

THE  
NATIONAL  
**Ballet**  
OF CANADA

Karen Kain  
Artistic Director

# The Merry Widow

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BalletNotes



# The Merry Widow

**Music by Franz Lehár**

Produced by kind permission of the Australian Ballet Foundation  
Original book and lyrics by Victor Leon and Leo Stein

Choreography: Ronald Hynd  
Scenario: Sir Robert Helpmann  
Music: Franz Lehár  
Musical Adaptation: John Lanchbery  
Set and Costume Design: Desmond Heeley  
Lighting Design: Michael J. Whitfield

This production entered the repertoire through the generosity of THE VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE, THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA, joined by the Rotary Club of Toronto.

This balletic version, choreography by Ronald Hynd and scenario by Sir Robert Helpmann, has been made courtesy of the composer's and librettists' heirs and by special arrangement with Glocken Verlag Limited, London.

*The Merry Widow* is presented by

**Deloitte.**

Cover: Greta Hodgkinson as Hanna (2001).  
Right: Karen Kain and John Meehan as Hanna and Danilo in the National Ballet premiere (1986).



# The Merry Widow

The year is 1905 and the fate of the proud but impoverished Balkan principality of Pontevedro hangs perilously on the marriage plans of a rich, beautiful widow. If she weds a foreigner it could spell financial ruin for her homeland, therefore she must be coaxed into marrying a fellow Pontevedrian.

*The Merry Widow* first delighted audiences as an operetta and has continued to do so as a ballet. Hungarian composer Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* was first presented in Vienna in 1905. A musical feast, it aptly captures the contrasting national passions of the Balkan Pontevedrians and the elegant Parisians whose city is the backdrop for this story of love and intrigue.



Artists of the Ballet (1997).

## **Act I Paris, 1905**

### **Scene 1: An anteroom in the Pontevedrian Embassy**

The staff is busy preparing for a ball to be held at the embassy. Njegus, the ambassador's personal aide, enters carrying a pile of debt notes drawn to finance the ball. There is general sadness about their country's precarious financial situation.

The Ambassador, Baron Zeta, and his young French wife, Valencienne, enter accompanied by Camille de Rosillon, a dashing French diplomat. A telegram arrives announcing that the beautiful Hanna Glawari, a recently widowed Pontevedrian, will be attending the ball. She is worth 20 million francs and, reportedly, is seeking a new husband. However, should she marry a foreigner, Pontevedro will lose the benefit of her wealth and the country will be left penniless. The first secretary, Count Danilo, is considered a prospective suitor for the young widow.

Camille and Valencienne are left alone. He is passionately in love with her, and she with him, but she clings shakily to her marriage vows. Njegus interrupts the lovers, and Danilo enters in a somewhat intoxicated state. Njegus attempts to explain to him that he should try to marry Hanna, but Danilo falls asleep. Baron Zeta returns and orders Njegus to ensure that Danilo is sober for the ball so that he may make a good impression on the wealthy widow.

### **Scene 2: The ballroom in the Pontevedrian Embassy**

Hanna Glawari arrives and Danilo is presented to her. They are shocked to recognize one another, having been lovers in Pontevedro some ten years earlier when Hanna was a mere peasant girl. Danilo had put an end to their affair at the insistence of his aristocratic parents. He is amazed at the transformation in Hanna and, in his confusion, mops his forehead with a handkerchief, which Hanna recognizes as the keepsake she gave him when they parted.

Danilo attempts to explain himself to Hanna and proclaims his love for her, but she brushes off his advances, declaring that what he really loves now is her money. Danilo, rebuffed, recalls their earlier days together.

Baron Zeta re-enters with Hanna and bids her choose a partner. Hanna regrets her earlier rudeness and chooses Danilo, but he, still smarting, refuses. To avoid an awkward scene Valencienne urges Camille to dance with Hanna. In the course of changing partners, Hanna finds herself in the arms of Danilo. It is clear they are still in love.

## **Act II The garden of Hanna's villa**

Several days after the ball, Hanna is holding a soirée at her villa and has invited the diplomatic elite of Paris.

As they all go in to supper, Baron Zeta, Danilo and Njegus arrange to meet in the pavilion for a small diplomatic discussion on Danilo's progress with Hanna.

