Franz von Suppé

Franz von Suppé: Overtures and Preludes

Compiled and Introduced by

Robert Ignatius Letellier



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Franz von Suppé: photographs from the 1840s to the 1880s

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INTRODUCTION

Franz von Suppé, the originator of the Viennese operetta, was baptized Francesco Ezechiele Ermenegildo Cavaliere Suppé-Demelli. He was born on 18 April 1819, a contemporary of Offenbach, in Spalato (Split) in the southern part of the Habsburg Monarchy, the son of an Austrian civil servant of Italian-Belgian parentage. His mother, Katharina Landovsky, came of Bohemian-Polish stock. Suppé was in fact related to the great Gaetano Donizetti of Bergamo, and a desire to compose showed itself early in Francesco Suppé-Demelli. As a boy, before beginning a cursory study of law, Suppé was taken to Vienna without knowing a word of German.

Vienna before the1848 Revolution showed many Italian characteristics: the small, single-storey houses, the many palaces of the nobility, and, the particularly, the musical theater, the Royal Opera. The Viennese, like the Italians, were keen theater-goers. Suppé became the pupil of the Viennese master of counterpoint Simon Sechter, but professionally soon worked as a kind of musical factorum for the Vienna stages. As conductor at the Theater an der Wien, as well as at the Theater in der Leopoldstadt, he collaborated with the directors Carl, Pokorny and Treumann in providing incidental music for the various plays, farces and satires so popular with the Viennese public.

During the 1850s the vogue for Offenbach's music spread out from Paris. Vienna was enthralled. Suppé decided to try to emulate something of his German-born French contemporary. In 1860 he celebrated his debut with a modest little operetta *Das Pensionat* and in 1865 he had his first truly international hit with the burlesque operetta *The Beautiful Galathea*, a Greek travesty with the Offenbach flavour. The next two decades saw Suppé at the height of his Viennese and international popularity as a composer of musical comedy, with works like *Fatinitza* (1876), *Boccaccio* (1879), *Donna Juanita* (1880), *Die Afrikareise* (1883).

Suppé died in his adopted city on 21 May 1895. He survived Offenbach by 14 years, and left a legacy at least as important: 31 operettas, 180 vaudevilles, as well as more serious compositions like a Mass, a symphony, and many chamber works and string quartets. The operettas, the first actual products of the new genre in the Imperial city, reflected varying degrees of success. The librettos of some were reworked often. Suppé was a master of three styles, the Italian, the French and the German. He knew how to blend them irresistibly, assisted in the instrumentation by his rich experience as a theatre orchestra conductor, and with a sure symphonic technique deriving from his classical training. His overtures were a major feature of his stage work, some attaining immense popularity, and securing him an enduring fame in the concert hall. Many of his operettas from the 1870s, on the other hand, have short preludes or instrumental introductions, very much in the mode of Offenbach (like *Der Teufel auf Erden, Fatinitza, Donna Juanita, Die Afrikareise, Des Matrosen Heimkehr, Die Jagd nach dem Glück*).

Suppé's music moves briskly; it is sparse in diction, free of cloying sentimentality, and effervescent in its crisp intensity. It mediates as it were between Vienna, the French *opéra-comique* and the Italian *opera buffa*. The melodious charm of his overtures, their artistic instrumentation (often featuring extended solos), the rhythmic verve and their masterful vocal composition, have ensured their survival for more than a century. *Poet and Peasant* and *Light Cavalry* are among the most famous overtures ever written, Their vivid themes and irrepressible passion are borne by a cosmopolitan grandezza in his favoured two-four and six-eight time. Suppé's predilection for spirited stretta effects is very Italianate. In exactly the manner of Rossini, his overtures always end with a sweeping, brilliant finale. In *Light Cavalry* it is the galop that predominates, Suppé's substitute for the Offenbach can-can. The scintillating élan of this catchy, fascinating A-major melody is reminiscent of Rossini's *William Tell* overture. Suppé's music does not sound particularly Viennese, but rather more international. The Viennese flavour belonged more to Johann Strauss the Younger (six year his junior) or Karl Millocker, whose work contains elements of folk music. Inherent in Suppé's music, however, is the generous multi-national spirit of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which he could compose and assimilate in his own special way.

