

1 French Operetta: Offenbach and Company

JOHN KENRICK

Introduction

Jacques Offenbach is the grandfather of musical theatre as we know it. *Oklahoma*, *A Chorus Line*, *Hamilton* – all are direct descendants of his operettas. He composed almost a hundred of them, the best of which became the first musicals to enjoy international popularity. And Offenbach's trademark combination of infectious melody, wry humour and sheer fun still echoes through the great stage and screen musicals of our time. He did not invent operetta, but he was the first to write operettas that earned worldwide acclaim.

In mid-nineteenth-century Paris, a city obsessed with appearances, Offenbach's appearance was anything but average. Standing barely five feet tall, he had a pencil-thin build. To offset his oversized hawk-like nose, he grew shoulder-length hair and mutton-chop whiskers. A casual observer might have thought him just another eccentric. But anyone who looked into his dark, penetrating eyes could see the passion that made him an artistic pioneer. But before we get ahead of ourselves, just what is operetta? Some sources have defined it as a comic or lighter alternative to grand opera, but that tells us what operetta is not. I respectfully offer a more comprehensive definition:

Operetta is a versatile form of musical that integrates songs and musical sequences with dialogue to dramatize a story, retaining the vocal pyrotechnics and forms of grand opera (arias, choruses, act finales, etc.) but relying on more accessible melodies. The songs develop character and/or advance the plot, which can be comic, romantic, or a combination of both.¹

Musical theatre requires a sizeable audience, so it must reflect the popular culture of its era. In order to understand Offenbach and the birth of French operetta, we have to consider the city and the ethos that inspired and embraced his work.

Paris and the Second Empire

Sometime in the third century BC, a Celtic tribe called the *Parisii* established a trading centre on an island in the middle of the Seine, now called the Île de la Cité. Under the Romans, the settlement expanded on both

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banks of the river. In 508, the Frankish kings made it their capital. By the Middle Ages, Paris was one of Europe's premier cities. It became a filthy, treacherous labyrinth of streets and alleyways, with palaces and slums within a stone's throw of each other.

More than stones flew when the first French Revolution began in the 1780s. Once Parisians discovered that mobs and barricades could topple governments, they made a habit of it. Republican regimes came and went, heads rolled off the guillotine, and Napoleon Bonaparte's empire rose and fell. When 'Citizen King' Louis Philippe was swept off his throne in 1848, a Second Republic was declared.

Political uncertainty fed a nostalgia for happier times. Louis Bonaparte (1808–73), a nephew of Napoleon and a masterful manipulator of public opinion, returned from exile and got himself elected first president of the new republic. In 1851, he staged a coup and declared himself dictator. Press opposition was silenced, and a revised constitution reduced the National Assembly to little more than a rubber stamp. Within a year Louis 'allowed' himself to be declared emperor. Because a cousin (twenty years dead) had technically inherited Napoleon I's crown for a few days, Louis dubbed himself Napoleon III.

Once in power, the ruler of the so-called Second Empire encouraged financial expansion. The Industrial Revolution did wonders for the French economy. Manufacturing, shipping and business investments flourished. But could a rejuvenated empire be content with an ageing and rebellion-prone capital city? Although a major manufacturing centre, Paris was strangled by a tangle of narrow, putrid streets.²

The emperor appointed Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, a bureaucrat with a genius for organization, to oversee the rebuilding of Paris. When public funds ran short, Haussmann quietly borrowed billions from a government-owned bank. Much of Paris was literally rebuilt on credit. As the historic web of twisting streets was demolished, over three hundred thousand impoverished Parisians were forcibly relocated to outer *arrondissements* that soon became as desperate as the old ones.³ New boulevards, too broad to be barricaded, were lined by townhouses and posh apartment buildings designed for the expanding upper-middle class. These residential structures were restricted to six storeys, giving the boulevards a handsome uniformity. Occasional imperfections were intentionally included to prevent monotony.⁴ Glass-covered arcades called *passages* led off the boulevards to provide access to shops, *boîtes* and *cafés*. Parisians became *boulevardiers*, regularly strolling the streets to admire the latest additions.