Valencienne and Camille sneak into the deserted garden and she finally succumbs to his persuasive passion. They withdraw into the darkness of the pavilion, but unbeknownst to them, are observed by Njegus. As Baron Zeta and Danilo approach, Njegus panics and locks the pavilion door. Looking through the keyhole, Baron Zeta sees all.

In the ensuing scuffle to wrestle the key from Njegus, Hanna appears and realizes the situation. She releases Valencienne through a side door and takes her place inside.

Baron Zeta unlocks the door and orders the guilty couple to emerge. To his amazement, Camille comes out with Hanna, who dumbfounds everyone by announcing she will marry Camille. Realizing that such a marriage will definitely send their country into bankruptcy, the guests offer frigid congratulations and depart.

Danilo is the last to leave and throws the handkerchief at her feet. She picks it up knowing that he truly loves her.

## **Act III Chez Maxim**

The Pontevedrians have come to drown their sorrows and spend their last francs at Chez Maxim. Camille arrives, hoping to find Valencienne and remedy the situation but Valencienne believes that the marriage announcement is true. The Pontevedrians, led by Valencienne, jeer at him.

Hanna suddenly appears and accepts Camille's unwillingly offered arm. This is too much for Danilo who advances to challenge him to a duel. Hanna and Valencienne attempt to intervene. It is clear to everyone, including Baron Zeta, that Camille and Valencienne are in love.

Everyone finally leaves, except for Hanna, who is left, forlorn, without a companion. Danilo quietly returns and embraces her in his forgiving arms.

## A Note on the Ballet

Choreographer Ronald Hynd was remarkably successful in adapting the operetta *The Merry Widow* into a ballet. Dramatically, the ballet fuses the plot's political intrigue with the characters' licentious and comical adventures. Hynd focuses on *The Merry Widow's* enduring popularity. Through ballroom dances and intimate pas de deux, the themes of romance, courtship and adultery receive a provocative and witty treatment. Franz Lehár's irresistibly appealing music, here orchestrated and arranged by John Lanchbery, is intertwined with the subtlety of character and strength of dramatic structure, making *The Merry Widow* a key work in the full-length ballet repertoire.

Hynd has not lost the essence of Lehár's operetta through dance, but added another layer to the lush story through choreography that unravels the plot through dancing, mime and gesture. Following the Canadian premiere of *The Merry Widow* by The National Ballet of Canada in 1986, Gary Smith, dance critic for the *Hamilton Spectator*, confirmed: "*A champagne cocktail of dance, a glorious evocation of gentler times, The Merry Widow remains an imperishable bon-bon of enchantment and romance. Singing or dancing, she's likely to work her way into your heart.*"

Hynd's production of *The Merry Widow* was given its world premiere by the Australian Ballet on November 13, 1975, at the Palais Theatre in Melbourne, and it immediately established itself as a classic of the 20th century. The Australian Ballet subsequently toured with the production to the United States and England, where it continued to receive critical and commercial acclaim.

Prima ballerina Margot Fonteyn was featured in the role of Hanna Glawari when she was almost 60 years old. It was her last major ballet role before her retirement from the stage. Fonteyn's interpretation of Hanna was highly praised, and John Percival of the *London Times* noted that, "*Ronald Hynd's production gives the last moments of all three acts to Hanna, twice with Danilo, once alone. I had thought that perhaps excessive when I first saw it, but Fonteyn proves that Hynd knew what he was about. I hardly know which to admire more — the sheer exhilaration she brings to the last curtain, like the incarnation of a Toulouse Lautrec poster, or the way she makes distress turn to joy at*

*the end of the second act, when Danilo rushes off to Maxim's and she realizes that his anger means he really does love her.*"

To celebrate the ballet's 10th anniversary in November 1985, the Australian Ballet revived *The Merry Widow* with the original cast of Marilyn Rowe and John Meehan as Hanna and Danilo. Australian critic Neil Jillett wrote of the revival: "*Why try to find new ways of describing perfection? A rave is the only appropriate response to the first full-length work commissioned by the Australian Ballet. The Merry Widow enchants the eye and ear and lifts the spirit. It is destined to be ranked as one of the great three-act ballets.*"

*The Merry Widow* was given its Canadian premiere on November 8, 1986, at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre featuring Karen Kain as Hanna, guest artist John Meehan in his original created role of Danilo, Yoko Ichino as Valencienne and Kevin Pugh as Camille de Rosillon. On December 27, 1987, CBC-TV presented the television premiere of the National Ballet's production of *The Merry Widow* starring Kain, Meehan, Ichino and Raymond Smith. Directed by Norman Campbell, the production was co-produced by Primedia and the CBC.



