

The Tales of Hoffmann premièred 1881

JACQUES OFFENBACH (1819-1880)

Libretto based on a Play that linked tales written by E.T.A.Hoffmann

Running time: 3 hours

Performed by the METROPOLITAN OPERA circa 2010

Hoffmann, a poet	<i>Joseph Calleja</i>	Tenor
Nicklausse, Hoffmann's companion		Mezzo
Stella, a Nuremburg opera singer	<i>Anna Netrebko</i>	Soprano
Lindorf, a Nuremburg councillor	<i>Alan Held</i>	Bass
Olympia, a mechanical doll	<i>Kathleen Kim</i>	Soprano
Coppélius, a scientist	<i>Alan Held</i>	Baritone
Spalanzani, inventor and rival of Coppélius		Tenor
Antonia, a Munich singer	<i>Anna Netrebko</i>	Soprano
Crespel, Antonia's Munich father		(Bass)
Dr Miracle, a Munich doctor	<i>Alan Held</i>	Baritone
Giulietta, a Venetian courtesan	<i>Ekaterina Gubanova</i>	Soprano
Dappertutto, a Venetian sorcerer	<i>Alan Held</i>	(Bass)
Schlemil, Giulietta's Venetian lover		(Bass)
Pittichinaccio, Giulietta's Venetian admirer		Tenor
Conductor	<i>James Levine</i>	
Director	<i>Bartlett Sher</i>	

Set in Nuremburg, Munich and Venice

Synopsis

ACT 1: A Nuremburg tavern adjoining an opera house where *Don Giovanni* is being performed. Councillor Lindorf plots to undo Hoffmann, who's his rival for the affections of the opera singer Stella. During the *Don Giovanni* interval, the taven is filled with students who persuade Hoffmann to sing about a deformed dwarf Kleinzach. During his song Hoffmann unexpectedly starts to indulge in a reverie about Stella. Brought back to his senses, Hoffmann sees Lindorf and explains how the councillor has previously thwarted his love affairs. Mellowed by punch he then starts to describe them ...

ACT 2: Inside the inventor Spalanzani's house.

Hoffmann loves a woman that he believes is Spalanzani's daughter. This inventor is afraid that his rival Coppélius will want to profit from his latest invention, and he hopes to buy him out. Spalanzani introduces his singing doll Olympia to the public. Hoffmann sings of his love for her. While Olympia sings, Spalanzani winds up the clockwork mechanism whenever it runs down. Despite Nicklausse's warnings Hoffmann is more and more enchanted by the doll, though somewhat surprised by her strange behaviour. After being given a bad cheque, Coppélius returns and destroys Olympia: the public is delighted when Hoffmann finally realises his error.

ACT 3: Within the Munich home of Antonia and Crespel.

Hoffmann has fallen in love with Antonia who's seriously ill, and hidden away by her father Crespel to prevent her from over exerting herself. She sings, even though this has been forbidden. Hoffmann finds her, and the two declare their love. This is followed by the entry of

the evil Dr Miracle (who'd attracted some suspicion during the death of Crespel's wife). During an 'examination' Miracle makes Antonia sing while she's under hypnosis. Although Crespel forces him out, Miracle returns and seizes a violin. Antonia is convinced that her dead mother – whose portrait hangs in her room – is encouraging her to sing. Antonia collapses as Hoffmann re-enters, and the doctor pronounces her dead.

ACT 4: At the Venetian waterside.

Hoffmann, who's renounced amorous exploits for the pleasures of wine, listens while the courtesan Giulietta and Nicklausse sing a languorous (and well known) barcarolle. The shadowy Dappertutto offers a diamond to persuade Giulietta to obtain Hoffmann's soul. When Hoffmann falls in love he sings an ecstatic duet with Giulietta. She manages to obtain the reflection of Hoffmann that Dappertutto has demanded. Hoffmann is then lured into a duel with Schlemil, who's his rival for Giulietta's hand. Schlemil is killed. Hoffmann obtains a key to visit Giulietta at night, only to see his sweetheart disappearing in a gondola with Pittichinaccio.



ACT 5: Back in the Nuremburg tavern.

Nicklausse admits that Hoffmann's loves were all personifications of his beloved opera diva. Stella herself arrives, but she then leaves the tavern on Lindorf's arm. Appearing as Hoffmann's poetic muse, Nicklausse assures him that his sorrow will enrich his poetry.

Operatic Context

The composition of *The Tales of Hoffmann* proved taxing for Offenbach as the Gaîté-Lyrique theatre which had commissioned this piece went bankrupt, whilst the composer continued to support his family by writing operettas for other theatres. Nevertheless he continued to write it, and within two years a performance of songs from this opera at his own house attracted Carvalho, who managed the Opéra-Comique. Some adjustments – eg dialogue rather than recitative – were made to meet their expectations. But plenty was left unfinished when Offenbach died: much of the Venetian act, Act 5 completion, plus the orchestration. Ernest Guiraud was asked to finish the work, so we can never know exactly how Offenbach would have completed this opera. A 1977 edition by Fritz Oeser may come closer than previous versions.

