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OPERA NEWS

JOHANN STRAUSS: OPERA-BUFFA
DIE FÜRSTIN VON HALIN
FÜRSTIN WERDENBERG

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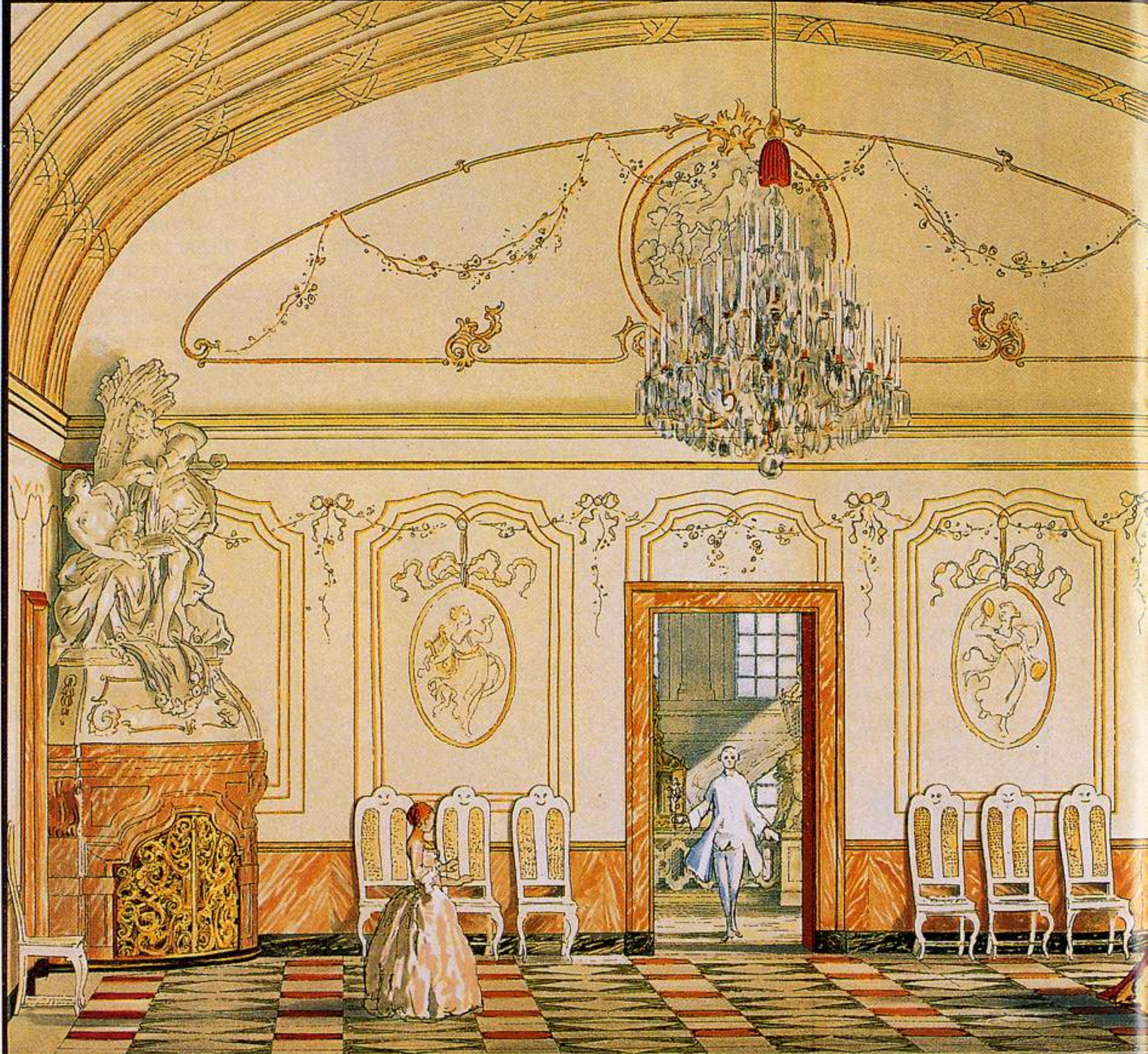


