

Sound Expertise – Episode 5

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Micaela Baranello, Will Robin

Micaela Baranello 00:00

This also posits that a lot of this art is explicitly about the fact that these people are considered sort of like powerless or somehow disempowered from public life, which makes his interpretations of readings of this art is usually as a kind of hothouse I think, is actually the word he uses at one point, of like secluded from life; and operetta tends to be much more engaged with social change and modernity.

[Music] 00:27

Will Robin 00:48

This is Sound Expertise, and I'm your host, Will Robin. So there's this amazing book called *_Fin de Siècle Vienna_* by the late historian Carl Shorske. I read it in college, and I think I found it totally gripping. Shorske brings brilliant penetrating insights into the music of Arnold Schoenberg and the art of Gustaf Klimt, the architecture, literature, politics and psychology of Vienna right around the year 1900. I fell in love hard with the book and the world it described. It made me want to go to Vienna and, when I visited, I saw the city through Shorske's eyes. Mine is not a unique story, you might have read Shorske in college as well. It's one of those canonic books that never goes out of print and always has something new to say to a new generation of readers. Definitive books like Shorske's, though also present a kind of problem. As much as they reveal, they can also conceal. The strength of Shorske's prose makes his arguments about art and history and culture take on a seemingly definitive status. But scholars know that no account of any era is definitive, and all are open to critique. That's not to say that we're just naysayers, declaring that all your favorite books are secretly bad. But it is to say that one important thing that musicologists do, in seminar rooms and in journal articles, is to take a closer look at canonic ways of thinking and say, what's missing from this? Why is it missing? And how can we fill in the gaps? My guest today, Micaela Baranello, is an assistant professor of musicology at the University of Arkansas. And she spent a long time grappling with really crucial aspects of Viennese cultural life that are totally absent from Shorske's account of this period. Because Vienna wasn't just a city of mystics and avantgardists, of Klimts and Schoenbergs. It was also a city with everyday people who appreciated everyday music, not symphonies and operas necessarily, but the lighter genre of operetta composed not by Gustav Mahler, but by Franz Léhar and Emmerich Kálmán, and a bunch of composers you've probably never heard of; and if we look at the culture of operetta -- as we will in my conversation with Micaela today -- we learn something fundamentally different, but equally fascinating, about fin-de-siècle Vienna.

[Music] 03:18

Will Robin 03:18

So you're writing a book about operetta. How did you get to operetta as something you were wanting to be interested in as musicologist?

Micaela Baranello 03:28

That's a slightly complicated question because operetta is not a repertory that especially in America, we encounter very frequently, just to start by saying exactly what it is.

Will Robin 03:38

Yes, that was going to be my second question, perfect!

Micaela Baranello 03:41

So operetta is kind of the ancestor of what becomes the Broadway musical. They coexisted for a period of time, but operetta originated more in the kind of mid 19th century. And it's not Opera in that it has spoken dialogue in between kind of song numbers. It's a kind of popular, or at least closer to popular culture than opera. And I got to know it when I was studying abroad in Vienna as an undergraduate actually, because a lot of these pieces are still performed there. And I saw some of them at the Volksoper. And I was really interested in them because they were written around the same time as some music I was studying in my program that -- music by composers like Mahler, and Schoenberg, who are much better known names to us today. And I was really curious because this music, the operetta seemed to present a complementary -- different, but in some ways, similar portrait of Vienna during this time, and I was wondering a bit why are we not learning about this at the same time, so that is sort of my mission is to add, to supplement our picture of late 19th and early 20th century Vienna with more of ... with this other repertory that has largely been forgotten in English-speaking scholarship.

Will Robin 04:51

Cool. So I mean, I also know you not just as a musicologist, but as a really great opera critic, and so did you... did you come to operetta already as an opera fan, or did that kind of develop simultaneously?

Micaela Baranello 05:04

I was already an opera fan. And I mean, part of the reason why I chose to go to Vienna to study abroad was that I could go to the ... see like 10 different operas at the Vienna State Opera in like two weeks...

Will Robin 05:16

I did that with Berlin and the Berlin Phil when I was in college, so...

