

Prima la musica e poi le parole?
Strauss's Symphonic Sketching for *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Arabella*

by Joseph E. Jones
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
jonestamuk@gmail.com
The American Musicological Society Southwest Chapter
Spring 2015
University of North Texas

Over the course of a long and productive career, Richard Strauss shared various insights into his creative process. Usually tending towards generalities, these descriptions have proven to be somewhat enigmatic for scholars of his music.¹ One particularly colorful, albeit puzzling, account of his working methods appeared in an English-language essay published in the *New York Times* on the composer's seventy-second birthday, 11 June 1936:

Musical ideas, like young wine, should be put in storage and taken up again only after they have been allowed to ferment and ripen. I often jot down a motif or a melody and then tuck it away for a year. Then when I take it up again I find that, quite unconsciously, something within me—the imagination—has been at work on it. [. . .]

But before I improvise even the smallest sketch for an opera, I allow the texts to permeate my thoughts and mature in me *at least six months or so*, so that the situation and characters may be thoroughly assimilated. Then only do I let musical thoughts enter my mind.²

Elsewhere, Strauss reiterated publicly his desire for lengthy gestation periods. Nearly two decades earlier, he wrote in a piece for the *Dresdner Nachrichten*: “*Ich arbeite langsam. Von meiner ersten schöpferischen Idee bis zur endgültigen Verwirklichung des Werkes vergeht immer viel Zeit*” (I work slowly. From my first creative idea until the final realization of the work always takes much time).³

Of special interest is the notion that Strauss preferred to absorb operatic texts for many months prior to sketching. This was indeed the case with *Feuersnot* (1901) for which the writer and cabaret impresario Ernst von Wolzogen provided a completed libretto well in advance. In

¹ In Charles Youmans's words, “the process of musical creation was to Strauss an intensely private activity, to be pursued diligently, quietly, and alone, in the *Werkstatt*.” Timothy Jackson maintains that Strauss was “secretive” when it came to the subject of his creative methods. See Charles Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition: The Philosophical Roots of Musical Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 16, and Timothy L. Jackson, “Richard Strauss' ‘Winterweih’: an Analysis and Study of the Sketches,” *Richard Strauss-Blätter* 17 (June 1987): 29.

² David Ewen, ed., *The Book of Modern Composers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), 54–55. Emphasis mine.

³ This letter was printed in the *Dresdner Nachrichten* on 13 May 1914 and was cited subsequently in Franz Trenner, *Richard Strauss: Dokumente seines Lebens und Schaffens* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1954), 128–29. Translation mine.

this instance, Strauss had ample time to thoroughly assimilate its situations and characters.⁴ Walter Werbeck and others have suggested that Strauss's practice of reflecting upon texts over an extended period applies well to his *Lieder* and to some of the programmatic orchestral compositions.⁵ For these genres, there are examples of poems and other literary works he absorbed for years before setting them to music. Clearly, however, this was not the case for all of his projects—especially those for the stage. Drawing upon extensive study of compositional manuscripts held in Vienna, Munich, and Garmisch-Partenkirchen, this article argues that Strauss developed substantial stretches of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) and *Arabella* (1932) from a purely orchestral framework. The essential musical character of such passages, from their conception, depends little on vocal melody or on the text supplied by his long-time collaborator, Hugo von Hofmannsthal. There are also cases where Strauss drafted music for a given passage before the text was even written, or at least before it arrived in his mailbox. This suggests further complexities in the Strauss-Hofmannsthal working relationship in that the compositional manuscripts sometimes contradict sentiments Strauss expressed publicly as well as in letters to Hofmannsthal.