Without Regret: Reflections on the Marschallin
by May Sarton
Orpheus (and Hoffmann) Descending
Alfred Roller: Rosenkavalier by the Book
Carly Simon Crosses Over
Broadcasts of Les Contes d'Hoffmann/Der Rosenkavalier

ERSTES KOSTÜM
ERSTER AUFZUG

VERLAG UND EIGENTUM FÜR ALLE LÄNDER VON ADOLPH FÜRSTNER BERLIN W.
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HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL - RICHARD STRAUSS: O



BÜHNENBILD FÜR DEN 2. AUFZUG: EIN SAAL IM PALAT

“T

he rich gold chamber of the Marschallin, the porcelain construction of the newly rich Faninal, the secluded lasciviousness of the inn.... The harmony of the costumes came out as convincingly as the creator, Alfred Roller, conceived it. I have never seen as elegant and yet lively theatrical harmony: it was the highest level of music and poetry.”

— Oscar Bie, *Berliner Börsen-courier*, January 28, 1911

Such was the observation of one of the many critics present at the world premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Dresden Court

Theater on January 26, 1911. This notice was a reflection on the set and costume designs by Alfred Roller after more than eighteen months of careful preparation and rehearsal. Each element — scenery, lighting, painting, properties, costumes — was coordinated to mesh into an organic, balanced stage picture. The resounding success of these designs continues to influence stage and costume designers to the present day.

The rococo milieu of mid-eighteenth-century Vienna offered a wealth of opportunities for a rich visual experience of

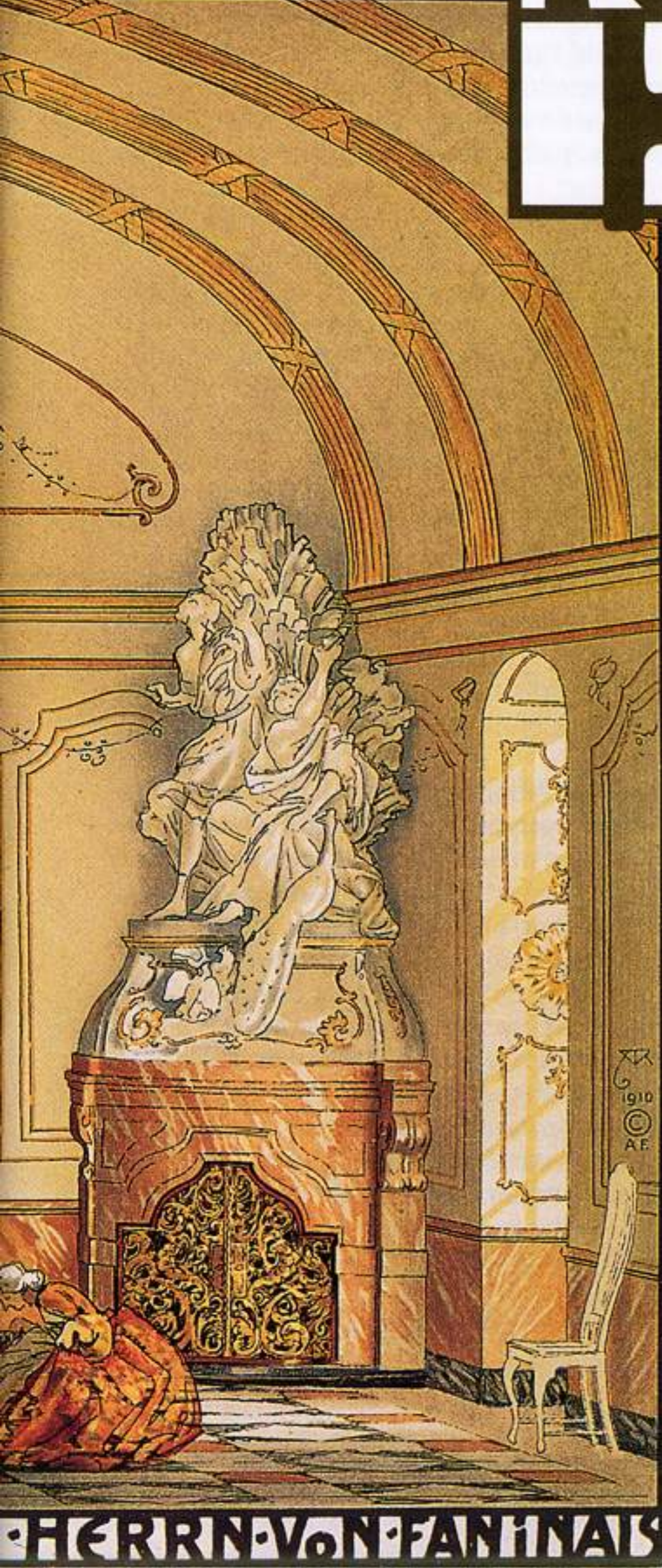
architecture, mode and manners. The librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, sought to bring to life “a half-real, half-imaginary world of the Vienna of 1740.” At the beginning of the collaboration, Richard Strauss, while recognizing the opportunities for superb theater, noted potential risks in the richly delineated text. On May 4, 1909, Strauss wrote to the poet, “All the figures are splendid and sharply defined. Unfortunately, first-rate performers will be required, for this is beyond the capabilities of the usual opera singers.”