Micaela Baranello 05:18

Yeah, yeah, it's, I mean, it still is the place... I mean, it's sort of quantity over quality for the most part, but I was not really informed about that element of it at the time. And so I was already kind of into opera. But I've also like been a longtime musical fan. And so the element of the ancestor to musical theatre part, like the kind of fun, the comic tone and the dance and that kind of thing really appealed to me very immediately about operetta and that it has a lot of the best parts of both opera and musicals together.

Will Robin 05:48

Cool. Well, so your book's on this... you call the Silver Age of operetta.

Micaela Baranello 05:51

Yes, it's the Silver Age.

Will Robin 05:52

So what is the Silver Age of operetta in Vienna?

Micaela Baranello 05:55

The Silver Age, rather predictably, comes after the Golden Age. So the Golden Age is the 19th century and the Silver Age is the 20th century more or less, the Silver Age starts in 1905. Most ... it's usually located as starting with Franz Léhar "Die lustige Witwe," The Merry Widow, which is still the best known example of repertory during this period. And it's a period when Viennese operetta becomes kind of a global export product. And it becomes very, very popular internationally and the works in the 20th century tend to be kind of more focused on romance and pleasure, in a way that the 19th century is a little more farcical and comic and the 20th century ... critics tend to say it gets very sentimental and kind of soupy, I would say it is lyrical and romantic.

Will Robin 06:42

OK -- so where did it ... what's the kind of origin story of those as periods; like, where did those terms come from? Is it out of like, Viennese print culture?

Micaela Baranello 06:51

So the first kind of histories of operetta written in the 1920s, which is predictably when operetta begins to decline... When the art is in decline, that tends to be when people start historicizing it, and the actual terms "Gold" and "Silver" don't show up till a little bit later ... well Gold shows up first. But historians do draw a pretty clear line between the 19th and 20th century really early on; you can even really see it like, in... even before "Die lustige Witwe" people ... because there's this like kind of wholesale generational shift in composers. People are saying, Well, now Johann Strauss has died, Carl Millöcker, Franz von Suppé are all gone, like this kind of trio of very important composers. And we need a new generation. So it's a pretty easy periodization. Like it's one that I'm actually pretty comfortable with. Usually these divisions seem kind of artificial. But here we had such a sort of shift in composers, and to some extent in compositional style, that people were noticing it really, really early on.

Will Robin 07:49

And in terms of I mean, also, you talk a bit in your book about the way in which modernism has really kind of overshadowed our understanding of the end of this period, that like the Carl Schorske way of looking at Vienna has become, you know, we study Klimt and Schoenberg and Mahler. How does the influence of those composers on how we approach the idea of Vienna in the early 20th century kind of obscure operetta as a topic?

Micaela Baranello 08:16

That's a great question. So I think the most neutral way of saying this at first, is that it's sort of an embarrassment of riches in this period, I taught a seminar in this period, and there's just so much to choose from; like it's just an extraordinarily productive period.

Will Robin 08:30

The art in Vienna, around the turn of the 20th century...`

Micaela Baranello 08:33

Yes, in general, but why we tend to prize this modernist kind of conception. So the Carl Schorske thesis is that ...

Will Robin 08:43

This is the famous book *_Fin de Siècle Vienna_* -- it's a great book. I'm sure that any scholar would have many critiques of it, I find it a very gripping book, but I'm not an expert in the area.

Micaela Baranello 08:52

Well, then what you just said is like exactly what ... why that book still has a lot of sway; it's very beautifully written and a lot of people encounter it as undergraduates, and they sort of honestly like, kind of take it hook line and sinker, in a way that I think is still in American musicology a bit unexamined at times. So the Schorske thesis is that there's this ... that a lot of the culture we associate with this period is the product of a liberal class that is excluded from public life with the rise of the Christian Socialist Party, which happens over the course of the late 19th century. So there are all these people who would otherwise have been somehow engaged in politics, who are now producing this kind of art and also at the same time that this art reflects this kind of conflict between rationality and irrationality, the kind of thing that you associate with... in musicology studies, this usually comes out with discussions of, like, the Brahms - Bruckner debates. And this kind of doesn't give you ... this also posits that a lot of this art is explicitly about the fact that these people are considered sort of like powerless, or somehow disempowered from public life, which makes his interpretations of ... readings of this art as usually as the kind of hothouse, I think, is actually the word he uses, at one point... of like secluded from life. And operetta tends to be much more engaged with kind of social change and modernity in a way that some of the things Schorske looks at... I mean, not all of them, but some of them are... don't really respond to that kind of question. So operetta doesn't really work in his model. So he just kind of ignores it, which ... I think he sort of says that, like, all of this stuff is there, it's just not what I'm writing about, which, fair enough -- we're all writing about some of it and not all of it. But that book has been so influential that people like forget that there's other stuff.

