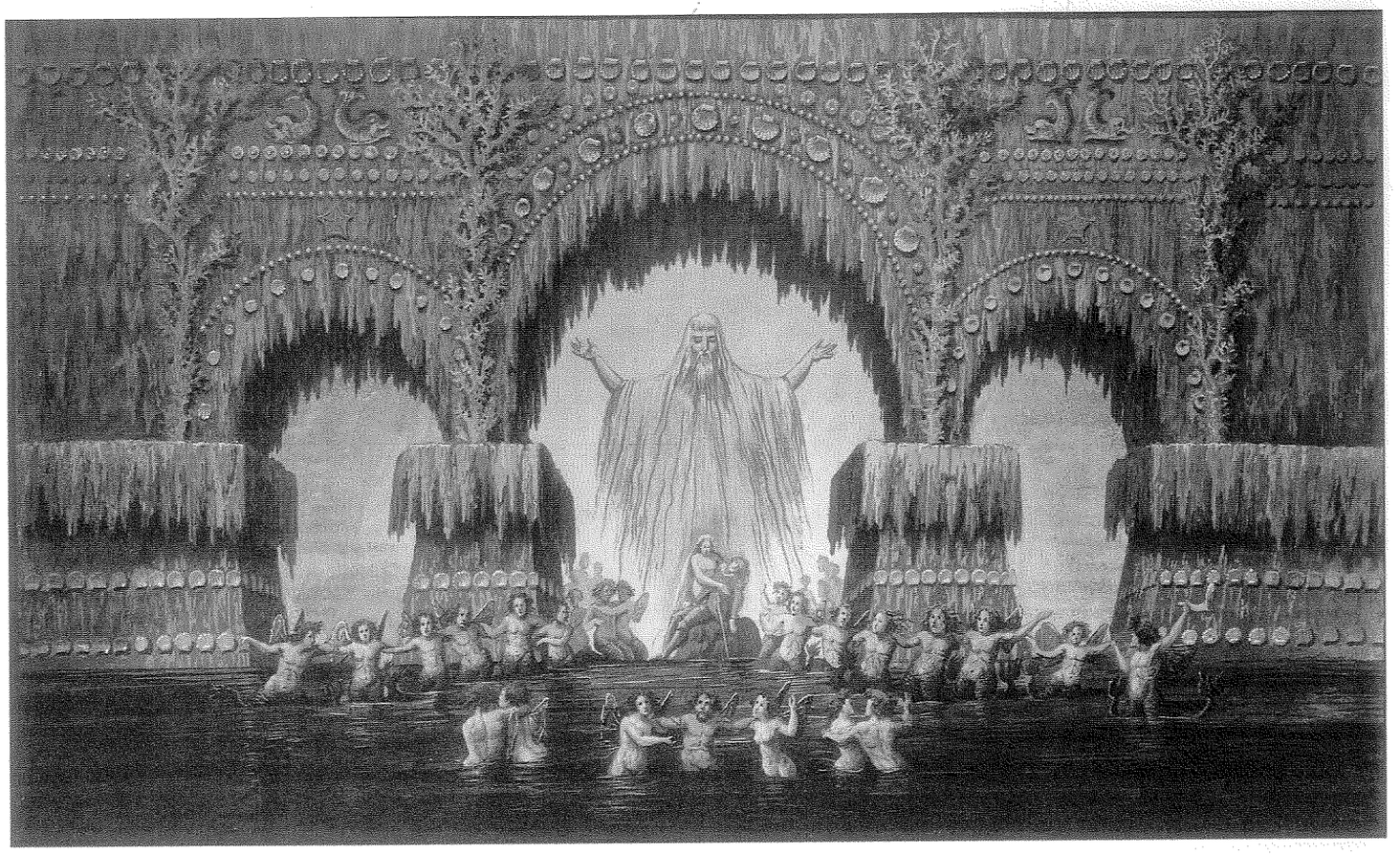


Fig.10 Karl Friedrich Schinkel, design for E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Undine*,
final scene of Act I of the original production at the Königliche Schauspielhaus, Berlin, first performed 3 August 1816,
gouache, 33.2 × 56.4 cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 22c.173

