

---

## Introduction

---

[N]ot only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as the sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.

(Walter Benjamin, "The Story-Teller")

BENJAMIN'S characterization of the storyteller as a mediator between past and present, between life and death, and as a figure who cannot be securely located in any single condition, will serve to introduce my discussion of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, which may be interpreted on more than one level as a death-utterance. Death plays a prominent role in the plots of the opera's three tales: the death of illusions, in the story of Olympia; the death of love, in the story of Antonia; and the symbolic death of the lover himself in the story of Hoffmann's lost reflection. But the larger narrative, of which these three tales are only constituent parts, also shows us Hoffmann in a situation resembling Benjamin's moment of death: the poet is a man (even a "poor wretch") looking back over his life with the authority, perhaps for the first time, to make sense of the whole scope of his experience and to recount that experience to others. The opera is the last utterance of another dying man, its composer, for as Hoffmann reviews his three *folles amours*, so Offenbach in the course of the work reviews his own compositional past, drawing its various elements into a musico-dramatic kaleidoscope. Finally, the death of the composer left an indelible mark on the piece, which was not and never has been satisfactorily finished.

It might be more precise, then, to say that *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* and its narrator are not dying, but rather *undead*. Even after his symbolic death at the loss of his reflection, the narrator continues to live and speak; likewise, his three lost beloved women turn out not to be truly dead, but only masks worn by a prima donna who remains very much alive. And the opera, despite or perhaps because of its unfinished condition, lives and flourishes as well. Consider the conductor-scholar Antonio de Almeida's description

#### 4 INTRODUCTION

of how he discovered a cache of new sources for the opera in the home of one of Offenbach's descendants in 1976: "Although Madame Cusset, who represented the Offenbach family, insisted they had little, if any, music . . . I was finally allowed to probe around the studio. In a very large *armoire*, I spotted two large green cartons, somewhat like the ones in which French notaries file their acts. I opened them, and it took the merest of glances to realize the real Offenbachian treasure trove I was facing."<sup>1</sup> This tale has all the elements of a Gothic drama in miniature: the ancestral home, the gatekeeper, the search, the casket within a casket, and finally the shock of recognition at the uncanny vitality of the casket's contents, which would provide material for a new edition by Fritz Oeser that radically altered the opera's contents and form. The opera was not laid to rest with this edition, however: rather, de Almeida's adventure was repeated in November 1984 with the emergence of another "treasure trove" and Michael Kaye's preparation in 1992 of another critical edition, equally distant from Oeser's and from the traditional version. Nor is the story ended, for Jean-Christophe Keck promised in 1993 that he would publish yet another edition, using sources to which Kaye had not had access.<sup>2</sup>

Thus *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* has resided and continues to reside, in Slavoj Žižek's phrase, "between two deaths"—in a liminal condition of restless incompleteness. How appropriate, then, that the opera should be populated with undead musical presences: Hoffmann, the storyteller; Dr. Miracle, the demonic violinist; Antonia, the singer suspended between life and death and between human and instrumental status; a feminine robot and a dead mother's portrait that inexplicably come to life. Indeed, *restlessness* characterized this piece from its very inception, for Offenbach conceived the idea for his "Hoffmann opera" decades before he sat down to write it, and once he began to write the work kept changing under his hands. The usually speedy and efficient composer was unable to put his project to rest, but instead kept rethinking, reshaping, and revising it, both in response to his own impulses and to external ones.

#### A LONG GENESIS

Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* is based on a five-act *drame fantastique* of the same name, which had enjoyed a reasonable success at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in March 1851. By making Hoffmann himself the narrator, the playwrights Jules Barbier and Michel Carré had contrived to stitch together three short tales, each thrilling but none substantial enough for a full evening's entertainment. E.T.A. Hoffmann's stories provided a cast of fantastical characters and four colorful settings: a tavern, a mad scientist's workshop, a parlor with its imposing portrait of Antonia's mother,

## INTRODUCTION 5

and a Venetian palazzo, complete with gondolas and faro tables. This synopsis of the play will also serve as a précis of the opera's plot, despite changes Barbier made to the ending of the opera's Venetian act:

### Act I. Prologue

*Luther's tavern, attached to a theater where Don Giovanni is being performed. Councilor Lindorf arrives in search of the prima donna "La Stella" and learns to his disgust that she has promised to meet the poet Hoffmann. A crowd of students arrive, followed by Hoffmann and his companion Nicklausse. Hoffmann offers to tell the stories of his three "mad loves."*

