



A Kálmán Idyll George Zukerman, O.C., O.B.C

In late April, 1945, just as World War II was drawing to a close in the European theatre of conflict, I was posted with a naval unit to the ruined city of Bremerhaven, in North Germany.

The Chief Executive Officer of our base was an enlightened patrician New England reserve officer who preferred Opera to operations. His mother, he proudly informed whomsoever would listen, had served on the Board of the Boston Opera in the mid 30's. He lamented (even to a mere enlisted man) that his deepest regret was to be posted in Germany where he had not yet been able to attend a single musical event – if, indeed, any were being held in those final days of the European war.

One day, shortly after the official declaration of the end of hostilities, I was summoned to the executive office. “With the signing of the armistice, there has been a lifting of restrictions on fraternization with the former enemy,” explained our commanding officer. “We recently received a request from the municipal authorities for instrumentalists to play with the Bremen Opera orchestra. In particular, they asked if by any chance we had a bassoonist.” I did not know that he was aware of the avocations of every one of his ship's company, but obviously he had done his research and had discovered that I had brought my bassoon with me to the Bremerhaven posting.

“They are in the process of re-creating their Opera company and I have initialled your assignment to play with the orchestra,” he said. “Of course, you will

continue your other duties here on the base, but a jeep will be available each day to take you to rehearsals.” The commander continued, revealing his full plan, “On performance nights, I will drive you there myself.”

As I saluted and turned to leave, he added, “The Bremen Opera house has been badly damaged in the raids. I urge you to take a warm coat with you.”

Even then he would not let me depart so quickly. “Have you read all of the Grimms' fairy tales?” he asked. “Not recently, Sir,” I replied. “Well,” he responded, “now at last you'll become one of the Town musicians of Bremen.” With that he returned my salute and I rushed to my barracks to see if I could find a good reed.

I had never before played Opera, and it seemed to me that the entire repertoire of this particular company consisted of the operettas of Emmerich Kálmán, Hungarian fellow student of Bartók and Kodály, banned, as Jewish, during the war years. They were all endlessly tuneful, wonderfully nostalgic, and

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emotionally satisfying to an audience deprived of any relaxed entertainment during so many years of harsh warfare.

I discovered later the reason why we played this endless banquet of Kálmán delicacies. In the shattered and badly damaged music library of the Bremen Opera House, the only intact orchestral scores and parts were of these Kálmán operettas. Scores of Mozart, Wagner, Weber, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti had been destroyed in the fire that gutted most of the building, but the Kálmán material had been discarded in some

distant corner of the building, where, forbidden in performance, at least it survived in hidden storage.

The orchestra generally rehearsed in bits and pieces for about forty-five minutes before the curtain was due to rise, and after that it became a feast of sight-reading! Night after night we played Kálmán, Kálmán and more Kálmán in the unheated shell of what was once a magnificent 1800-seat opera house. We performed *Countess Maritza* sixteen times, *The Gay Hussars* on ten occasions, and *The Gypsy Princess* at least seven times.

I was not allowed to shed my uniform, and the astonished stares of the audience each night should have made me decidedly uncomfortable. What could be made of the spectacle of a young musician playing in Allied military uniform with an all-German orchestra, less than a month after the war's ending? Heaven knows what they would have thought if they had suspected, on top of all else, that I might be Jewish. But I was young then and felt nothing more than the delight of sampling Kálmán for the first time.

The costumes had been rescued from some musty safe storage, where they had been mothballed since long before the war. The overpowering smell of camphor wafted downwards into the pit, so that I shall always associate those delicious bassoon passages that accompany the tenor in so many Kálmán arias with the aroma of a dry cleaning establishment.

Indeed, tenor parts were often doubled by the bassoon, and since there was a desperate shortage of good tenors, each performance became a feast of glorious solo passages for me. Kálmán-in-Bremen in 1945 became a kind of bassoon accompanied Singspiel.

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The experiment with fraternization did not last long and the policy changed after five months of Kálmán immersion. As suddenly as it had started, I was returned to my full time naval duties.

I learned later that the Executive Officer of the base had been transferred to Terceira in the Azores. His jeep no longer made its clandestine trips to the Opera House, and presumably the tenors of the Bremen Opera company had to make do with the second clarinetist covering the melody line on – what else? – a tenor saxophone.