JOHN WARRACK

FAIRY MUSIC

ON 11 January 1798, the audience in Vienna's Leopoldstadt Theatre saw a new piece about a Danube water sprite entitled *Das Donauweibchen*. The author was the theatre's director, Karl Friedrich Hensler; the music was by Ferdinand Kauer, a busy composer who was to turn out some 200 works for Vienna stages in melodious, untroubling succession. Five weeks later, a second part was performed; and in 1803 popular demand led to a sequel, *Die Nymphe der Donau*. By then, the piece had begun to spawn imitations, rewritings, further sequels, translations, parodies, all the apparatus of instant theatrical success. It was seized upon by the humblest stages looking for a quick financial return, it scaled the heights of Goethe's Weimar theatre (as *Die Saalnixe*), it crossed Europe in all directions and rooted itself in St Petersburg in a new setting on the banks of the Dnieper, with a new text and new music in yet more different versions and sequels. The piece inspired a dramatic poem by Pushkin, and thence Alexander Sergeyerich Dargomyzhsky's opera *Rusalka* (1856), helping to keep alive a myth that was still potent by the time of Dvořák's *Rusalka* of 1901.

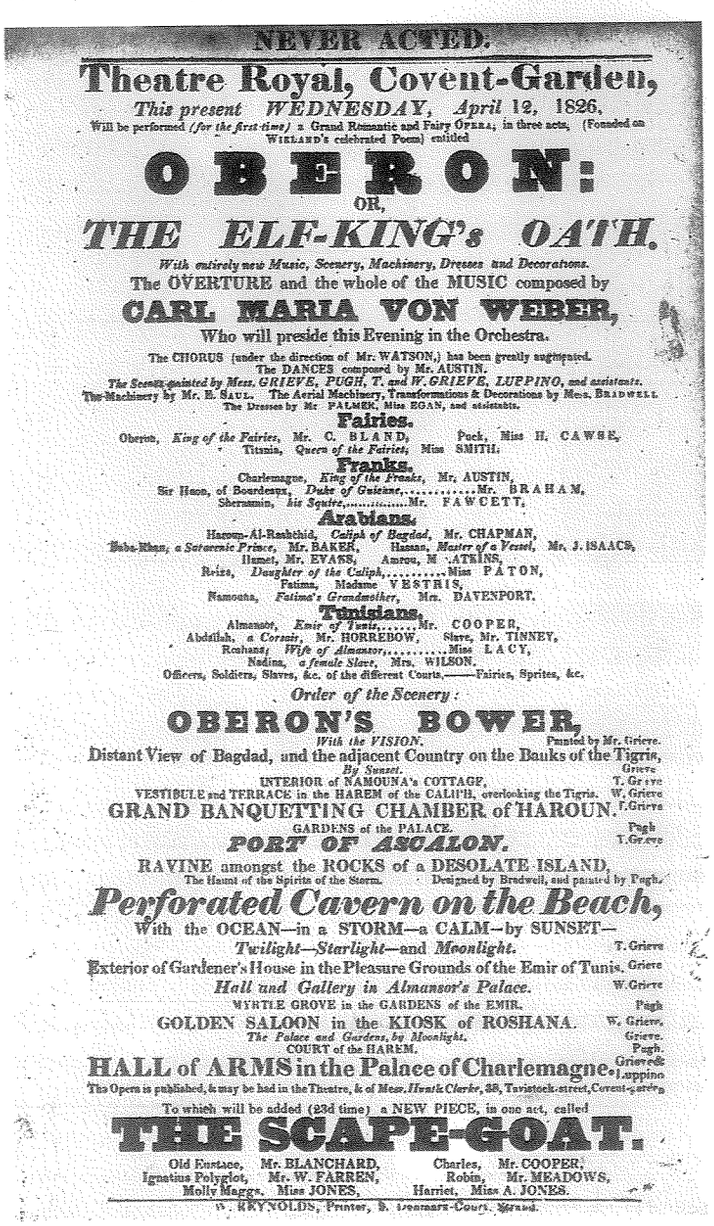
Yet the original Singspiel, no more than a well crafted musical tale, scarcely seems to justify all this activity. Albrecht, with the comic Viennese Käsperle in attendance, is intercepted on his way to his wedding to Bertha by the Danube nixie Hulda, upon whom he once fathered a daughter, Lilli. Mother and daughter try to regain his love, with all manner of entertaining disguises and apparitions and with farcical humiliations for Käsperle. But Albrecht goes through with the marriage, even rejecting Hulda's plea for just three nights of love a year. She has the last word, using her magic to carry him off. A final tableau shows him at her feet in her watery realm.

