

BIOGRAPHIC DETAILS REGARDING THE OPERETTA *THE LAND OF SMILES* BY FRANZ LEHÁR

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Abstract

This essay on biographic details regarding the operetta *The Land of Smiles* by Franz Lehár is entirely dedicated to facts found in literature and repositories of performance organisers. It does not aim at discussing importance or consequences this operetta might have on current musical life neither in central Europe nor in Asia. Being aware of this, here are only details mentioned that are helpful for further studies and do not mislead into speculation. Also, this essay is just a first access to the materials from the viewpoint of recent experiences with operettas.

Keywords: operetta, exoticism, Franz Lehár, Vienna

Franz Lehár was born on 30th April, 1870 in Komárno, a town then belonging to Hungary. His father was Franz Lehár (senior) the military capellmeister from Habsburg; province of Moravian Silesia. His mother was Christine Lehár of Hungarian origin (Linke, 2001: 7). Due to the father's profession, Lehár frequently moved from place to place in his early childhood. Hence, in 1871 the Lehárs were ordered to Bratislava, 1875 to Sopron, 1877 to Cluj and in 1879 to Carlsberg. The family became larger from one station to the next. Three of Lehár's siblings died shortly after birth, whereas Maria Anna was only 11 years old when she passed away. A long life was only granted to Lehár and his 1876 born brother Anton and to his 1890 born sister Emilie Christine (ibid: 13).

In Lehár's parents' house music played a crucial role. For the parents, it was obvious that one day their eldest son would overtake the father's profession (ibid: 14). Music was frequently performed at home and Lehár's first attempts to play piano critically supervised by his father. Already at the age of six, Lehár composed melodies from poems and was able to practice his compositional skills (ibid: 15).

In Sopron, Lehár went to elementary school. After another transfer to Budapest in 1880, he visited the Piarist Gymnasium. Because he was familiar to the Hungarian language since early childhood, a short time later the parents decided to send their son to gymnasium in Moravian Sternberg so that he can acquire a much better knowledge of the German language (Schneidereit, 1983: 18). Here, he received from his uncle, the town's capellmeister, music lessons in violin and orchestral playing. His musical skills were developed so well that his parents took a college education into consideration. In 1882, the twelve-year old Lehár accessed the Prague Conservatory and accomplished his studies in violin major and minor in music theory and composition (Linke, 2001: 16). After Lehár presented some of his compositions to Anton Dvořák and Johannes Brahms, they encouraged him to continue building up his compositional talent and to devote himself to composition (Glocken Verlag, 1985: 212). On 12th July, 1888 Lehár successfully completed his legal state exam as orchestra and solo player and immediately got a job as the first violinist at the Vereinigte Stadttheater in Elberfeld-Barmen, today's Wuppertal (ibid). Even though he accepted the position mainly for practical reasons – the salary was 150 Mark per month – Lehár was quickly promoted to a concertmaster and had a very clear vision about theatre and opera life (ibid).

In 1889 Lehár followed the request of his father to become a violin soloist in his band in Vienna and he left for military service at k.u.k. Army, Infantry Regiment No. 50¹. In 1890, Lehár was given the post of capellmeister at the 25th Infantry Regiment in the north Hungarian Losoncz. Hence, he became the youngest music director (Linke, 2001: 21). Besides rehearsals and performances with the band, Lehár remained in the seclusion, much leisure and opportunity, to acquire additional talent as an orchestra musician and composer (Glocken Verlag, 1985: 213). He mostly used the night hours for his compositions. More than 30 works were created during this period (Linke, 2001: 22). He wrote his first opera project *Rodrigo* in 1893 on the occasion of an announcement for a one act opera of the Duke of Cobourg-Gotha. But he did not win the competitive tendering.

