

MUSIC NOTE

CONDUCTOR ORMSBY WILKINS TALKS TO CHLOE GORDON ABOUT *THE MERRY WIDOW*'S HARMONIOUS TRANSITION FROM OPERETTA TO BALLET.

The Australian conductor Ormsby Wilkins began his career as a rehearsal pianist for The Australian Ballet in 1973, under the leadership of Principal Conductor John Lanchbery. Wilkins played piano for all of the rehearsals for the premiere season of *The Merry Widow*, and went on to conduct the production in later years. He became The Australian Ballet's resident conductor in 1982, and has also held the positions of conductor with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet (now the Birmingham Royal Ballet) and of music director and principal conductor at the National Ballet of Canada. He became music director of American Ballet Theatre in 2005.

John Lanchbery arranged the score for *The Merry Widow* from the operetta of the same name by Franz Lehár. How did he translate the score in order to make it appropriate for dance?

An operetta is a dialogue with musical numbers in between. It wouldn't generally have enough music for a full-length ballet, because of course a ballet has no dialogue, it's all music. There are dance-like pieces in *The Merry Widow* operetta: for instance, a polonaise, and so-called 'Pontevedrian' music, which is Central Hungarian-style music. Lehár came out of the tradition of Johann Strauss Jr. from the 19th century, and Viennese music is filled with waltzes and polkas and dance music, even in the arias. Jack had to make these small pieces much larger, turning them into a full dance for the corps de ballet, or a big waltz number like the one at the beginning of the second scene in the first act. He wouldn't alter the melody or the harmony, but he extended the music. He would move it to another key. He had lush, Mantovani-type strings supporting the choreography. Jack just understood how to synthesise the two forms. He knew how to take an operetta and translate all those wonderful tunes into a ballet.

In an opera you have a voice and then you have an accompanying orchestra, but in a ballet, the orchestra is not just accompanying. It is the music. So you have to embellish the sound of the orchestra to support the choreography and make it balletically interesting, rather than just having a soprano sing. Jack was excellent at that.

I should note that Alan Abbott orchestrated a lot of *The Merry Widow*. He was a great friend and colleague of Jack's, and could be trusted to produce work that wouldn't seem out of place. A big part of how you go from the operetta to the ballet is in the orchestration. How do you make the orchestra fizz when you don't have singers?

You once mentioned (in an interview on The Australian Ballet blog) that Lanchbery was especially good at managing the transitions between scenes, giving those moments their own dramatic weight, rather than just performing the function of moving into the next piece.

Jack totally understood how to get from one piece to the next. A wonderful example of this ability is the transition from the first scene of the ballet to the second. Design-wise, it's the most fantastic moment: the first scene takes place at the front of the stage where there's a big desk, then the curtains go up to reveal that incredible ballroom. How do you match that, musically? Jack does it through transition music that is actually not Lehár



Artists of The Australian Ballet. Photography Jeff Busby

at all. The lights go down, the desk disappears, and the score moves into this slightly mysterious music to start with, a little like the waltz that's coming up soon, although you don't know that yet. He goes through a whole series of keys, with more crescendo and crescendo and crescendo, and then the curtains and lights go up. The success of that moment is not just in what you see, but in what you hear.

Did the score change a lot from the rehearsal studio to the stage?

I've worked on other full-length ballets since *The Merry Widow*, and usually the score changes a lot from the original ideas. This score was barely changed: what Jack produced was almost the form that it ended up in at the first performance. He was so clever and such a genius at understanding what worked, and how to contribute to an overall dramatic piece.

One change was that there were actually voices in the first seasons of *The Merry Widow*. It was a condition of using the operetta that we include voices, and so there was a chorus, just at two or three moments in the whole ballet: during the folk dancing, and some humming during a short strain of the Merry Widow Waltz. The voices had been dropped by the time I conducted it.

Subsequent to *The Merry Widow* debut season, you became a conductor, and have conducted this ballet many times since. What place does the ballet hold in your own career?

I began conducting in 1976, and the first full-length ballet I conducted was *The Merry Widow* in Adelaide. I think that Jack was confident enough to have me conduct because I knew *The Merry Widow* really well. The orchestra could feel that I knew it, so that was very helpful. I performed it with The Australian Ballet many times. When I became music director at the National Ballet of Canada, they had presented it before, and it came back into the repertoire during my time there. When I went to American Ballet Theatre, it was in

the repertoire there too. I've done it many times and I always feel very comfortable conducting it. It's beautiful music and always takes me back to my early days, and to all these steps I took towards becoming conductor for ballet. It was a very central part of my becoming a conductor. I feel very close to it.

Are there particular moments in the ballet that you especially enjoy conducting?

I love Camille and Valencienne's pas de deux. It is just one beautiful melody after another, and I never tire of it. It is also the most beautiful duet in the operetta.

How did Lanchbery's work as a conductor inspire you?

I learned so much from him. He could just make the music pop out of the pit. He brought rhythmic vitality to his work. Obviously in dance you need to have rhythm, and he brought something very special to the performances in that way, even though he may not have given the dancers a perfect tempo. He could push the dancers more than they might feel comfortable with, but I think they knew deep down that the way he was accompanying them was actually helping to showcase them.

I wouldn't be what I am today without Jack. He gave me my first job and he was an inspiration. I have a huge amount of respect for him. If I can inject a small percentage of my performances with energy in the way Jack did, I will be very happy.

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