Will Robin 10:48

So Schorske's making the case that like, these incredible visionary artists are like these prophets who kind of retreat from politics to develop this esoteric but incredibly beautiful and amazing artistic and musical language but operetta is not about retreating, it's about kind of like being present with people and responding to what's happening in the world?

Micaela Baranello 11:09

Yeah, that's a good way of putting it and it's more succinct than the way I just phrased it [laughs]

Will Robin 11:14

[laughs] I mean, you're doing the actual work, I'm just reflecting...

Micaela Baranello 11:17

Yeah. No, it's good.

Will Robin 11:19

So you talk about the way in which we need to kind of move beyond Vienna as a kind of temple of art -- I think you use that phrase temple of art.

Micaela Baranello 11:26

Yeah, Schorske does too...

Will Robin 11:27

So, okay, the focus on the high art canon. So like, Why? Why is it important that we get beyond the high art canon in Vienna? Like what do we learn about Vienna that we might not know otherwise, when we start talking about operetta?

Micaela Baranello 11:40

We learn about different people. But we also learn about different kinds of issues. So this is the period when Vienna was changing, and really, very rapidly. It's a kind of late industrializing city. But in the last few decades of the 19th century, and continuing through the early 20th century, there's an enormous increase in population, mostly from other parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And so the city is becoming much more diverse in terms of ethnicity and language, and in some ways ... kinds of ways people work, kind of division of labor. There are more, there's a bit more industry. It's not a super industrialized city, but there are more people who have factory jobs. And operetta is written for ... It's written for a pretty broad audience. But the kind of middle class is your classic operetta audience. But they do speak to some extent to a kind of working-class audience as well, which is generally a different audience than our kind of high art, which is written for a very kind of elite educated liberal class, for the most part.

Will Robin 12:42

Interesting.

Micaela Baranello 12:43

So it tells us about things, like these changes in labor, and changes in kinds of gender roles and things like that.

Will Robin 12:49

Can you tell me a little bit about some of the like, maybe one or two of the composers who are most active that you're looking at? What kind of work they were doing, like how did it reach the stage?

Micaela Baranello 13:01

So I'll talk about two composers I'm looking at the first is Franz Léhar, who's probably the best known name because his *The Merry Widow* is still performed a whole lot.

Will Robin 13:12

Is he Hitler's famous composer or no?

Micaela Baranello 13:16

Yes, that's him. So he's very, very popular in Vienna around the time Hitler was living in Vienna. This is covered in a lot of detail in Brigitta Hamann's book, *Hitler's Vienna*, which is a great book, I highly recommend it as a study of the kind of working class in Vienna around like 1910-1912, a really great historical study. And so Léhar is... his ethnicity is a kind of complicated issue, which is very typically Austro-Hungarian. The Press always calls him Slovakian, but he more identified as Hungarian. The Hungarians always call him Hungarian. It's complicated...

Will Robin 13:54

[laughs] very, very Austro-Hungarian.

Micaela Baranello 13:55

Yeah, it's true. It's a great example of how these questions are so complicated, because he moved ... his father was in the military, so he moved around a lot. His name is Slovakian, so that's what people tend to gravitate towards. But he spends most of his life in Vienna, so he's really kind of Viennese to some extent. He also is in the military, and works as a kind of military band master, but eventually leaves and gets a job as a kind of assistant conductor at the Theater an der Wien, the operetta theater, and starts writing operettas himself, eventually. He studies "serious music," as it's called in German, *ernste Musik*, and he has, he always has this kind of dream that he's going to write the great opera kind of like the the, like Mr. Holland's Opus problem, like, I'm going to stop doing all of this kind of drudgery and someday I will produce my masterpiece.