One week later, Hofmannsthal respond-

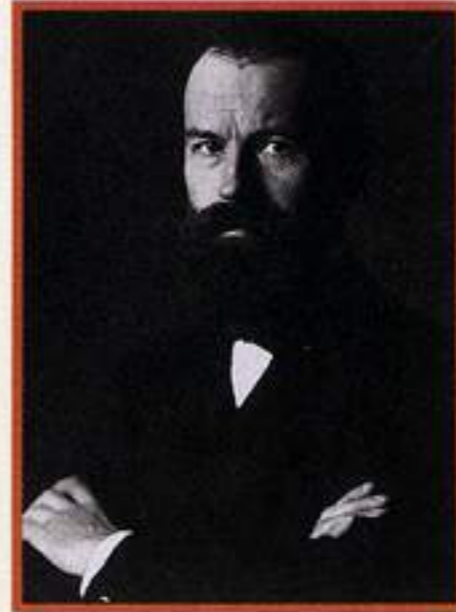
Designs courtesy of Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester

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**Designer Alfred Roller
completed the trio
that brought
Der Rosenkavalier
vividly to life
by Evan Baker**

known to both men long before, being a major figure in the world of the visual and theatrical arts in Vienna and abroad.

Roller (1864–1935), a native of what is now Brno, Czech Republic, was a highly respected teacher at the Vienna School for the Applied Arts and designer for the theater. He received his first artistic training from his father and later entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Along with Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser and Josef Hoffmann, Roller was a founding member of a new art movement that evolved in the spring of 1897 into what was to be known as the Secession. This was an agglomeration of ideas and philosophies, for all its members had their own aesthetic identity. There were some similarities in visual form, such as the “curving styles” comparable to Jugendstil or Art Nouveau.

Instead of having everything provided for the viewer, the Secession encouraged viewers to think for themselves. Emphasis was given to the ideal of unity: all forms of art should come together to provide a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art.” One of the primary elements of the Secession was to create *Stimmung* — “atmosphere,” perhaps better, “ambience.” These ideas were fundamental to Roller’s artistic values. As director of production at the Vienna Court Opera since 1903, he undertook a sweeping reform of the scenic arts. Overdecoration was banished; every element of opera staging had a specific

purpose within the whole production. A total work of art, uniting singers, settings, costumes, lighting and orchestra, led the audience to partake in the overall experience of opera. Roller was

among the first to use lighting as an essential part of stage production, bringing out the mood and atmosphere of the drama.

After designing more than twenty productions, Roller resigned from the Court Opera in June 1909 and returned to the School for the Applied Arts as its director. Toward the end of his engagement with the Court Opera, he had begun to apply his energies to *Der Rosenkavalier*. Several weeks after the Viennese premiere of *Elektra*, on March 24, 1909, Hofmannsthal discussed with Roller the scenario for much of the still untitled opera.