Haussmann sprinkled Paris with public parks, and the grounds of Louis Napoleon's Tuileries Palace were opened to the public. The imperial residence was handsomely redecorated, but all was done on the cheap.

The new imperial silverware was merely gilt. The shiny 'golden' imperial insignia shining on army uniforms were brass. No one really cared. If all that glittered was not gold, at least there was plenty of glitter – and appearances were what mattered. Masked balls at the Tuileries and elsewhere gave the impression of Paris as a never-ending carnival.⁵

Much of the glitter was provided by the emperor, his courtiers and the nobles and diplomats who made up the *beau monde* of Parisian high society. Many are attracted by shiny objects, and Second Empire Paris attracted adventurers of every stripe. Investors and charlatans crowded the bustling stock exchange in the Place de la Bourse. Fortunes were made and lost on a daily basis. Men with money attracted the attentions of a new breed of courtesans known as *grandes horizontales*. Their beauty and scandalous behaviour made these women celebrities in their own right. They were one of the most visible elements of the *demi-monde*, which historian Virginia Rounding has described as 'that half-way world between respectable high society and the low life of the common prostitute ... where nothing is quite as it seems'.⁶

The *demi-monde* included artists, actors, shady business men, would-be courtesans – anyone who looked more respectable than they were. And looking respectable was easier thanks to department stores that sold affordable, mass-produced *haute couture*. Anyone who could scrape together a few sous could fit in while strolling among the rich and powerful or sitting beside them in theatres.

Journalists faced stern censorship, but those who wrote for the stage had an easier time. As long as one avoided direct attacks on the emperor or his government, there was room for creativity. Opera and theatre flourished, attracting an ongoing procession of talented hopefuls anxious to make their mark in Paris. Most were French, but some were immigrants – including the composer who would become the musical voice of the Second Empire.

Offenbach: Early Life and Career

Isaac Eberst was an itinerant Jewish musician in southern Prussia. Hoping to avoid anti-Semitic prejudice, he renamed his family after Offenbach-am-Main, a suburb of Frankfurt. By the time his seventh child, Jakob Offenbach, was born on 20 June 20 1819, Isaac was cantor of a Cologne synagogue. Jakob showed an early passion for music. Encouraged to study the violin, he insisted on switching to the cello, on which he proved to be a prodigy. He formed a trio with a brother and a sister and played in local restaurants.

Determined to give his son every opportunity, Isaac sent thirteen-year-old Jakob to Paris. The Conservatoire admitted only native French students, but Jakob's audition won him immediate admission. Within a year, the headstrong teen quit the school and joined the orchestra of the Opéra-Comique. He was befriended by chorus master Fromental Halévy, who instructed the ambitious youngster in composing for the stage. Two years later in 1837, Johann Strauss the Elder brought his Viennese orchestra to Paris, where his waltzes became the rage. Offenbach quickly published several waltzes of his own, winning his first taste of celebrity. To make his name sound less foreign, he began billing himself as 'Jacques Offenbach'.

Offenbach began turning out songs as well as dance music. He performed at the finest soirées, where he charmed some of the most influential people in France. With the *beau monde* in attendance, his cello concerts became social events. He toured England, giving a command performance for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle. On his return to Paris, he converted to Catholicism and married Hérminie d'Alcain.

Offenbach wanted to write full-length musical stage works – but something lighter than grand opera. The Comédie-Française appointed him musical director and allowed him to provide incidental music and songs for various plays. But company policy forbade full-length musical productions. While the government considered Offenbach's application for a licence to open a theatre of his own, he wrote *Oyayaye ou La reine des îles*, a musical farce presented for a few performances at the Folies-Nouvelles. The manager there was Florimond Ronger (1825–92), a trail blazing operetta composer who protected his job as a church organist by writing and performing in stage works under the pseudonym Hervé. He wrote more than 120 operettas, but because his licence limited him to no more than two singing characters, his dramatic options were limited. Although tuneful, Hervé's works never found a large audience outside of Paris (his late work *Mam'zelle Nitouche* excepted). Hervé may have been the first French operetta composer, but, thanks to talent, timing and sheer determination, Offenbach would turn this local phenomenon into a worldwide sensation.

