

**Jacques Offenbach  
French Opera Bouffes**

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## **Jacques Offenbach Opera Bouffes**

- **Comic opera has a long history and goes back to the Baroque period and particularly to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to Italian Commedia dell'arte. It continued through Mozart's Viennese period, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the Italian Belcanto with Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti to France in the Opera-Comique theatre in Paris. It influenced the Viennese Operettas of Johann Strauss Jr. and his fellow composers, became popular in England with Gilbert and Sullivan and finally shaped the American Musicals.**
- **The French Opera Bouffes by Jacques Offenbach developed from the early 1850 ties to the beginning of the 1870 ties.**
  - **Life and Career of Jacques Offenbach  
6,20,1819-10.5.1880**
- **Offenbach was born in Cologne, Germany to a synagogue Cantor. He showed outstanding early musical talent and was accepted at 14 years as violin-cello student at the Paris conservatory led by the**

## **Life and Career of Jacques Offenbach continued**

- **stern Luigi Cherubini. Offenbach did not find this strict academic life full filling and left after one year.**
- **Between 1835 and the early 1850 ties he earned his living as a cello-virtuoso and conductor. He first composed many pieces of Music for the cello, collaborating with Fromental Halevy and Friedrich von Flotow, who were successful composers.**
- **His ambition was to compose comic operas for the Musical Theatre, but he could not gain entrance to the Parisian Opera Theatres.**
- **His German accent and birth in Germany were part of his struggles. He was however sponsored by the salon of the comtesse de Vaux.**
- **During the revolution in 1848 he briefly transferred his wife and daughter back to Cologne, returning to Paris in 1849.**

## **Life and Career**

continued

- In 1850 he started to compose comic musical pieces for the stage and in 1855 he founded the Bouffes-Parisiennes, a small comical theatre. He was favored by the court of Emperor Napoleon III, whose court and the Parisian life was satirized in his opera bouffes. Napoleon finally gave him French citizenship.
- His most successful musical period was between 1858 and particularly the 1860s until Parisian life collapsed in the French Prussian war in 1870. Offenbach went briefly in Exile.
- The 1870s were difficult times in France, but he became popular in England and in 1876 he made a successful Tour of the United States in connection with the centennial exhibition.
- Since 1877 he was working on an opera based on a stage play about "Les contes fantastiques d'Hoffmann" which became his masterpiece The Tales of Hoffmann and was accepted by the Opera houses in the world.

## **Offenbach's last years of life**

- He did not complete "The Tales of Hoffmann" and died in 1880. He left the vocal score complete. His family friend Ernest Guiraud and his 18 year old son Auguste completed the orchestration.
- Guiraud added the recitatives for the Vienna premiere 1881 and other versions were made later.

## **Jacques Offenbach's Opera Bouffes 1858-1868**

- **Offenbach wrote about 100 Opera Bouffes. The earliest ones are only one hour long and have no more than 3 principal singers. The French State then changed the rules and allowed more principal singers and a chorus and dancers.**
- **The Bouffes Parsienne originally used the Salle Champs-Elysees next to the 1855 great Exhibition**
- **Others were the Salle Choiseul or the Salle Lacaze in the 1856-59, depending on the season.**
- **The star soprano of most of his opera's was Hortense Schneider. In the 1860 ties Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy, the nephew of his mentor Fromental Halevy, were his librettists. Offenbach spoke of their relationship to him: " I am their father and they are the son and the Holy Spirit."**
- **Bizet was Offenbach's devoted friend.**

## **Opera Bouffes 1858-68 continued**

- **There are 5 Opera Bouffes still in the repertoire They are usually not presented in a version of 3 acts.**
- **Today's productions are usually made in France and since their digital projection system is different from the American system, they can not always be adapted to our system and, therefore not all are easily accessible, or not at all.**

## **Offenbach's Opera Bouffes on DVD presented in this lecture**

- I. Orphee aux Enfer premiered 1858**  
DVD Opera National de Lyon 1997, Art Haus 2009
- II La Belle Helene premiered 1864**  
DVD Theatre Musical de Paris-Chatelet, Le Musiciens Du Louvre  
Kultur 2000
- III. La Grande-Duchesse de Gerolstein premiered 1866**  
Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble  
video recording Virgin Classic 2005
- IV. La Vie Parisienne Premiered 1867**  
Opera National de Lyon December 2007  
Virgin Classic
- IV La Perichole premiered 1868**  
Opera Geneva 1982 with Ewing , disc of a film version.