Both Roller and Hofmannsthal saw that extraordinary demands would be placed on the staging and visual aspects of the production — that a new style in stage directing would be required. Hofmannsthal wrote to Strauss, “It will be hard work but *conditio sine qua non* to maintain the work throughout upcoming decades. This style, new and homogeneous, may seem strange at first, but it will be gradually accepted.” Strauss subsequently required theaters — Dresden, Munich, Berlin, Vienna, Milan — to use Roller’s production and staging materials as part of the performance contract. This raised a storm of controversy, but Strauss remained firm, and theater directors, sensing artistic and financial success,

ed by reassuring Strauss that only the role of Ochs would be of concern. He also proposed that Roller be part of the creative team. “Roller is full of fire and energy to create for us a staging manual, complete with designs for the costumes and settings in finished form, which can be part of the musical materials rented out by [your publisher] Fürstner.”

Roller was no stranger to Strauss or Hofmannsthal, having designed the monumental, brooding setting for their *Elektra* at the Vienna Court Opera, two months after its premiere in Dresden. He was

THE ACT BED WAS A CENTER OF CONTROVERSY...

grudgingly capitulated.

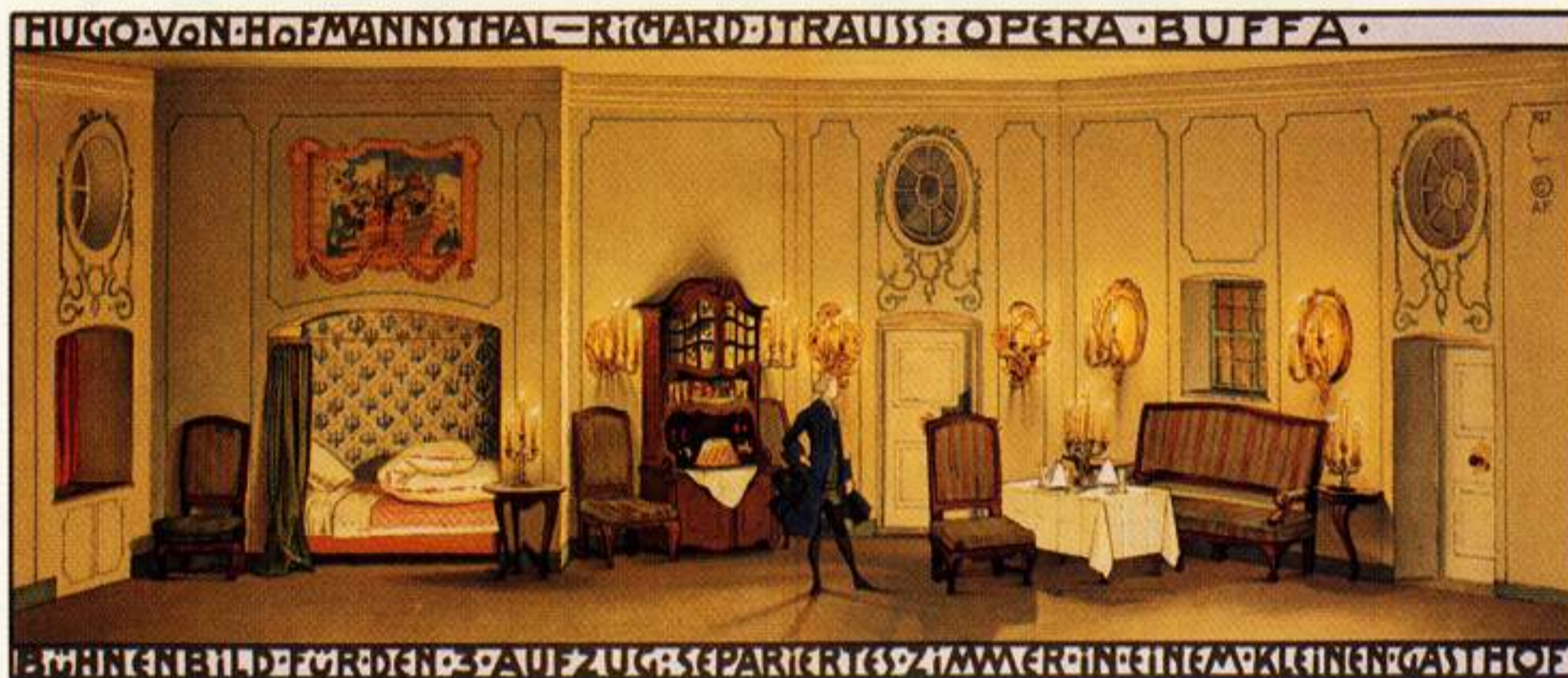
Roller concentrated on designs for three act settings and more than forty-five costumes. In July 1909 he reported to Hofmannsthal that the bedroom and several costumes were beginning to take shape. Hofmannsthal concluded with Roller a firm