Nowhere was the music responsible for this European popularity. Kauer was hardly more than a workmanlike composer who could turn out an effective song; in two of the Russian versions, Stepan Davydov and Catterino Cavos were skilled enough to add some pieces giving the Danube nixie touches of local colour; and this is worked more thoroughly in Davydov's recomposition *Lesta, ili Dneprovskaya Rusalka* (1805), in which a new libretto establishes her firmly on the Russian territory where she had always had a home in legend. Prince Vidostan has abandoned Lesta for Princess Miloslava; tiring of his bride, he seeks Lesta again, and though they reaffirm their love, she is obliged to renounce him. Whether seductive southern Slav *rusalka* or vengeful northern Slav *rusalka*, beguiling *Donauweibchen* or betrayed Undine, the water sprite had an appeal across national styles and transcended musical and theatrical conventions. The wild, instinctive creature and the rational, calculating man are drawn irresistibly together, yet are unable to find a true marriage. Each is liable to forfeit life and soul in the attempt. The tale spoke deep: Nature and Reason, too far sundered in the Enlightenment, are, post-Rousseau, vainly seeking a new union.

This emergent Romantic idea found its most resonant voice in Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine* (1811). His *Novelle* was quickly seized upon by E.T.A.Hoffmann, who had staged Kauer's Singspiel at his Bamberg theatre and now persuaded Fouqué to act as librettist for his own opera (1816; fig.10). As Hoffmann well knew, Fouqué's tale is one that accords with the view of the Romantics' prized philosopher Schelling and his idea of Nature and Mind striving to become one and so to restore the lost harmony of the world. Undine is now a water spirit who must find union with a mortal if she is to acquire a soul. She is a fisher

couple's foster daughter, replacing their supposedly drowned child, and for her sake Huldbrand abandons Berthalda. The old water spirit Kühleborn warns her of man's perfidy and of the danger of her destruction if she is betrayed. Huldbrand becomes uneasy at Undine's spirit nature, and abandons her in turn when she reveals that Berthalda is the missing orphan. At the wedding feast of Huldbrand and Berthalda, a well is opened and Undine appears. She gives Huldbrand her kiss of death, and they are united in what is described as a *Liebestod*.

Fig.11 Playbill for the first performance of Carl Maria von Weber's *Oberon*, Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London, 12 April 1826



NEVER ACTED.

Theatre Royal, Covent-Garden,

This present WEDNESDAY, *April* 12, 1826,

Will be performed *(for the first time)* a Grand Romantic and Fairy OPERA, in three acts, (Founded on WIELAND's celebrated Poem) entitled

OBERON:

OR,

THE ELF-KING's OATH.

With entirely new Music, Scenery, Machinery, Dresses and Decorations.

The OVERTURE and the whole of the MUSIC composed by

CARL MARIA VON WEBER,

Who will preside this Evening in the Orchestra.

The CHORUS (under the direction of Mr. WATSON,) has been greatly augmented.
The DANCES composed by Mr. AUSTIN.
The Scenes painted by Mess. GRIEVE, PUGH, T. and W. GRIEVE, LUPPINO, and assistants.
The Machinery by Mr. E. SAUL. The Aerial Machinery, Transformations & Decorations by Mess. BRADWELL
The Dresses by Mr PALMER, Miss EGAN, and assistants.

