

SPOTLIGHT

A Night at the Opera Ball

don't just dance the waltz, dream it. Nowhere is that imperative more gloriously observed than in Vienna at the crescendo of its carnival—the Opera Ball. This is the ball of balls: the grandest (5,500 revelers), the fanciest (hosting a box can cost more than \$25,000), the most fragrant (15,000 pink carnations), the most miraculous (the Habsburg Empire, dismembered in 1918, revives in three-quarter time at nine P.M. sharp on the Thursday before Ash Wednesday, to glitter, swirl, gambol until it swoons away again at dawn).

Like many Viennese mirages, this one was commissioned by the Emperor Franz Josef. In 1860 he ordered construction of an opera house that could hold "opera balls." Since 1877 the ball, stopping now and then for a World War or two, has lilted its way across history. Never more imperial than today, it is a mirage riding on electronic logistics. Debutantes are briefed by video for its opening cotillon. A computerized effort deploying 1,000 workers erases all seats to transform auditorium into ballroom overnight. But once the miracle waltzes, the myth of Vienna becomes flawless flesh. —FREDERIC MORTON

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY DEROY GRUBER

PERFECT PAIRS

On February 6, the 380 debutantes and escorts selected out of 1,500 applicants from all over the world made black-and-white magic.