Over the bed hangs a pompous canopy from the ceiling. Its outside curtains are of gold damask with gold fringe.... Above the curtains is a carved wooden crown of gold, topped off with white ostrich feathers."

This bed became a center of controversy with Count Seebach, intendant of the Dres-

open, and when Octavian closes it, the general lighting should darken somewhat. The soft lighting through the front window should then gradually and imperceptibly increase to full brightness.

The second-floor reception room in Faninal's "palace" was described by Roller as



Left: Roller's design for *Rosenkavalier's* Act I; opposite: the designer's sketches come to life, in the original La Scala production, with Lucrezia Bori as Octavian; Roller and Hofmannsthal agreed to create a separate staging manual that would set every movement "down to each and every button and shoelace," codifying the opera to the authors' intentions

oral agreement on the business terms of his participation. Otto Fürstner would publish the designs along with the staging manual.

Because Roller lived in and Hofmannsthal near Vienna, much of their discussion took place in personal meetings. Their attention to minutiae was striking, each set described in detail in the published libretto, vocal and full scores, with only minor variations. Even greater detail was accorded the staging instructions. Strauss added precise tempo indications and even accidentally set one stage direction to music. These sources are readily available in both German and English. Less well known are Roller's notes on settings and lighting for the staging manual. These descriptions were intended to assist in scenic construction and painting, as well as the execution of lighting effects. Roller stressed that the settings and colors should be as close as possible to those of his designs, to reflect the intended atmosphere. To achieve the desired scenic intimacy, the relatively small space within settings should be maintained.

The first act, Roller wrote, is a "typical high-ceilinged, symmetrically laid-out room of posh splendor; it is more pompous than comfortable and hygienic. Not quite a lady's private room but, contrary to our concept of a bedroom, simply too much architectural detail and pathos." Much detailed description of decorative work on the walls, doors, alcoves, curtains and windows follows. "The large bed ... should be covered with white silk sheets, a bolster covered with white, frilly silk sheets as well, and two small white satin feather blankets, of which one lies on the floor....

den Court Theater. According to the libretto, the curtain opens with the Marschallin lying in bed and Octavian kneeling on the floor, holding her hand. Seebach protested to Strauss that the idea was morally repugnant. Strauss replied, "In Dresden, if one takes objection and won't believe that people who sleep lie in bed, the Marschallin can already be out of bed and standing. For other, more pleasant functions, the bed is certainly known not to be necessary. I have no feeling for such theatrical aesthetics; I conduct my own private life properly and therefore have no need for such prudishness." In the end, a compromise: Roller noted that the Marschallin is "seated on a small sofa. Octavian kneels before her on a small footstool, held with a cuddling embrace in her lap. His head rests on her breast, and her face is hidden in his hair."

Roller's lighting instructions included a note that the curtains in the right alcove should be translucent, allowing the morning light in. One curtain should already be

"a pretentious high hall with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, through which all display of splendor makes a more ostentatious than elegant effect. Everything looks new, cold and un-lived-in." To the rear is a grand staircase that reaches the stage from an opening in the stage floor. In the hall there should be warm daylight, by the stairs somewhat less. Sunlight streams through the window at the right. When the large double doors are opened for the entrance of Octavian and his livery, more sunshine should stream in, as if from a high window.



Costume sketches for the Marschallin, Octavian, Baron Ochs

...FOR THE DRESDEN COURT THEATER.

