

# 'The most elegant affair of our lives'

Shannon Proudfoot's final instalment of her Debutant Diaries swirls from the giddy chaos of the final rehearsal to the nerve-racking grand entrance at last night's Viennese Ball

It seems unfair that after all the anticipation, the magical moments come and go so quickly. It has been a day filled with hair, makeup and nail appointments, missing dance partners and sore feet, but suddenly, the debutantes and cavaliers are marching up the endless red carpet toward the glittering Great Hall, and everyone is waiting just for us.

Dozens of guests line the mezzanine, snapping pictures and pointing at our rustling, black-and-white line.

We barely have time to savour this attention — and the nerves that accompany it — before the orchestra begins the lilting notes of the Polonaise, and we weave our way between the impeccably-dressed crowd toward the dance floor.

My only clear memory of our first dance is fixing my eyes on a spotlight far at the back of the gallery and smiling for all I am worth while the cavaliers and my fellow debutantes spin perfectly across the floor around me.

The final preparation for this, our coming-out party, began 24 hours before at the Fred Astaire Dance Studios. When I arrive for our dress rehearsal, the tiny reception area is crammed with debutantes and cavaliers, beaming family members, and what appear to be several kilometres of tulle, silk and satin.

The girls who are already dressed gather on the dance floor in bobbing constellations of white, exclaiming over the gown of every debutante who emerges self-consciously from the offices they are using as dressing rooms. Although we are all wearing the required white ballgown, each girl has her own take on it, and even without makeup and hair done, they all look like dreams.

The guys congregate on the other side of the studio, looking slightly overwhelmed by the princess convention.

"It was pretty intimidating, I'm not going to lie. A little out of the comfort zone," Paul Brikis, 17, says of seeing all the girls in their finery.

Finally, Melissa Krulick, the dance instructor, manages to bring order to the giddy chaos and get us lined up to rehearse the Polonaise and the Landler. There are a few hiccups, mostly involving long dresses and the heels of other people's shoes (and on one occasion, my dress and my own shoe), but otherwise it goes smoothly. Everyone heads home to rest, but most are sure they won't sleep a wink.

Early Saturday morning, we arrive at the Gallery

in street clothes and then change for our only shot at rehearsing with the orchestra. The guys only need to wear the jackets of their tuxedos to get the feel of dancing in them, so these dapper tops are paired with khakis, jogging and pyjama pants.

We approach the Great Hall through the Collonade, an endless red carpet lining the glassed-in hallway that stretches across the front of the Gallery. Four of the debutantes walk arm-in-arm behind me, totally awed by the dramatic setting where we will line up before making our entrance and dancing for many of the city's most prominent.

"It's like *The Bachelor* or something!" Erin Lindsay exclaims.

After rehearsing with the orchestra, I am swishing through the lobby when a tour group of small children spots me. "Hi Bride! Hi Bride!" one of them chants. I don't know how to explain the concept of debutantes to six-year-olds, so I simply smile and glide away to our hidden dressing room.

Following the morning rehearsal, the girls rush off to the various hair, makeup and nail appointments that will render them nearly unrecognizable princesses by the time we return for the ball.

At the same time, teams of caterers, decorators and lighting technicians are transforming the Great Hall into a crystalline ballroom. When we return just before our guests trickle in, blue spotlights illuminate the glass spires of the roof, and everything else — dinnerware, chairs, tables, flowers — is a glittering white.

"It looks like a winter wonderland! Ooooh!" Caroline Boulos coos. "Finally, we understand why Peter keeps doing this!" she says of my dance partner, six-time Viennese Ball veteran Peter Zachar.

Everyone is awed by the setting, but the excitement is tempered by the knowledge that in a short time, we will be centre stage at the most elegant affair of our lives. We retreat to our dressing room, but time is most certainly in fast-forward, because word comes down that we are expected.

We line up two-by-two, and then drift up the Collonade like a walking fairytale, the strains of Beethoven's Ninth carrying us along. We stand just outside the Great Hall while Austrian Ambassador Otto Ditz welcomes everyone, but then the world speeds up again and we are suddenly beneath the blinding spotlights, dancing the Polonaise more perfectly than we ever did in rehearsals.

In what seems like an instant, it is all over. We sashay off the floor, and Mr. Zachar and I ask Ambassador and Maureen Ditz to join us on the dance floor. We waltz and twirl in the wintery glow of the Great Hall, our clicking heels keeping time with the string musicians on the stage. For the briefest of moments, it feels like Vienna has crossed the Atlantic and settled in the shadow of Parliament Hill.

PHOTOS BY ASHLEY FRASER,  
THE OTTAWA CITIZEN



Ottawa's glitterati showed off their moves on the dance floor at the National Gallery of Canada.