The Right Time

In 1851, Great Britain built a 990,000-square foot steel and plate glass 'Crystal Palace' in London to house a world's fair. Celebrating the miracles of modern English industry, it drew millions of visitors. Not to be outdone, Louis Napoleon started planning an 1855 *Exposition Universelle* of his own to showcase France's economic advancement under his reign. Offenbach realized that masses of fairgoers looking for entertainment would provide

a unique opportunity. He leased a dilapidated wooden theatre on the avenue des Champs-Élysées, crammed in a few hundred seats and dubbed it the Bouffes-Parisiens.⁷

With the help of several well-connected admirers – including Henri de Villesment, founder of the newspaper *Le Figaro* – he obtained a licence to present comic plays with music. Because of the small size of the theatre, the licence limited Offenbach to one-act works with no more than three characters; a fourth non-singing character could be added for an added fee. Offenbach had a new one-act operetta ready. But audiences would expect a full evening's entertainment. To create additional material, he called in Ludovic Halévy (1834–1908), an aspiring playwright and nephew to Fromental Halévy. (Who you know mattered even then!) It was the beginning of what would prove to be a long and profitable collaboration.

The Bouffes-Parisiens opened on 5 July 1855. The programme included a prologue (*Entrez, Messieurs, Mesdames*), a pastoral (*Une nuit blanche*) and a pantomime. But the highlight was the operetta *Les deux aveugles*. Billed as a 'bouffonnerie musicale', this half-hour long one-acter involved two beggars pretending to be blind while battling for the right to panhandle on a popular bridge. Such con men were common on the streets of Paris. Étienne Pradeau and Jean-François Berthelier triumphed as the beggars.

With jaded tastes and substantial disposable income, Parisians had developed a craving for anything new and sensational. They packed the Bouffes-Parisiens nightly, and Offenbach's theatre became *the* place to be seen. Tickets were so hard to get that the composer's wife had to sit on the aisle steps. The emperor was unwilling to appear at a theatre that was not funded by his government but got around that by having a command performance at the Tuileries.

During the run, Offenbach was introduced to Berthelier's mistress, soprano Hortense Schneider (1833–1920). When she auditioned for the composer, he stopped her before she had finished her second song and hired her on the spot. She made her Bouffes debut soon afterwards and proved an immediate sensation. Although not a great beauty, her charm and stage presence were undeniable. We can only wonder if either the composer or the soprano realized that each would become a defining factor in the other's career.

When the chill winds of autumn forced the Exposition to close, *Les deux aveugles* was still playing to capacity houses. Offenbach leased a winter-friendly theatre located in the Passage Choiseul, a fashionable shopping arcade on the rue Monsigny. After costly renovations, Offenbach had a 900-seat jewel box auditorium with excellent sight lines and acoustics. He gave this venue the old name of Bouffes-Parisiens.

On 29 December 1855, the new theatre opened with *Ba-ta-clan*, a one-act ‘chinoiserie musicale’. Fé-an-nich-ton and Ké-ki-ka-ko are two Parisians stranded in the royal court of China. While plotting their return home, they learn that Emperor Fè-ni-han is another stranded Parisian. To everyone’s surprise, the scheming captain of the guard, Ko-ko-ri-ko (the French equivalent of ‘cock-a-doodle-doo’), is yet another Parisian. This unseen character communicates via notes and sends the other three back to France so that he can become the new ruler.

This was Offenbach and Halévy’s first major collaboration. The music spoofed grand opera, with quotations of Meyerbeer melodies thrown in. The libretto, in which political power was a joke, court life empty mummery and an emperor a poseur, was a sly comic reflection of the French court. But the show was so charming and the satire so genial that it would have looked clumsy if Louis Napoleon’s censors had tried to shut it down. So, the emperor and his ministers joined in the applause, and *Ba-ta-clan* thrived.