Fairies.

Oberon, *King of the Fairies*, Mr. C. BLAND, Puck, Miss H. CAWSE,
Titania, *Queen of the Fairies*, Miss SMITH.

Franks.

Charlemagne, *King of the Franks*, Mr. AUSTIN,
Sir Huon, of Bordeaux, *Duke of Guienne*,.....Mr. BRAHAM,
Sherasmin, *his Squire*,.....Mr. FAWCETT,

Arabians.

Haroun-Al-Rashchid, *Caliph of Bagdad*, Mr. CHAPMAN,
Babe-Khan, *a Saracenic Prince*, Mr. BAKER, Hassan, *Master of a Vessel*, Mr. J. ISAACS,
Hamet, Mr. EVANS, Amrou, Mr. ATKINS,
Roiza, *Daughter of the Caliph*,.....Miss PATON,
Fatima, Madame VESTRIS,
Namouna, *Fatima's Grandmother*, Mrs. DAVENPORT.

Tunisians.

Almanzor, *Emir of Tunis*,.....Mr. COOPER,
Abdallah, *a Corsair*, Mr. HORREBOW, Slave, Mr. TINNEY,
Roshana, *Wife of Almanzor*,.....Miss LACY,
Nadina, *a female Slave*, Mrs. WILSON.
Officers, Soldiers, Slaves, &c. of the different Courts.——Fairies, Sprites, &c.

Order of the Scenery:

OBERON'S BOWER, *With the VISION.* Painted by Mr. Grieve.

Distant View of Bagdad, and the adjacent Country on the Banks of the Tigris, *By Sunset.* Grieve
INTERIOR of NAMOUNA's COTTAGE, T. Grieve
VESTIBULE and TERRACE in the HAREM of the CALIPH, overlooking the Tigris. W. Grieve
GRAND BANQUETTING CHAMBER of HAROUN. T. Grieve
GARDENS of the PALACE. Pugh
PORT OF ASCALON. T. Grieve

RAVINE amongst the ROCKS of a DESOLATE ISLAND, The Haunt of the Spirits of the Storm. Designed by Bradwell, and painted by Pugh.

Perforated Cavern on the Beach,

With the OCEAN—in a STORM—a CALM—by SUNSET—
*Twilight—Starlight—*and *Moonlight.* T. Grieve
Exterior of Gardener's House in the Pleasure Grounds of the Emir of Tunis. Grieve
Hall and Gallery in Almanzor's Palace. W. Grieve
MYRTLE GROVE in the GARDENS of the EMIR. Pugh
GOLDEN SALOON in the KIOSK of ROSHANA. W. Grieve,
The Palace and Gardens, by Moonlight. Grieve.
COURT of the HAREM. Pugh.
HALL of ARMS in the Palace of Charlemagne. Grieve & Luppino

This Opera is published, & may be had in the Theatre, & of Mess. *Hunt & Clarke*, 33, Tavistock-street, Covent-garden.

To which will be added (23d time) a NEW PIECE, in one act, called

THE SCAPE-GOAT.

Old Eustace, Mr. BLANCHARD, Charles, Mr. COOPER,
Ignatius Polyglot, Mr. W. FARREN, Robin, Mr. MEADOWS,
Molly Maggs, Miss JONES, Harriet, Miss A. JONES.

W. REYNOLDS, Printer, 9, Leonard-Court, Strand.

With his belief in music as a mysterious realm of experience – as he describes in his stories *Don Juan* and *Ritter Gluck* – Hoffmann sought through the medium of opera to confer a new depth on this tale of the natural and the supernatural seeking one another. Even if his musical gifts did not match his literary genius, he produced a strange and affecting work, one in which he strove for a new artistic unity. His achievement was immediately acknowledged by Carl Maria von Weber, who, in a long essay after the first performance, praised Hoffmann's realisation of 'the German ideal, namely a self-sufficient work of art in which every feature and every contribution by the related arts are moulded together in a certain way, and dissolve to form a new world'.