## The Viennese Ball BY THE NUMBERS

- 210: Pounds of veal for the main course
- 220: Ounces of chocolate for the *mignardises*
- 7: Number of bite-size hors d'oeuvres in the starter
- 661: Ounces of foie gras for main course
- 30: Number of debutantes and cavaliers
- 600: Ounces of vodka for chocolate martinis
- 200: Ounces of Creme de Cacao for same
- 511: Bottles of red wine
- 225: Bottles of white wine
- 129: Bottles of champagne
- 480: Glasses of champagne served at opening reception
- 60: Limousines
- \$310: Combined value of items in gift bins and her gift bags
- 50: Total number of musicians
- 357: Hours of labour for set-up of venue
- 9: Number of flags in the great hall: (three each of Canada, Austria and the EU)
- 300: Feet of red carpet
- 729: Size of rotunda dancefloor in square feet
- 162: Size of mezzanine dancefloor in square feet
- 6: Number of musical groups performing
- 11: Number of committee members
- 31: Number of non-committee volunteers
- 3: Number of national anthems: (Canada, Austria and the EU)
- 24: Number of boutonnières: (for cavaliers and orchestra members)
- 28: Number of corsages: (for debutantes and orchestra members)
- 65: Number of couples who took the free dance lessons that go with the ticket

— Compiled by Jennifer Campbell



## A glittering night of magic and memories

BY JENNIFER CAMPBELL

For the 10th year in a row, the Viennese Winter Ball came off with the magic and elegance that have come to define the event. Some 375 members of Ottawa's glitterati donned their best dresses and tuxedos to take in an evening of Austrian flair at the National Gallery of Canada.

Ball-goers kicked up their heels and enjoyed the splashy evening, but it was particularly special for a group of 30 high school students who auditioned and were selected to be the evening's debutantes and cavaliers. Aged 15 to 18 (with the exception of the *Citizen's* Shannon Proudfoot), they kicked off the ball by performing the Polonaise, a traditional Austrian dance, to the music of the Thirteen Strings Orchestra.

Enjoying what he swears will be his last ball — at least in terms of organizing it — David Wallace, ball chairman, co-founder and a vice-president of major sponsor BMO Harris Private Banking, was nostalgic about its impact.

"Today, I've been thinking about the success that this thing has become over 10 years," Mr. Wallace said at a private reception hosted by Austrian Ambassador Otto Ditz before the ball. "And after watching it progress, the thing I keep coming back to is the contribution it makes to youth."

Mr. Wallace was in Austria earlier this year and met a former debutante of the Ottawa ball.

"She has extraordinarily fond memories," Mr. Wallace said. "Being a debutante helped build her character, leadership skills — all the things we look for in the development of leaders."

Ambassador Ditz lauded Mr. Wallace's accomplishments.

"I'll miss him," said Mr. Ditz, who, with his wife Maureen, serves as the ball's honorary patron. "He has been the heart and soul — and the financial muscle — of this thing. Without him, we wouldn't be here tonight."

Among Mr. Ditz's head table guests were European Union ambassador Eric Hayes, Turkish Ambassador Aydemir Erman, RCMP Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli, Gen. Rick Hillier, and Brig-Gen. Guntmar Heck. Mrs. Ditz's cousin Alexan-

dra and her husband, Maj. Douglas Martin, of the Canadian army, enjoyed their first Viennese Ball and seats at the head table.

Also spotted were Mayor Bob Chiarelli and his friend, Randi Hansen, former U.S. ambassador Gordon Giffin and his wife, Patti, and Jim Watson, Ontario's minister of health promotion.

This is the third Ottawa ball Mr. Ditz has officiated. He said he was pleased to see that it has truly become a community event.

"I think it adds something to the life of the city," he said.

Notable was one couple who looked like sisters, but were actually mother and daughter. Taylor MacLean, 14, was her mother Donna-Lee's date for the event. Her mother, who works with a charity associated with Champions for Children, one of the ball's beneficiaries, thought her daughter would enjoy seeing the debutantes.

"Maybe she'll be one some day," Ms. MacLean said.

For appetizers, guests feasted on lobster medallions, cod Brandade, Dungeness crab salad, Peking duck crepes and lamb medallions. The main course featured a veal tenderloin medallion with pan-fried duck foie gras and a cognac black truffle sauce. Dessert included fruit and vanilla miniature cake, and creme brûlée topped with fresh berries.

During the evening, guests were invited to have their pictures taken and were free to enjoy the music of the Ottawa Schrammel Quartet.

Guests left with his and hers gift bags. Enclosed? Wine, chocolates, and a classical CD for each. The men received a copy of the *Citizen's* book, *Each Morning Bright* and a money clip, while the women received a Swarovski crystal swan and free tickets to a Thirteen Strings Orchestra concert.

The Ottawa ball, which sells out months in advance, is one of only five officially sanctioned international Viennese balls. It raises \$50,000, which is split between the Champions for Children Foundation (the fundraising arm of the Children's Aid Society) and the Thirteen Strings Junior Orchestra.



Hours of preparation and hard work lead to a flawless entrance.



Shannon Proudfoot dances with Austrian Ambassador Otto Ditz. Behind them is Jim Watson, Ontario's minister of health promotion.

On the web: More glitter, more glamour, more jitters

Seven-day subscribers can go to [ottawacitizen.com](http://ottawacitizen.com) to see more photos of Shannon and the other debutantes getting ready for the big night.