The true challenge of theatrical success is to keep the hits coming. And Offenbach had to keep standards high. The intimacy of the Bouffes-Parisiens meant that the lyrics and dialogue mattered just as much as the music, and artistic flaws were hard to miss. In an 1856 article, he wrote:

In an opera which lasts only three quarters of an hour, in which only four characters are allowed and an orchestra of at most thirty persons is employed, one must have ideas and tunes that are as genuine as hard cash. It is also worthy of note that with a small orchestra, such as incidentally sufficed for Mozart and Cimarosa, it is very difficult to cover up mistakes and ineptitudes such as an orchestra of eighty players can gloss over without difficulty.⁸

In 1856, Offenbach wrote and produced seven one-act operettas. The zany plots were always rooted in social satire. In *Le 66* (1856), a peasant thinks he holds the winning lottery ticket 66, only to find out that he’s actually got number 99. Unable to meet the constant demand for new operettas, Offenbach presented comic operas by Adam, Mozart and Rossini. He also held a competition, asking composers to create music for a Halévy libretto. There were two winners – Charles Lecocq (1832–1913) and Georges Bizet. Both versions were presented at the Bouffes. But Lecocq, infuriated by the implication that anyone was his equal, held a lifelong grudge against Offenbach.

Offenbach usually did not compose until he had a completed libretto in hand. A speedy worker, he was always pushing Halévy and other playwrights to deliver. Offenbach even had a writing desk installed in his carriage so that he could compose during Paris traffic jams. Uneasy with

solitude. he threw lavish parties and sketched new melodies amid chatter and gossip. His attention to musical detail was extraordinary. He purposely used tempi and melodies to strengthen the overall dramatic effect. Even so, nothing he wrote was sacrosanct. Once rehearsals began, he would ruthlessly cut and revise material. After premieres, any music that did not please the public was disposed of.

Offenbach's melodies delighted all classes, with his music equally at home in taverns and in ballrooms. Tourists took these melodies home with them, and Offenbach's songs swept through Europe. Offenbach's troupe toured the continent in 1857, bringing his works to Vienna and London, where local translations became standard fare until well into the next century.

Orpheus in the Underworld: Audiences in Heaven

The more money Offenbach made, the more he spent. He poured profits into theatre renovations and new productions. He entertained lavishly, was generous to anyone in need and was an inveterate gambler. So even though the Bouffes-Parisiens was packed at every performance, the composer and his company were soon swimming in debt.⁹

Offenbach's answer was to dream bigger. Now that Napoleon III himself was a fan, the government issued the Bouffes a new licence permitting larger casts. Halévy provided a multi-act libretto inspired by the Greek myth of Orpheus. Since Halévy had just been appointed secretary general to the Ministry for Algeria, playwright Hector-Jonathan Crémieux expanded and revised the text. Anxious to keep his new job, Halévy gave Crémieux sole credit. While Offenbach avoided bill collectors by hiding out in a series of hotels and borrowed rooms, he turned out his most ambitious score up to that point. Having long since perfected the art of dramatizing characters in intimate works, he and his collaborators made the transition to writing large-scale operetta with ease.

When *Orphée aux enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld) opened on 21 October 1858, it boasted six principals, more than a dozen supporting characters, a full chorus, and sets by artist Gustave Doré. As in the original Greek myth, the musician Orpheus goes into the dreaded land of the dead to bring back his deceased wife Eurydice. But in this version, Orpheus is bored with his cheating spouse and only makes the trip to placate a nagging character named Public Opinion. Jupiter and the gods of Olympus are depicted as vain and capricious, a direct reflection of Louis Napoleon and his court. However, this operetta's intention was not to incite rebellion but to evoke laughter. In the world of *opéras bouffes*, nobody is perfect, and everyone can afford to laugh –even at themselves.

Jupiter is depicted as an overworked philanderer with a jealous wife and a self-indulgent mob of courtiers. The king of the gods also shared Napoleon III's obsession with public opinion. Jupiter warns the gods, 'Let us preserve appearances, for everything depends on that!' But like his imperial echo, Jupiter has a knack of getting his way. At the end of the operetta, he frees the beautiful Eurydice from Hades to appease Public Opinion. But he tricks Orpheus into making a minor mistake and as a 'punishment' sends Eurydice to Olympus to serve as an acolyte to Bacchus. Orpheus and his unwanted wife are free of each other, Public Opinion is thwarted, and Jupiter has ready access to a new mistress.