### Act II. The Tale of Olympia

(based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman")

*Hoffmann's first love is the daughter of Spalanzani, a mad scientist. Seen through magic spectacles provided by the sinister Coppélius, Olympia appears as a charming girl. At her debut party, Olympia sings a brilliant aria and seems to accept Hoffmann's love. But when they dance together, she flings him aside, breaking his spectacles, and runs away. Coppélius, furious at Spalanzani for cheating him out of some money, breaks Olympia into pieces—and Hoffmann realizes that she was only a robot.*

### Act III. The Tale of Antonia

(based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Counselor Krespel")

*Hoffmann's second love, Antonia, has a mysterious illness that will kill her if she sings. For his sake she promises not to sing anymore, but the demonic Dr. Miracle arrives and tempts her. He brings to life a portrait of her dead mother, a great singer, and Antonia sings herself into a fatal frenzy. Hoffmann arrives just in time to see her die.*

### Act IV. The Tale of Giulietta

(based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's "A New Year's Eve Adventure")

*Hoffmann, having renounced love, gambles at the Venetian palazzo of Giulietta, a courtesan. Her master, Dappertutto, commands Giulietta to steal Hoffmann's reflection for him in a mirror. Hoffmann succumbs to Giulietta, but must kill her current lover, Schlemil, to get the key to her room. The guests mock Hoffmann's terror at the murder and the loss of his reflection. Giulietta mistakenly drinks poison intended for Nicklausse. Dappertutto laughs.*

### Act V. Epilogue

*Luther's tavern. Hoffmann is drunk when Stella arrives, and Stella leaves with Lindorf. Nicklausse now reveals himself as the Muse of Poetry in disguise, and claims Hoffmann for her own.*

## 6 INTRODUCTION

The outline of an opera libretto was, in a sense, ready-made, for many of the play's scenes already revolved around musical numbers. In Act I, the students greeted the tavern-keeper with a rousing chorus, and Act II featured Olympia's "Doll Song" (not sung, but played on an English horn) and a waltz for Spalanzani's guests. Hoffmann and Antonia sang a love-duet at the beginning of Act III, and that act ended with a fatal duet for Antonia and her mother, urged on by Dr. Miracle's violin. In Venice, Hoffmann scoffed at love in a *couplets* with chorus, "Amis, ce flot vermeil," and the students, back in the tavern, sang a final chorus.<sup>3</sup> Although the musical episodes attracted no critical attention, the text did provoke some raised eyebrows when its prose dialogue blossomed into rhyming hexameters at emotional and dramatic high points, including the "Vision" that interrupts Hoffmann's Kleinzach ballad; the struggle between Antonia and Dr. Miracle, which culminates in the mother's song; and the love scene between Giulietta and Hoffmann. These extended poetic passages were retained *verbatim* in the libretto.

It is not surprising that this play, with its musical episodes and musician characters, should have captured Offenbach's fancy, although more than twenty years elapsed before he suggested to Barbier and Carré that they should rework *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* as the libretto for a serious opera. His theatrical imagination had always been drawn toward the fantastical landscapes, playful humor, grotesquerie, and pathos found in these tales. Furthermore, E.T.A. Hoffmann embodied the generation of German Romanticism that Offenbach loved, not yet weighed down by what he saw as Wagnerist bombast and self-conscious modernism. This was the German style he admired in Weber's *Der Freischütz* and had tried to emulate in his own "gros Romantisch Oper" *Die Rhein-Nixen* of 1864. As recently as 1872, his failed opéra-comique *Fantasio* had featured moments of old-fashioned "Weberist" color, including a *Männerchor* from which he would later borrow a climactic phrase for the chorus of students in Luther's tavern. Indeed *Fantasio*, featuring a lovelorn jester-hero, anticipated the tone of *Les Contes* in its combination of facetious and pathetic accents. He began work on the Hoffmann subject in 1876, envisioning a five-act opéra-lyrique for performance at Vizentini's Théâtre de la Gaîté-Lyrique. This planned opéra-lyrique would have adhered closely to Barbier and Carré's play, retaining both the poetic passages and the order of the tales, with Olympia first, Antonia in the middle, and Giulietta last. As in the play, the opera's three tales would have progressed from light to darkness, from comedy to something approaching horror.