Will Robin 14:41

So he wants to write an opera ultimately.

Micaela Baranello 14:43

Yeah, well, that's the kind of \$10 million question. He wants to write something that will "get him the respect he wants." Whether that's an opera or not, I think is a...

Will Robin 14:53

... like a biopic in the making. Are there Viennese biopics about Léhar?

Micaela Baranello 14:58

Um, I don't know of any -- I think there's some about Johann Strauss but I'm not sure if there are any Léhar ones. ... Yeah, call me, Hollywood or like Viennese film, I don't know...

Will Robin 15:11

Viennese Hollywood, yeah ... Babelsberg?

Micaela Baranello 15:14

Babelsberg's in Berlin... no, Léhar has a Berlin phase later in his career... But yeah, anyway, he does write some operas and he ultimately his like dream piece is this piece he writes ... it's his last work, I guess he considered he had fulfilled his life mission at this point, it's in the 1930s, it's a piece called *Giuditta* that's performed at the Vienna State Opera, and it's like he finally got his his State Opera premiere, and it gets *completely* slammed by the critics; like universally negative reviews saying, Why is this not in the Theater in der Wien, it violates our laws of theatrical gravity. But so Léhar has a rather typical career except to the fact that he's extraordinarily successful, and that he works for a theater as an assistant conductor. He kind of gets set up with some sort of librettist to write him, give him some librettos, and he kind of has a few sort of flops. But he keeps going. And he has of course this huge success with the *Merry Widow* in 1905, which touches off the Silver Age. The second composer I should probably introduce because he's, I think he's probably my favorite in terms of music is Emmerich Kálmán, who is Hungarian. And he has ... he also starts life training as "serious" music composer. He's actually a classmate of Bartók. I found this funny review from a German language Budapest newspaper that is about like the graduating class at that Conservatory, and talks about all the different students' works. And it's like this piece by Emmerich Kálmán is pretty good, like, we think he has a future, but *everybody* forgot about it once they heard the piece by Bartók. And they're not two composers we ever think of as like having any kind of relationship or anything but they did go to school together. And he doesn't really get anywhere as a serious music composer really. He also went to Law School for a while, never became a lawyer, worked as a music critic. But he does eventually get into writing operettas in Budapest, one of them gets performed in Vienna, and eventually he's quite successful and moves to Vienna and achieves success a little bit later than Léhar, but they're working in kind of the same system. And Kálmán I think is interesting because he's a Hungarian working in Vienna. So he really embodies a lot of the kind of Austro-Hungarian kind of tensions between the two, and the kind of tensions of ethnicity also, and that his music is usually identified by critics as being in some way reflecting his Hungarian heritage in ways that are kind of ... he usually picks librettos that puts that in some kind of ... uses that to his advantage.

Will Robin 17:44

Cool. I want to talk a bit about the kind of nationalist multi ethnic component, but ... so you talk a lot about operetta as this kind of pluralist art form that synthesizes art and entertainment. Actually, I like this -- You say, to write operetta is to stand in the middle of things. How does that kind of play out in any given piece by Léhar or Kálmán? Like, run me through how the art/entertainment dichotomy works on stage and in your favorite operetta of what you're studying. Yeah.

Micaela Baranello 18:17

So a lot of elements of operetta, especially in the Silver Age, are like pretty formulaic. I mean, I used to always compare this to an episode of *Law and Order* and there are certain things that you expect to happen at certain times, but nobody watches *Law and Order* anymore. So I'm gonna have to get a new metaphor. My students don't get it anymore.

Will Robin 18:36

You can run the Law and Order metaphor! Well, this podcast is maybe a slightly older clientele, but... who knows.

