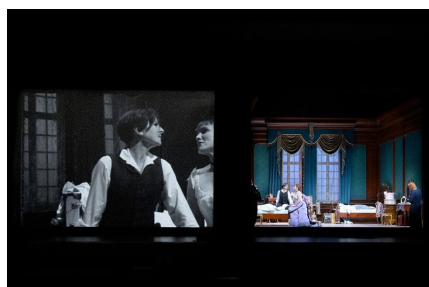


## Time Travellers

JESSE SIMON

The final collaboration between Strauss and von Hofmannsthal was also, in some ways, their least consequential: if *Arabella* is unquestionably a cut above the average domestic entertainment, it is also ultimately a tidily conceived tale of true love overcoming human foibles, set against the comfortably nostalgic backdrop of 1860s Vienna. While the excellent new production at the Deutsche Oper couldn't quite elevate the low key drama of the libretto to the level of mythic universality that Strauss and von Hofmannsthal's best work achieves so effortlessly, it nonetheless made a strong argument that, beneath the opera's period details and comedic misunderstandings are elements that may seem all the more relevant in the twenty-first century.

Director Tobias Kratzer used the stated setting of the opera as his starting point, and the first act unfolded against the backdrop of a meticulously recreated Viennese hotel. The only intrusion of the modern world was a camera crew of three who, despite being on stage and amidst the characters, were so inobtrusive that they could not possibly have belonged to the same reality as the action. Indeed, their footage was broadcast live (in black and white) onto screens that were pulled down, at various times, over one half of the set or the other; and while the crew filmed close-ups of the characters in order to capture actions and expressions that would not have been visible from the auditorium, they just as often lingered on the elegant details – bouquets of flowers or pieces of furniture – that gave the setting its verisimilitude.



Strauss: *Arabella*. Sir Donald Runnicles,

Kratzer, *Arabella*  
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**Berlin, martes,  
18 de abril de  
2023.** Deutsche  
Oper Berlin.

Strauss: *Arabella*  
(Dresden, on 1 July 1933). Lyrical Comedy  
in Three Acts. Poem by Hugo von  
Hofmannsthal. Tobias Kratzer, director.  
Albert Pesendorfer (Count Waldner). Doris  
Soffel (Adelaide). Sara Jakubiak  
(Arabella). Elena Tsallagova (Zdenka).  
Russell Braun (Mandryka). Robert Watson  
(Matteo). Thomas Blondelle (Count  
Elemer). Kyle Miller (Count Dominik).  
Tyler Zimmerman (Count Lamoral), and  
Hye-Young Moon (Fiakermilli). Alexandra  
Hutton (Fortune Teller). Choir and  
Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Sir  
Donald Runnicles, conductor



It was only in the second act that the staging escaped from its suffocating period recreation. Although the act opened in the corridor outside a Viennese ballroom – only when the door was open could one glimpse the dancers in full swing – the staging became unmoored in time shortly after the first meeting of Arabella and Mandryka, and in the course of the next half hour we were taken from the nineteenth century to the iPhone era, with numerous stops along the way: a group of

conductor. Tobias Kratzer, director.  
Deutsche Oper Berlin, March 2023. ©  
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waltzers disappeared into the ballroom, and when they re-emerged their ballgowns had been replaced with flapper dresses; when they appeared again it was in swinging London attire. At some point a disco ball appeared in the ballroom behind the door and Mandryka's servants went from bowler-hatted layabouts to small-time hoods with slicked-back hair doing lines of coke; after a brief foray into industrial club-culture, badly-dressed hipsters formed a logical, if unfortunate terminus to the chronological journey.

Everything about the act was ingeniously conceived and perfectly executed, but the rush of temporal signifiers eventually came to eclipse the drama, and one had to wonder if Mr Kratzer was merely showing off, or if there was some greater argument in mind (beyond the fact that the modern world represents a nadir of fashion). Yet Mr Kratzer silenced all doubts in the third act, in which it was revealed that the temporal world of the action had splintered in two, with the principal stage action fast-forwarding to the present while the period drama of the first act had continued in parallel as a black and white film. The schism between film and stage allowed Mr Kratzer to treat the events of the final act against two very different sets of social mores; and if the multiple timelines offered only subtle revisions to the tensions between Arabella and Mandryka, it provided Mr Kratzer the opportunity to transform the relationship of Zdenka and Matteo from comedic subplot into an explicitly trans-positive statement (a decision that provoked vocal outrage from some members of the audience).

