

## December 30, 2021 – Franz Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe*

On the final Thursday Night Opera House of 2021, we'll travel to Paris where a rich widow must marry one of her countrymen or lose her late husband's fortune. Although the action takes place in Paris, Franz Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*) is the quintessential Viennese operetta. First performed at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on December 30, 1905, it was the composer's first major success, leading to *Der Graf von Luxemburg* (1909), *Paganini* (1925), *Der Zarewitsch* (1926), *Der Land des Lächelns* (1929), *Schön ist die Welt* (1930), and *Giuditta* (1934). A few years ago I had the pleasure of singing one of Lehár's most famous arias, "Dein ist mein ganzes Herz," in the composer's Vienna home, accompanied on his own piano.

The complicated plot of *The Merry Widow* deals with the attempts of the Pontevedrian Ambassador to France, Baron Mirko Zeta (bass-baritone **Bryn Terfel**), to obtain the widow Hannah Glawari's (soprano **Cheryl Studer**) fortune for his impoverished country by getting his compatriot Count Danilo Danilovitsch (baritone **Boje Skovhus**)—the Embassy's First Secretary—to marry her. Danilo had earlier wanted to marry Hannah, who had no money of her own, but had been forbidden to do so by his uncle. Eventually Hannah married an older banker, who made her a wealthy young widow when he died. A subplot is concerned with the flirtation between Zeta's young wife Valencienne (soprano **Barbara Bonney**) and a French officer, Camille de Rosillon (tenor **Rainier Trost**).

**John Eliot Gardiner** conducts the Monteverdi Choir and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in this 1994 Deutsche Grammophon recording.

From a 1997 Paris Opéra production, **Boje Skovhus** (Danilo) and **Karita Mattila** (Hannah) sing the lovely duet (popularly known as the Merry Widow Waltz), "Lippen Schweigen": <http://youtu.be/Qqd1aGiEFV4>.

In 1909, a French version—*La Veuve joyeuse*—had its premiere at Paris's Apollo Theatre, changing the scene of the final act to the actual Maxim's, and renaming several of the characters. As a bonus, I'll present a complete 1967 EMI recording starring **Micheline Dax** in the title role and **Michel Dens** as Danilo.