The score of *Les Contes*, as initially conceived, can be seen as a negotiation with the classic outlines of opéra-comique, which Offenbach had claimed as the model for all his previous works—not only those presented at the Salle Favart in the 1870s, but even his operettas at the Bouffes

## INTRODUCTION 7

Parisiens. In 1856, at the beginning of his career as impresario of the Bouffes, he had published a brief manifesto on the genre of opéra-comique, reminding readers of its eighteenth-century origin as a play with songs and defining its native French qualities as wit, clarity, and brevity.<sup>4</sup> Most elusive of all, perhaps, was the quality of *esprit*, a lightly borne confidence and melodic ease, propelled by rhythmic impulses and gestures rooted in dance. Songs, such as *couplets*, rondos, ballads, chansons, predominated in opéra-comique, and vocal style was simple and light, avoiding the excessive virtuosity of the Italian style and the strenuous style of grand opera. Melody should be the primary musical value throughout a score, and forms and accompaniments should never become so complex as to obscure or distract from a number's songful qualities. Offenbach pledged that his new theater would uphold these values, and throughout his career he did adhere to them, even when he mingled—or some would say adulterated—them with the strains of facetiousness, parody, and farce that were equally constitutive of his operettas. Now, in his self-consciously serious opéra-lyrique, he would not leave the values and techniques of opéra-comique behind, but would extend its expressive and dramatic resources.

Although *Les Contes* was conceived as a number opera, Offenbach's musical thought was working on a larger scale. The Olympia act, for example, is largely made up of traditional *couplets*, romances, choruses, and chansons, but these are linked together to form longer, uninterrupted stretches of musical action, a procedure more typical of act finales. Thus the party scene that begins with the waltz chorus for the guests' entrance continues without a break through Spalanzani's tuneful presentation of his "daughter," Olympia's "Doll Song", a *parlando* dialogue over yet another dance theme, and finally a reprise of the waltz chorus as the guests depart.<sup>5</sup> Borrowing Auber's technique of constructing a scene over a continuous stream of dance music, Offenbach integrates the characters' private conversations into the musical action without having to stop and start for spoken dialogue. Elsewhere he seems to test the boundaries of individual numbers from within. The Antonia act, strikingly short of *couplets* and romances, is dominated by larger-scale dramatic ensembles. While it would have been perfectly appropriate, in the opéra-comique tradition, to present the charming "C'est une chanson d'amour" as a self-contained song, Offenbach frames it instead as the final section of a four-movement grand duet for Hoffmann and Antonia. The men's trio "Pour conjurer le danger" has the same Italianate structure, with a wonderfully suspenseful *tempo di mezzo* in which Dr. Miracle compels the absent Antonia to sing. The composer does not entirely give up his old habit of pushing his ensembles to a frenzied conclusion, but now employs it to a new and more serious dramatic purpose: instead of culminating in wild dances or hilariously inebriated exhaustion, musical frenzy proves fatal, with Olympia whirling into

## 8 INTRODUCTION

the malevolent grasp of Coppélius, and Antonia falling dead. The finales of the Olympia and Antonia acts unmask the latent violence beneath the old slapstick numbers.

Without abandoning his native tunefulness, Offenbach expanded it beyond the boundaries of conventional *couplets* structures, treating melody and form with unaccustomed freedom. The prologue, with only a few full-scale “numbers,” seems the most modern part of the score: here Offenbach treated melodic ideas with wonderful nonchalance, and from the moment of the students’ entrance the prologue bubbles along in an almost seamless flow of *arioso* fragments and musical miniatures, including the exchange of insults between Hoffmann and Lindorf, and the brief chorus “Écoutez!” The most striking formal innovation is Hoffmann’s “Légende de Kleinzach,” where an extended rhapsody is embedded within a traditional strophic song. In that rhapsody we also see Offenbach’s melody at its most unconstrained, as the composer breaks out of his customary four-square phrases in favor of free declamation. The tenor romance “O dieu de quelle ivresse,” which could have been a self-contained solo, also occurs within a larger number, the “Duo de reflet.” (Perhaps this move imitates Bizet’s placing of the Flower Song within Carmen and Don Jose’s Act II duet). Finally, Offenbach complicated the relationship between voice and orchestra at expressive high points: at the climaxes of Hoffmann’s “Vision” and his lavish “O Dieu de quelle ivresse,” the orchestra takes over the melody, and the interdependence of voice and orchestra anticipates Massenet and even Puccini. At these moments of emotional excess, the melody seems to exceed the scale of individual human utterance, and to pass to a transcendent instrumental voice. All these innovations suggest that Offenbach hoped at once to retain and to transcend the conventional musical values of opéra-comique.

