

1970 The Count of Luxembourg

Talented cast score a hit with 'The Count'

An eminent authority has expressed the view in a biography of Franz Lehar that this composer's work can only be truly effective with interpreters of the right calibre. The East Surrey Operatic Society took up this challenge at the Market Hall, Redhill, last week when their production of "The Count of Luxembourg" was timed to coincide with the centenary of Lehar's birth.

To their credit they succeeded magnificently in confirming the forecast that there would be a triumphant revival of Lehar's music in the theatre. Even with such a talented cast one felt that this highly enjoyable production achieved its success largely through its obvious sympathy and close understanding of each others aims between the producer Elsie Rendell, the musical director Christopher Slater and the choreographer, Shirley Knight.

This is a formidable team. The cast and orchestra were superbly controlled throughout, not an easy task in a hall without an orchestra pit, and the choreography which plays such a big part in "The Count" was obviously the work of one who clearly understands that the beauty of line and movement is enhanced when the dancers are working well within their capabilities.

For an amateur to play the part of an operatic Prima Donna is to invite criticism, so it was an achievement for Susan Rowlinson, in her first leading role, to win the admiration of the audience with such skill. Certainly her acting seemed to inspire Andrew Glass in the role of her lover The Count, so that he brought a moving quality of sincerity both to the duets and to his solo number "Tiny glove". Even surrounded by a crowd his experience has clearly given him the ability to command attention on the stage.

The soubrette role of Juliette was probably the finest opportunity for years for Joyce Gascoyne-Pees to exploit the familiar lilting quality of her voice, and she displayed a sense of fun and infectious enjoyment that quickly communicated itself to the audience. She was certainly well cast to play opposite Toni Williams-Pugh as Brizzard, who sang strongly, moved well and proved a most amusing foil to The Count.

Perhaps the most telling effect of Douglas Chantler's portrayal of the highly amusing Grand Duke Basil was the fact that it was difficult when he commanded the stage to remember that this was an amateur performance, so "professional" was his approach to comedy and so well controlled was his voice. This "professional" approach was noticeable, too, in a small vignette part that made a real impact in the last act. While Joan Passingham may lack the strength of singing voice for the role of the Russian Princess Kokozov she amply compensated for in a well studied interpretation that gave an added "kick" to the finale. Frederick Harrison as Saville proved to be that rare phenomenon, an agile bass singer, who tackled with equal expertise his songs and

a vigorous can-can with the dancers.

In fact, without a strong cast of dancers “The Count of Luxembourg” would fail, but here the East Surrey Operatic Society are well served. They earned well-deserved applause in the climax of the ballet in the second act and worked so smoothly throughout that it was difficult to single anyone out for special praise from the team of Corinne Pratt, Elizabeth Cook, Diane Kevan, Ann Spurrey, Angela Hurst and Fiona May.

Roger Misson and Peter Adams as the twin Cossack officers, Philip Davies as the Registrar of Marriages, Anthony Terrible as Marchand, Malcolm Howe, Trevor Muller, Dennis Pratt and Michael Morgan as the cute page boy efficiently completed the list of principals.

The singing of the chorus was, as one now expects from this society, full and well balanced so that one could appreciate the rich scoring of Lehar’s music, a richness that is son lacking in modern operettas. Moving 50 people on such a small stage is in itself an achievement for the producer but knowing the severe limitations of space in the “wings” of the market Hall, comment would not be complete without adding high praise for the work of Stage Tech Inc. who so efficiently undertook complete state management and lighting.