DER ROSENKAVALIER

That Strauss composed much of *Der Rosenkavalier*'s opening act with ease is apparent both in his voluminous correspondence with Hofmannsthal and in the sketches. On 16 May 1909, shortly after receiving a draft of the text for the first few scenes, Strauss reported, "*Meine Arbeit fließt wie die Loisach: ich komponiere alles mit Haut und Haar*" (My work is flowing along like the Loisach: I am composing everything—neck and crop).⁶ Hofmannsthal experienced his own rush of inspiration at the opera's inception after developing the scenario in early February in close collaboration with Count Harry Kessler.⁷ Hofmannsthal's progress was generally slower, though, interrupted by illness, depression, or by other projects. While Strauss and Hofmannsthal finished the first act in just three months, the second required more than ten and the third nearly six, as both were subject to extensive revisions. At times, Strauss urged Hofmannsthal to work faster while he sketched ahead, even if he had only a rough idea of how the music and words would come together. Strauss rarely mentioned this to his collaborator, instead conveying his preference to have the text up front. As he approached Act III, for instance, Strauss reminded Hofmannsthal: "*Ich habe nur alles gern eine Zeit vorher, damit ich den Text durcharbeiten und*

⁴ The genesis of *Feuersnot* is discussed in Klaus Schultz and Stephan Kohler, eds., *Richard Strauss, Feuersnot: Ein Singgedicht in einem Akt von Ernst von Wolzogen* (Munich: Bayerische Staatsoper, 1980) and Morten Kristiansen, "Richard Strauss before Salome: The Early Operas and Unfinished Stage Words," in *The Richard Strauss Companion*, ed. Mark-Daniel Schmid (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 235–84.

⁵ See in this regard Werbeck's *Die Tondichtungen von Richard Strauss* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1996) and his essay on Strauss's compositional process in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Youmans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22–41.

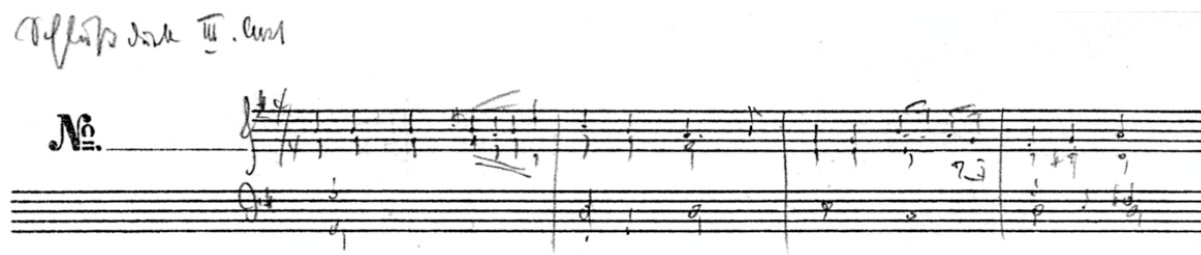
⁶ Strauss's letter dates from 16 May 1909. See *The Correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. Franz Strauss and Alice Strauss, trans. Hanns Hammelmann and Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 32–33. The collected letters were first published in German in *Briefwechsel zwischen Richard Strauss und Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. Franz and Alice Strauss (Zurich: Atlantis Verlag, 1952). Hammelmann's and Oser's translations are used hereafter.

⁷ During their meetings, Kessler introduced Hofmannsthal to *L'Ingénu libertin* (1907), a French opérette by Louis Artus and Claude Terrasse. While scholars have long-identified earlier literary models from Molière and Beaumarchais, Michael Reynolds convincingly argues that Artus' *L'Ingénu libertin*, above all, influenced the shaping of the *Rosenkavalier* scenario. See "The Theatrical Vision of Count Harry Kessler and its Impact on the Strauss-Hofmannsthal Partnership," (Ph.D. diss., Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2014).

verdauen kann, bevor ich zu musizieren anfange” (I like having everything a little while beforehand so that I can work through the text and digest it before getting down to the music making).⁸ In practice, when one compares Hofmannsthal’s progress with Strauss’s sketches, it appears the composer never had substantial blocks of text several months before the corresponding music took shape. The following two examples show Strauss developing music absent the text or focusing his attention on material intended for the orchestra at the expense of the voices. While a few such instances are described in the letters, others are revealed only through study of Strauss’s compositional manuscripts.