Initial response to the piece was positive, but there were rumblings of dissent. French intellectuals treated ancient mythology as a serious subject, and some took issue with Offenbach's irreverent approach. Six weeks into the run, just as ticket sales were slowing down, a major critic published an article vigorously condemning the show for 'profaning sacred antiquity'. Sensing an opportunity, Offenbach published a witty reply in a competing paper – pointing out that the same critic had spoofed mythology in his own writing. Parisians loved a juicy controversy and wanted to see what was inspiring this ruckus. Ticket sales soared. After 280 performances, the exhausted cast demanded a break, protesting that it was unnatural for a large production to run so long. In a few months, *Orphée aux enfers* was reintroduced at the Bouffes, and the composer would revive it whenever his income needed a boost.

Many of Offenbach's upbeat melodies have an infectious, giddy lilt that this author refers to as the 'Offenbach bounce'. It offers the sonic equivalent of drinking fine champagne – minus any hangover. In *Orphée*, the god Mercury's *rondo saltarelle* ('E hop! E hop!' / Look out! Look out!) sets feet tapping and inspires delight on the first hearing as well as the hundredth. And Offenbach's 'galop infernal' in the final scene became the most popular cancan music of all time. It remains the oldest musical theatre tune still in widespread use, a universally recognized melodic symbol of Paris and of French culture.

The lack of international copyright laws made Offenbach's scores irresistible to US producers, who staged his works without paying him a penny in royalties. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, ten or more Offenbach revivals played on Broadway almost every year. These productions then made fortunes touring North America, advertised as coming 'Direct from Broadway'. The composer wasted little energy worrying about receiving royalties from the United States or other countries that ignored French copyrights. With new hits pouring out of his pen, he earned far more than most composers of his time could dream of.¹⁰

Offenbachiades: The Golden Years

Orphée aux enfers was the first in a decade-long series of jubilant, full-length operettas that are referred to as ‘offenbachiades’. These celebratory send-ups of Second Empire politics and society were so genial and seductive that no one was quite sure whether Offenbach and his librettists were critics or publicists of their comic subjects. A few went so far as to call Offenbach ‘*le grand corrupteur*’.¹¹ By any measure, Offenbach was a leading figure in society. In 1860, he formally became a French citizen and a year later received the Legion of Honour. Then the emperor’s stepbrother, the influential Duc de Morny, asked to co-author an Offenbach libretto with Halévy. *Monsieur Choufleuri* was not a major hit, but the involvement of a member of the royal family meant that Offenbach and his operettas were as in vogue as could be.

Aside from his penchant for overspending, he lived the life of a respectable gentleman. He relished fine clothes, had a fine residence in Paris and a country estate in Étretat. He made regular trips to the spa at Ems, where he ‘took the waters’ in a vain attempt to alleviate his chronic arthritis. When in Paris, he was almost always immersed in composing, producing and managing his productions. A rare free hour might find him strolling in the gardens of the Tuileries or conversing with colleagues at a café. When vacationing or on tour, he pestered collaborators with letters and telegrams. He was always impatiently waiting for the next libretto or just the next scene to compose for.

In 1864, Meilhac and Halévy concocted *La belle Hélène*, inspired by the legendary Helen of Troy. As Offenbach began turning out a beguiling score, he realized the title role would be perfect for Hortense Schneider. However, the actress, who had gone to another company to obtain a higher salary, had just left that company for the same reason. With no producer willing to meet her record-breaking demands, Schneider abruptly announced her retirement, sold her furniture and was packing to leave Paris.

Offenbach and Halévy showed up at her door, hats in hand. After some lively negotiation, the two men agreed to pay Schneider an unprecedented 2,000 francs a month. Her temperamental outbursts made rehearsals at the Théâtre des Variétés exasperating. More than once, Offenbach walked out swearing he would never return. But in the theatre, triumph heals all wounds. When *La belle Hélène* opened, *le Tout-Paris* embraced the show, which ran for 700 performances. Within six years, it was performed in every major theatrical city in Europe and the United States.