No composer was better placed than Weber himself to explore worlds in which the human and the supernatural touched. Like most of his contemporaries, he was fascinated by such tales, and with the Wolf's Glen scene in *Der Freischütz* (1821) he gave musical voice to the diabolical horror that may lurk beneath a sunny village normality; but he also took pleasure in a lighter fairy world. In Weimar, he made friends with Christoph Martin Wieland, whose Shakespeare translations of the 1760s had come as a revelation to Germany. The only verse translation among these was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play which so haunted Wieland's imagination that he re-entered its world in the last major work of his long life, *Oberon* (1780). Here he combined Shakespeare's fairy realm with an old *chanson de geste* to make a tale in which a pair of lovers must prove their fidelity under severe trials before the fairy king and queen can be reconciled. It was quickly seized upon for several operas, most successfully by Paul Wranitzky, whose *Oberon* (1789) held the stage until Weber's own *Oberon* (1826; fig.11).

Reluctantly composed as he was dying, to a Covent Garden commission he hoped would provide for his family, Weber's *Oberon* is a sorry mess. English 'opera' of the day, as interpreted for him by his librettist James Robinson Planché, permitted little else. Yet in *Oberon* Weber created some of the most ravishing fairy music ever composed. Part of his genius as a composer was to make the timbre of instruments essential to the musical invention, rather than a colouring of it. As the curtain rises on the fairies guarding the sleeping Oberon, he uses his orchestra primarily as delicate texture. He pits muted strings against a solo viola and the magic horn of the troubled fairy king, around

whose head flutes and clarinets flutter while a bee hums in the violins. He has the full orchestra as a resource, but he chooses a few instruments at a time from it, as if this were chamber music. When Puck summons his spirits to whip up a magic storm, they cluster about him in a cloud of instruments of which the swiftly circling figures and transparent scoring create the sense of a myriad creatures hovering; the storm passed, mermaids rock in gently lapping waves of horn and strings.

The score of *Oberon* reached Germany a few months later, and may have reached the ears of the boy genius who five years earlier had marvelled at *Der Freischütz*, Felix Mendelssohn. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was his family's favourite play, translated in part by his philosopher grandfather Moses Mendelssohn, and often staged by them domestically with Felix and his sister Fanny taking turns in different roles. 'We were really brought up on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', Fanny was later to write, and it scarcely needed the arrival in this cultured Berlin household of the new Schlegel and Tieck translation that year for Felix's mind to be set racing. In time found between his university lectures, he drafted the concert overture which distils much of the play's essence: the four mysterious woodwind chords disclosing the magic wood, the dancing, flickering fairy violins, the lyrical figure for the lovers, the heehawing of poor translated Bottom.

The overture seems not to have come easily to him, probably because he could not find a musically satisfying form in which to contain his ideas; at any rate, when seventeen years later he was commissioned to write a full set of incidental music, he allowed the overture's invention to colour much of it. If it is the fairy element which is the most vivid – and the composer of some of the fleetest scherzos in all music was in his own element here – this arises from his understanding of the play. Though he provides for necessary incidents, with the Bergomask and with the most famous of all Wedding Marches, it is the fairies who predominate, Mendelssohn seeing his music as providing the dimension of magic in which the drama lives. So there is no music after the overture until the first act is over, when the banished lovers find themselves in the wood near Athens and, with a Scherzo, Mendelssohn can advance the fairy world to the centre of the drama. It remains a dazzling orchestral *tour de force*, especially for the speeding flute, creating a sense of pace but also a glint of danger that brings us face to face with Puck as the curtain rises on Act II. There is a thread of menace in Titania's call for 'a roundel and a fairy song', answered by the fairies' 'You spotted snakes', as Mendelssohn's darting, sinuous figures depict the creatures exorcised in protection of the Queen's sleep. In the depths of the magic, the lovers, too, sleep, sheltered in the Nocturne whose woodland horns surround them with their lulling melody.