In 1894, Lehár was awarded a position as the Navy capellmeister in Pola, today's Croatia. On 6th April, 1894 Lehár had the task to welcome the German emperor Wilhelm II with music, for which he received the highest award (Decsey, 1924: 50). Besides directing the band, he increasingly dedicated his time and energy to composition: so, he created marches, polkas and waltzes and he focused on another opera project: *Kukuška* (Linke, 2001: 25). After his opera was accepted at the Stadttheater Leipzig, he dropped his job as Navy capellmeister to focus only on composition. The premiere on 27th November, 1896 was a great success (ibid. 27). Since Lehár was financially weak due to lack of a position, he travelled in 1897 to Trieste as a military capellmeister of the Infantry Regiment No. 87 and overtook the band of his seriously ill father in Budapest in 1898 who passed away on the 7th February of the same year.

Lehár received financial support from his mother. This enabled him to take over the opera material of his work *Kukuška* from the publisher Hofbauer. As a self-publisher, he was successful to perform the opera in Königsberg and Budapest. Once again, he became very successful and again he gave up his position (Glocken Verlag, 1985: 214). In Budapest he started looking for a new libretto, but this project was a failure, because operettas were not popular at this time (Linke, 2001: 28). In 1899, Lehár once again became a military capellmeister of the Infantry Regiment No. 26 in Vienna. Since the Viennese audience was always enthusiastic for something new, Lehár set newspaper reports to music, such as the *War Songs March to China* dedicated to the defeat of the Boxer revolt (Decsey, 1924: 66). In the years to come, quite a lot of works were created through which Lehár became more popular, e.g. the Cycles of Waltzes, 1900-1902. Especially here, the waltz *Gold und Silber* may be mentioned, which Princess Pauline Metternich-Sándor ordered Lehár to compose as the opening waltz for a ball under the motto gold and silver. With this work, Lehár maintained a lasting success to this day (Linke, 2001: 30). After Lehár's regiment was to be transferred to Győr, he decided to remain without a position in Vienna. After a short time, his mother also moved to Vienna.

The operetta in Vienna was outdated at the end of the 19th century (Keller, 1926: 420). Thanks to the Hungarian writer and director William Karczag at the Theater an der Wien, who was able to promote renaissance values and hence, he appointed completely new employees and singers for the theatre (Holzer, 1951: 222). In the course of this restructuring, in 1902 Lehár became a contract as a conductor and composer of operettas for the newly engaged staff.² On the 21st November, 1902 his first operetta entitled *Wiener Frauen* at the Theater an der Wien had premiere. Shortly after his operetta *Rastelbinders* followed which was premiered on the 20th December, 1902 at the Carl Theatre in Vienna. This work was Lehár's first major success and was played throughout Austria-Hungary and Germany (Linke, 2001: 34). Then he composed the less successful operettas *Göttergatte* (Vienna, 1904) and *Juxheirat* (Vienna, 1904). Lehár himself said: "In diesen Werken habe ich meinen eigentlichen Stil noch gesucht, den ich dann in der *Lustigen Witwe* gefunden habe"³ (Glocken Verlag, 1985: 215).

With his next project, *Die Lustige Witwe*, Lehár responded to societal change. The masses of the petty Viennese bourgeoisie dominated the theatre. The people of Vienna demanded openness and modern forms of living together, since divorce was allowed in Hungary since 1895. Thus, Hungarian subjects

¹ It was a common army of Austro-Hungarian ground forces. Until 1889 it was called k.u.k. Army (meaning kaiserlich-königliche Armee = Imperial-Royal Army, which was misleading for a joint institution of the two halves of the Empire since 1867). Therefore, upon Hungary's request in 1889, the name k.u.k. was introduced.

² Hence, Lehár was contractually bound to the Theater an der Wien. He had to compose operettas exclusively for this theatre, where his compositions had their world premieres.