Micaela Baranello 18:40

Yeah, so there's elements that are kind of a bit like ... the critics would always say, this is an industrialized, standardized product, built on assembly line, because you are ... you do expect some things, like there's always a plot twist in the second act finale, that kind of thing. Where it looks like everything is going to be good and you're almost at the end of the piece but then - horrors, there's some kind of revelation. And suddenly everything is thrown into disarray. That always happens at the end of the second act. But, also these are pieces that are written for like relatively large orchestras. They're larger than we'd ever see in a Broadway musical these days, which is part of what makes these pieces rather difficult to produce, because they're not cheap, they're ... relatively require a pretty good number of resources. The performers... my kind of pet theory, at least and I haven't done a lot of detailed research into this, is that most of them are not particularly great singers, the vocal lines are almost always doubled in the orchestra, and my impression is, from the few recordings we have, is that a lot of it was like more about kind of personality than it was about, like, bel canto kind of beauty, which ... something we could work on for contemporary performance practice. But on this ... at the same time, these composers are really trying to come up with a kind of unique compositional, kind of ... local color elements. And my favorite thing about these pieces is how they use these kinds of tropes sort of self-reflexively, and they kind of reflect on their own status, sometimes even as sort of commodified objects. And some of them are about performers in a way that is kind of familiar from opera -- we have all these kinds of performer characters -- and are about, like, the success of operettas within operettas and things like that. You have a lot of kind of meta stuff. Yeah, especially in the 1920s, when you're getting to kind of late style stuff. But you also have composers like Les Harte, Lehár, who's like, I want to write a real opera. So he writes an operetta that has like a section that imitates like Brünnhilde on a rock and like act two of Walküre. So they're like these kinds of weird allusions to things that you don't expect to see in operetta, but it reminds you of the fact that this is an art form that really merges lots and lots of different kinds of cultural currents.

Will Robin 20:57

Right. So what are the kind of political implications for that kind of synthesis? You write about operetta being multinational and multi ethnic. How did that ... what did the multinational and multi ethnic mix look like in Vienna around, kind of, World War I when you're looking at these works?

Micaela Baranello 21:15

There's an argument by an Austrian historian named Moritz Csáky that this kind of multinational, kind of compromise that we see in operetta ... because operettas almost always establish some kind of binary or sort of dichotomy or opposite poles between two different things, and always tries to come up with a compromise between those two things by the end; so it's ... this tension is resolved. So Csáky argues that this is basically reflecting the status of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, which is the last standing kind of multinational empire in Europe. So it's trying to say that we don't, that we can have one state that unites Czechs and Hungarians and Slovaks, and well, Germans, which is what they would say they wouldn't really use the term Austrian all that often yet. That's a tense issue. And all these different nationalities can live under this one state because they can somehow express their own

nationality within this kind of larger umbrella of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And that kind of conciliatory kind of compromise spirit is an element in operetta. And we do have these kinds of immigration assimilation narratives that I find really interesting that ... where characters, like, come to Vienna and, like, have to sort of negotiate their identities in the big city and things like that.

Will Robin 22:37

Do you see in the response, the press response to various operettas a clear engagement with ... are the Viennese public seeing things on stage that show them some... tell them or show them something about being within this multi ethnic multinational Empire?

Micaela Baranello 22:53

Yes, absolutely. They talk about things... they identify things nationally, very, very frequently, and one thing I really should mention... I've mentioned earlier is that this was a large... composers were ... and librettist were overwhelmingly Jewish. This is ... whether it counts as a Jewish art form, I think is something ... it's a complicated question because it doesn't often engage with it kind of directly, in that these ... there are not very many Jewish characters in these operettas and Franz Léhar is like kind of our most prominent non-Jewish composer, but like, almost everybody else was Jewish, which is also an element of this kind of compromise and assimilation, because this is a time period when assimilation is very much valued in Vienna's Jewish community, and the element of ... there's an idea that you can be both Jewish and a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the same time, like the state is considered a pretty friendly place for Jewish people, and Jewish artists; and the operetta industry is friendly to Jewish artists in a way that, like say, the Staatsoper, famously to Mahler is *not*, which is one of the reasons you have so many Jewish composers working in operetta.

Will Robin 24:01

So high art is less friendly to Jewish composers in this period?

Micaela Baranello 24:05

Um, I wouldn't want to generalize but in some ways Yes, yes. And so we can see in operetta this ... also this kind of assimilation based on class and religion; but also people want ... people are a little wary about things that might portray negative stereotypes. This is something the censor is always very strict about; you can't, like, make fun of any nationality...

Will Robin 24:30

Tell me about the censor, what's going on - so what ... how does that all work?