George Zukerman, O.C., O.B.C.

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<https://www.bassoonasyouareready.ca/>

George Zukerman has led parallel careers on the Canadian music scene since the 1950's. He toured the world as a solo bassoonist and recorded the major bassoon concerto repertoire on Vox-Turnabout. As impresario, he brought music to smaller communities throughout the West, receiving the Order of Canada and the Order of BC for his lifetime contributions to music and touring. He was a member of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and CBC Chamber Orchestra and was founding Artistic Director of the White Rock Concerts series. He lives in Surrey with his partner, violinist Erika Benedik.



The Importance of Being Silly

It's easy to dismiss **Countess Maritza** as a piece of fluff (while keeping in mind that it is perfectly legitimate for an operetta to do nothing more than delight the senses and add a bit of laughter to the world).

Maritza is a lovely, silly, warmhearted romantic comedy, but it has an unexpected poignancy, both in the shadows of history that crowd round it and in the thread of loss and longing that weaves through its sunniness.

Set on a posh estate in the Hungarian boonies, *Maritza* is a visual feast, serving up lavishly dressed barons, counts, showgirls, and exotically costumed Gypsies. The music teems with earworms – so many that you can get rid of one simply by listening to the next.

The story is as predictable and far-fetched as any self-respecting operetta ought to be. Countess Maritza is young, very rich, and very tired of being pestered by men who want to marry her for her money. So she invents a fiancé and gives him the first name that pops into her head – Baron Zsupan, the fictional pig farmer in Strauss's *The Gypsy Baron*. Cue a genuine pig-farming Baron Zsupan, who shows up at her door, eager to go through with the wedding.

Meanwhile Maritza's eye is caught by her handsome, new, and very efficient farm manager, whom she finds disturbingly uppity, but strangely attractive. Little does she know that he is actually the impoverished Count Tassilo, working incognito to earn a dowry for his sister Lisa – who happens to be Maritza's new best friend.

Sparks fly as Maritza, Tassilo, Lisa, and Zsupan try to sort out their feelings. Things get even flakier when Princess Bozena – a dowager reminiscent of a benevolent, slightly dotty Lady Bracknell – turns up with her Shakespeare-spouting valet, a retired theatre prompter who clearly has unrealized ambitions to steal every scene he's in.

After an inevitable flurry of misunderstandings, true love overcomes jealousy and suspicion, and we are left to contemplate the futures of not one, but three happy couples.

Many of the delights of Countess Maritza come from its gentle mockery of the highfaluting aristocrats who swan about the countryside, utterly clueless about farming, pursuing their endless round of tennis and cabarets, while expecting the Gypsies to entertain them and the servants to know their place.

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Cast & Creative Team

Artistic Director Timothy Vernon has been aflutter with anticipation as he prepares to lead the **Victoria Symphony** in performances of *Countess Maritza*. *It is, he raves, a masterpiece of the genre, aswirl with infectious tunes, singing to rival Puccini, and a surge of warmth and humour – all with a dash of Paprika!*



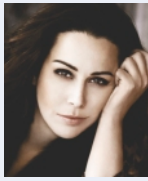
We welcome New-York based director **Linda Brovsky**, who has directed opera productions across the US and in Israel and Italy. She recently directed her critically acclaimed Seattle Opera production of *Don Quichotte* for the Canadian Opera Company.



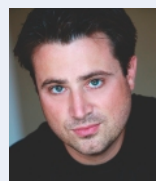
Our design team includes **Patrick Clark**, who was responsible for two of our most beautiful past productions, *Albert Herring* and *Madama Butterfly*, along with **Kimberly Purtell** who did the gorgeous lighting for *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *The Barber of Seville*.

Dance plays an important role in *Countess Maritza*, and the choreography is in expert hands with the gifted **Jacques Lemay**, whose work for February's *La traviata* was a triumph.

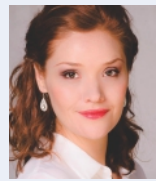
Leslie Ann Bradley, who plays Countess Maritza, was the less frivolous Countess in our 2014 *The Marriage of Figaro*. She was last at Pacific Opera for a beautiful performance as Desdemona in *Otello*.