It is ironic, then, that *Les Contes*, conceived for a more serious venue, ended up at the Opéra-Comique after all. The bankruptcy of the Gaité-Lyrique’s impresario Vizentini, in January 1878, left Offenbach without a producer for his still-unfinished work, and Leon Carvalho, director of the Opéra-Comique, accepted the piece in May 1879. Offenbach had made several previous attempts at composing legitimate works for this venue, but had so far found it difficult to convince its audiences of his sincerity and worth; “Petrus,” writing for *La Petite République*, recalled that in response to *Robinson Crusoe*, “The public had cried, ‘Return to the Bouffes or the Folies-Dramatiques: the Opéra-Comique is not made for you.’”<sup>6</sup> The Opéra-Comique, as both an institution and a genre, was defined by its respectability, and this meant the careful maintenance of social and stylistic boundaries between opéra-comique and operetta. (Offenbach undoubtedly ran afoul of the Opéra-Comique audience’s horror of *parvenus*, of joking, and of vulgarity with his first effort, *Barkouf*, which featured a singing

INTRODUCTION 9

dog.) This was, after all, the theater to which a respectable man could bring his wife and daughters without endangering their purity of mind or associations. And the institution's sociological profile translated into a vague yet powerful notion of musical respectability: a mastery of emotion, a preference for epigrams over diatribes or rhapsodies, and for sincere and well-formed expression over outbursts of raw feeling.

The Opéra-Comique itself was changing, however, and *Les Contes'* unconventional qualities were not unsuited to the institution's emerging modern profile. Carvalho, who had spent most of his career as impresario of the Théâtre-Lyrique between 1856 and 1868, defined "opéra-comique" liberally enough to accommodate those features of *Les Contes* that broke or tested the traditional limits of the genre. As both a genre and an institution the opéra-comique was moving into a new phase, which would be its last: while it remained committed to the heritage of what Hervé Lacombe has characterized as the "conversational" salon style—such hard-to-translate qualities as *élan*, *insouciance*, and *légèreté*—it was admitting more diverse and serious works than had been favored in the past.<sup>7</sup> Bizet's oft-cited cry of "Down with *La dame blanche!*" signaled that opéra-comique had entered a period of transition, and in the aesthetic turbulence of the 1870s, the Favart was becoming an "experimental theater." *Carmen*, in 1875, had broken the long-standing taboo on tragic endings, so the death of Antonia and even Hoffmann's slaying of Schlemil and Pitichinaccio in the Venetian act were acceptable, as was the progress of the dramatic tone from bright to nightmarish. Although one would be hard-pressed to claim resemblances between *Carmen* and *Les Contes*, both works show how the new opéra-comique could tolerate diminishing amounts of spoken dialogue, and a modern style of vocalism. Rather than leaving opéra-comique behind, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* became one of its last, modern incarnations.

Despite Carvalho's acceptance of the numbers already written, and his support for the composer's overall conception, he did immediately insist upon one significant change to the score; indeed the modern *sound* of the opera probably owes as much to Carvalho as to Offenbach. Offenbach had conceived the role of Hoffmann as a baritone, but Carvalho insisted that he adapt the lead role for the Opéra-Comique's star tenor, Andre Talazac, currently enjoying a brilliant success in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*.<sup>8</sup> Talazac belonged to the first generation of tenors that broke with the opéra-comique tradition of genteel light vocalism, and in transposing the role for him, Offenbach endowed Hoffmann with that lyric urgency which also characterizes the nearly contemporary role of Don José. The role of Hoffmann thus helped to define an emerging French tenor voice and persona: the modern opéra-comique hero sang in full voice, like his colleagues in serious and tragic pieces, but in an ardent rather than bellicose strain. Fas-

## 10 INTRODUCTION

cinating though it is to imagine how the opera would sound with a baritone hero, it is hard to consider the rewriting of this role in 1879 as anything other than a fortunate change. The tenor Hoffmann's plangent tones—like those of Don José before him, and of Massenet's Chevalier Des Grieux and Werther a few years later—now seem uniquely suited to the expression of *amour fou*.