Micaela Baranello 24:32

So the censor is a really interesting topic, because for one thing we have an archive, it's in Sankt Pölten, which is this little town about a 40 minute train ride outside of Vienna. Why it's not in Vienna itself, is... I'm not sure, it's kind of annoying. But we have this archive of all the scripts that were submitted to the police censor, we can see what the censor looked ... what the censor did before they approved the script. So they went through it and with a red pencil marked anything they thought was problematic and then they wrote a report about the piece, and sometimes they're kind of drama critics,

like they say whether they think it's gonna be a hit or not. But they also say like what is objectionable? And most people know what the censor thought was OK, what...

Will Robin 25:12

So they worked for the government?

Micaela Baranello 25:14

Yes, technically it's like the police department, yeah, they do work officially for the Empire, and most people knew what they could do, so you don't find a lot of censor... like people don't try things they know aren't gonna get through, for the most part, and censorship had been ... had been tinkered with, but had been more or less enforced in a pretty similar way since Metternich in Vienna, so it had been a long time. And ... but the the number one thing the censor objects to is people talking about national groups in a way that might be disparaging, because I think that could cause public unrest and they don't want anything that can cause public unrest.

Will Robin 25:56

The government is protecting some kind of idea of tolerance or coexistence, in some fashion.

Micaela Baranello 26:03

Yeah, I mean, that's a positive way to spin it. There is no freedom of speech is another way of putting it. They mostly just don't want people rioting; like this is the other ... The Austro-Hungarian state is a police state. And they really want kind of the appearance of public peace. And they're really, really scared of some kind of national... that their Empire's going to come unglued. And this is a way of trying to not let something spark something that could become much larger.

Will Robin 26:29

And so how does the ungluing and World War One ... How is that reflected in opera? Sorry, operetta.

Micaela Baranello 26:37

Yeah, so operetta in the 1920s. It very much has the shadow of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So the 1920s are a period in Vienna that ... especially the Viennese theatre industry, is generally pretty terrible. Like there's all these economic crises in Vienna in the 1920s. They start much earlier than things do in the US, before the stock market crash. Actually, there's... I think there's been a study relatively recently, that kind of posited that the crises in Vienna were kind of a bit of a foreshadowing of what would later engulf the whole world in a financial crisis. But it's a really bad time if you're trying to make money in theater and Vienna. And a lot of the pieces people find will surely sell is something that sort of nostalgic, and operetta becomes really intensely nostalgic in the 1920s. So you still see these multinational themes, only they're very kind of looking back, like those were the good old days, kind of thing. And they're revivals of older works. And there is an idea that ... I think the decline of the Empire and the decline of operetta are very, very closely linked for a number of reasons.

Will Robin 27:51

Do you feel like that kind of, I guess, cosmopolitan idea of operetta in our kind of current climate of resurgent nationalism is, you know ... can ... does operetta tell us anything about Europe as a political project today, do you feel like your book has like resonances with 2020?

Micaela Baranello 28:11

I would like to be able to say yes to that. But I think as operetta is currently practiced in Austria, it more resembles what is happening in the 1920s, in terms of looking back to a imagined past; and that... It's a nostalgic because in ... operetta goes through this whole nostalgic period that's been studied in detail by Kevin Clark, in the 1950s, and through kind of the 1970s, and there are all these TV movies made specifically ... more in Germany than Austria; there are these TV movies of operettas and now it's considered mostly an art scene by older people who grew up watching these productions on TV. So it tends to be really pretty old fashioned in theatrical terms. And it's seen as music that kind of has these sort of comforting qualities.

Will Robin 29:09

Zooming out a bit, to kind of think more methodologically. How did you go about... I mean, it seems like this is an incredibly well documented period. How did you go about researching this book? What are the kinds of sources that you find yourself dealing with most? It seems like you spent a lot of time in libraries in Vienna.

Micaela Baranello 29:27

Well, now you don't really need to go to Vienna for a lot of this stuff. So there's this project by the Austrian national library called austrian newspapers online. It's extremely helpful and it was smaller when I started my dissertation, they've expanded it quite a bit like quite regularly. And occasionally, something would come online and I'm like, I spent the last three months in the basement of the Austrian National Library looking at microfilms of this and now it's full text on the Austrian national website ... library's website. I had a Fulbright and spent a year in Vienna, which I guess was fun. So even if... but I mean, it's convenient for me now that I have teaching all the time and I can't go to Vienna all the time.

