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# Fanny Elssler as the Swiss Milkmaid

Ivor Guest

CARL AGRICOLA's portrait of Fanny Elssler in *Das Schweizer Milchmädchen* is most surely the work of an artist in love with his subject. Indeed, in 1831, when it was painted, the whole of Vienna seemed to be in love with the enchanting ballerina who had been reared from childhood on the stage of the Kärntnertortheater and, at the age of twenty-one, was then on the threshold of international fame.

Fanny had been destined for the ballet, along with her elder sisters Anna and Therese, from early childhood, and had made her first stage appearance at the age of seven. Her progress had been followed by the Viennese with proprietary pride and affection, and one of the most distinguished men of the city, Friedrich von Gentz, the celebrated publicist and an Imperial Counsellor, had won her friendship despite the difference in their ages. Their liaison was to be shortlived, for Gentz died in 1832, but it was to bring a lasting benefit in the intellectual education which the young dancer gained from it. Before his health began to fail, Gentz was an attentive escort to the lovely ballerina and more than once accompanied her to the studio of the portraitist, Carl Agricola.

The ballet, *Das Schweizer Milchmädchen*, had a particular significance in Fanny Elssler's career in that it revealed for the first time her outstanding dramatic talent. The ballet had originally been produced by Filippo Taglioni in Vienna in 1821, to music by Adalbert Gyrowetz, and Théodore Rozier, the daughter of Aumer, had created the part of the milkmaid. In the famous dance scene of the ballet, the heroine, believing herself to be alone, confesses her love before a statue of the young count, and fails to notice that the count himself has taken the statue's place. This scene, beginning with the girl's passionate declaration and culminating in her embarrassment at finding her secret revealed, was a great test of the dancer's interpretative powers, and Fanny passed it with complete success when she made her first appearance in the ballet on 8 October 1830, during a visit to

Berlin. Rahel von Varnhagen was so entranced that she wrote to her friend Gentz:

But yesterday — have you seen her Milkmaid? — the complete Venus rose from the waves. She was applauded like some great singer, step by step, nothing was missed by the public.

Gentz had not of course seen her Milkmaid, for Vienna was not to see it until 4 February 1831. The Viennese press was then unanimous in its acclaim. Until then Fanny Elssler had made her mark principally by the virtuosity of her dancing, but in this soubrette role she produced a delightful character study, full of roguishness, grace, and charm. It was a light role, but it was to be the first step towards her great triumphs in *Giselle*, *Esmeralda*, and *Catarina*, which were to establish her as the greatest actress-dancer of her generation.

The role of the Swiss milkmaid thus belongs to the early spring of Fanny Elssler's long career, but during her historic tour of the United States in 1840-42 it was one of the ballets with which she enchanted the new world audiences. At one performance, in Boston, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller were caught in a spell of enchantment. "Ralph," whispered Margaret Fuller, "this is poetry." "No, Margaret," replied Emerson, completely carried away, "it is religion."

Albert Theer's miniature based on Agricola's painting now rests in the Harvard Theatre Collection, donated by Mr. & Mrs. John H. Russell as a tribute to the retiring curator, Helen D. Willard. One can hardly imagine a more appropriate gift for the occasion, for not only is it in itself a significant addition to the dance material that forms such an important section of the Collection, but with its delicacy and haunting charm it is a most fitting tribute to a curator who has earned the respect of all the scholars who have sought her aid, and to many of them has become a personal friend.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

IVOR GUEST is an English lawyer and a distinguished historian of the nineteenth-century ballet; of more than a dozen books on the subject that he has written, the most recent is *Fanny Elssler*, which was published in 1970 by T. L. Black in England and by the Wesleyan University Press in the United States.

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### CORRIGENDUM

In the October 1972 issue (XX:4, 436 — "Browning's 'Sicilian Pastoral,'" by John Maynard), the original manuscript of Browning's "Sicilian Pastoral" should have been described as a part of the Amy Lowell Collection, which is now housed in a special room in the Houghton Library.