Figure 1 comes from sketchbook TR.22 held at the *Richard-Strauss-Archiv* (RSA), a private repository of the composer’s personal effects in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. TR.22 is devoted largely to the first half of Act II but also includes this early sketch for Octavian and Sophie’s *Schlußduett*—perhaps the first music Strauss conceived specifically for Act III.⁹ From the correspondence, we know that he showed interest in the final scene long before the libretto for that portion took shape. In late June 1909, he solicited text to accompany a Mozartian tune he had already penned for the opera’s final number.

Figure 1. *Schlußduett* in Act III: preliminary sketching in advance of the text (TR.22, p.6).



In his letter, Strauss even described a specific model he hoped Hofmannsthal would accommodate: “Für den Schluß des dritten Aktes, das ausklingende Duett von Sophie und Octavian, habe ich eine sehr hübsche Melodie. Wäre es Ihnen möglich, mir etwa 12 bis 16 Verse zu schreiben in folgendem Rhythmus . . . Mir fällt gerade nichts Besseres ein, handelt sich nur um den Rhythmus” (For the end of Act III, the softly-fading duet of Sophie and Octavian, I have a very pretty tune. Could you possibly write me some 12 to 16 lines in the following rhythm . . . Can’t think of anything better at the moment: it’s the rhythm that matters).¹⁰ This request came ten months before Hofmannsthal sent his preliminary draft of the final act; the sketch confirms that Strauss had developed the musical framework well in advance. Hofmannsthal later wrote that while he felt confined by Strauss’s rhythmic scheme, he ultimately found it agreeable and the words he supplied followed the prescribed model—even utilizing fragments of text Strauss suggested.

Figure 2, from the RSA sketchbook TR.23, is part of a multi-page continuity draft that includes work on the climactic all-soprano trio in Act III. Page 1 begins with a single melody shared in the completed score by oboes, violins, and the Marschallin as she sings the trio’s

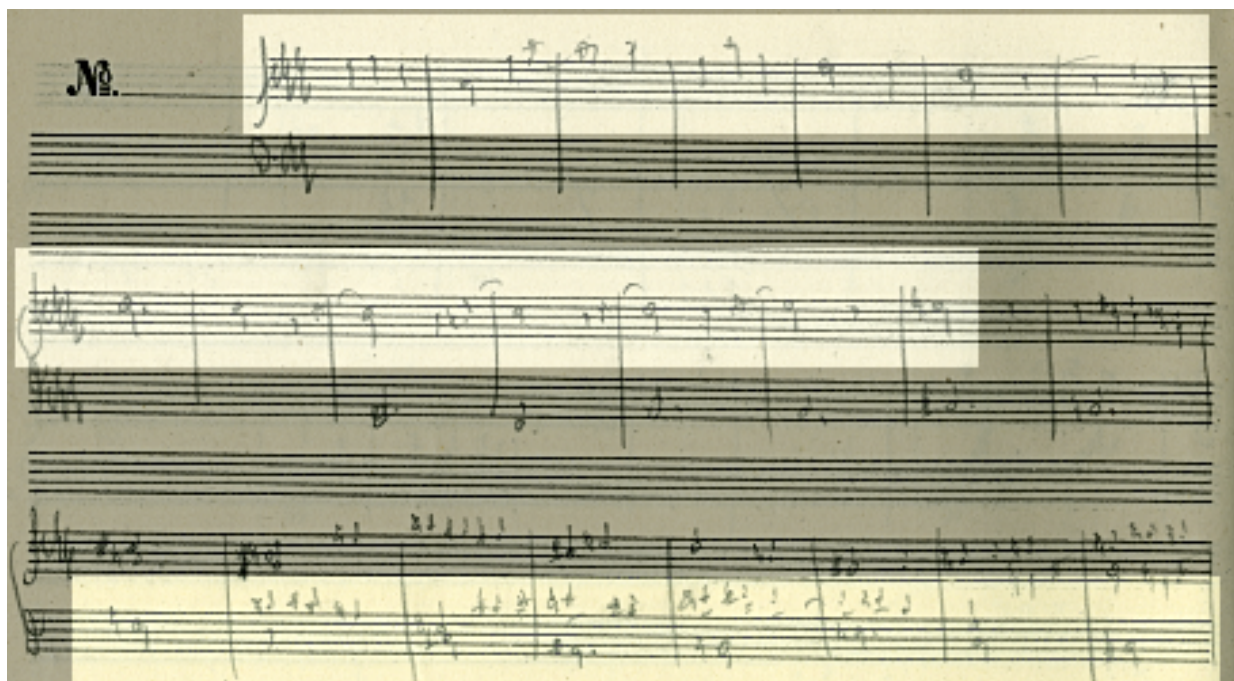
⁸ This letter dates from 2 May 1910. *Correspondence*, 55.