In this version, Helen is depicted as the ultimate Parisian courtesan. Bored with her marriage to the King of Sparta, Helen is so hungry for a change that

she welcomes being kidnapped by Paris, the prince of Troy. Once again, Offenbach and his team turned an ancient legend into a genial satire, but this time their target was Parisian society's insatiable thirst for pleasure. The newest member of that team was co-librettist Henri Meilhac (1830–97), a journalist and boulevardier-turned-playwright, and a former schoolmate of Halévy. That acquaintance opened the way to a collaboration that would last for years. Together, Meilhac and Halévy co-authored the librettos for several of Offenbach's greatest hits, as well as numerous plays and eventually the libretto for Bizet's *Carmen* (1875). The two writers became so closely identified with each other that Offenbach referred to them as 'Meil-hal'.

Spoofig Courts and Crowns

By 1866, years of over-indulgence were catching up with Louis Napoleon, who now suffered painful bladder stones. The powerful Duc de Morny died at age 53 thanks to dissipated living and quack physicians. Even the French economy, built on reckless investments and a constant cycle of booms and busts, was showing signs of exhaustion. In an ominous development, Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck was building a federation of more than two dozen petty monarchies to form a new German Empire. With a large and well-equipped army, Germany posed a serious threat to France. In short, it was the perfect time for an operetta with a macabre sense of humour.

Barbe-bleue (1866) revisited the ghoulis French folktale of a knight who marries and murders half a dozen wives. But in this version, his chief poisoner has secretly kept them alive and . . . well serviced. All this occurs under the nose of a despotic king and his dissolute court. Eventually, Bluebeard's latest wife leads the others in humiliating and escaping forever from their murderous spouse. A century after its debut, this work found renewed popularity in East Germany, where audiences saw parallels to their own experiences under a communist dictatorship.

For *La vie parisienne* (1866), Offenbach, Meilhac and Halévy dispensed with mythical settings and set the action in contemporary Paris. The plot involved a boulevardier betting that he could seduce a titled tourist. With characters from all classes of society, this operetta gave audiences at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal the opportunity to laugh at mirror images of themselves. Reality had become improbable enough to be accurately depicted in a comic operetta.

At one point in *La vie parisienne*, a Brazilian millionaire arrives, determined to have a whale of a time in the city of lights. In a rapid-fire rondo brimming with 'Offenbach bounce', he explains that as this is his third visit to Paris, he knows exactly what to expect:

I am Brazilian, I have gold,
And I come from Rio de Janeiro
Twenty times richer than before,
Paris, I come back to you again!
Hurray! I just landed,
Put on your false hair, cocottes!
To your false teeth I bring
My whole fortune to consume!
The pigeon comes, so pluck me bare!
Take my dollars, my bank notes,
My watch, my hat, my boots,
But tell me you love me!
I will behave exquisitely,
But you know my nature.
I will get pleasure in return,
Yes, I will get my money's worth!¹²

Tourists like this one were about to flood Paris as never before. With the Second Empire showing serious signs of fatigue, Louis Napoleon decided to mount another *Exposition universelle* in 1867. Determined to make it bigger and more impressive than its predecessor, it was enclosed in a vast open iron and glass arena. Along with millions of commoners, this fair drew most of the crowned heads of Europe. All were suitably impressed by the technological wonders on view at the Expo, but both royalty and the general public were far more excited to see Offenbach's newest *opéra bouffe*.

Just days after the Expo's opening, *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867) premiered at the Théâtre des Variétés. Halévy and Meilhac's libretto was a hilarious satire of the chaos caused by promiscuous, self-indulgent monarchs. Thanks in large part to Schneider's seductive performance, royals chose to see *La Grande-Duchesse* as a send-up of Catherine the Great. But it was aimed at the sexual excesses of monarchs of either gender. In the operetta, the female ruler of a fictional German duchy has a weakness for men in uniform. She declares a needless war in order to find new prospects. Reviewing new recruits, she admits in the ribald 'Ah, que j'aime le militaire':

Ah, how I love the military!
Their cocky uniforms,
Their moustaches and their stiff plumes.¹³

She promotes Fritz, a handsome but naive private, to the rank of general. To the dismay of her jealous courtiers, he wins a battle without firing a shot – by getting the enemy drunk. When he fails to respond to the duchess's romantic overtures, she allows her courtiers to humiliate him.