Only Berlioz, who deeply admired Mendelssohn and especially the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, could rival this fairy delicacy, but he instantly regretted his casual remark, dropped when they were out riding together near Rome in 1831, that 'no-one had ever thought of writing a scherzo on Shakespeare's glittering little poem "Queen Mab".... Happily for me he thought no more about it.' He included two settings in his choral symphony *Romeo and Juliet* (1839), the first a dancing little vocal Scherzetto. But, throughout the symphony, it is when his imagination is released in a purely orchestral movement that it burns brightest. His 'Queen Mab' is a dizzying nocturnal Scherzo, swift, unnerving, charged with graphic touches as the fairies' midwife courses through men's dreams, with lovers sighing and serenading, the soldier's bassoon snoring in his nightmare of breaches and ambuscadoes, fantasies suddenly broken off at daybreak.

This was not Berlioz's first encounter with the fairy world. An overture to *The Tempest* was inspired in 1830 by his 'délicieux Ariel', the beautiful and seductive pianist Camille Moke. 'When she frolics upon her piano', he wrote, enraptured, 'it is like an army of fairies dancing on the keys.' The piece found its eventual home in the odd entertainment which he appended to the *Symphonie fantastique* in 1832, *Lélio*. Here it has become a *Fantaisie sur la tempête de Shakespeare*, as a chorus of spirits of the air softly call 'Miranda!' through rippling flutes and clarinets, muted strings and little trills and flourishes from the piano. The orchestration – gentle timbres, airy textures, instruments in their lightest registers deftly alternating as if hovering motionless – set a new standard for fairy music. In fact Berlioz had tried his hand with it once before, for, next only to Shakespeare and Virgil, Goethe claimed his devotion, and his first reading of *Faust* in 1828 had set his mind in a ferment. Without quite knowing their destination, he began composing eight scenes from the poem, the third of them a Concert de Sylphes. Rewritten, they found their ultimate home in *La Damnation de Faust* of 1846. This *légende dramatique*, a concert work appealing

to the listener's dramatic imagination, turns Goethe's ever striving Faust into a doomed Romantic, each of life's consolations stripped from him by Mephistopheles until he is in the Romantic hell of numbness from all sensation, even from that of Marguerite's love. His first vision of her is conjured up as he lies dreaming by the banks of the Elbe. Mephistopheles's soothing melody turns subtly into that of the *Chœur de Gnomes et de Sylphes*, scored in 1846 with even greater delicacy and airiness than before as orchestra and chorus create a luminous haze around the murmur of these alluring creatures of the devil's imagining; and by yet another diabolical twist, the theme turns into a pretty waltz for the sylphs, with flutes, violins and harps, all these enchantments weaving Faust into his dream until, spellbound, he calls her name, and is lost.

Fairy operas continued to tempt composers in all traditions and all manners, from the farcical to the most ambitious. *Kaspar der Fagottist* (1791) was one of the first, and the most enduringly successful, of Wenzel Müller's operas. It finds comedy in the encounter between the fairy world and a plain Viennese citizen, a vein still yielding richly (and still with Müller's music) to Ferdinand Raimund in the 1820s. Wagner's first completed opera, *Die Feen*, written in 1834 but never produced during his lifetime, is rather a heavy-handed attempt at conquering the genre of German Romantic opera with a tale of divided fairy and human worlds (fig.12). He may have known Auber's *Le Lac des fées* (1839), a Parisian Grand Opera in which a student falls in love with a lake fairy: at any rate, he seems to have remembered her companions' undulating melody when he came to compose his own Rhine maidens.

Fig.12 The final tableau of *Die Feen*, Wagner's first completed opera, first performed on 29 June 1888 at the Munich Court Theatre, five years after the composer's death, from the *Illustrierte Zeitung*, Leipzig, 28 December 1889. Recent developments in stage technology ensured that the production was spectacular, using electricity to illuminate stars and flowers.