³ Translation: In these works, I still searched for my own style, which I was then able to find in *Die Lustige Witwe*.

and music urged to the forefront in order to ignore moral barriers for one evening (Csáky, 1996: 147). The operetta *Die Lustige Witwe* celebrated on 30th December, 1905 at the Theater an der Wien premiere. A new type of genre was born: the fairy tale scenes were removed. The sentimental songs to Vienna and wine were no longer timely. The figure of the merry widow (*Die Lustige Witwe*) was realistic and the dramatic structure was arranged logically (Czech, 1960: 108). The triumph of this operetta spread over to Hamburg, Berlin, Prague, Zurich, London and Paris. Performances in English language took place in New York, Chicago, India, South Africa, China and Japan (Linke, 2001: 47). The success of *Die Lustige Witwe* triggered a demand, which influenced the whole operetta industry. New theatres were opened and the premiere service increased (Hadamowsky, 1947: 399).

In 1906, Lehár's mother passed away. Between 1906 and 1914 he worked on the rearrangement of his already existing works including ten new operettas. Lehár was a rich man. In the summer of 1912, he bought a villa in Bad Ischl (today's Franz Lehár's Museum), while his girlfriend Sophie Meth moved in the yard building. Here he spent the summer with great pleasure and used his time for composition (Linke, 2001: 64).

After the outbreak of World War II, about 75 per cent of the male population, including Lehár's brother and his sister's husband were convened. As the third member of the family, Lehár was now freed and able to continue to dedicate his time for his compositions (ibid: 66). He documented the last cavalry battle of world history at Jarosivice/Galicia with the composition of the *Reiterlied* in 1914. Herewith he started his song cycle *Aus eiserner Zeit*. There were two other operettas: *Der Sterngucker* (Vienna, 1916) and *Pacsirta* (Budapest, 1918), Lehár's first operetta in Hungarian language achieved great success even after the end of the war.

After the closure of the regiment in November 1918, Lehár opted for a Hungarian citizenship as a result of the war, because his birthplace *Komárno* now belonged to Czechoslovakia. He kept his residences in Vienna and Bad Ischl (ibid: 71). Here was much misery: there was almost no food, the heating did not work and there was no electricity at night. Lehár had to earn money. He composed and conducted every day. On 28th May, 1920 *Die blaue Mazur* celebrated, on the belated festivity of his 50th birthday, premiere at the Theater an der Wien. Lehár was once again able to record another big success.

In January 1922, the one-act musical comedy, *Frühling*, was performed at the Theater an der Wien. This was a special circumstance far from the everyday operetta: Lehár focused here the housing problem and the economic crisis (Lichtfuss, 1989: 153). This was followed by the premiere of the operetta *Frasquita* at the Theater an der Wien on 12th May, 1922. The famous tenor, Richard Tauber, whom Lehár had learned to know in 1921 in Bad Ischl, overtook the main male role two months after the premiere. The performances were sold out shortly after Tauber started singing at the theatre (Linke, 2001: 76). This was the beginning of a strong cooperation and friendship between Tauber and Lehár. Lehár composed the main role of his upcoming work entitled *Die Gelbe Jacke*, exactly suitable for Tauber's voice register. Although Tauber did not sing the role – Lehár did not meet Tauber's demands to share the total income⁴ – the premiere on 9th February, 1923 at the Theater an der Wien was given due attention (ibid: 77).

Karczag died on 11th October, 1923. This prompted Lehár to free himself from the Theater an der Wien, and to withdraw the legal rights for his further world premieres (ibid: 79). But this was not the true reason: Lehár composed the main parts of his operettas for selected singers of the theatre. Since however, his favourite stars were no longer there after 1923 and also Tauber – for the time being – saw off from the operetta in order to switch to serious opera at the Vienna State Opera. So, Lehár saw no reason to continue working for the theatre (ibid. 81).

On 20 February, 1924 Lehár married his long-time girlfriend Sophie in Vienna. After a while, on 8th March, 1924, the Bürgertheater Vienna presented his new operetta *Cloclo*, in which Lehár for the first time added to modern drums and saxophone in the orchestra (Schneidereit, 1983: 119). A year later a revival sparked at the Johann Strauss Theater in Vienna, a renewed enthusiasm for Lehár, upon which the opera director agreed with Lehár to premiere his next operetta entitled *Paganini* in the Johann Strauss Theatre (ibid. 215). In several aspects, this work represented a turning point in Lehár's creative period:

⁴ total investment income consisted of one-night fee plus a share in the future income generated by the operetta, while lowering the author's licenses.

