

J. STRAUSS I *Furious Gallop. Four Temperaments. Masked Ball. Jelacic March. Swedish Songs. Quadrille in Military Style. Beloved Katinka. Chinese Gallop. Radetzky March. Salon Polka. Dance-Signal. Exeter Polka. Fire of Youth* & • Ralph Kulling, cond; Old Vienna Strauss Ens • EDITION HERA 02007 (68:15) & **J. STRAUSS II** *Emperor Waltz*

INVITATION TO THE DANCE Ralph Kulling, cond; Old Vienna Strauss Ens; Maria Theresa Ullrich (mez)¹ • EDITION HERA 02008 (78:37)

WEBER *Invitation to the Dance. LANNER* *Evening Stars. ROSSINI* *L'italiana in Algeri: Cruda sorte!*¹ *La cenerentola: Nacqui all' affano e al pianto.*¹ **J. STRAUSS II** *Tritsch-Tratsch Polka. Die Fledermaus: Overture; New Csardas;*¹ *Wine, Women, and Song. LEHAR* *Giuditta: Meine Lippen, die küssen so heiss.*¹ **E. STRAUSS** *Elegantly. Doctrines. JOSEF STRAUSS* *The Dragonfly. Forward!* **ZIEHRER** *Do You Understand?*

The name of this fine ensemble as it appears on outer and inner surfaces of these fine CDs is *Alt-Wiener Strauss-Ensemble*. The band specializes in the music of Vienna, but its actual home is Stuttgart. Violinist-conductor-arranger Arthur Kulling founded the group of 12 players in 1972, approximating the size and sound of the elder Johann Strauss's Viennese dance band. In 2001, Arthur's son Ralph, also a violinist and conductor, became leader. The instruments consist of three violins, two horns, and one each of viola, cello, double bass, flute (or piccolo), oboe, clarinet, and bassoon. Edition Hera is the band's proprietary label, and the present discs are two of nine they have so far released.

The first disc, bearing the title "Dance-Signal" (*Tanz-Signale*), is—except for its generous "encore"—entirely devoted to music by Johann Strauss I (1804-1849), and demonstrates as well as any I have heard that the father's talent was fully equal to that of his famous progeny. No doubt, the Kullings were thinking of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the composer when compiling this selection. The serious, or perhaps in this case, the light-hearted listener will find plenty of variety in invention, tempo, and spirit, making for an altogether charming concert, presented in a warmly accurate acoustic.

"Invitation to the Dance" presents us with a somewhat longer and even more diverse program. We have works by eight composers: Johann Strauss I and his three sons, plus four composers whose lives collectively span almost 160 years, yet belonged to the epoch of European Romantic music in 1770 which the Strauss family flourished. The players of the Old Vienna Strauss Ensemble are also involved with the Stuttgart State Opera, where the mezzo-soprano Maria Theresa Ullrich sings. Her rich and supple voice makes her four contributions high points of this fine recording. The Csardas from *Fledermaus* is not the familiar one, but a second setting composed late in life by Johann II to oblige the mezzo Marie Renard.

The other selections may also be unfamiliar to many listeners. That being the case, Hera should have printed texts and short synopses. Indeed, Hera identifies the aria from *Cenerentola* simply as "aria of Cenerentola." "I was born to anguish and tears" is in the final scene, when anguish and tears are firmly in the past. But *Cenerentola* reflects briefly on her miserable years before rejoicing in her good fortune and - I was astonished by this when I first encountered the opera - she insists on forgiving her step-sisters and step-father and drawing them into her new royal family. The torchy ballad from Franz Lehar's *Giuditta*, "My lips they kiss so passionately," also begs for explanation. *Giuditta* is no ordinary operetta, but rather a bittersweet love story in which the primary lovers are losers. The musical language is that of late 19th-century Viennese musical theater, but the length and complexity of the work place it closer to the world of grand opera in its *verismo* phase. Finally, "Cruda sorte!" ("Cruel fate!") is Isabella's first aria in *L'italiana in Algeri*. She has just survived a shipwreck on the north coast of Africa, and observes the corsairs heading in her direction. This is a comic opera, but the Italian girl sings as if she does not yet know about the ultimate happy, if implausible, ending.

Notes for both discs are otherwise ample and informative. Both are highly recommended.

Robert McColley

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