After completing one hundred operettas and other stage works, this was – excluding one less successful venture *Die Rheinnixen* – Offenbach's only attempt to write a full scale opera. [*Rheinnixen* is incidentally the original source of the famous barcarolle, which Offenbach has transferred effectively from one watery environment into another!] *Tales of Hoffmann* avoids the parodistic element that's so conspicuous in earlier works such as *Orphée aux enfers* and *La Belle Hélène*. Instead of imitating the style of Meyerbeer or Bellini, the composer concentrates on the widely varied characteristics of Hoffmann's writing: reality and fantasy, romanticism and the grotesque. This opera has become the most frequently performed of all Offenbach's works.



Les contes d'Hoffmann: a play by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré

Although Jacques Offenbach – named Jacob at his birth in Cologne – could have read Hoffmann's fiction in the original German, he was more inspired by the way that these tales were transformed into an 1851 French play. A brief analysis of the opera synopsis indicates that the German poet has been introduced into this theatrical plot as the central character, and also that the first and last acts could be less directly derived from Hoffmann's oeuvre.

Councillor Lindorf actually comes from Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf*, and the dwarf Kleinzack from his *Klein-Zaches* story. The OLYMPIA episode comes from *Der Sandmann*, the ANTONIA portion from his *Rat Crespel*, and the GIULIETTA episode from *Die Abenteuer der Silvester-Nacht*. It's definitely not coincidental that this play/opera takes place while a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is being performed, or that Stella is an operatic diva [more below]. In the French play and during Offenbach's masterpiece, some of the Nuremburg opera-goers find Hoffmann's amorous confessions so intriguing that they stay in the tavern, instead of leaving when the Mozart performance is due to resume!

Offenbach's Life and Works

Offenbach's father was a Jewish Cantor who'd exchanged his original surname Eberst for Offenbach, the town near Frankfurt where he'd once lived. His second son Jacob/Jacques was a cello prodigy who left Germany in 1833 to study at the Paris Conservatoire. He relished Paris's rich music theatre attractions, and won the chance to play in the orchestra at the Opéra-Comique.

Offenbach's salon playing experience led to his first waltz compositions, public cello recitals, and also to acclaim from the young Queen Victoria. Before a brief 1848-50 absence due to a French political crisis he composed several stage works. Later he returned to Paris to conduct music at the Comédie-Française, much of it written by himself.

Dissatisfied by the Opéra-Comique's reluctance to stage the type of comic opera that he envisaged, he started to write his own short operettas. The initial four-part bill staged at the Bouffes-Parisiens was successful, despite onerous licensing restrictions which limited the composer to less than four stage performers. Moving into a more permanent theatre, a pattern was quickly established: musical satire, with contemporary Parisian characters transplanted into an exotic or fantastic setting.

The name of Dr Miracle can be traced back to this era, as an 1857 collaboration with this specific title (by Bizet and Halévy) was performed in the same theatre. The Bouffes company toured London, Vienna and the French provinces. Their performances inspired imitations by the cosmopolitan composer Suppé, as well as Sullivan's *Cox and Box*. In 1858 when a full chorus was allowed at the Bouffes theatre, *Orphée aux enfers* the first great full-length French operetta was produced.

After a period of intermittent success the combination of a new star Hortense Schneider, a new venue at the Variétés, and a new team of librettists all contributed to *La Belle Hélène* another triumph. A purple patch followed which included: *Barbe-bleue*, *La vie parisienne*, and *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*.

By 1869 however the public started to be disenchanted by the existing opéra-bouffe tradition. They were tired of parodies and puns, though clever plots with jokes could still succeed if they were well written. The Franco-Prussian War almost immediately ended the frivolity of the Second Empire, and Offenbach – still ashamed of his Germanic origins – fled France.

After this war Paris craved excessive spectacle, or plenty of sentimentality. Offenbach returned in 1873 to manage the Théâtre de la Gaîté, but although *Le Roi Carotte* – also derived from E.T.A.Hoffmann's *Klein-Zaches* – allowed a lavish spectacle it was too satirical to attract a favourable reception. Offenbach's works were falling out of favour during the late period when he was writing *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822)

Hoffmann was a highly influential German Romantic author of fantasy and Gothic horror. Outside the German-speaking world his influence on Composers is probably best known. As well as possessing a name immortalised in Offenbach's opera title, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, a novella by Hoffmann inspired Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* ballet. Delibes' ballet *Coppélia* is based partly on *Der Sandmann* and partly on another Hoffmann story (hence the name of Coppélius the scientist, who appears in the Offenbach opera). Schumann's *Kreisleriana* is based on Hoffmann's character Johannes Kreisler. Hindemith, Adolphe Adam and Busoni can also be added to this list; and Wagner prepared a Hoffmann libretto that was never used.