Fritz returns to his peasant fiancée, and the Grand Duchess is manoeuvred into marrying her long-time betrothed, the foppish Prince Paul. She acquiesces with the wry observation, 'When you cannot have what you love, you must love what you have.'

Almost every world leader visiting the exposition made a point of catching *La Grande-Duchesse*. Many of them also paid court to leading lady Hortense Schneider. So many stopped by her dressing room that the hallway leading to it was dubbed 'le passage des princes'.¹⁴ To Schneider's dismay, the same nickname soon applied to her. Her generous admirers added to her celebrated collection of diamonds. Schneider kept them in a lockbox in her dressing room, guarded by eight dogs – none of which was nearly as ferocious as their owner. One afternoon, Schneider's carriage arrived at the exposition's gate. When police explained that only royalty could drive into the grounds, she replied with mock grandeur, 'Make way, I am the Grand Duchess of Gérolstein!' The gendarmes saluted and passed her through. No one took offence. After all, the boundary between reality and make-believe was growing blurrier by the day.

Disaster and Renewal

The public's appetite for 'Offenbachiades' was fading, so Offenbach shifted gears and stepped closer to the world of *opéra comique*. Meilhac and Halévy's libretto for *La Périchole* (1868) dispensed with satire, offering the tale of a beautiful Peruvian street singer who fights off the amorous obsessions of a viceroy. Hortense Schneider won acclaim as the titular peasant and kept the Variétés packed for months. In 1869, Offenbach labelled *Vert-Vert* an *opéra comique*, as he did *Fantasio* (1872), *Madame Favart* (1878) and *La fille du tambour-major* (1879).

When Offenbach and his team offered Schneider another role short on glamour, she refused – a decision she probably came to regret. *Les brigands* (1869) involved a band of common forest bandits out to fleece the Duke of Milan. They outsmart the *carabinieri*, military police who proclaim their approach with the plodding tramp of their boots ('de bottes, de bottes, de bottes!'). The *carabinieri* became the toast of Paris, re-enacting their number in full costume at balls and parties. With Bismarck threatening to put a Prussian prince on the Spanish throne, nervous Frenchmen enjoyed a chance to laugh at men in uniform.

In 1869, Offenbach turned fifty. He was the undisputed master of the operetta world. *Les brigands* was the latest in a string of hits reaching back more than a decade. His scores dominated the stages of Paris, Vienna, London and New York. His music was familiar to most of the civilized

word. But *sic transit gloria mundi*. Within two years, this triumphant moment would be a bitter memory. Realizing that the French army was all flash, Bismarck sabotaged peace efforts and lured Louis Napoleon into the Franco-Prussian War.¹⁵ Paris sent the army off to war with patriotic fervour, singing marches from *La Grande-Duchesse*. Louis Napoleon and his disorganized troops suffered a crushing defeat at Sedan in September 1870, and a Republican government sued for peace. The emperor went into exile, and that should have been the end of it. But Paris declared itself an independent commune, and the resulting siege left thousands dead and much of the city in ruins. Rebuilding began almost immediately, but the acrimony of defeat lingered.

Post-war Paris belonged to a new and expanding middle class. The *beau monde* of the imperial court, and the demi-monde that shadowed them, were gone. With almost all the other icons of the Second Empire either dead or in exile, Offenbach became a prime target. The German press attacked him for being French, the French press attacked him for being German, and both sides despised him because he was a Jew. Caricatures depicted 'the Great Corrupter' as a monkey, and for a time the major theatres of Paris would not even consider staging anything by Offenbach.

The frivolous *opéras bouffes* of the past were out of fashion, but Offenbach (as usual) needed money. He turned his energies to *opéras féeries*, operettas that stressed large casts, fantasy plots and spectacular effects. Playwright Victorien Sardou provided the libretto for *Le roi Carotte* (1872), in which an irresponsible king is replaced by a magical giant carrot with a court of dancing vegetables. *Le voyage dans la lune* (1875) was based on one of Jules Verne's outer space novels. Both enjoyed profitable runs.