Between its intelligent engagement with up-to-the-moment issues and the constant dazzle of its conceptual and technical execution, there was little about the staging that wasn't conspicuously brilliant; and yet, at the end of the evening, one was left with the feeling that the story and music of *Arabella* had been pressed into service as a vehicle for certain arguments and theatrical feats with only cursory attention given to the characters and the drama. Arabella herself remained opaque, a curious void at the centre of the story. It was almost impossible to discern her moral outlook in the first act – was she driven by a capricious heart, cynical detachment or mere indifference? – and even more difficult to draw a line between the Viennese Arabella of the beginning and the present-day Arabella of the conclusion. If the chronological shift of the staging allowed us to understand different facets of the supporting characters, Arabella alone seemed poorly defined, forgotten amidst the staging's more pressing arguments.

The staging may have been more interested in ideas than characters, but the strong, consistently likable cast went a long way to restoring the balance. If Zdenka emerged as a figure of equal importance to Arabella it was due in large part to Elena Tsallagova, whose unfailingly beautiful tone and ability to elucidate the conflicts within the character yielded a performance of keen intelligence and captivating intensity. For much of the first act she was the dominant figure – there were few moments in the evening that could equal her scene with Arabella – and her brief but arresting appearances in the second and third acts



Strauss: *Arabella*. Sir Donald Runnicles,  
conductor. Tobias Kratzer, director.  
Deutsche Oper Berlin, March 2023. ©  
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brought a notable increase of energy to the stage.



Strauss: Arabella. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor. Tobias Kratzer, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin, March 2023. © 2023 by Thomas Aurin.

Sara Jakubiak's appearance as Arabella had been announced only a few days earlier – she was a very late replacement for the indisposed Gabriela Scherer – but her performance was notable not only for its wide emotional range but also its total assurance. If she seemed most invested in the deflated pragmatism of the third act – her cautious acceptance of Mandryka's essentially flawed character provided the evening with one of its few moments of genuine gravitas – she was able to summon hints of dreamy ecstasy in her solo scene at the conclusion of Act One, and conveyed an appropriate romantic naïveté during her first meeting with Mandryka.

Russell Braun, as Mandryka, sounded a touch hesitant in his initial appearance but his performance grew in stature throughout the evening. His narration to Waldner in the first act was notable primarily for its thoughtful phrasing, but his declarations to Arabella at the beginning of the second revealed an appealing immediacy of expression and nobility of character; during the remainder of the opera he traced a convincing arc from jealousy to rage to overwhelming guilt. And Robert Watson was ideally suited to the role of Matteo: his light, lyrical tone combined with the desperate fervour of his delivery resulted in a sympathetic portrait of a character struggling to find his correct place within the confusion of the drama.

While Count Elemer is ultimately written out of the libretto's intertwining love stories, Thomas Blondelle sketched a figure of unusual complexity in his few appearances, combining aristocratic poise and well-crafted ardour into a performance of delightful ambiguity: throughout his first-act scene with Arabella – another of the evening's highlights – one could never be sure if his courtship was born of genuine passion or simply part of an elaborate game. It was also a pleasure to see Doris Soffel and Albert Pesendorfer as Adelaide and Count Waldner; the elder Waldners may be peripheral to the drama, but the two singers brought palpable warmth and authority to each of their appearances.

Strauss' interwar operas, some of which contain passages of exaggerated beauty that seem out of proportion to the situations they describe, can be problematic for any conductor unwilling to engage with them on their own terms, and throughout the evening one could sense a reticence in the musical direction of Sir Donald Runnicles. Although he had no problem highlighting the illustrative passages that push the drama forward and give the opera its basic form, he did not always seem as comfortable indulging in the high-gloss opulence on which Strauss' later music so often thrives. The result was a performance that felt oddly low-key, never lacking in motivation or discipline, but rarely acknowledging the potential for transcendence that lay in the work's most highly-charged moments. He need not have been so cautious: between the generous charm of the vocal performances and the constant invention of Mr Kratzer's staging, there was little chance of this *Arabella* tipping over into mere melodrama.