Among the decorations described in detail are large marble fireplaces in the corners of the hall, their openings closed by "rich, gold-covered wrought-iron grilles" that open onto the stage. These fireplaces are not specified in the score or libretto, which note that Valzacchi and Annina enter "from secret doors at the rear" to catch Sophie and Octavian *in flagrante*, but Roller's manual suggests a more effective entrance: "The large wrought-iron gates of both fireplaces open silently; from the right surfaces Annina, and from the left Valzacchi. The gates close silently behind them."

The "private room" at the inn in Act III, Roller notes, "is neither new nor elegant. Through many renovations and adaptations, this room has taken shape by accident, and it appears even more so by the incomprehensible placement of the windows." Primary lighting comes from candles; the intensity of the lighting is regulated by the number of candles burning onstage. In addition, moonlight filters through the left window.

Through October 1910, Roller worked on his costume designs, treating them with equal importance to the settings. The tailoring of the costumes should reflect each character's social status. Men's breeches, for example, for the "elegant" characters (Octavian, Faninal, Italian Singer) are shorter and better-fitted than for those who are "coarse, inelegant or clumsy" (Ochs and his retinue, Valzacchi). Hofmannsthal in a letter of July 9, 1910, proposed that the Marschallin should not have a full fur robe for her morning wear,

but instead a "flowering brocade robe with small fur trim ... it should be more of a morning dress rather than a complete cloak" — a suggestion incorporated by Roller. After seeing several designs during a visit to Vienna in April 1910, Strauss wrote to Hofmannsthal, "Roller's costumes are magnificent!"

At first the opera was to be called *Ochs von Lerchenau*, but from early on, Hofmannsthal had objected. Needing a title to place on the set and costume designs, Roller pressed Strauss for a decision, whereupon the composer with exasperated humor replied, "I don't like *Rosenkavalier*. I like *Ochs*! But what am I to do? Hofmannsthal loves the delicate, ethereal, and so my wife tells me: *Rosenkavalier*. All right then, *Rosenkavalier*! The hell with it all!" Receiving this answer, Roller discreetly labeled each design "Hofmannsthal-Strauss: Opera-Buffera."

By the end of October 1910, all designs were in the hands of Fürstner, who began reproducing them in color on large sheets of art paper, placed in a portfolio along with the descriptions of sets and costumes. These portfolios were sent to the theaters that were clamoring to begin construction in time for the final rehearsals. Roller's staging manual, supplementing the directions printed in the libretto and scores, received the approval of Strauss and Hofmannsthal. Strauss wrote to Roller in December, "Reinhardt has expressed his great admiration of the manual. He proclaims it as an

excellent model of its kind."

During the first week of January 1911, Georg Toller, resident stage director of the Dresden Court Theater, began the staging rehearsals. A week later, Roller arrived for technical rehearsals and to supervise final preparations for the sets and costumes, most of which were made in the Berlin workshops of Hugo Baruch. Strauss and Hofmannsthal arrived shortly thereafter. Although Toller followed the manual, the results of the first staging rehearsals were a disaster. Fears of postponement or even cancellation reigned, and only with the timely arrival of Reinhardt was the situation saved. On the evening of January 26, *Der Rosenkavalier* was brought to its triumphant premiere.

A large number of the color prints and manuals disappeared during World War II. These are now very rare and fetch high sums on the antiquarian market. Few complete sets survive in performing-arts li-



Roller's designs for Sophie, Annina and Act III servant



braries and museums; in fact, only two complete sets of designs and one manual have been found in the U.S. In 1969, however, all the designs were published in color as part of the libretto accompanying the splendid LP recording of the opera conducted by Sir Georg Solti for Decca/London.

Hofmannsthal wrote to Ottonie Degenfeld, a close friend, "Roller, with his unbelievable talent and dedication, has created for us a scene of the eighteenth century which, before now, I have *never* seen on the German stage. Every spot that the eye sees does wonders, as if viewing a pastel by Delatour or other similar color prints." Almost forty years later, Strauss wrote in his memoirs, "Roller's decors were glorious, a model of their kind! All honor to his memory!" □

MR. BAKER, who recently completed a study of Roller's productions at the Vienna Court Opera, is a New York-based theater researcher specializing in opera staging.