## **Characteristics of French Opera Bouffes**

- The Opera Bouffes have dances that has the chorus move in unison in Can can and gallop rhythm , unlike the Waltzes and Polkas and Minuet rhythm of the Viennese operettas .
- The French version of the comic Musical reminds me more of the American musical , which is even often faster moving.
- The last of the big Opera Bouffes La Perichole with his arias, duets foreshadows some of the style of the Tales of Hoffmann.

## **Orphee aux Enfer**

**Libretto Hector Cremieux and Ludovic Halevy  
Drama libretto Agathe Melinard**

- **Offenbach is making fun of the gods of Antiquity and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Public Opinion represents custom and morality in Thebes. Eurydice is bored by her husband's, a gifted musician's music.**

**Act I, Chapter 5**

**Duo concerto: Ah! Cest ainsi!**

- **She secretly enjoys the attention of her neighbor Aristeus, a shepherd, who is Pluto in disguise.**

**Act 1, Chapter 9**

**Chanson d'Aristee**

- **Pluto (Aristeus) abducts Eurydice into the Underworld. Orpheus is**

## **Orphee aux Enfer continued**

- **Happy over his regained freedom, but Public Opinion demands to bring his wife back. On his way he passes Mt. Olympus where the gods live, who are bored. Pluto is summoned and agitates the assembly of the gods to revolt against Jupiter, who has often been unfaithful to his wife Juno**

**Act I Chapter 32**

**Il approche! I s'avance**

**All follow Jupiter into the Underworld to search for Eurydice.**

**In the Underworld Eurydice is in a luxurious chamber and Pluto tries to prevent Jupiter to see her. Jupiter transforms himself into a fly and he enters through a keyhole. The gods in the Underworld dance an infernal gallop, showing their ungodly behavior**

**Act II chapter 50**

**Ce bal est original (all dancing in gallop style)**

## **Orphee en Enfer continued**

- **Jupiter gives up Eurydice with the condition Orpheus can not look back at her leaving the underworld. Of course he turns around and Jupiter's thunderbolt sends her back to the Underworld, where she has to serve Bacchus.**

## **Jacques Offenbach**

**La Belle Helene premiered 1864**

**Libretto Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy**

- **This is a modern European production in 20th century costumes and sets, that this time uses the Greek kings of Antiquity from the Greek myth of Paris and Helen, to make fun of Parisian Society. The set in the first act is a bedroom with Menelaus, a fat little man sleeping in his bed.**
- **Helen, his Queen, after preparing for a love evening, finding him uninterested, is frustrated and takes a sleeping pill. She awakes, complaining to Calchas, the High Priest, of the absence of love. She is obsessed about the story, that Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, was promised by Venus on Mount Ida, when he gave her the love apple, that he would get the most beautiful woman of the world: Queen Helen of Sparta. Suddenly Paris, a beautiful young man appears in disguise of a shepherd and sings how he gave the apple to Venus**

## **La Belle Helene continued**

**Act I , Chapter 10, Scene 5**

**Le jugement de Paris- Au mont Ida , trois Deeses**

- **The raucous Greek kings arrive and initiate a word game, which the stranger Paris wins. Menelaus invites him to dinner.**
- **Calchas declares an oracle: Menelaus should go for a month to crete. Helen and Paris are happy of the verdict.**
- **After parodies of the Greek court, which presents a critic of the demoralized court of French Emperor Napoleon III, Paris comes to Helen. She first is trying to be an honorable married woman**

**Act II, Chapter 20, Scene 2**

**Invocation a Venus: on me nomme Helene la blonde**

**Helen gives joyfully into Paris when he tells her, it is all a dream.**

## **La belle Helene continued**

**Act II , Chapter 25, Scene 5**

**Duo c'est le ciel qui m'envoie**

- **Menelaus suddenly appears. The raucous Kings and the population send Paris away, who goes knowing that Venus promised Helen to him.**
- **He tells her there are 3 ways to get a woman: 1.love, 2. rape and 3. trickery.**
- **The Kings including Menelaus and Helen and their entourage move to Nauplia for the summer season.**
- **A boat with Paris disguised as a Priest of Venus arrives. He declares Helen has to go with him to the island of Cythera to sacrifice for her offenses. She recognizes Paris and elopes with him, sailing both away.**

**La Grande-Duchesse de Gerolstein**  
**premiered 1867**  
**Libretto Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy**