The Overtures and Preludes

1. Ein Morgen, Mittag und ein Abend in Wien (Morning, Noon and Night in Vienna)

Lokales Gemälde in zwei Aufzuge. Dramatist: Told. First performance: Vienna, Theater in der Josefstadt, 26 February 1844.

The immensely famous overture is a work of Suppé's youth, written at a time when he had just taken up his conducting post at the Josefstadt. It is noted for its tripping woodwind figures in the opening section, recalling the composer's visit to Milan in 1843 when he met Rossini, Donizetti, and the young Verdi. He later met Donizetti, a distant relation, when he was in Vienna.

2. Des Wanderers Ziel

Festspiel in einem Aufzug. Librettist: K. Meisl. First performance: Vienna, Theater an der Wien, 30 August 1845.

The histrionic opening catches attention before moving into harp arpeggios and a lyrical melody containing the solo instrumental textures that Suppé was so accomplished in, before the exciting conclusion.

3. Dichter und Bauer (Poet and Peasant)

Lustspiel in drei Aufzuge. Dramatist: Karl Elmar. First performance: Vienna, Theater an der Wien, 24 August 1846.

The original work is a comedy with songs. Suppé, now aged 27, had already used the overture twice before under other titles, but without success. Indeed, he performed it a third time against the advice of the director of the Theater an der Wien. However, on this third occasion it worked and was encored on the night of the premiere of Elmar's play. As it happened, the rustic, bucolic mood of the overture, as well as its later exuberance, was particularly approriate to the character of the play, in which a poet, suffering from a broken heart, makes use of a holiday in the mountains to create all kinds of havoc and confusion among the country belles and their beaux.

After the brassy and stately introduction there follows a sumptuous 6/8 opening andante with beautiful writing for cello and harp. A vigorous change of mood initiates a broad, exciting and syncopated common-time allegro that gives way to a relaxed episode in crisp waltz time, these two themes now played out in alternation. With its big bold themes and bright almost bumptious orchestration, the rustic *Poet and Peasant* overture became, with the very military *Leichte Kavallerie*, the composer's most famous work, and was subject to some 37 different arrangements, from brass band, piano duet to flute duet. It enchanted generations of popular concert-goers entirely ignorant of its origins and relationship to the forgotten dramatic work in question. Poor Suppé derived no profit at all from this enduring triumph: during a difficult period, he ceded his rights to a Munich publisher for the derisory sum of 8 thalers. The vocal score of the whole of the incidental music was not published until 1968, in Berlin.

4. Die Irrfahrt um's Glück

Romantische-komisches Zaubermärchen (romantic-comic magic play) *in drei Aufzuge*. Dramatist: Karl Elmar. First performance: Vienna, Theater an der Wien, 24 April 1853.

The accomplished overture is very dramatic.

5. Paragraph 3

Grosse Oper. Librettist: Grandjean. First performance: Vienna, Court Opera, 8 January 1858.

The libretto is derived from a French source. The opera was unsuccessful. The overture opens on a single note of the French horn, leading into a dramatic crescendo that culminates in a melancholy melody in the Italian operatic mode, before the emergence of the typical Viennese feel that is the hallmark of all Suppé's overtures.

6. Das Pensionat

Komische Operette in einem Aufzug. Librettist: J. Kaulich. First performance: Theater an der Wien, 24 November 1860.

After 1858 and the highly successful production of *Orphée aux enfers*, the vogue for Offenbach's new operettas was growing. The Theater an der Wien was unable to buy the rights to these works, so commissioned Suppé to provide them with their own substitute. The result was *Das Pensionat*, which the composer wote in the Parisian style. This work, inspired by the example of Offenbach, was Suppé's first essay in the genre of Viennese operetta. When Alois Pokorny became bankrupt in 1862, Suppé moved to the Kaitheater as conductor. When this was destroyed by fire, he moved to the Carltheater with the actor-manager Carl Treumann, where he established his reputation as a composer of light opera.