⁹ Nearly all of the sketches in TR.22 were penned from mid- to late summer of 1909. The *Richard-Strauss Institut* maintains a comprehensive online catalog of manuscripts and other primary sources at <http://www.rsi-rsqv.de>.

¹⁰ *Correspondence*, 35–36.

opening words “*Hab’ mir’s gelobt.*” The accompaniment staves are empty for the first nine measures and then Strauss gradually fleshes out the harmonic foundation (low strings and winds in the finished score) while layering in strands of countermelody (flutes and horns). Page 2 continues in this vein with block chords supporting a single melody: a remarkably sparse texture considering that the passage will feature three independent voices and full orchestra. By the third page, the accompaniment staves are pared back leaving little more than a solitary melodic line. These pitches form the orchestra’s principal melody in the completed score, heard in the high winds and strings especially and only occasionally doubled by one of the singers. While elements such as the D-flat key signature carry through to the autograph score, the singers’ text is absent.

Figure 2. Soprano trio in Act III: focus on harmonic-melodic framework (Tr.23, pp. 48–50).



№.

Handwritten musical score for No. 70, featuring three systems of staves. The notation includes notes, rests, and chords. The first system has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second system has a bass clef. The third system has a treble clef. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

№ 70.
In Herb. ac. Mus. Universitatis, Nr. 51

№.

Handwritten musical score for an unnamed piece, featuring three systems of staves. The notation includes notes, rests, and chords. The first system has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second system has a bass clef. The third system has a treble clef. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

Did Strauss have the trio text on hand when he drafted this passage in TR.23? His preliminary manuscripts can be difficult to date; often the sketchbooks span several years in their use and many contain drafts for multiple compositions, usually with no indication that he has moved on to a different piece.¹¹ Furthermore, Strauss frequently worked on loose sheets of manuscript paper, some of which he later sold or gave as gifts while others were simply lost. By contrast, Hofmannsthal's manuscripts for *Der Rosenkavalier* can be dated more precisely.¹² We know that he mailed Strauss a draft of the latter portions of Act III, including the trio, on 6 June 1910 and they discussed a number of dramaturgical issues in the weeks that followed. This led to significant revisions including the excision of a duet for the Marschallin and Sophie from which Strauss borrowed the Marschallin's text to launch the trio ("*Hab' mir's gelobt . . .*"). Since the corresponding measures in TR.23 are textless, Strauss either drafted ahead of Hofmannsthal's progress, or, if the sketches were penned after June 6, he constructed the trio from a harmonic-melodic orchestral framework and saved the detailed settings of the vocal lines for a later date.

