenly Matteo appears and asks his best friend, "Zdenko," to help him win Arabella—otherwise he will shoot himself. Then he rushes off, leaving Zdenka desperate.

Arabella returns from a walk to find presents from her three other suitors, Counts Elemer, Dominik, and Lamoral. Although Zdenka loves Matteo, she begs her sister to favor him so he will not be heartbroken. Arabella replies that the right man for her hasn't appeared yet—she knows that once he does, she'll recognize him. Elemer arrives to invite Arabella for a sleigh ride. Before she goes off to change, she notices a stranger outside the window whom she had seen earlier that morning. The two girls leave as Count Waldner enters and tells his wife that as a last resort he has sent a photograph of Arabella to a rich old friend and fellow officer, Mandryka, hoping he would marry her. A few moments later Mandryka himself is announced—in fact, not the old Croatian friend, who has died, but his nephew and heir. The younger Mandryka has fallen in love with Arabella's portrait and sold one of his forests in Slavonia to come to Vienna and ask for her hand. He lends the stunned Waldner some money, then leaves with the promise of an introduction later in the day. Waldner sets off to gamble with his newfound wealth. Matteo returns and Zdenka promises him she will have another letter from

her sister that evening at the Coachmen's Ball. Arabella, alone, reflects on the decision as to which suitor she will choose, her thoughts turning to the stranger she saw in the street. When Zdenka returns, the sisters go off to their sleigh ride.

Act II

In the foyer of the ballroom, Waldner introduces Arabella to Mandryka, who turns out to be her fascinating stranger. Their meeting begins awkwardly as Mandryka, not used to Viennese society, feels he doesn't find the right words, but Arabella is instantly attracted by his honest and straightforward manner—it is love at first sight. Mandryka tells of his young wife who died, of his lands, and the Slavonian custom of a girl pledging her engagement by presenting her future husband with a glass of water. Arabella returns his declaration of love but asks for one last evening to bid farewell to her girlhood. The coachmen's mascot, the Fiakermilli, enters accompanied by her admirers and names Arabella queen of the ball. Mandryka orders champagne for everyone and steps aside as Arabella bids goodbye to Dominik, Elemer, and Lamoral. Meanwhile Matteo pleads desperately with Zdenka for some sign of Arabella's professed love. Zdenka presses a key into his hands, telling him it opens the door next to Arabella's bedroom, and that Arabella will meet him there later this evening. Mandryka, who has overheard the conversation, is appalled. Furious, he orders more champagne, drinks recklessly, and flirts with the Fiakermilli. Waldner appears, demanding to know what's going on, and Adelaide explains that Arabella has gone home. Assuming there must be some sort of misunderstanding, Waldner convinces Mandryka to return with him to the hotel at once.

Act III

Arabella enters the hotel lobby, dreamily thinking about her future life. Matteo, who has just spent some time in a dark room with someone he thought was Arabella, is amazed to find her there and can't make sense of her cool cordiality. Mandryka arrives with the Waldners. Recognizing Matteo as the person who was given the key, he is convinced of Arabella's betrayal despite her protestations of innocence. His behavior leads Waldner to demand satisfaction. Suddenly Zdenka comes running down the stairs in a nightgown. Overcome with shame, she confesses she gave herself to Matteo to avert a worse disaster. While her shocked parents forgive her, Matteo happily realizes that something hadn't been adding up from the beginning and that he is in love with Zdenka. Mandryka, though mortally ashamed, quickly takes charge of the situation and asks Waldner for Zdenka's hand on Matteo's behalf. As the others retire to their quarters, Arabella asks Mandryka to have his servant bring a glass of water to her room. Left alone and unable to forgive himself for his lack of trust in Arabella, Mandryka despondently wonders how she feels about him now that she left without even saying goodnight. As he is about to leave, Arabella appears at the top of the stairs, water glass in hand. She forgives Mandryka, and they renew their promise of love.

Richard Strauss

Arabella

Premiere: Dresden State Opera, 1933

The romantic comedy *Arabella* was the final collaboration of Richard Strauss and his great librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal. It tells the story of an impoverished noble family in mid 19th century Vienna trying to function on a tight budget in a changing world. The parents hope to marry one daughter, the title character, to a wealthy suitor while raising her younger sister, Zdenka, as a boy to save money. While certain elements of operatic farce are present (including class issues and gender disguise), there is a sober atmosphere about the work. The second act, for example, takes place at a ball—but rather than a fantasy of an aristocratic utopia, it's a "coachman's ball." The issues of transformation—emotional, spiritual, psychological—that Strauss portrayed so powerfully in extreme terms in his earlier operas become, in *Arabella*, universal. The work is a simple romance with a mundane domestic setting, but its characters' journeys are as moving and affecting in their own way as in, say, the highly symbolic *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Arabella herself—honest, pure, well-meaning—is one of opera's most appealing and believable characters. The setting of "Old Vienna" is quite different from that in the same authors' *Der Rosenkavalier*: the nostalgia of the earlier opera is mythical and self-consciously anachronistic; in *Arabella*, it is frank and without irony.

