**Richard Strauss**  
Born June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany.  
Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch, Germany.

**Suite from Der Rosenkavalier, Op. 59**

Strauss began his opera _Der Rosenkavalier_, a “comedy for music” on a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in 1909 and completed it on September 26, 1910. The premiere was given on January 26, 1911, at the Dresden Court Opera. The orchestral suite was first performed on October 5, 1944, in New York, under Artur Rodzinski, who is traditionally credited as its arranger. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, ratchet, cymbal, bass drum, celesta, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances music from Strauss’s _Der Rosenkavalier_ (a suite of waltzes) were given at Orchestra Hall on December 1 and 2, 1911, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances (a suite from the opera) were given on December 20, 21, and 22, 2007, with Ludovic Morlot conducting. The Orchestra first performed music from the opera (a suite of waltzes) at the Ravinia Festival on July 31, 1936, with Werner Janssen conducting, and most recently (the act 3 trio and finale with Renée Fleming, Heidi Grant Murphy, and Susan Graham) on July 31, 2004, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

_Salome_ made Richard Strauss the most famous composer alive. It also made him rich. Shortly after the Dresden premiere in 1905, Strauss built himself a villa in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, which he paid for with royalty checks. He moved in at the beginning of June 1908, and the first work he completed there, at a large oak desk positioned for a postcard view of the mountains, was _Elektra_, based on an adaptation of Sophocles’ play by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. But it was Strauss’s next opera, _Der Rosenkavalier_, with an original libretto by Hofmannsthal, which made the two of them the most celebrated composer-poet team since Mozart and Da Ponte, and brought Strauss his greatest popular success. To accommodate the public, special _Rosenkavalier_ trains ran from Berlin to Dresden following its premiere there in January 1911. (Fifty performances were given in Dresden within the year.) Later, _Rosenkavalier_ brands of champagne and cigarettes were sold. In 1926, a silent film was made—the opera was so popular that, even without singing, it had an audience.

“We were born for one another and are certain to do fine things together,” Strauss wrote to Hofmannsthal before they had even settled on the eighteenth-century Viennese tale that became their “comedy for music,” _Der Rosenkavalier_. These two made an unlikely pair. A poet of exquisite and refined tastes, Hofmannsthal tended to be withdrawn and aloof. (He lived outside Vienna in a small rococo castle which he refused to equip with modern bathrooms or central heating.) Strauss was a showman and a good businessman; he could be crass, but he was eminently practical, and he possessed a shrewd sense of theater—what would play and what wouldn’t. They were, in other words, a perfect match; their professional relationship lasted twenty-three years and produced six operas. They did nearly all their communicating by mail—partly because Hofmannsthal disliked Strauss’s wife, whom he thought loud and pushy—and even at the end of two decades they still weren’t on a first-name basis (Strauss’s letters are usually addressed to “Lieber Freund,” Hofmannsthal’s to “Lieber Doktor Strauss”).

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After the premiere of *Elektra*, with its searing dissonances, powerhouse orchestra, and Wagnerian voices, Strauss felt the need for a change of pace, and he was overheard saying, "Now I shall write a Mozart opera." Hofmannsthal knew precisely what Strauss wanted, and the new libretto he mailed in installments practically set itself to music, as the composer later commented. Nevertheless, it took Strauss a year and a half to complete the score. It was a labor of love, and Strauss worked with such enthusiasm that he even set one of Hofmannsthal’s stage directions to music by mistake. *Der Rosenkavalier* is one of opera’s landmarks, particularly in its balance of music and words, and even Hofmannsthal, always a tough critic, was nearly brought to tears by its “whole beauty, by a complete unity, by absolute harmony.”

For this “Mozart opera,” Strauss assumed a new musical personality, one steeped in tradition rather than poised on the brink of the avant-garde. *Der Rosenkavalier* was later criticized as a signal retrenchment in the course of twentieth-century music, the first step in Strauss’s abrupt turning away from the music of his day in favor of old-world artistic sensibilities. But as a musical response to a period comedy, and as a way of imbuing the music of the past with all the modern conveniences, it’s an ingenious, completely successful, and ultimately influential work of art.

*Der Rosenkavalier* abounds in orchestral virtuosity, and symphony orchestras have long enjoyed playing selections from the opera, reminding us that before Strauss became the most popular opera composer of his day, he produced an astonishing decade-long series of hit tone poems, beginning with *Don Juan*. Of all the orchestral condensations of *Der Rosenkavalier*, only one, the delightful First Waltz Sequence, was actually made by Strauss himself, but the suite performed this week, apparently put together by the conductor Artur Rodzinski, is the most satisfying as a bird’s-eye view of the whole score. (Rodzinski led the premiere of the suite in New York in 1944—more than three decades after the opera was first staged and only five years before Strauss’s death—and conducted the first Chicago Symphony performance in 1947, during his first season here as the Orchestra’s music director.)

The action in *Der Rosenkavalier* revolves around the Marschallin, who has taken the seventeen-year-old Count Octavian as her lover, and the bumbling, lecherous Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau, who lacks both money and social graces, and who has arranged to marry Sophie von Faninal, who has both in spades. When Octavian is selected to present Sophie with a silver rose—an elaborate engagement “custom” devised by Hofmannsthal—the two fall in love. In the end, inevitably, Octavian leaves the Marschallin for the pretty, young Sophie, and Ochs is revealed as the silly old fool he is.

The suite begins where the opera starts, famously, with the bold, erotic horn music that is *Der Rosenkavalier*’s calling card and always a welcome sound to opera lovers. The following music introduces first the Marschallin, swooning over her young lover Octavian, and then, in the rapturous Presentation of the Rose scene, Sophie. We next meet Baron Ochs, promising a chambermaid, against all evidence, that “with me no night is too long,” in the most famous of the opera’s waltzes. Despite his surname, it wasn’t Strauss who had the idea of putting waltzes in *Der Rosenkavalier*, an anachronistic touch that quickly became the opera’s signature. “Try and think of an old-fashioned Viennese waltz,” Hofmannsthal wrote as he was preparing their libretto, “sweet and saucy, which should pervade the whole of the last act.”

The suite now shifts to the celebrated trio (actually three separate, simultaneous monologues) for the Marschallin, Octavian, and Sophie, reflecting on love from their different points of view, followed by the final duet of Octavian and Sophie as they go off together. This is one of opera’s most touching and glorious scenes, and for sheer melodic splendor and high-calorie harmonic richness, it’s unsurpassed in Strauss’s output. (In the now-distant days of LPs, a *New Yorker* cartoon showed a man on his deathbed asking to hearing side 8 of *Der Rosenkavalier* one last time.) Unlike the opera, the suite ends with yet another waltz.

Although his career lasted another thirty-plus years, Strauss never surpassed the popular success of *Der Rosenkavalier*. During World War II, when American soldiers showed up at the door of his Bavarian villa, he introduced himself simply by saying, “I am Richard Strauss, the composer of *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*.” In June 1949, to celebrate his eighty-fifth birthday, Strauss went to Munich, where he attended
rehearsals of Der Rosenkavalier conducted by a young Georg Solti. The composer picked up the baton and led the very end of act 2. He died that September. The music performed at his memorial service—under Solti’s baton—was the great trio from Der Rosenkavalier.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.