- Tauber visited Lehár in the summer of 1924 in Bad Ischl, while he was working on *Paganini*. After Lehár had played some passages from his new play, Tauber decided to return to operetta music and to collaborate with Lehár in the future (Linke, 2001: 81). Tauber described his decision as follows: “Warum sollte ich, der Mozart singt, eine schöne Melodie bloß deshalb nicht singen dürfen, weil sie von einem so eminenten und in seiner Art sicher genialen Musiker wie Lehár geschrieben wurde”⁵ (Marilaun, 10/10/1922). Henceforth, Lehár made it to his assignment to fit the melodies to Tauber’s voice, to enhance the opera-like and thus, to create a new form of operetta singing (Linke, 2001: 82).
- In Lehár’s previous works the unity of the good old Austria was realized on the stage long after the collapse of the monarchy (ibid: 90). Now, Lehár was convinced that “... ein großer Umschwung in der mitteleuropäischen Seele vollzogen hat. Man könnte sehr wohl von einer Stabilisierung der Gemüter sprechen. Die Menschen begannen wieder aneinander zu glauben (...) Die Verfassung des Publikums in unserer Zeit ermöglicht auch der Operette, sich von der Lüge des Happy-Ends abzuwenden”⁶ (Lehár, 19.10.1929). Starting from *Paganini*, Lehár waived the classic good end of the operetta and put on opera-like sentiment and pathos.

The premiere of *Paganini* on 30th October, 1925 in the Johann Strauss Theater was a success.

Already in 1925, Lehár’s operettas were not only enjoyed in theatres and on opera stages. More media was developed: So, for example, Lehár travelled to Paris for the premiere of the silent film *Die Lustige Witwe* that was filmed in Hollywood (Linke, 2001: 83), and the Berlin performance of *Frasquita* was broadcasted as first operetta transmission of the world via radio on 1st October, 1924 (Schneidereit, 1976: 210).

Lehár’s and Tauber’s following operetta project was *Der Zarewitsch*. For months, the two had gone through every scene prior to the premiere that took place in the German Artists’ Theatre in Berlin on 16th February, 1927, after their successful rehearsals. This success gave Lehár the opportunity to go on tour with Tauber who was going to play *Zarewitsch*. In so doing, the operettas were performed in Frankfurt, Munich, Dresden, Chemnitz, Hanover, Hamburg and Cologne (Linke, 2001: 88). Once Lehár returned to Bad Ischl, he used the time to meet with friends, colleagues and managers, among them, Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin (ibid: 85). In this way, he also received the libretto for his next musical comedy *Friederike* that celebrated its premiere at the Metropol Theatre in Berlin on 4th October, 1928.

This was followed by recordings in Vienna. From mid-June 1929 *Friederike* was performed on the Dutch Lehár Festival, The Hague, Amsterdam, and Munich. Lehár travelled a lot to focus on his operettas and to take care of the conducting on respected performances (ibid: 96).

Back in Bad Ischl he and Tauber began rearranging *Die gelbe Jacke*: The new title was *The Land of Smiles*. Prior to the premiere, on 10th October, 1929 in the Metropol Theatre in Berlin, a gramophone recording of the song *Dein ist mein ganzes Herz*, was made (sung by Tauber). The audience streamed in masses into the theatre, mainly to enjoy the live performance of the already published song *Dein ist mein ganzes Herz* (ibid: 96). This was followed by performances in Hamburg, Cologne, Stuttgart and Munich. Schneidereit (1983: 169) explains in one of his works the success of the *Land of Smiles*: “In der Geschichte der Operette gibt es kein weiteres Werk, in dem jede Musiknummer so zum Erfolgsschlager wurde. *Land des Lächelns* ist die Vollendung der spätbürgerlichen Operette und zugleich ihr Abschluss”⁷. Worldwide it took the second position among Lehár’s operettas, right after *Die Lustige Witwe*. The enthusiasm of Lehár’s operettas led to numerous simultaneous offers of various

⁵ Translation: Why shouldn’t I, who sings Mozart, be able to sing a beautiful melody, because it was written by such an eminent and – in his own way – ingenious musician like Lehár?