7. Die Kartenschlägerin, or Pique Dame

Komische Operette in einem Aufzug. Librettist: T. Treumann. First performed: 1st version: Vienna, Kaitheater, 26 April 1862; 2nd version: Revised and renamed *Pique Dame*, Graz, Thalia, 24 June 1864; Vienna, Carltheater, 1865.

The revision, designated *komische Oper* and in two acts, was much more successful. The overture has retained its popularity because of varied and vivid melodies. It begins ominously but passes into a lighter mode, with a beautiful flute solo, and themes that leap up and down between the upper and lower instruments of the orchestra.

8. Zehn Mädchen und kein Mann

Operette in einem Aufzug. Librettist: Friedrich. First performance: Vienna, Kaitheater, 25 October 1862.

The number of frustrated maidens was later increased to 25. The overture presents an extended clarinet solo followed by a rapid march and lyrical waltz. The vocal score was published in Vienna (1865).

9. Flotte Bursche, oder Das Bild der Madame Potiphar (Gay Blades, or the Portrait of Madame Potiphar)

Komische Operette in einem Aufzug. Librettist: Leitermayer or J. Braun. First performance: Vienna, Kaitheater, 18 April 1863.

The plot concerns romantic student activities in Heidelberg. The overture uses several German student songs, including the famous "Gaudeamus igitur" (so anticipating both Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture* and Sigmund Romberg's *The Student Prince*). The vocal score was published in Vienna (1870). The opera proved popular, with over 100 performances.

10. Die schöne Galathea

Operetta in einem Aufzug. Librettist: Poly Henrion (Kohl von Kohlenegg). First performance: Berlin, Meysels Theater, 30 June 1865; Vienna, Carltheater, 9 September 1865.

Short operettas continued in the 1860's, notably with *Die schöne Galathea*. The parody of a Classical subject was borrowed from the example of Offenbach whose *La Belle Hélène* had been staged in Vienna three months earlier as *Die schöne Helena*. The sculptor Pygmalion makes a statue of a beautiful woman. He proceeds to fall in love with his artefact, and with the intercession of Venus, succeeds in having her brought to life, where she wreaks havoc by flirting with all her admirers. The situation is resolved only when he prays for her to be returned to her original state, and she is turned back into stone. The statue is sold to Mydas who first set his heart on acquiring it. The irreverent mocking of sacrosanct Antiquity uses the satirical-mythological story in the way Offenbach did in *Orphée aux enfers* and *La Belle Hélène*, underlined by the topical jokes and allusions, as when Galathea, on coming to life, demands an ancient Greek schnitzel with pickled gherkins.

This delightful work is the earliest Viennese operetta to remain in the repertoire, despite having its premiere in Berlin. The overture opens with two sections that return in the score: the opening drinking trio for Pygmalion, his servant Ganymede and the wealthy patron of art Midas, followed by the music of Galathea's transformation, an episode noted for its sophisticated chord progressions and shimmering violins. All leads into a magnificent waltz peroration.

11. Leichte Kavallerie

Komische Operette in zwei Aufzüge. Librettist: C. Costa. First performance: Vienna, Carltheater, 21 March 1866.

