

## THE VIENNESE WINTER BALL

# An evening of elegance

Once derided as scandalous, the waltz will be front and centre tomorrow night at the NAC when a who's who of Ottawa society dances the night away at the Viennese ball.



ISABEL TEOTONIO

New Orleans has Mardi Gras, Rio de Janeiro has Carnaval, Vienna has Fasching.

And Ottawa? Well, for one splendid evening it puts on a party that's a hybrid of all the above — with some exceptions.

There will be no baring of the breasts for beads, no gyrating to the sounds of the Samba Parade, and no waltzing until dawn to salute the sun with a glass of champagne.

This is, after all, the capital city, not sin city.

Nonetheless, about 450 of this city's glitterati will descend on the National Gallery tomorrow for a hedonistic night of epicurean delights where they'll waltz the night away — a dance once considered so risqué it was forbidden.

The eighth annual gala of the Viennese Winter Ball — a.k.a. this city's social event of the year — will be in full swing with dapper dignitaries grooving alongside a gaggle of 26 teens, whose collective mantra will be "heel, toe, toe."

Decked out in white tulle and black tuxes, the 13 couples plucked from various high schools will pose as Austrian debutantes and cavaliers. After a champagne reception, they'll kickoff the evening — and if their prayers are answered, not each other — with a performance of the polonaise, a traditional European court dance.

The ceremonial opening was originally designed for Vienna's leading families to introduce their daughters to high society and present them for marriage.

Nowadays, the girls come from all walks of life and the opening number is designed to get toes tapping, legs shaking and lure revellers to the dance floor.

"They want to celebrate," says Roland Pirker, president of the Austrian Society of Ottawa and one of the organizers.

"They have dance fever, they want to dress-up," he says in an excited pitch that intensifies as he launches into the "magical" essence of the waltz.

But the magic of Strauss will float far beyond the dance floor, transforming the entire gallery into a magnificent ball, he says with the kind of lyricism and passion that only an Austrian can.

"We wanted to have a little bit of Austria in Ottawa," says Mr. Pirker, admitting that while they haven't recreated the season of Fasching, they've put together one heck of a party that rivals some of the best classical balls in Vienna.

During Fasching, which begins on New Year's Eve and lasts until the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday, there are more than 300 balls in Vienna. The city is giddy with them and everyone has one: fire fighters, chimney sweeps, atomic scientists, breeders of small animals, even the homeless.

The overabundance means there's something to satisfy all musical tastes — be it orchestras playing Mozart to DJs spinning Madonna.

Long ballgowns are the staple of Vienna's classical balls, while bodypaint and S&M gear are the rage at counter-culture balls.

It's also during those days preceding Lent — a period of 40 weekdays before Easter marked by penance and fasting — that Carnaval and Mardi Gras are celebrated in similar fashion: lavish costumes, an endless stream of music and dancing until dawn.

But unlike some of those festivals, which have become synonymous with the excesses of wild and drunken revelry, the ball in Ottawa isn't about bingeing on reckless abandon before the Lenten purge.

It's a glamorous red-carpet event where people go to see, be seen, swap business cards, and, as was the case last year, rub shoulders with the prime minister.

Proceeds from the event go to two local charities: the Champions for Children Foundation and the Junior Thirteen Strings Orchestra.

"It's the youth that start off the elegance, the ambience and the magic ... and the proceeds at the end of the night go back to the youth," explains David Wallace of BMO Harris Private Banking, who's also chairman of the event.

"So it's a win-win for the younger



GEORGES SCHNEIDER

In four well-rehearsed lines, 174 young couples dance the opening polonaise of the 42nd traditional Viennese Opera Ball in 1998. Held each year in the Vienna State Opera House, the prestigious social event attracts guests from around the world. Some 5,000 are expected to attend this year.

generation ... It's not just everyone coming in and paying a high price for tickets."

And at \$350 a head — by far the most expensive Viennese ball in Canada — it raises about \$60,000 for charity.

"If we didn't have the Viennese Winter Ball we wouldn't have the Junior Thirteen Strings," says Sylvia Gazsi Gill, executive director of the ensemble.

As in past years, the troupe of musi-

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**ROLAND PIRKER,**

President of the Austrian Society of Ottawa and one of the organizers of this year's ball at the National Arts Centre.

cal teens should have guests swaying to Vivaldi and Mozart when they perform during the champagne reception.

"They're really excited," says Mrs. Gazsi Gill. "They really seem to enjoy it because they get to look at all the people in their gowns — it's quite special."

And they'll surely have quite an eye-ful, particularly since it's not unheard of for people to spend thousands of dollars getting dolled up for the evening.

"People love to come and show themselves in that beautiful milieu, in their beautiful dresses," says Mr. Pirker, adding, "It's not for everybody's wallet."

While the waltz typically conjures up images of lavish balls, its roots are quite humble.

The waltz, which means "to advance by turning," evolved from the landler, a folk dance in three-quarter time. The

first true waltz was probably danced around 1750, replacing hopping and jumping with graceful gliding.

Originally danced by small groups of dirt farmers in the inns near Vienna's woods it eventually moved into city parks where bands and orchestras played on weekends.

The waltz flourished with the musical talent of Johann Strauss and his son, Johann Strauss Jr., and by 1840, they had all of Europe waltzing — but not without some resistance.

Its appearance in England is pegged around 1790 or 1812, and it was introduced in France in the early 19th century by Napoleon's armies after returning from fighting the Austrians.

Before the waltz, dance sequences involved groups, rather than couples, with men and women kept at "safe" distances from each other and physical contact limited to momentary touching of gloved hands at arms

length.

But the scandalous waltz required couples to hold each other so closely that their faces touched as they twirled rapidly, doing 30 rotations per minute.

The result was a new physical sensation of grace, flow, and motion, that was lauded by some as romantic escape and lambasted by others as wild and immoral.

It quickly earned the distinction as being the forbidden dance. Some countries, such as Switzerland and Swabia, a former duchy and now a region of Germany, forbade it, while Kaiser Wilhelm II didn't allow it into the court balls of Germany.

Decrees were issued forbidding "all gliding and turning," and public ordinances were posted that read: "Men and women must be dressed decently for the waltz," and "Women and girls must not be thrown about."