

## December 9, 2021 – Jacques Offenbach’s *Orphée aux Enfers*

On this week’s **Thursday Night Opera House**, I’m delighted to present perhaps the most enduringly popular of all French operettas, *Orphée aux Enfers* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*), a hilarious burlesque of Greek mythology as well as a satire on Second Empire French society. First performed on October 21, 1858 in Paris, it was set to a libretto by Ludovic Halevéy. The team based this irreverent parody on the mythological story of Orpheus and Eurydice that had long attracted opera composers, beginning in 1600 with Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice*. In the 18th century, there were versions by Georg Philipp Telemann (1726), Carl Heinrich Graun (1752), and, most famously, Christoph Willibald Gluck’s 1762 *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Gluck’s 1774 French version, *Orphée et Euridice*, permanently popularized operatic treatments of the legend in France, and thus became the target of Offenbach’s parody.

In the Halevey/Offenbach retelling, the flighty Eurydice (soprano **Natalie Dessay**) is bored to death of her choirmaster-turned-violin teacher husband Orphée (tenor **Yann Beuron**). She’s been having an extramarital affair with the shepherd Aristéus (tenor **Jean-Paul Fouchecourt**), who reveals that he’s really Pluto, the Ruler of the Underworld, after he’s arranged to have her bitten by a snake. Eurydice is delighted to accompany him to the Underworld. Orphée is, in the meantime, in love with a shepherdess, so he’s ecstatic to be finally be rid of his harping wife. However, Public Opinion (contralto **Ewa Podles**), a character created by Halevéy and Offenbach, insists that Orphée try to reclaim her. Jupiter’s (baritone **Laurent Naouri**) attempts to instill good behavior into the other deities are thwarted first by their reminding him of his own innumerable amorous adventures and then by the arrival of Orphée, who halfheartedly pleads to have Eurydice returned to him.

Jupiter decides to personally investigate and descends to the Underworld with the rest of the gods. Euridice is kept in solitary confinement by the dim-witted former King of Boeotia, who’s known in the story as John Styx (baritone **Steven Cole**). He’s bored and willingly accepts a bribe from Jupiter, who transforms himself into a fly in order to get into Euridice’s cell. Orphée arrives and the now-exasperated Ruler of the Underworld offers to give the flighty wife back to him so long as he doesn’t turn and look at her while on the way back to Earth. To make sure that Orphée has to take Euridice back, Jupiter hurls a thunderbolt at his feet during the journey. Resigned to return to her boring husband, Euridice decides to become a Can-Can dancer. The operetta ends at the Moulin Rouge, where Euridice has become the star attraction.

**Marc Minkowski** conducts the Orchestra and Chorus of the National Opera of Lyons and the Grenoble Chamber Orchestra in this 1998 EMI recording, CD number 56725.

Here’s the famous Can-Can finale from *Orphée aux Enfers*:  
<https://youtu.be/38lfgWlg8o>

As a bonus, we’ll hear highlights from Offenbach’s *La Vie Parisienne* (*Parisian Life*), which uproariously portrays contemporary life in the 1866 French capital city.