Suppé was employed in the Carltheater from 1865 until his retirement in 1882. This was the first Viennese operetta on army life, and the title alone is enough to conjure up the eternal magic and attraction of the uniform. This tone is immediately established by the overture with its brilliant introductory trumpet fanfares, echoed, and the famous equestrian march, a galop, that follows, full of sparkle and brilliance. The overture is dominated by the scintillating verve of this catchy A-major melody, and the spirited stretta finale instils a breathless excitement. Suppé very interestingly intercalated several Hungarian melodies into his score, which was very successful in itself. The work reflected events from real life, with relations between the two great powers of Austria and Prussia entering critical phase in 1866, the year the libretto was offered to Suppé. The Hussars who served in the colourful army of the Austrian Empire gave their name to the piece, and played a part in it. But with Austria's defeat at the Battle of Königsgrätz, the patriotism of the story was felt to be inappropriate and the work failed to secure a place in the repertory despite the huge and enduring fame of its overture, so spruce and evocative of the military parade, which toured the world and remains one of the most popular of all 'classical' pieces. The vocal score was published in Vienna in the same year.

12. Banditenstreiche

Komische Operette in einem Aufzug. Librettist: B. Boutonnier. First performance: Vienna, Carlstheater, 27 April 1867

This was the first slightly longer operetta. The story is set in a small harbour town near Naples. Gaetano, who is poor, wants to marry Lidia, the daughter of the mayor, but her father prefers the wealthy Lelio. The aristocratic brigand (à la Fra Diavolo) arrives on the scene, and in true Robin Hood style, after many complications, enables the couple to marry. The overture, presenting some of the finest melodies from the opera, especially Gaetano's romance, opens with

fanfares heralding an ominous motif, before a march begins, and later relaxes into the gentle dance of the robbers' mountain hideaway. When the overture is heard in the theatre, the romance is heard before the curtain rises, a feature not unique to Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1891). The operetta became very popular.

13. Die Frau Meisterin

Komische ZauberOperette in drei Aufzüge. Librettist: C. Costa. First performance: Vienna, Carlstheater, 20 January 1868.

This is a magic operetta involving two married couples, one of whose partners is always annoying the other with arguments and a generally quarrelsome nature. A sorcerer from Savoy, Pierre, succeeds in calming the nagging wife and uncouth husband respectively, by means of his magic spells. The mood of the work is suggested the dramatic overture, which presents the usual potpourri of tunes from the work, including a lyrical Savoyard song, a melancholy Viennese waltz, and a huntmen's chorus. There was a later revival of this work, arranged by Léon and Held as *Die Pariserin, oder Das heimliche Bild* (Operette in drei Aufzüge) at the Carltheater, 26 January 1896.

14. Isabella

Komische Operette in einem Aufzug. Librettist: Joseph Weyl. First performance: Vienna, Carltheater, 5 November 1869.

The librettist is better known as the policeman poet who famously wrote the words of the *The Blue Danube*, set by Johann Strauss in 1867 for the Vienna Male Voice Choir. The local colour of the story is conveyed by the Spanish flavour of the introduction to the overture. This is interrupted by a brief lyrical cello solo, before moving into an ominous march. An inevitable Viennese waltz is unfolded before the return to the Spanish colour.

15. Fatinitza

Operette in drei Aufzüge. Librettists: Friedrich Zell (Camillo Walzel) and Richard Genée. First performance: Carltheater, 5 January 1876.

The 1870s were dominated by Johann Strauss II at the Theater an der Wien, where with Friedrich Zell and Richard Genée, he established himself as the leading figure in Viennese operetta. But Suppé responded with real verve, and in 1876 began a counter-attack at the Carltheater, using Strauss's own librettist collaborators. The libretto of *Fatinitza* was in fact only a translation of the original French libretto *La Circassienne* which Eugène Scribe had provided for Auber in 1861. The German adaptation had even been turned down by Strauss before being offered to Suppé. *Fatinitza* became one of the most popular of Suppé's works, and the source of his fortune. The Fatinitza March "Vorwärts mit frischen Muth" (Forwards with good heart) became the best known piece of the work, and was largely instrumental in spreading its fame throughout Europe and America..

The Austrian authors gave the role of the young Russian officer to a woman, underscoring the practices of operetta, but thereby missing some of the edgy ambiguity of the original French conception. The music is interesting, well written, and abounding in ingenious details of instrumentation. It also testifies to a great facility in the arrangement of the voices. The score was published in Hamburg in 1877. The work was performed more than 100 times over the next few years. On its return to France, the work was rearranged and translated back in French by Alfred Delacour and Victor Wilder, and sung by Vols, Paul Ginet, Pradeau, Ed. George, Scipion, Mlles Preziosi, J. Nadaud and Périer.

