

February 10, 2022 – Jacques Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*

On this week's Thursday Night Opera House, I'm presenting Jacques Offenbach's only opera: *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (*The Tales of Hoffmann*). Born Jakob Offenbach in Cologne, Germany in 1819, his father took him to Paris in 1833, where he was enrolled at the Conservatory. After becoming one of Europe's finest cellists, Jacques began composing operettas for important theaters like the Bouffes-Parisiens. He was working on *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* when he died on October 5, 1880. A fascinating and at times disturbing work, it tells three inter-connected stories in which the poet is thwarted in love by his evil genius. It was premiered in Paris on February 10, 1881.

The opera opens in Luther's beer cellar in Nürnberg, Germany, where students are awaiting the end of a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, starring Stella, who's being amorously pursued by the poet Hoffmann (tenor **Nicolai Gedda**) and the sinister Counselor Lindorf (bass **Nicola Ghiuselev**). To pass the time, Hoffmann offers to tell the story of his three great loves, in all of which he is aided by his young friend Nicklausse (baritone **Jean-Christophe Benoit**)--who's later revealed to be the embodiment of the Muse of Poetry.

In Paris, Hoffmann is sold a magical pair of glasses by Coppélius (bass-baritone **George London**) and falls in love with Olympia (soprano **Gianna d'Angelo**), the "daughter" of the inventor Spalanzani (tenor **Michel Sénéchal**). She turns out to be a mechanical doll, which Coppélius destroys when he discovers that Spalanzani has double-crossed him.

In Venice, Hoffmann is having an affair with the courtesan Giulietta (soprano **Elizabeth Schwarzkopf**), who--at the urging of the magician Dapertutto (baritone **Ernest Blanc**)--steals his reflection. Hoffmann kills Giulietta's former lover Schlémil (baritone **Jean-Pierre Laffage**) in a duel and flees for his life.

In Munich, Hoffmann has fallen in love with the singer Antonia (soprano **Victoria de Los Angeles**). Her father, Crespel (bass **Robert Geay**), has forbidden her to sing, without telling her the reason: she is consumptive as was her dead mother, also a great singer. The evil quack Dr. Miracle (**George London**) brings to life the portrait of her mother and urges her to sing ever more ecstatically. The strain is too much and she dies in Hoffmann's arms.

Back in the Nürnberg beer cellar, it becomes apparent that all three of Hoffmann's lovers are aspects of the diva Stella. Hoffmann is now totally drunk and a triumphant Lindorf escorts Stella away. The opera ends with Nicklausse urging Hoffmann to return to poetry.

André Cluytens conducts the Paris Conservatory Orchestra and the René Duclos Chorus in this 1965 EMI recording, re-released in 1989 on CD number 63222.

From a 2000 production, **Natalie Dessay** sings Olympia's aria, "Les oiseaux dans la charmille": <http://youtu.be/LwfGFgWRfd4>.

As a bonus, we'll hear American baritone Sherrill Milnes sing Don Carlo's aria "Urna fatale del mio destino" from Verdi's *La forza del destino*.