Jacques Offenbach was a prolific composer of operettas, but Tales of Hoffmann is his only opera. It is one of the great operatic oddities of all time, but also a remarkably popular member of the standard repertoire. The Met has staged Hoffmann more than 250 times, in a variety of productions.

The history of this opera began in 1851, when two of that century’s most popular playwrights – Jules Barbier and Michel Carré – wrote a play based on the fantastic stories published by another contemporary writer – E.T.A. Hoffmann. In that play, Barbier and Carré wrote in a major role for E.T.A. Hoffmann, the author of the stories. That would be equivalent to someone in 1625 writing a new version of Othello that included a leading role for Will Shakespeare. Not only did Barbier and Carré manage to pull this off, successfully, but they enlisted the help of a young virtuoso cellist to conduct the incidental music for the play. That cellist was Jacques Offenbach.

Twenty five years later, that same virtuoso cellist was now the most popular composer of operettas in the world, and he was looking for a libretto in which he could invest himself. He wanted to prove to the world that he was not just the composer of popular music, but was a musician to be taken seriously. He went back to the script for which he had conducted the incidental music, and asked the writer, Barbier, (Carré had died) to prepare an opera libretto based on the play. This would be his magnum opus.

While working on Tales of Hoffmann, Offenbach wrote five more operettas, just to pay the bills, but Hoffmann was his focus. Unfortunately, Offenbach never finished his last effort. When he died in 1880 he had composed a lot of material for Hoffmann, but he had not yet synthesized his efforts. It was confusing, and still is, even though several musicologists have offered reconstructions.

The story of the opera is basically Hoffmann’s telling of three different failed love relationships, each one overlapping the other with parallel characters. Note that the reasons for the failed relationships are rather atypical. Nothing simple, like, “You had an affair!” Rather, Olympia turned out to be a robot, not even human, and Hoffmann didn’t notice because he was wearing rose-colored glasses. Really. Giulietta stole Hoffmann’s shadow in exchange for a diamond. And poor Antonia was under the influence of her mother’s ghost, who encouraged her daughter to sing, knowing that singing would kill her.

(continued...)

Hibla Gerzmava sings all three heroines

Operaphoria™: A state of ecstasy induced by opera
The three stories are bracketed by a Prologue and an Epilogue. The opera opens in Luther’s, a Nuremburg bar, with a tribute to the numbing effects of alcohol. The opening lines are “Glug, glug, glug…” sung by barflies called “The Spirits of Beer and Wine,” who tell us that getting drunk is the way to have a good time. The poet Hoffmann enters, already drunk. He is in love with Stella, an opera star who, that very night, is singing Donna Anna in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. Even though Luther’s is attached to the opera house, it is a downscale bar with low-grade musical tastes. The barflies prod Hoffmann into singing a ditty about “Klein Zack,” an oddly shaped dwarf. While singing, he recedes into a reverie about his three lost loves, all of whom have something in common with Stella. They are, in effect, parts of her.

The next three acts feature the three lost loves that devastated Hoffmann. In each case, an evil character is blamed for Hoffmann’s failure in life and love. Finally, in the Epilogue, the Muse attempts to comfort Hoffmann with the observation that pain is good for the creative process. He might be a total failure in interpersonal relationships, but at least he has his poetry. The opera ends with Hoffmann clutching his poems, a caricature of an alcoholic artist who thinks alcohol or drugs can court the Muse. He puts himself into that category of artists who have never learned they would have been greater artists if they were not alcoholics, and that whatever greatness they achieved was in spite of their alcoholism, not because of it.

So, what is this opera about? At the end of the opera the barflies are still singing about the glories of alcohol, and the Muse tells Hoffmann:

*Let the ashes of your heart
Ignite your genius once again.
The Muse will ease your blessed suffering.
Love makes one great.
Tears make one even greater.*

Which is not true, of course. Tears do not make us greater. Certainly, how we handle our grieving can result in personal growth, but tears and pain and suffering can take an enormous toll on us, and some of us don’t survive it.