⁶ Translation: ...the Central European soul underwent a great change. One could quite talk about the stabilization of the minds/feelings. People began to believe each other again (...) The state of mind of the audience in our time also enables the operetta to turn away from the untruth of happy endings.

⁷ Translation: There is no other work in the history of operetta, in which every musical part became such a successful hit. *The Land of Smiles* is the completion of the late bourgeois operetta and simultaneously the end.

works within one and the same city. On 17th November, 1929 nine of his performances were carried out only in Berlin (Czech, 1960: 245).

Lehár turned 60 in 1930. In his honour, his works were performed on all the major stages, such as Amsterdam, Budapest and London. Lehár Festivals took place in Berlin and in Vienna. He conducted his own works with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. On 28th October, 1930 made the RAVAG a live radio broadcast from the Theater an der Wien possible when *The Land of Smiles* was performed (Linke, 2001: 99). On 8th November the world premiere of a sound movie, *The Land of Smiles*, produced by Richard Tauber-Tonfilm GmbH, was premiered in the Apollo Cinema. This was Lehár's first German sound movie production, which was soon to be succeeded by *Friederike*, *Der Zarewitsch*, *Frasquita*, *Paganini*, *Eva* and *Cloclo*. Lehár composed individual soundtracks for the movies *Es war einmal ein Walzer* (1932) and *Großfürstin Alexandra* (1933).

Over the years, Lehár got considerable prosperity, thus he was able to purchase the Schikaneder Villa in Vienna-Nussdorf in 1932, which lies along the Danube. In 1933 he received his first award in Paris, from the President of the Republic, who distinguished him with the Commander's Cross of the Legion of Honour (ibid: 101). Despite Lehár's successes, the financial situation in Germany became increasingly hazardous. The world economic crisis of 24th October, 1929 left its mark: high unemployment rate, bankruptcies and bank closures steadily increased. Thus, living conditions worsened, the demand of the audience decreased and many theatres were forced to close (ibid: 99). On 10th May, 1933 Lehár signed a contract with the Vienna State Opera, where his next stage work, *Giuditta* was premiered. The entry to the State Opera was a success for Lehár under the given circumstances, because the opera director took the budget issue into considerations with the intention to support the audience magnet, Lehár, to get rid of his financial problems (ibid: 107). In this regard, Lehár points out: "Glücklich, dass sich der Traum meines Lebens erfüllte, dass es mir nach dreißigjähriger Tätigkeit als Komponist vergönnt war, auf der klassischen Bühne der Wiener Staatsoper aufgeführt zu werden, mein Werk von den prominentesten Künstlern gesungen und dem berühmtesten Orchester der Welt gespielt zu hören"⁸ (Lehár, 01.19.1934). The premiere of *Giuditta* on 20th January, 1934 was broadcasted live by 120 radio stations from the Vienna Opera House.