Friedrich Zell was the pseudonym of Camillo Walzel, who, after a varied career, had worked for 17 years as a captain of the Danube Steamship Company. He became artistic director at the Theater and er Wien from 1884 to 1889, where Richard Genée was conductor from 1868 until 1878. Together they became the most famous literary collaborators of the Viennese operetta, the Austrian equivalent of Offenbach's famous team of Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy in Paris.

16. Der Teufel auf Erden

Fantastische Operette in drei Aufzüge. Librettists: C. Juin and J. Hopp. First performance: Vienna, Theater an der Wien, 5 January 1878.

The music included motifs from Suppé's unperformed operetta *Das Höllenkind*. The vocal score was published (London, 1878).

17. Boccaccio [Giovanni Boccaccio], oder Der Prinz von Palermo

Operette in drei Aufzüge. Librettists: Friedrich Zell (Camillo Walzel) and Richard Genée. First performance: Carltheater, 1 February 1879.

Three years after *Fatiniza*, the Carltheater mounted another great success. The libretto by the redoutable partners Zell and Genée was based on the play *Boccace*, *ou Le Décaméron* (1853) by Bayard, de Leuven, Lhérie and de Beauplan, derived in its turn from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This was perhaps Suppé's most famous work, and was described by the composer as the greatest success of his life. The scenario is a clever conceit woven around the life of the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio—his romantic adventures in 14th-century Florence with his student friends. The title role was created by the brilliant actor and singer, Alexander Girardi.

The Italian setting allows for the inclusion of a tarantella, featured to great advantage in the brilliant overture after a more formal minuet, with fine use of the string quartet, representing the court life of Florence that plays an important role in the story. The whirling dance is introduced by a woodwind passage that suggests the rhythm to come. Suppé's greatest success presents the peculiarity of having been created without its celebrated overture. This was substituted only later on for the brief prelude that initially began the work.

A rather extended and heavy opening section gives way to a succession of spirited ensembles, swaggering solos, colourful choruses, and enchanting love duets. The composer's assertive melodies are full of Italianate inflexion, and his orchestration is bold, and theatrically charged. The best numbers are Boccaccio's first solo "Ich sehe einen jungen Mann dort stehen"; Fiametta's hauntingly beautiful "Hab' ich nur deine Liebe" which becomes a duet with Boccaccio and the theme of their love; and their act 3 love duet "Florenz hat schöne Frauen" (or in its Italian form "Ma bella forentina"). The gusto of the score is captured in the march familiar from the overture, "Der Witz, die Laune", which reappears in act 3, and returns to bring the work to is joyful conclusion. It was intended to repeat the success of the celbrated march from *Fatinitza*, and certainly succeeded in doing so. The score was published in Hamburg and Stockholm in 1880.

18. Donna Juanita

Operetta in drei Aufzüge. Librettists: Friedrich Zell (Camillo Walzel) and Richard Genée. First performance: Vienna, Carltheater, 21 February 1880.

The Zell-Genée-Suppé collaboration bore yet more world-wide success. This time it was another adaptation of *Fatinitza*. The main motif of a young disguised lieutenant mistaken for a real woman was taken over completely, as was the military ambience of the plot. The only major variation was the replacement of the Russian-Turkish conflict by a French-Spanish one. A French cadet, disguised as the lady of the title, and sung by a mezzo en travestie, penetrates the Spanish lines. It failed to win the huge success of Fatinitza, but did have an international career, and was seen in Berlin (Friedrich-Wilhelmstädtisches Theater, October 1880), Paris and Madrid. Its popularity was further maintained by the Juanita March taken from the opera. The score was published in Brussels in 1880.