However, there are real lessons to be learned from *Hoffmann*. The story of Olympia, for example, is not just a silly story about someone who falls in love with a robotic doll. Rather, it is another way for us to look at the archetypes of Isolde, or Cyrano’s Roxane. These women were fantasies generated by incomplete men who needed to believe in feminine perfection as a way of saving themselves. Hoffmann does something similar. He is fitted with “rose-colored eyes” and falls in love with a woman who has no identity of her own, but is the creation of men who needed her to be what they needed.

We also learn to not allow the sale of our shadow to anyone for any reason. That is, we should not bargain with someone who wants to take away our identity, our sense of self, for their own personal gain. Nor should we fall in love with people we cannot support. If we need someone to give us something that will diminish them in any way, we should release them to grow without us. If someone cannot sing, we must not ask them to sing.

Finally – perhaps an unintended lesson – don’t drink so much. – GP.

**Production**

*Tales of Hoffmann*, by Offenbach
Sat, Jan 31, 2015  12:55 p.m.
3 hrs 45 min, Two Intermissions

Conductor:  *Yves Abel*
Production:  *Bartlett Sher*
Olympia, Giulietta and Antonia, All sung by  *Hibla Gerzmava*
Nicklausse:  *Kate Lindsey*
Hoffmann:  *Vittorio Grigolo*
The Four Villains:  *Thomas Hampson*
E.T.A.

*Tales of Hoffmann* has been described as bizarre, and the description probably fits. However, E.T.A. Hoffmann was not bizarre simply for shock effect. There is great depth of searching inquiry in all his stories. E.T.A. Hoffmann himself was an oddity in mind and body, and the ditty of “Klein Zack” in the Prologue might be at least partly autobiographical. In his personal and social life E.T.A. Hoffmann was always in trouble, and he cultivated his antisocial image quite fearlessly. His stories, also, appeared to challenge the reader to misunderstand him. And even though he was quite an interesting person, he typically insulted his hosts and other guests at parties, to the degree that he was no longer welcomed at future gatherings in those homes. Nevertheless, along the way, the ashes of his heart ignited his creative genius. In addition to *Tales of Hoffman*, The Nutcracker ballet is based on one of his short stories. Also *Coppelia*. He explored limits and pushed boundaries. If he were in Paris today he would be carrying a placard, “Je suis Charlie.” — GP

**All Three**

The three failed love relationships in *Tales of Hoffmann* are usually sung by three different sopranos – first of all because they really require three different types of voices. Besides that, each role is enough for anybody for one evening. However, a few sopranos with a wide range, and with the ability to color their voices to match the different roles, have sung all three roles in the same opera, the same evening – a major achievement. Sometimes the opera is presented as a vehicle for a soprano who wants to demonstrate she can do it.

Olympia is a high, light coloratura soprano. Think of Kathleen Kim, who could be the reigning

(continued)

Olympia. Giulietta is a dramatic soprano, and Antonia is a lyric soprano.

For the first six performances of this run of *Tales of Hoffmann*, Hibla Gerzmava will show her colors, singing all three. The simulcast of January 31 is the fifth of her six spectacular performances. In February the three roles will be cast with three different sopranos. — GP

**Hard Work**

We will not print the name of the author of the following quote here, because we are not treating him fairly. But, just to give our readers some idea of how hard some musicologists are working to understand this opera, following is a fragment of an analysis of *Tales of Hoffmann* we found recently on the internet.

“...refers to concepts of intertextuality, intermediality, ... ‘bricolage’... demonstrates how – within this process of structural ‘translation’ – central motifs, themes or models are transformed into the opera by becoming relevant, realised or re-contextualised and, in an eminent self-reflexive turn, are reflected and criticised. These aspects, closely linked to each other, stretch from musico-literary poetological reflexions on models of production or artistry, concepts of the author and the (decentralised) subject, to critics of Enlightenment and materialism, questions on gender, and, finally, to a de-/reconstruction of romantic thoughts.”

Get it? If not, don’t worry. This is an excellent, engaging, production of a great opera. It is thoroughly entertaining, and supported by the best singing of Offenbach’s best music. — GP

**Next Simulcast:** February 14, 2015
Two One-Act Operas
*Iolanta*, by Tchaikovsky, and
*Bluebeard’s Castle*, by Bartok

 Operaphoria program notes written by Glen Peterson and Gil Davis. Direct feedback to Operaphoria@gmail.com