Will Robin 30:05

You can double check all your spelling errors.

Micaela Baranello 30:06

Yeah, it's not very searchable because ... I mean, the OCR is getting a bit better... at first it wasn't searchable at all. Because it's all printed in Fraktur, the old kind of Gothic script style, and OCR of that is really tough. But it's getting better. And it's more searchable now, but there were incredible numbers of newspapers in Vienna at this time, like there were so much newspaper printing going on. And so there's an enormous amount written about operetta. There's also quite a bit in kind of magazines and journals. There are two really helpful collections of articles about operetta put together by this German theater scholar Marion Linhardt. I will say the hardest thing about studying operetta is the librettos, because they were... they're really hard to get, because they were printed in very small quantities. The scores they sold, because you can then play the music at home or perform it in some fashion, but they controlled the circulation of libretto, so the spoken dialogue, because you could put on a bootleg production, theoretically if you got that; and they want to control the circulation of the pieces, like they're

always trying to find people who are producing these things who aren't paying the royalties, "they" being the publishers, which are usually, in many cases of the same thing as the theater; like the Theater an der Wien is like a vertically integrated operetta industry, like they also have a publisher, and they publish most of the pieces they produce, and not all of them. And they're always... I've gone to their archive of papers. And they're always trying to chase down pirate productions. But by printing ... by only making the libretto available as a rental, they cut down on that. And it means that there are very few copies printed and it's super hard to find them. So that is the biggest challenge, actually, in terms of sources is that they exist -- they're just in very small numbers.

Will Robin 31:48

Interesting. And you are now working on an opera. Sorry, a second project about space opera?

Micaela Baranello 31:56

Oh, well, yeah, that's a conference paper. So I'm very interested in kind of opera production practices, this is another research area of mine that doesn't entirely connect. And I'm interested particularly in Regietheater in Germany, and

Will Robin 32:09

What is Regietheater, for those who might not know?

Micaela Baranello 32:11

So also one real question is how you pronounce it, [laughs] because the word is half French and half German and no one can really agree. So that's the pronunciation I'm using, but you may disagree, so don't judge me.

Will Robin 32:23

What's the other pronunciation?

Micaela Baranello 32:24

"Regietheater" [hard G - German pronunciation]

Will Robin 32:25

Okay, that makes sense. Okay.

Micaela Baranello 32:26

Yeah. So the question is kind of more or less about the G, to some extent the R.... Yeah, kind of like that. And so it translates most literally as director's theater, it's the kind of theater ... it emerged in kind of the later half ... the second half of the 20th century in Germany as being these kinds of radically reimagined versions of classic works, first plays now operas. And I think that is in some ways a consequence of our relatively small repertoire of operatic works, and that we are looking for new ways of seeing things, as opposed to new scores to a large extent. But I'm very interested in the the way we see these classic works into what ... how we sort of envision their classic status, or how ... what about them bothers us and we are changing things. So with the space opera project, I'm particularly interested in operas that deal with kind of exotic ... exoticism or people that we would consider sort of

"others." And these are works that people are often very wary of staging now, for very understandable reasons, in that they tend to depict non-European people in racist or stereotyped -- at best -- ways.

Will Robin 32:30

It's like [hard G] GIF, [soft G] GIF...

Micaela Baranello 32:58

Like what would be an example of that? The one I'm really looking at is "L'Africaine," the African, by Meyerbeer. You might also consider things like Aida, or Monostatos in the Magic Flute. And there are lots and lots and lots of examples. Even Carmen is one that I think is still like kind of unexamined to a large extent as to what we consider about Carmen's ethnicity.

Will Robin 33:58

So operas that traditionally trade on some kind of stereotype of non-European ethnicity,

Micaela Baranello 34:03

Exactly. So I'm interested in productions that in some way try to "rectify" that. And the way that I'm looking in this paper are productions that take the kind of stereotypical depiction of others and make them into space aliens.

Will Robin 34:18

[laughs]

Micaela Baranello 34:19

It's surprisingly common, you might think that sounds completely wacky, but I have a list...