- In spite of that this opera is a farce on militarism, it had a parade of visitors who also attended the Paris Exposition. The royalty and aristocrats visiting the show included Napoleon III, the future King Edward VII of the United Kingdom, Tsar Alexander II of Russia, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria and even Otto von Bismarck of Prussia .
- Europe had the Prussian/Danish war in 1864, the Prussian/Austrian war 1866 during this period and after Bismarck saw the military satire in the piece remarked "That's exactly how it is".
- In this production the supposed 20 year old Duchesse is sung by the famous Felicity Lott who has a great voice but does not look the role.
- The opera starts with Fritz ,a handsome soldier and his girl friend Wanda singing how war interferes with love

**The Grande-Duchesse de Gerolstein continued**

**Act I , Scene Duo, Fritz and Wanda**

- The soldiers assemble for the inspection by the Grande-Duchesse
- Act I Scene Choer-Recit e Rondeau**
- The Duchess sings about her love for the military and selects Fritz, a simple soldier who she likes, and quickly promotes him her general. She is betrothed to the foppish Prince Paul who is not to her liking.
  - The court Chamberlain Baron Puck generates a war to amuse her.
  - Fritz wins the battle easily by making the whole opposing army drunk. At his return, he crowned with victory and the Duchess declares his love for him, pretending she reports for another lady.

**Act II Scene Duetto et Declaration**

- Fritz ask her if he could marry Wanda to her great distress.

### **The Grande-Duchesse de Gerolstein continued**

- **The Duchess is so distressed that she conspires to assassinate Fritz upon his return from the wedding ceremony.**
- **When everything is ready for the bloody deed, she changes her mind. Her love life seems to be forever ill-starred.**
- **Finally the duchess becomes philosophic and decides to marry her original betrothed Prince Paul after all.**
- **In the Finale she sings her ancestors will be proud of her**

**Act III Finale**

**Fritz and Wanda can go home happily married.**

### **Jacques Offenbach première 1866 La Vie Parisienne Libretto Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy**

- **Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy presented 2 plays at the Theatre du Palais –Royal that they then formed into the Libretto of La Vie Parisienne. The opera was revised in 1873, which is the version now usually used.**
- **The chorus is part of the actions, not just communicating on the story, which started with Gluck's Reform Operas in 1762.**
- **The opera is a comic version how Parisian Life was viewed by many European visitors, where they thought to experience sex, beautiful women , good food and wine.**
- **Fun is made of the visiting Baron and Baroness Gondremarck from Sweden, who brought a letter written by one of the Baron's friends to the girl Metella, with whom the friend had an affair for 6 weeks while in Paris and introducing the Baron.**

### **La vie Parisienne continued**

- 2 Parisian dandies pretend they are guides to the city and took them to their homes pretending the homes were small hotels, part of the Grand Hotel, which was filled. The servants pretend to be aristocrats and a series of simple Parisian people act as if they were important people. There is lots of dancing, rapid pattern singing to hilarious situations and finally the Baron attending a wild party at the dandy Bobinet's house, so that the other dandy could pursue the Baroness in his home.
- You will see the end of a wild party , the Baron made drunk , the finale of the third act which starts with a sextet. This a picture of Paris during the reign of emperor Napoleon III in the 1860 ties, But all ends well at the end Mitella teaches them a lesson.

Act III, Scene Sextour Chapter 16

"Votre habit a cracque dans le dos"

continue Finale: Soupons, soupons, c'est le moment" Chapter 17

### **La Perichole premiered 1868**

**Libretto Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy**

- The title character is based on Micaela Villegas, a beloved 18<sup>th</sup> century Peruvian entertainer and a famous mistress of Manuel de Amat y Juniet, Viceroy of Peru from 1761-1776
- The story concerns two impoverished Peruvian street- singers, too poor to afford a marriage licence and a lecherous viceroy Don Andres de Ribera who wishes to make la Perichole his mistress.
- I agree with Andrew Lamb, who calls Offenbach's score "most charming" , rather than satirical style. Its contains boleros, seguidillas and gallops and the exotic backdrop.
- Of all of Offenbach's Opera Bouffes I presented, it is my favorite . I had the luck to hear and see it in 1980 ties here in Rochester when Ruth Rosenberg of the Rochester Opera Theatre brought it to Kodak Hall.

### **La Perichole continued**

- **To me la Perichole foreshadows what about ten years later will be 'The Tales of Hoffmann'**
- **The Metropolitan Opera premiered the new version in 1956 with Patrice Munsel and Teresa Stratas who have sung the role.**
- **Unfortunately there is only a French production, a film with Maria Ewing, but not available in the United States. I was able with Peter Elliott's help to get a disc with a murky picture, that does not project well and there are no sub titles.**
- **We will play the overture to let you have a sample of the wonderful melodies while the orchestra is playing and the names of the performers are projected.**