Adam Luther (Tassilo) returns to Pacific Opera following recent performances as Tamino (*The Magic Flute*) and Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*).



Jennifer Taverner, who lit up the stage (literally) as the evil Armida in last season's *Rinaldo*, makes a welcome return as the Gypsy Manja.



Tenor **Michael Barrett** (Baron Zsupan) played the dual roles of Don Curzio and Don Basilio in our 2014 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*.



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Countess Maritza is a masterpiece of the so-called Silver Age of Viennese operetta. The earlier Golden Age was epitomized by the works of Johann Strauss II, notably *Die Fledermaus* (1874) and *The Gypsy Baron* (1885) – riches from the heyday of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when Vienna was one of the cultural centres of the world.

The Silver Age, extending from Lehár's *The Merry Widow* (1905) to the early 1930s, is characterized by a sense of nostalgia for a vanishing world, of longing for the glamour of an empire that, by 1918, had self-destructed.

The leading composers of the Silver Age were the Hungarians Franz Lehár and Emmerich Kálmán. When *Countess Maritza* premiered in 1924, Kálmán was already world famous; *Maritza* was yet another hit, running for 374 performances at the Theater an der Wien before moving to Broadway in 1926 where it played for 321 performances.

The work's enormous popularity stemmed in part from its timing: Europe was still reeling from the Great War, longing for charm and cheeriness, ravishing tunes, a reliably happy ending.

Maritza brims with music that compels you to tap your toes, to swoon, to dream. It has all the nostalgic elegance of a Viennese operetta; but Kálmán's score is spiced with Hungarian flavours – just

enough Magyar melancholy, edgy syncopation, and soulful Gypsy passion to counterbalance the waltz and the schmaltz.

As musician and critic Christopher Howell noted, *Though I confess to a sweet tooth generally where post-Johann Strauss Viennese operetta is concerned, ... Countess Maritza has always struck a particular chord in me.... Its melodies and harmonies seem to me to transcend their actual comedy context to express strong, melancholy emotions which somehow tug at my heartstrings.*

The shadows behind the frivolity of *Countess Maritza* are thrown into sharper relief when we consider what followed.

When *Maritza* premiered in 1924, Hitler was already chair of the Nazi party. In the next two decades, the shadows would close in.

Like many creators of Viennese operetta, Kálmán and his librettists, Julius Brammer and Alfred Grünwald, were Jewish. Brammer and Grünwald, the most successful writing team of Vienna's Silver Age, worked with Lehár and Oscar Strauss, among others, and wrote five operettas with Kálmán.

But with the Anschluss – the 1938 annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany – the creators of *Countess Maritza* were forced into exile. All three fled to Paris. Brammer died in 1943 in France. Both

Grünwald and Kálmán emigrated to the US in 1940.

Kálmán's daughter Yvonne has often recounted the story that in 1940, Hitler sent an officer to Paris with an offer to make Kálmán, one of Hitler's favourite composers, "an honorary Aryan" if he would return to Vienna. Kálmán took that as his cue to leave for America with his family, getting out just before the Nazis occupied Paris.

Kálmán's works were then banned by the Nazis as *Entartete* (degenerate), their performances prohibited. Hence the irony, as George Zukerman recalls, that the Kálmán scores stored in the Bremen Opera House survived the war and the bombing precisely because they had been cast aside. And after the war, there was *Countess Maritza*: an imperishable bauble glittering amid the ruins.

In a tribute to the glory of what he calls *the much-mocked art of Viennese operetta*, critic Richard Bratby said, *An ephemeral art can evoke something enduring ... a dance rhythm, a telling lyric and an indelible tune can speak to the human condition.... It's glorious entertainment. But if you chose to take it seriously ... you could see and hear a tragedy of alienation, exile and disillusion.*

Maureen Woodall

Discover more!

www.pov.bc.ca/maritza.html

Bruce Kelly is Prince Popolescu – another of his wonderful character roles for Pacific Opera, including, most recently, the Magician in *Rinaldo* and the High Priest in *The Magic Flute*.



Coloratura soprano **Suzanne Rigden** was a sassy Zerbinetta in our 2014 *Ariadne auf Naxos* and a bewitching Tytania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She now returns as the love-lorn Lisa.