Literary influence notwithstanding, Hoffmann was also a music critic, conductor and composer. For much of his career Hoffmann regarded himself as a musician rather than an author. *Die lustigen Musikanten* the first of his surviving operas was completed in 1804. The title page records the adoption of Amadeus as his third Christian name, confirming the Mozartian admiration that's evident within his score.

Although Hoffmann did not succeed in obtaining many theatrical positions, he continued his musical activities including *Undine* his most successful opera. *Liebstock* – transfigured death – is one concept that's explored in this opera. Wagner, a lifelong admirer of Hoffmann, may conceivably have remembered this idea years later?

Hoffmann had an equivocal friendship with the composer Weber, and he may have felt overshadowed by a more gifted composer and his exceptionally successful opera *Der Freischütz*. Opera and singing also feature prominently in Hoffmann's literary output, eg *Kreiseriana* as well as *Rat Crespel*, which yielded the Munich act of Offenbach's opera.

The *Don Giovanni* Connection

It's little surprise that Hoffmann as a Gothic writer and Mozart aficionado should have been particularly attracted to *Don Giovanni*, Mozart's most Gothic opera. *Don Juan* a Hoffmann short story was published in 1813.

A traveller learns that his hotel room has a door that leads directly into a theatre box where he can watch a performance of *Don Giovanni*. While he's watching this production, he senses that someone else has entered his box, though he's too engrossed to turn round. During the next interval he realises that the visitor is the lady who's played Donna Anna on the stage. She persuades him to see the opera in a new light.



Donna Anna disappears, the performance resumes, and the traveller (who's also the narrator) enjoys the rest of the opera. Afterwards, while dining he overhears that other audience members have been less impressed by this performance. When the traveller returns to his room he decides to re-enter his theatre box, where he calls out 'Donna Anna!' into the empty theatre. Anna makes a second visit. Later while the narrator is trying to fall asleep in his bed, he thinks he hears Donna Anna talking to him.

During a restaurant lunch the following day, hotel guests talk to the traveller about the death of the Signora who played Donna Anna. In her analysis of this story Birgit Röder identifies a 'Liebestod' element in this narrative, with Donna Anna as *an example of the extreme Romantic individual who can find fulfilment only in death*.

Selected Musical Biographies

HOFFMANN: JOSEPH CALLEJA is a Maltese tenor born in 1978. His focus on 19th Century Italian repertoire is highlighted by recordings of Bellini (*I Capuleti e I Montecchi*), Donizetti (*Maria Stuarda*), and Verdi (*Simon Boccanegra* and *La traviata*).

STELLA/ANTONIA: ANNA YURIEVNA NETREBKO is a Russian coloratura soprano born in 1971, who's performed in New York, Vienna and London. Discovered by Valery Gergiev, she began her career at the Mariinsky Theatre. She attracted global attention at the 2002 Salzburg Festival. Having been known for lyric and coloratura roles, Netrebko later proceeded into heavier 19th century romantic repertoire, particularly Verdi. Since 2016 she's focused on verismo roles.

LINDORF/COPPÉLIUS/DR MIRACLE/DAPPERTUTTO: ALAN HELD is well into his fourth decade as a leading American bass-baritone. His operatic appearances include New York, Vienna, London, Paris, Milan, Germany, Belgium, Holland and Canada. His widely ranging repertoire includes major roles in four Wagner, two Puccini and two Richard Strauss operas.

CONDUCTOR: JAMES LEVINE (1943–2021) was an American conductor and pianist. Levine held leadership positions which included the Munich Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He made his Metropolitan Opera debut just before he turned 28 in 1971, and was named its principal conductor in February 1972. Following a series of injuries in his seventies, Levine's health problems led to fewer Metropolitan Opera engagements, and he stepped down from his position as music director at the end of the 2015–16 season.



Königsberg/Kaliningrad: A Topical Footnote

E.T.A.Hoffmann was born in Königsberg. During the era before 1945, Germany extended much further eastwards and – with fellow luminaries such as Immanuel Kant and Käthe Kollwitz – Königsberg was probably Germany's most important cultural and intellectual centre east of Berlin. In 1945 Kaliningrad, as it's now known, became an anomalous enclave belonging to the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. [When I last retrieved Wikipedia information, the most distinguished citizens since WW2 were all Olympic medallists. This may suggest how fundamentally Kaliningrad has changed during the modern era?]

In recent months this Baltic enclave – which has been part of Russia since the Soviet Union collapsed – has become a more exposed flashpoint. It has no land boundary with 'mainland' Russia (or with Belarus). There are only limited ways to travel between the two parts of Russia: by sea, air, or via the NATO states of Lithuania or Poland. Global Warming may potentially facilitate sea access to and from St.Petersburg, which traditionally hasn't been straightforward (but this involves a route that's now flanked by several other NATO countries).