In between, Charles Lecocq scored a whopping success with his score for *La fille de Madame Angot* (1873), the story of a girl seeking romance who gets tangled up in the aftermath of the 1793 'reign of terror'. The historic setting and straightforward plot meant that it is usually classified as an *opéra comique*, but to our ears today it is an operetta. Lecocq wrote several other hits, most notably *Giroflé-Girofla* (1874) and *Le petit duc* (1876). The charm and easy humour of Lecocq's operettas were appealing to middle-class audiences, and he delighted in temporarily eclipsing Offenbach.

Robert Planquette (1848–1903) was a Parisian café pianist who achieved a surprise success with his first operetta score, *Les cloches de Corneville* (1877). A romantic comedy involving mistaken identities in a French village during the reign of Louis XIV, it proved a great favourite in London (where it ran for over 700 performances) and New York as *The Chimes of Normandy*. Planquette had several other international hits, most notably *Rip Van Winkle* (1888).

Falling back on his first full-scale hit, Offenbach revived *Orphée aux enfers* as a spectacle in 1874. With over 200 in the ensemble and expanded to four acts, *Orphée* won fresh praise. Amid all the fun, Parisians found themselves once again warming to the ageing composer. That same year, a lavish revival of *La Périchole* succeeded, with Hortense Schneider back in the title role. Schneider next starred in Hervé's *La belle poule* (1875). When critics mentioned that the forty-two-year-old diva was looking 'motherly', she promptly retired. That same year, Offenbach debuted no fewer than five new scores.

Although Offenbach had composed several grand operas over the years, none had enjoyed major success. He collaborated on and off over several years with poet Jules Barbier on *Les contes d'Hoffmann* but kept setting it aside to complete new operetta scores that were not among his best efforts. The Opéra-Comique finally agreed to present *Hoffmann*, but the costly production suffered a succession of delays. Despite crippling pain, the composer supervised rehearsals until his health collapsed. Offenbach died on 5 October 1880 at the age of sixty-one. When rain thinned the crowd at his funeral, one friend never wavered. Hortense Schneider walked with the coffin all the way to Montmartre Cemetery. In February 1881, *Les contes d'Hoffmann* premiered, and it remains a favourite at opera houses worldwide.

By contrast, the French operettas of Offenbach and his contemporaries are now rarely performed outside of France. But these works are the artistic ancestors of musical theatre as we know it, and they are more than echoes of Second Empire Paris. A century and a half after their premieres, the best of these works remain insightful and entertaining, with scores rich in melody and filled with the 'Offenbach bounce'. And scores that have fallen out of use are ripe for rediscovery.

Notes

1. John Kenrick, *Musical Theatre: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 21.
2. Colin Jones, *Paris: The Biography of a City* (New York: Viking 2004), 304.
3. Jones. *Paris*, 318.
4. Stéphane Kirkland, *Paris Reborn: Napoleon III, Baron Haussmann, and the Quest to Build a Modern City* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 172–3.
5. Alistair Horne, *The Seven Ages of Paris* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 241.
6. Virginia Rounding, *Grandes Horizontales: The Lives and Legends of Four Nineteenth-Century Courtesans* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 2.
7. Peter Gammond, *Offenbach: His Life and Times* (London: Omnibus Press, 1980), 37.
8. Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 85.
9. James Harding, *Jacques Offenbach: A Biography* (London: John Calder, 1980), 89.
10. See Harding, *Jacques Offenbach*, 155.
11. Jacques Rancière, *The Intellectual and His People: Staging the People*. (London: Verso, 2012), Vol. 2, 18.

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12. Author's translation.
13. Author's translation.
14. Alexander Faris, *Jacques Offenbach* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), 149.
15. Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 285–6, and 288.

Recommended Reading

- Burchell, Samuel C. *Upstart Empire: Paris During the Brilliant Years of Louis Napoleon*. London: MacDonald, 1971.
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