The Creators

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) composed an impressive body of orchestral works and songs before turning to opera. After two early failures, *Salome* (1905) caused a theatrical sensation, and the balance of his long career was largely dedicated to the stage. His next opera, *Elektra* (1909), was his first collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), a partnership that became one of the most remarkable in theater history. Hofmannsthal emerged as an author and poet within the fervent intellectual atmosphere of Vienna at the turn of the last century. Their personalities were very different—Hofmannsthal enjoyed the world of abstract ideas, while Strauss was famously simple in his tastes—which makes their collaboration all the more extraordinary.

The Setting

Arabella is set in Vienna around 1860. The historical moment that drives the plot is the situation of a fading landed gentry attempting to keep up appearances while somewhat adrift in the modern urban melting pot.

The Music

The score of *Arabella* is beautiful and charming, with a wealth of lyrical melody perfectly attuned to the demands of the story and characters. Arabella's love interest, Mandryka, is one of Strauss's great baritone roles: his music, as his character, is straightforward, with excursions into the bumptious (the end of Act II and the beginning of Act III, when he thinks himself mocked by the jaded city dwellers) and conversely into the lyrical (later in Act III when he seeks forgiveness for his earlier behavior). However, it is Strauss's most exalted domains—his writing for the soprano voice and for the orchestra—that are magnificently apparent throughout this score. The title character's introspective soliloquy that ends Act I is a rich and evocative portrayal of a person's calm yet profound internal monologue. Arabella's Act I duet with Zdenka (also a soprano) is among the finest for this voice type in the repertoire. Beyond its ravishing beauty, it conveys a sense of wistful melancholy that represents Strauss's human insight at its best. It is also one of the moments in the score that makes use of a Balkan folk melody. Another such instance appears when Arabella meets Mandryka at the ball, and further development of this idea is heard in her Act III musings about the married life in her future. Act II contains bright dance music as well as vocal display in the character of the Fiakermilli, written for a coloratura soprano as an artistic recreation of yodeling. The orchestra creates unforgettable effects, nowhere more notable than in the touching final scene, in which the listener is transported into a musical experience of forgiveness, wisdom, and the burgeoning of true love.

Arabella *at the Met*

The U.S. premiere of *Arabella* took place at the Met in 1955, in an English-language production directed by Herbert Graf and conducted by Rudolf Kempe. Eleanor Steber sang the title role, opposite George London, Hilde Güden, and Roberta Peters. Swiss soprano Lisa della Casa made 16 notable appearances as Arabella in this production between 1957 and 1965, and Anneliese Rothenberger appeared 12 times as Zdenka in the same period. The current production by Otto Schenk premiered in 1983, with the work presented in German for the first time at the Met. Erich Leinsdorf conducted Kiri Te Kanawa in the title role, Bernd Weikl as Mandryka, and Kathleen Battle as Zdenka. Christian Thielemann led eight performances in 1994, including the Met debut of Natalie Dessay as the Fiakermilli. The most recent revival in 2001 starred Renée Fleming as Arabella, Barbara Bonney as Zdenka, and Hans-Joachim Ketelsen as Mandryka, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting in his Met debut.

Program Note

It is fortunate for posterity that Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss had little personal contact and, during the many years of their artistic collaboration, conducted virtually all their business by letter. Their extensive correspondence allows us to watch, with an intimacy rarely granted to outsiders, the tortuous process of creation that resulted in so much fascinating work. In these letters we can follow with exceptional clarity the development of *Arabella*, first produced at the Dresden Opera in 1933 and, because of the poet's untimely death four years earlier, their final work together.

The essential features of the Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaboration were established right at the beginning of the partnership. In 1906 Strauss persuaded Hofmannsthal to adapt one of his plays into a libretto. During the course of his labors, Hofmannsthal found himself acceding over and over again to Strauss's demands for various changes. Tedious as this must have been to him, *Elektra*, the opera that resulted from their joint efforts, proved that Strauss's instincts had been correct. As Hofmannsthal discovered, often to his chagrin, those instincts remained in all essentials correct during the remaining years of their collaboration.

While Hofmannsthal—fastidious, complex, touchy, self-protective—admired the scope of Strauss's musical talent, he found the composer intolerably coarse in sensibility from the beginning of their professional relationship, and was slow to acknowledge Strauss's superior sense of theatrical effectiveness. Even as late as 1927, when the pair were finishing up their work on *Die Ägyptische Helena*, their fifth opera, Hofmannsthal was ever ready to explode at what he took to be the more insensitive of Strauss's demands for changes.