There are other instances in the *Rosenkavalier* manuscripts where Strauss drafted music prior to receipt of the text, such as the Mozartian trio in Act I (the Marschallin, Octavian-as-Mariandel, and Baron Ochs). For this scene, Strauss again asked Hofmannsthal for additions to fit music he acknowledged was already in draft. In pitching the Act I trio, Strauss wrote: "*Wollen Sie mir dazu noch etwas nachdichten: die Musik ist schon fertig, ich brauche nur Worte zur Begleitung und zum Ausfüllen*" (Would you add some more text here: the music is all ready—I only need words for accompaniment and filling in).¹³ This points to Strauss's active role in shaping the dramatic action as well as his willingness to compose with only a general conception of how the plot would unfold.

ARABELLA

The Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaboration took a tragic turn while the librettist was revising Acts II and III of *Arabella*, roughly two decades after they began work on *Der Rosenkavalier*. At the time of Hofmannsthal's death in July 1929, only the libretto for the first act of *Arabella* was properly finished. Strauss thus had to set text for the latter acts that Hofmannsthal certainly would have modified had he lived longer. While critics have noted the weaknesses of Act III in particular, the opening act has been praised as one of the most cohesive and successful in the Strauss oeuvre. This comes as no surprise: he and Hofmannsthal spent more than eighteen months ironing out the wrinkles.¹⁴ The fruit of their labor, a polished text for Act I, arrived in Strauss's mailbox just days before Hofmannsthal's passing.

Strauss's manuscripts for Acts II and III understandably reveal some detachment from the text. The bulk of his sketches for Act I, on the other hand, were penned when Hofmannsthal was alive. Thus, one would expect a deeper engagement with the Act I text even at this early stage in his creative process. Despite the collaborators' lengthy exchanges on aspects of plot development and characterization, however, Strauss's drafts appear at times to marginalize the

¹¹ Strauss also reused sketchbooks if empty space remained to draft new material. For instance, immediately following the trio in TR.23 are more than a dozen pages for *Eine Alpensinfonie* (1915), a work he began six months after the *Rosenkavalier* premiere. Bryan Gilliam cites 11 June 1911 as the date Strauss began work on the tone poem. See *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 94.

¹² Dirk Hoffmann and Willi Schuh provide exhaustive documentation of Hofmannsthal's *Rosenkavalier* manuscripts in the critical edition of the poet's collected works. See Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. XXIII, ed. Dirk O. Hoffmann and Willi Schuh (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1986).

¹³ *Correspondence*, 33.

¹⁴ Their collaboration on the *Arabella* scenario began in late 1927.

text; at other times they omit the vocal lines altogether. While Strauss may have worked out this material in his mind or on papers discarded or lost, the surviving manuscripts support the conclusion that he conceived of several passages in Act I from an orchestral framework.

We can observe this practice in his sketches for the scene in which Arabella shares with her sister, Zdenka, her wish to hold out for *der Richtige*—the right man. As they await the arrival of Arabella’s next suitor, Elemer, Zdenka worries that her beloved Matteo, who also courts her sister, will suffer a terrible blow should Arabella choose Elemer. Arabella, meanwhile, mentions that she spotted a mysterious traveler around the corner from their hotel—Mandryka, her eventual match. Strauss produced a series of drafts for this scene in Mus.ms.20858, a sketchbook devoted primarily to Act I, held at the *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*.¹⁵ Figure 3 corresponds to the moment when Zdenka fears all is lost between her and Matteo and that he will never find happiness.

Figure 3. Zdenka in Act I: misplaced text and focus on orchestral motives (Mus.ms.20858, p.51).



The upper system is dominated by sixteenth-note figures later assigned to the clarinets and flutes while the vertical sonorities filling the lower system will be taken up primarily by the horns. Penciled in throughout the two systems is the final version of Hofmannsthal’s text for this passage:

*[Mat]teo um. Ich klopfe an seine Tür, er gibt nicht Antwort
Ich werf mich über ihn – ich küsst zum ersten Mal seine*