Will Robin 34:22

I mean, you go to the opera a lot, right? And so you just see...

Micaela Baranello 34:24

I haven't seen all of these ... so it's really hard to find this, like, it's not very Googleable or like otherwise. researchable, like, I have gotten a lot of help from people on social media.

Will Robin 34:36

So Aliens... like, what, give me a general... like what is an opera that has been recast with an alien in it.

Micaela Baranello 34:43

So the one I'm looking at in detail is Meyerbeer's L'Africaine. It's a production from the Oper Frankfurt from like two years ago, and it's about... It's an opera about Vasco de Gama, the explorer, and he's like going out to find ... "discover," depending on the version either India or Africa, it's kind of fascinating that this is actually debatable...

Will Robin 35:04

[laughs] Two very similar places! Yeah,

Micaela Baranello 35:09

Yeah. And whether it's actually Vasco da Gama or just like, Joe the Explorer, is also a question.

Will Robin 35:15

OK -- Oh, I see, translation-wise...

Micaela Baranello 35:16

Yeah, well, there are different versions of the work, is the thing, there are two different versions. But either way that he's finding some "other" that is very, very generalized and yet still problematic. And in this production I saw, that I'm writing about, is ... it borrows its imagery from everyone's favorite James Cameron movie that isn't Titanic. Or like, I guess the other ones? Yes, Avatar!

Will Robin 35:39

So literally, there's just like a blue person.

Micaela Baranello 35:42

Yes, he finds a lot of blue people. Not just one blue person, lots of people, the whole chorus of people.

Will Robin 35:48

So this is like a way to get around the race problem, but it doesn't really get around the race problem?

Micaela Baranello 35:55

Yeah, that's what I'm getting to... yes, it's Oper Frankfurt. Directed by Tobias Kratzer. And it's ... so it tries to get around it. And the question is, does this actually really get around it? And I would argue No, like every single bit of scholarship about Avatar is about how it's actually like really colonial,

Will Robin 36:16

Yeah, Avatar is super racist! Like textbook, like Ferngully...

Micaela Baranello 36:20

Yeah, it's like you made it a little less literal, but it's still a narrative that's just some extent about... well, to most extents about, like, kind of Western domination of other people. But like, my ultimate argument about this opera is that it actually ends up being quite nuanced and ambivalent, but that's because the original text is nuanced and ambivalent, it's not because the production does it. With some text that's a bit more ... less kind of nuanced about this, you're not really gonna get out of anything, I don't think. But I think this impulse that we won't have to correct this text and we're trying to kind of recapture this sense of wonder is interesting, even if it actually doesn't achieve what it sort of claims to do.

Will Robin 37:01

Do you ... Is this gonna be potentially part of a larger project about contemporary opera staging?

Micaela Baranello 37:06

Yeah, well, I'm not sure if this particular part is gonna be a part of it, but I am planning a study about contemporary opera staging is my next big thing. I have some other kinds of Article length things that I think are going to be part of it. I'm really interested in how recent productions at the Bayreuth festival, consider ... consider German history, particularly kind of Bayreuth's role in German history, which is something that's like a very pronounced trend in Bayreuth. And the political implications of that I think are super interesting, and they are very much onstage. So that is something I'm looking at. I'm interested in kind of fairytale operas and how we often set them as being very, very dark and violent, even though we think of them as being these sort of magical stories. I've looked at some productions of Rusalka for this by Dvorak. So I'm kind of brainstorming for this. I need to finish my operetta book first though,

Will Robin 37:06

Yeah. Cool. Well, thank you so much. This was awesome!

[None] 38:04

[music]

Will Robin 38:10

I'm very grateful to Micaela Baranello for that rich conversation, you might know Michaela from the twittersphere and way back when, the blogosphere. She tweets @ZerbinettasBlog and you can read some of her fantastic writing at likelyimpossibilities.com . For notes and links related to today's episode, please visit soundexpertise.org . Over on Twitter, I'm @SeatedOvation and over at SoundCloud, my producer D Edward Davis is warmsilence. Next week I'll be speaking to Jesse Rodin, a scholar of music of the Renaissance. Thanks for tuning in!