But by the time they began to make some headway with the project that was to become *Arabella*, Hofmannsthal had learned to control his impatience better, to assert himself whenever he thought his ideas superior to Strauss's but to do so in a more flexible and productive way than before. "I am by no means annoyed by your letters and suggestions," he replied to Strauss when asked for greater liveliness in the action of *Arabella*, "they are, on the contrary, of real service to me." Some of his old scorn flashed out in response to the composer's suggestion that what they might use in the second act of *Arabella* was "a colossal ballet" based on South Slav folk tunes. "By now," Hofmannsthal responded acidly, "I have come to regret my premature description which has led your fantasy, busy and active as it is, along the wrong track." But such reactions were by then rare.

Strauss took Hofmannsthal's rebuke in good humor, but he continued to ask, in his own sometimes insensitive way, for what he most needed: characters about whom he could care, diverse and interesting situations, a drama, not of metaphysical speculation, but of down-to-earth situations. Though intrigued by many features of Hofmannsthal's evolving libretto, as time went on the composer

felt that something fundamental was lacking. Only after much thought and uncertainty did he realize that the difficulty was central and concerned the heroine herself, whom, as he wrote to Hofmannsthal, he suddenly found, "altogether too flat and psychologically insignificant." Directed to the source of the trouble, Hofmannsthal was able to proceed, if not more smoothly than before, at least more purposefully, and after a great deal more work he was finally able to bring Acts II and III into focus in a way that met with the composer's approval.

Through Strauss's insistence, Hofmannsthal could at last discover the destiny of the figures whom he had found haunting his imagination so many months before, when he first developed the idea for *Arabella*. These characters derived mainly from *Lucidor*, a short story he had outlined years earlier. The most important of them were a pair of sisters—Arabella, the elder one, as Hofmannsthal wrote to Strauss, "dazzling," and Lucile, the younger, "softer and more humble"—balanced by a pair of suitors. One of these men, who figured in *Lucidor*, had lost his heart to the older sister, who, however, did not return his love. Instead, he was loved in secret by the younger sister (who, for reasons of familial expediency, was dressed by her widowed mother as a boy, under the name Lucidor). Lucile/Lucidor wrote letters to the suitor in Arabella's name and arranged an assignation in a dark bedroom, in which she took her sister's place. The other suitor, at first a Tyrolean, half peasant, half gentleman, soon began to turn into a character "from a half-alien world (Croatia), half-buffo and yet a grand fellow, capable of deep feelings, wild and gentle, almost daemonic…" From the beginning, Hofmannsthal pictured the first as a high tenor and the second as a baritone. They would eventually be called Matteo and Mandryka, and the younger sister became Zdenka.

Now that the last two acts had found their true shape, both Strauss and Hofmannsthal understood for the first time what became of the story's protagonists. There remained the task of discovering the springs of their behavior, the psychology and traits of character that lead them to behave in the way that had been marked out for them. The collaborators knew their characters' destiny—now they had to find out exactly who they were.

At the beginning of July 1929, almost two years after the idea of *Arabella* first surfaced, Hofmannsthal sent the composer a completely reconceived first act, much simpler in action than any of the earlier versions, and showing, in Hofmannsthal's words, "the character of Arabella more definitely in the center." But even then Strauss was not satisfied: still missing was a monologue for Arabella herself, something introspective and lyrical with which to bring down the curtain on Act I.

In part, no doubt, the composer was influenced by his lifelong love affair with the soprano voice, for him the most expressive as well as sensuous of all the musical means as his disposal. In *Der Rosenkavalier*, the first Strauss-

Hofmannsthal collaboration to be based on an original libretto, the psychological understanding communicated to the audience by the Marschallin's monologue at the close of Act I irradiates the rest of the opera. The same could be done for *Arabella*, Strauss believed, and he asked his librettist for a "great contemplative solo scene" with which the heroine might end the first act. Strauss's music rose magnificently to the opportunities offered by Hofmannsthal's lines, beginning "Mein Elemer!," and the essential features of the heroine's character remain with us throughout the events that follow—above all, the idealism and purity of soul that make her yearn, not merely for a husband, but for a soulmate.

A particularly fascinating aspect of the final collaboration of these two complementary geniuses is that Strauss's insistence on using elements of popular theater lends the work its psychological complexity. It was the composer, for example, who suggested that Mandryka should overhear the assignation given to Matteo by Zdenka in her sister's name. Only through Hofmannsthal's gift for language could Strauss find the long-breathed lyricism that would transfigure his heroine, her sister, and her suitor into such memorable creatures. And only through Strauss's sense of theater could Hofmannsthal discover the true nature of his characters' inner lives.

—Dale Harris