19. Die Afrikareise

Operette in drei Aufzüge. Librettists: Richard Genée and M. West. First performance: Vienna, Theater an der Wien, 17 March 1883.

The work ran for less than a month despite the presence of Girardi in the cast. The *Titania-Walzer* lacks the delicacy of the fairy queen, but drawn from the work as a suite of memorable tunes represents the enchantment of the operetta genre itself. The score was published in Hamburg (1883). While not in the same league as the other great Suppé successes, the work played profitably in European and American theatres.

20. Des Matrosen Heimkehr

Romantische Oper in zwei Aufzüge. Librettist: Langer. First performance: Hamburg, Stadttheater, 4 May 1885.

Suppé, like Offenbach, never, amidst his great fame as a composer of light and entertaining works, forgot his aspiration to a higher calling. This opera represents such a weighty work. The vocal score was published (Hamburg, 1885).

21. Die Jagd nach dem Glück

Operette in ein Prolog und drei Aufzüge. Librettists: Richard Genée and B. Zappert. First performance: Vienna, Carltheater, 27 October 1888.

Like *Die Afrikareise*, this work did not enjoy the success of the three great operettas of the 1870s, but had a successful run in both Europe and America.

22. Das Modell

Operette in drei Aufzüge. Librettists: Victor Léon and Held. First performance: Posthumously, Vienna, Carltheater, 4 October 1895.

The librettist Léon would later become famous as the co-author of Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe*. This work was unfinished at the time of Suppé's death on 21 May 1895. By then he had written only the overture and a handful of numbers. The score was completed by J. Stern and A. Zamara. The overture begins delicately, with intrusions from the solo bassoon. It builds up excitement, before making way for the rhythms of the Viennese waltz.

FRANZ VON SUPPÉ: Overtures and Preludes

EIN MORGEN, EIN MITTAG, EIN NACHT IN WIEN

Ein Morgen, ein Mittag, ein Abend in Wien.

Un Matin, un Midi, un Soir à Vienne. * Morning, Noon and Evening in Vienna.



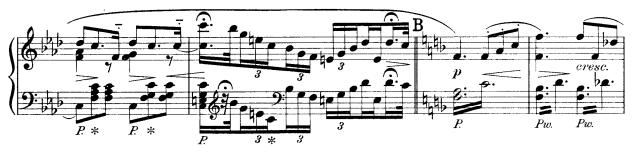


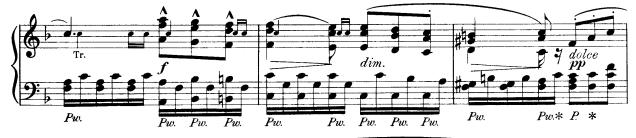














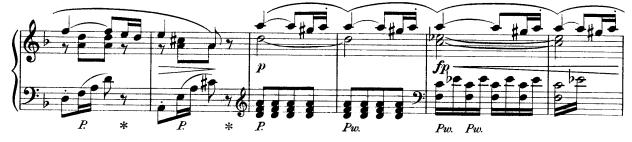






















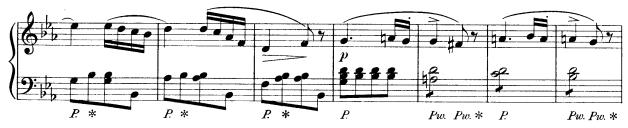






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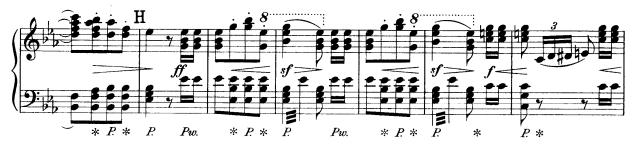
















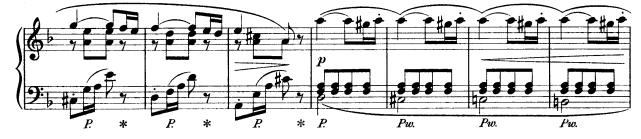










































DES WANDERERS ZIEL