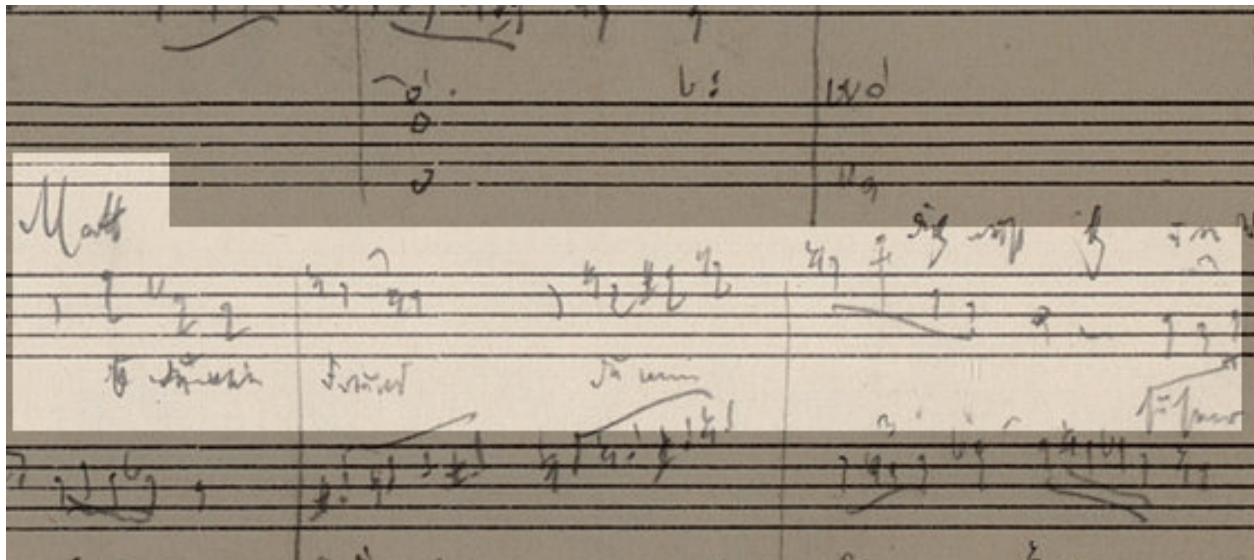
¹⁵ Strauss finished sketching no later than September 1929 when he reported to Viennese music critic Ludwig Karpath that Act I was complete. See “Richard Strauss and Ludwig Karpath, *Briefwechsel*,” *Richard Strauss-Blätter der Internationalen Richard Strauss-Gesellschaft* 7 (May 1976), 8.

The only sustained melody, highlighted in the middle staff of the second system, predicts material that is shared by the flutes, oboes, and first violins in the orchestral score. Despite the inclusion of Zdenka's text, she does not sing at this moment in the completed work, and the sketched melody bears no resemblance to her preceding or subsequent material. As in the *Rosenkavalier* trio, Strauss appears to develop the orchestral framework first and leave the precise setting of text for a later stage.

Strauss adopted a similar approach in another Munich sketchbook, Mus.ms.9984, which includes more than two dozen pages for a subsequent scene in Act I featuring the parents, Waldner and Adelaide. With their daughters away on a sleigh ride with Elemer, Waldner recalls sending Arabella's photograph to a wealthy acquaintance as a last-ditch effort to solve his family's financial problems. As in figure three, Strauss focuses on broad harmonic progressions in the lower staves while sketching distinctive motives above. More developed melodies in the upper staff, when present, are often subsequently assigned to orchestral instruments rather than voices. Frequently, Waldner's and Adelaide's text does not correspond precisely with the musical content below, or it is absent altogether.

Figure 4 comes from Mus.Hs.34244, a sketchbook devoted to Act III, held at the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* in Vienna. It is a draft for the pivotal scene in which Zdenka, still clad in her nightgown, rushes down the stairs to confess that she tricked Matteo into sharing her bed. Matteo, who believed the intimate encounter was with Arabella, suddenly realizes he has been in love with her younger sister all along.

Figure 4. Matteo in Act III: hybrid melody for the voice and violins (Mus.Hs.34244, p.8).