Undine returned in various guises, for example in one of Lortzing's light operas (1845) and in an operatic project which Tchaikovsky never completed, though he saved some of the music for *Swan Lake* and for Ostrovsky's play *The Snow Maiden*. Dozens of minor figures tried their hand at a genre in which popular interest was assured. In the wake of Weber's *Oberon* there was a flurry of attempts in England, where the fairy operas of Edward Loder, Henry Bishop and many more, especially John Barnett's *The Mountain Sylph* (1834), stimulated Gilbert and Sullivan to satire in *Iolanthe* (1882). Yet Sullivan shows more affection than mockery towards the tradition, and indeed by being of such superior quality to the targets of its parody, *Iolanthe* actually contributes to it.

Music for the ballet lagged behind. When Taglioni's Sylphide floated on to the Paris stage on points in 1832, her fairy seduction of the hapless young human hero was to negligible music by one Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffer. Despite the example of Adolphe Adam and Léo Delibes, music was long regarded as the least important ingredient of the Romantic ballet, and this attitude transferred itself to Russia with the succession of French ballet masters who were summoned to St Petersburg – Charles Didelot, Jules Perrot, Arthur Saint-Léon and Marius Petipa, all of whom found the Russian admiration for French manners fertile ground for their talents. Under them grew and flourished the great Russian tradition of dance virtuosity serving stage spectacle as aristocratic entertainment in *divertissement* and *ballet-féerie*. The composers were conductors or hack theatre musicians, men such as Cesare Pugni, Yuly Gerber and Ludwig Minkus, cordially despised by Russian composers ambitious for the emancipation of their country's music.

It was not until discussions about the Romantic ballet among a group of artists and intellectuals led to the commission for Tchaikovsky to write *Swan Lake* (1877) that any real musical quality entered the genre. A lover of ballet, he had never seen dance as incompatible with music of quality. His score for *Swan Lake* was promptly derided as 'too symphonic', since he conferred a strong musical structure on this new version of the doomed attempt of a human to find union with a supernatural being. This he did with a carefully designed key system, by some use of motive, and by moving between substantial musical movements for the main action, graceful dances that were functional to the plot, and some colourful *divertissements* that lay outside it. He developed the method with even greater richness and virtuosity in *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), finding some of his most ravishing music for the Lilac Fairy who rescues the lovers from the curse of the wicked fairy Carabosse. However, in the fairytale context of the plot, neither the Lilac Fairy nor Carabosse are very different from the Princess to whose christening they are invited; it is as heroine and villainness that they are depicted, careful as Tchaikovsky is to keep them within the bounds of fairy ballet convention rather than allow them the human characterisations of his operas. His most celebrated fairy portrait was reserved for the *divertissement* finale of his third and last ballet, *The Nutcracker* (1892). Lamenting 'the absolute impossibility of depicting the Sugar Plum Fairy in music', he chanced upon a Paris instrument maker's new invention, the Celesta, and promptly had one dispatched to St Petersburg, secretly so that no rival should get to hear it first. The instrument's succulent chimes, combined with the creamy murmur of the bass clarinet, could not be more apposite for the Sugar Plum Fairy, who guides Clara through the Kingdom of Sweets.

It is with Shakespeare, and the illusion of an illusion, that the fairy century closes in opera. Tricked into Windsor Forest as punishment by the Merry Wives of Windsor, Verdi's superstitious Falstaff is alarmed to be encompassed by all manner of apparitions, as elves, imps and fairies surround him with their pinching and pricking, their stinging and stabbing. The music is in the fairy convention of Mendelssohn or of Berlioz's 'Queen Mab', but crackles with light malice and with a suppressed laughter. It is the laughter which wins through when Falstaff spots what is being done to him, and sees that the ghosts and ghouls are the Merry Wives and their menfolk, his little fairy tormentors the children of Windsor. But also, in the darkness and its charades, the lovers have had their union truly blessed in defiance of the same parents who have set themselves to humiliate Falstaff, and so he draws them all into a circle of forgiveness in a fugue that picks up voice after voice until they are all singing the same music. It is the aged Verdi's farewell to the stage, on a fairy trick reasserting human companionship. '*Tutto nel mondo è burla*' – 'All the world's a jest', Falstaff reminds them and, as the fugue ends at curtain-fall, off they go to supper together.