A big perk of operetta is being able to incorporate theatre actors for a little scene-stealing spoken dialogue.

The thespian brigade is led by Canadian theatre icon **Nicola Cavendish** as the princess Bozena. A veteran of the Shaw Festival and beloved for hundreds of performances as Shirley Valentine, Nicola is no stranger to opera. She played Florence Foster Jenkins in *Glorious* (that counts as opera – sort of), and she was the Duchess of Krakenthorp in *The Daughter of the Regiment* for Vancouver Opera (before Ruth Bader Ginsburg made a splash in the role).



As Penizek, the Shakespeare-quoting valet, we welcome **Brian Linds**, a well-known local actor, playwright and sound designer, who played Owl in our recent libretto workshop of *The Flight of the Hummingbird*.

Also in speaking roles are **Jim Leard** (Tschekko), founder of Story Theatre Company and local theatre luminary; actor/director **R.J. Peters** (Karl-Stefan); and **Nolan Kehler** (Berko). In a cameo as the Gypsy violinist is **Julian Vitek**.

Adding music and colour are the **Pacific Opera Chorus**, directed by **Giuseppe Pietrarroia**, and members of the **Victoria Children's Choir** under **Madeleine Humer**, who is VCC's Artistic and Concert Choir Director, longtime Director of the St. Christopher Singers, and a respected educator and community leader.

Kálmán's daughter **Yvonne** will bring particular panache to *Countess Maritza*. She travels the world to attend performances of her father's operettas. We are delighted to welcome her to Victoria and to Pacific Opera!

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Unless otherwise specified, events are at the Baumann Centre, 925 Balmoral Road, Victoria.

Women in the Operatic World

Monday, April 1, 12:30 pm. Linda Brovsky, director of *Countess Maritza*, discusses her journey as a female director in the world of theatre.

Inside Opera at UVic Sunday, April 7, 10 am or noon. Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, University of Victoria. With Robert Holliston and guests.

Inside Opera at the Union Club

Friday, April 12, 11:45 am. The Union Club, 805 Gordon. With Robert Holliston and guests. \$35 includes lunch. Reserve with payment by April 8: 250.382.1641

Opera FYI Saturday, April 13, 3 pm. The Opera Shop, 620 Discovery St. When you hear a song, what do you see? Join local art instructor Nathan Davis in this hands-on experience of making art in response to live music.

Opera Motifs Tuesday, April 23, 12:30 pm.

Robert Holliston explores aspects of Kálmán's operetta *Countess Maritza*.

Master Class Monday, April 29, 7 pm.

Baritone Bruce Kelly (Popolescu in *Countess Maritza*) coaches Victoria-based singers.

Lunchbox Opera Tuesday, April 30, 12:30 pm.

Lunchbox Loves the Operetta! With soprano Leslie Ann Bradley (*Countess Maritza*) and tenor Adam Luther (Tassilo). Donations gratefully accepted (\$15 suggested).

Opera Goes to the Movies Wednesday, May 1, 7 pm.

Love me Tonight, 1932. Hosts: Rebecca Hass and Robert Holliston.

Lunchbox Opera Saturday, May 4, 12:30 pm.

A Celebration of Voices. Music from opera, operetta, Broadway, and the world of song. Singers from Pacific Opera's Artist Development Program, with Robert Holliston, piano. Donations gratefully accepted (\$15 suggested).

Countess Maritza

April 25, 27, May 3, at 8 pm
Sunday, May 5, 2:30 pm
Royal Theatre
Pre-performance lobby lecture
1 hour before curtain

Sense of Occasion

Thursday, April 25, 6:30 pm, East Lobby, Royal Theatre

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *Countess Maritza*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. \$35 per person. Reserve with payment by April 16: 250.382.1641.

DONOR SALON SERIES

President's Circle Working Rehearsal

Saturday, April 20, 6 pm. Royal Theatre

6 pm: Coffee and cookies

6:15 pm: Discussion


7:00 pm: Piano Technical Rehearsal

Refreshments and discussion with members of the creative team, followed by the Piano Technical Rehearsal for *Countess Maritza*.

By invitation to members of the President's Circle and Impresario Circle. RSVP by April 15: 250.382.1641 or rsvp@pov.bc.ca

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