# Franz Lehár

## Composer

Together with Johann Strauss and Jacques Offenbach, Franz Lehár is one of the undisputed masters of operetta, a form of light opera developed in Paris, Vienna and London during the second half of the 19th century. Lehár's ability to incorporate dance rhythms into his compositions helped to continue the operetta tradition into the 20th century.

Lehár was born in Komaron, Hungary, in 1870. His father was the horn player in the orchestra of the Theatre an der Wien as well as a military bandmaster and composer. At the age of 12, Lehár was sent to the Prague Conservatory to pursue serious studies in violin and composition and by 1888 he was theatre violinist at Barmen/Elderfeld in the Rhineland.

Lehár used his obligatory military service to his advantage by playing in the bands of infantry regiments and becoming a bandmaster. During this time he composed mostly dances and marches. It wasn't until 1896 that he produced his first opera, *Kukuska*. In 1899, he was posted to the 26th infantry in Vienna, a city where he could pursue his more serious musical interests with a wider audience.

Lehár proved an instant success in Vienna and in 1902 left the military service to pursue full-time composition. He created operettas for the Theatre an der Wien and the Carltheatre, including two great successes — *Wiener Frauen* and *Der Rastelhinder*. His next two works, *Der Gottengatte* and *Die Juxcheirat*, were dismal failures.

In 1905 Lehár was able to recoup his losses with the world premiere of *The Merry Widow*, which proved to be his most successful operetta and a perfect example of his unique style of composition. Lehár's fluent melodic output had a quality and substance not commonly found in this style of composition and allowed for an originality not heard in other operettas. Lehár's waltzes are unique and identified by having a more swaying-type rhythm than other waltzes. This swaying has been visualized by Ronald Hynd in his choreography for *The Merry Widow* ballet, creating a beautiful and unusual waltz movement.

Lehár continued to compose operettas, though none were comparable in popularity to *The Merry Widow*. Though a creator of light entertainment, he wanted to “enlarge the framework of operetta.... People did not regard it as an art form, but simply as a means of entertainment, something to be diverted by, and then forgotten.” Lehár sought to reject these stereotypes in pursuit of more ambitious and serious works. He attempted to create opera with more substantial subject matter and innovative musical styles. Sadly, these proved less popular with his public, who deemed them pretentious and sentimental and believed his true talent to lie in the lighter operetta genre.

Following the First World War, Lehár revitalized his fame in a series of new operettas that were created especially for the talents of the singer Richard Tauber, a musical partnership heralded to this day. These operettas include *Paganini* (1925), *Der Zarewitsch* (1927), *Friederike* (1928) and *Das Land des Lachelng* (1929).

In 1934, Lehár produced his last operetta, *Giudetta*, concluding the end of a great musical era. The following year Lehár founded his own music publishing house, Glocken Verlag (still in existence today), which took over the rights to many of his works, including *The Merry Widow*.

The onset of the Second World War was a difficult time for Lehár and his Jewish wife, Sophie. Hitler asked Lehár to abandon his wife but was defied by the composer. Wishing to remain neutral from politics, the Lehárs divided their time between Vienna and Bad Ischl, and were spared persecution only because *The Merry Widow* was Hitler's favourite operetta. In 1946 the Lehárs moved to Zurich, where Sophie died in 1948. Lehár then returned to Bad Ischl, where he died on October 24, 1948, at the age of 78. His villa is now the Lehár museum.

For more information on this production visit the National Ballet's Virtual Museum at [national.ballet.ca](http://national.ballet.ca)

Chan Hon Goh as Valencienne  
and Aleksandar Antonijevic as  
Danilo (1997).



Above: Aleksandar Antonijevic  
as Danilo (1997).

Photographs: Andrew Oxenham  
and Cylla von Tiedemann.

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