Both at home and abroad, the new operetta became very popular. It was only in Nazi Germany, where it could not be performed. Lehár was disgraced because he was confounding with his brother, who critically commented on the German neutral policy (Linke, 2001: 111). In November of 1934, it became public that Mussolini had rejected the dedication of *Giuditta* on the grounds that the representation of a deserter on stage would, in every form, make the principles of a leader and the authority obviously ridiculous (Grun, 1961: 270). This denunciation came just right for Lehár's opponents. Starting from Berlin anti Lehár demonstrations had an effect, since he was accused of having worked with Jewish librettists. Already in 1932, *The Land of Smiles* was in the German stage correspondence, attributed to the Jewish operettas (Kieser, 1991: 29). Nazi cultural communities received end of 1934 the information that Lehár's operettas were to be considered as inappropriate to be performed in Germany (Linke, 2001: 111). Nevertheless, in a circular of 1st July, 1936, the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, declared that the operettas should be performed (Kieser, 1991: 30). Simultaneously, Hitler as well personally allowed the performance of Lehár's operettas, although Lehár was married to a Jewish woman. Hitler appreciated Lehár whose works he very much enjoyed during his time in Vienna. So, he welcomed Lehár in November 1936 in Berlin as a guest of honour at the annual meeting of the Reich Chamber of Culture and the NS Community *Kraft durch Freude*⁹ (Linke, 2001: 112). With the German stages, the largest market was once again opened for Lehár.

Shortly before the collapse of the Publishing Company W. Karczag, Lehár succeeded to take away his publishing properties. Henceforth, he decided to publish his works on his own and received the

⁸ Translation: That the dream of my life could come true, that even after thirty years as a composer my work still had the chance to be performed on the classic stage of the Vienna State Opera, to listen to my work to be sung by the most prominent artists accompanied by the most famous orchestra of the world.

⁹ A recreational organization of the Nazi regime to enforce the necessary upgrades to increase production without wage increases. Recreational events should serve to relax and regenerate in order to encourage the output (performance on the job) and simultaneously convey the idea of a classless society in the sense of the Nazi ethnic community.

appropriate license from the Viennese magistrate on 21st February, 1935. This was the birth of the Glocken Verlag (ibid: 115). On 30th January, 1938 the Vienna State Opera included Lehár's second operetta, *The Land of Smiles*, in its repertoire.

On 12th March, 1938, Hitler marched into Austria. With this the connection to the German Empire was sealed. In 1939 Lehár moved his residence and artistic offices from Vienna to Bad Ischl, since his wife was safer here from the persecution of Jews (ibid: 117). On 1st September, 1939, World War II broke out. Still, Lehár travelled to Berlin, Hamburg and Budapest in order to conduct the performances of his works. But because an increasing number of male actors had to go to the front, most theatres and opera houses were shut down one after the other.

In 1940, Lehár received some honours: he was appointed an honorary citizen of Sopron (Hungary). He was awarded the Honorary Ring of the city of Vienna and the Goethe Medal for Art and Science from Hitler (Schneidereit, 1976: 327). In the same year Lehár was committed to conducting at the front as part of the cultural special services and the health care at the Western Front. Thus, he was able to retreat from composing war marches and songs (Linke, 2001: 120).

On 20th February, 1943 Lehár ended his musical career with a world premiere of the *Zigeunerliebe*, which he rearranged as a musical comedy under the new title *Garbonciás*, at the Royal Opera in Budapest (ibid: 121). After the second play, which he conducted, he collapsed and was taken to Bad Ischl, where he had to stay in bed. His health showed gradual improvement only in 1945. With the end of the war, the time without theatre came to an end as well. The Berlin Metropol Theater announced for the end of September Lehár as the conductor to his work *Paganini*, but a stroke and complaints with his eye prevented him from the trip (ibid. 124). Since there was lack of medical care in Austria, the couple went to Zurich for treatment at the end of January, 1946, where it stayed at the Hotel Baur. After arriving in Zurich, the couple withdrew from public life for about a year. It only received friends and relatives. On 28th September, 1947 they attended a performance of *Paganini* in the Stadttheater Zurich. A few days later Sophie passed away.

In Lehár's last year a joint concert still took place, in which Tauber sang and Lehár conducted. In February 1948, Lehár conducted another concert in the Congress House of Zurich. End of July of the year 1948, Lehár returned to Bad Ischl accompanied by his sister, where he was awarded an honorary citizenship on 14th October. On 24th October, 1948 Lehár passed away. He was buried in the family vault in Bad Ischl on 30th October after a requiem (ibid: 127).

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