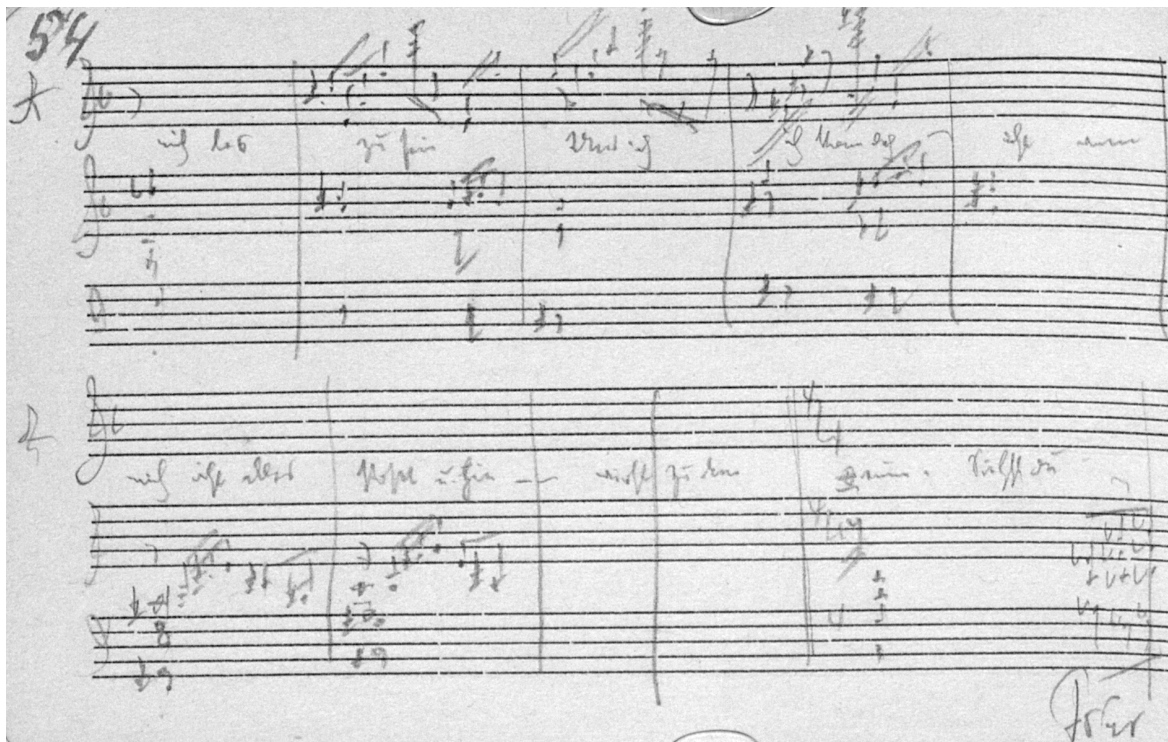


The melody in the upper staff of the second system is a hybrid—one that Strauss will divide between instruments and the voice in the completed score. The large “Matt” at the left signals a change in voice from Zdenka to Matteo, who sings “*O du mein Freund! Du meine Freundin!*” The notes sketched for Matteo's first phrase “*O du mein Freund*” match what he sings in the finished work, but the notes for “*Du meine Freundin*” are played by the first violins and not

sung by Matteo. Strauss drafts melody in a similar fashion in the surrounding pages, shifting back and forth between the voices and prominent instruments in the orchestral score. Comparing these passages to the corresponding measures in the completed score, the singers often seem to double the instruments; it appears that Strauss constructed the vocal lines by piecing together snippets of melody initially conceived of as part of the orchestra.

The final two examples aim to illustrate that Strauss's sketching practices described above are not isolated cases. In figure 5 (*Arabella*), Strauss has penciled in Hofmannsthal's text in each system—the same words that appear in the libretto. There is no vocal melody while the vertical sonorities in the lower staves and rapid figures above anticipate what the oboes and bassoons play when Arabella describes her first glimpse of Mandryka in Act I.

