

BOOK REVIEW

Wolff, Larry. *The Shadow of the Empress: Fairy-Tale Opera and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*

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Larry Wolff takes the reader on a long romp through the late Habsburg monarchy before, during, and after the Great War. He brings together a cast of characters from artistic royalty and Austrian royalty. Nostalgic love for Austria and its musical culture in the waning Austro-Hungarian Empire and the postwar decade suffuses his detailed descriptions: the reality and the operatic settings; the actual people and the opera characters. He features a composer (Richard Strauss), a poet (Hugo von Hofmannsthal), an archduke (Karl, the grandnephew of Emperor Franz Josef), and an Italian princess (Zita of Bourbon-Parma, a descendant of kings of France and Portugal, as well as a deposed duke of Parma). The conceit, or perhaps the illusion, of the book is the parallels Wolff constructs between the Strauss/Hofmannsthal's production of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and the reign of the last emperor and empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The chapters go back and forth between artistry and reality, the fantasy on the stage, and the fading empire with its hapless royalty. The result is an intriguing yet overlaid cultural history of something perilously close to decadence in art and power.

Part I of the three parts of the book describes a “fairy-tale empire” before World War I. It begins with Hofmannsthal conceiving a fairy-tale opera about an emperor and empress, about the same time the real empress-to-be is growing up into an appropriate spouse for the last emperor. The chapters are suffused with descriptions of imperial baroque, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, juxtaposed to modernity in travels and trends in the now-declining empire. Going back and forth between the production of *Frau ohne Schatten* and the life of Princess Zita, who would soon become the last empress, these six chapters depict a bewildering miscellany of influences, events, and artistry. Somehow, Wolff manages to bring them into relations among themselves, but still, it depicts a jumbled scene, dancing on the edge of a volcano. Wolff ends the first part of the book with Act One of *Die Frau* mostly written and composed before the outbreak of World War I. When the volcano erupted on 2 August 1914, Hofmannsthal had finished the libretto of the first act and was well into the second, and Strauss had been scoring the last two lines of Act I of Hofmannsthal's libretto: “You are the bridge that extends over the abyss, by which the dead return to life!”

Part II (Wartime: Habsburg Catastrophe, Operatic Transfiguration) depicts the war years, with Hofmannsthal and Strauss struggling to put together the last details of the opera while the war goes on; in the fading empire, Princess Zita and her husband were immersed in wartime duties. Wolff describes Hofmannsthal's and Strauss's wartime travails, their struggles to create, their military duties, such as concerts for the Red Cross and war widows and orphans, and their reflections on the course of the war. These chapters have the interest of all wartime histories that depict how people carried on in extraordinary circumstances. Wolff manages to link parts of the libretto of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* with the duties of now-Empress Zita, but the effort is strained. Still, these wartime chapters begin to fill a large gap in the cultural history of the Austrian Empire during the war, seen through the lens of the Hofmannsthal/Strauss partnership. His last chapter of Part II describes “the rebirth of Austrian culture.” It is a short chapter and does not linger on this “rebirth,” but nevertheless, Wolff has made an elegant case for the survival and new potential for artistry after the war.

Part III, “Postwar: The Afterlives of Empresses,” takes the reader into Switzerland with ex-Emperor Karl and ex-Empress Zita, then turns to the premiere of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* in October of 1919 in Vienna, at the nadir of Austria, now radically reduced in size and facing a winter of food and fuel shortages, depression, and discontent. Wolff gathers the critics’ reviews in detail: some critical, others laudatory, some psychological, others sociological and political. Paul Bekker, the most important music critic in Germany and a Social Democrat intent on recovering and strengthening German musical culture for all, recoiled from what he called “inner unclarity, artistic complexity, the contradictory ambiguity, and speculative excess of his symbolism” (276); in short, he diagnosed a whiff of moral decay. Wolff takes the opera through the 1920s and into the 1930s in Austria, Germany, and Greater Germany after the National Socialist Anschluss with Austria, and Mussolini’s Italy, then wraps up the story-laden history with ex-Empress Zita in her waning years in Swiss exile.

The Shadow of the Empress has many virtues: great erudition, lively writing, and undeniable energy. Nevertheless, over 365 pages, the detail becomes wearisome, the slow pace becomes plodding, and the frequent writer’s ploy of foreshadowing what “would” transpire too coy.