Figure 5. Arabella in Act I: emphasis on distinctive orchestral figures (Mus.ms.20858, p.54).

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for the opera Arabella. It consists of two systems of staves. The top system has a vocal line on a single staff with lyrics written below it: "ich hab' dich nicht gesehen". Below the vocal line are two staves of orchestral accompaniment, showing complex rhythmic patterns and vertical sonorities. The bottom system also has a vocal line with lyrics: "ich hab' dich nicht gesehen". Below it are two staves of orchestral accompaniment. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols like notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The page is numbered "54" in the top left corner.

In figure 6 (*Der Rosenkavalier*), Strauss omits Baron Ochs's vocal melody and instead drafts clumsy, chromatic sonorities that reflect the Baron's crude behavior as he examines Sophie, his young bride-to-be. Strauss's focus on the underlying harmonic and motivic framework carries over into the finished score where the orchestra's music is far more distinctive than the notes Ochs sings. Such passages exemplify *Rosenkavalier's* quasi-*parlando* style, which requires the singer to move through substantial portions of text quickly.

Figure 6. Ochs in Act II: focus on harmonic-motivic framework (TR.22, p.17).

The image displays two musical scores. The top score is a handwritten manuscript for voice and piano, labeled 'Nr. 70.' and 'An Ochs in Act II'. It features a vocal line with lyrics in German and English, and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Hand-ge-lenk. Da-rauf halt ich gar viel. Ist un-ter' and 'de-li-cate is a thing I ad-mire. 'Tis an at-'. The bottom score is a printed version of the same music, showing the vocal line with lyrics and the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Hand-ge-lenk. Da-rauf halt ich gar viel. Ist un-ter' and 'de-li-cate is a thing I ad-mire. 'Tis an at-'. The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'p'.

This survey of opera sketches does not mean to suggest that Strauss simply transferred his motivic and orchestral practices from the tone poems to the stage. Clearly symphonic and operatic procedures continue to coexist well into his later years. Yet Strauss's manuscripts offer evidence that he regularly conceived of vocal writing as an outgrowth of the orchestra—especially for the light, conversational style that characterizes many of his post-*Elektra* operas. For *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Arabella*, respectively the first and last projects in his long collaboration with Hofmannsthal, Strauss approached substantial stretches of the scores as orchestral music, layering in the voices at a later stage in his compositional process. By then, the essential musical character was already more or less fully realized. Hofmannsthal keenly observed the impact of this practice on the finished works. Reflecting on *Der Rosenkavalier* less than a year before his death, he wrote: “*die Stimme immer nur dem im Orchester zentrierten Leben des Ganzen sich einflieht, auftauchend, untertauchend, aber—wenn mein Gefühl mich nicht betrügt—nie ganz souverän, nie ganz als Träger*” (the life of the whole thing is centered on the orchestra and the voice is only woven into it, emerging sometimes and submerged again, but is never—unless my impressions deceive me—never wholly sovereign, never takes the lead).¹⁶ The sketches are a strong reminder of Strauss's background as a tone poet, and when he fleshes out the vocal parts in the *Particell*, they are often derivative of an existing orchestral fabric. The voices are, so to speak, along for the ride.

¹⁶ *Correspondence*, 507.

Legend of Figures

- Figure 1. *Schlußduett* in Act III: preliminary sketching in advance of the text (TR.22, p.6)
- Figure 2. Soprano trio in Act III: focus on harmonic-melodic framework (Tr.23, pp. 48–50)
- Figure 3. Zdenka in Act I: misplaced text and focus on orchestral motives (Mus.ms.20858, p.51)
- Figure 4. Matteo in Act III: hybrid melody for the voice and violins (Mus.Hs.34244, p.8)
- Figure 5. Arabella in Act I: emphasis on distinctive orchestral figures (Mus.ms.20858, p.54)
- Figure 6. Ochs in Act II: focus on harmonic-motivic framework (TR.22, p.17)