Other changes were required as well, for better and worse. Offenbach's original conception would have omitted a bright spot for modern sopranos, for Olympia was to have been a simple soubrette, and her "Doll Song," as drafted in 1877, had only a moderate tessitura and limited ornamentation. The Opéra-Comique's leading lady, Adele Isaac, was a coloratura whose recent success as Gounod's Juliette no doubt convinced her that her new role would be incomplete without a brilliant waltz aria. Isaac's talents inspired—indeed, commanded—the showpiece we know today. The double role of the Muse/Nicklausse, which Offenbach had imagined as a dramatic mezzo-soprano, was entrusted to the inexperienced *soubrette* Marguerite Ugalde, a change that proved less happy than the casting of Talazac and Isaac. In the course of rehearsals, the double role of the Muse/Nicklausse lost two substantial solos: the *couplets* for the Muse that opened the Prologue, and Nicklausse's sumptuous aria "Vois sous l'archet frémissant" in the Antonia act. The lively "Trio des yeux," in which Hoffmann and Nicklausse were to meet Coppélius and buy his magic spectacles, had to be replaced by a stretch of spoken dialogue. (These three numbers, restored to the score in Fritz Oeser's 1977 critical edition, have had various degrees of acceptance: mezzo-sopranos have embraced the *couplets* and especially the aria, but the trio, which replaces Coppélius's only solo, remains something of a novelty piece.) Ultimately Nicklausse was demoted to a *comprimaria* role, and the Muse's part cut back to a single speech in the Epilogue.

Revisions, rewrites, and cuts made to accommodate individual singers were not the only challenges Offenbach confronted as he worked to complete *Les Contes* in its opéra-comique form, and the Venetian act and epilogue had not yet been finished to everyone's satisfaction when the composer died on October 5, 1880. Carvalho, together with Ernest Guiraud, worked for several months to pull together the unfinished work, but on February 5, 1881, five days before the opera's long-delayed premiere at the Opéra-Comique, Carvalho decided to cut the troublesome fourth act altogether, eliminating the tale of the Italian courtesan Giulietta. The loss of the Venetian act was both aesthetic and material: when Talazac complained that he would lose some of Hoffmann's best music, Carvalho responded petulantly, "You may lose one lovely act, while I—I lose three sets and a hundred costumes."<sup>9</sup> Yet even at this point, the Venetian act was not completely eliminated; rather it was dismantled and dispersed. Carvalho, reluctant to lose the three most effective numbers, distributed them else-

INTRODUCTION 11

where in the opera: the Barcarole was sung by off-stage soloists and chorus during the Antonia act; Hoffmann's passionate "O Dieu de quelle ivresse," which would have been sung to Giulietta, was moved to the Epilogue, where Hoffmann addressed it to the Muse; and the *Duo de Reflet*, in which Giulietta would have stolen Hoffmann's reflection, became a "rejection duet" for Hoffmann and Stella in the epilogue. Still other numbers were stored away, and had been presumed lost until their very recent re-discovery. Thus the opera as premiered in Paris and in Vienna included only two of the intended three tales.

Within a year of the premiere, however, the tale of Giulietta had been revised and restored. The Offenbach family appointed Ernest Guiraud to reconstruct the Venetian act and to replace the spoken dialogue of the opéra-comique version with recitatives so that the opera could be performed in other theaters, and his version was published later in 1881 and in 1882. Guiraud condensed the unwieldy act from four scenes to one, retaining only four numbers: the Barcarolle, Hoffmann's *couplets*, Dapertutto's "Tournez, miroir," and the *Duo de Reflet* for Hoffmann and Giulietta. He rewrote the ending so that the courtesan did not die, but sailed away in a gondola, laughing at Hoffmann. Most significantly, Guiraud rearranged the three tales, placing the Venetian act between the Olympia and Antonia acts.<sup>10</sup> Like his other decisions, this was a pragmatic one: the reconstructed Venetian act, shorter and musically weaker than either "Olympia" or "Antonia," would show its flaws least if sandwiched between these two more powerful pieces.

Within a year of its first performance and publication, then, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* already existed in a double form—one version with the Venetian act, and one without—and this initial instability only foreshadowed the proliferation to come. Guiraud's version of the Venetian act remained a magnet for editorial intervention. Three twentieth-century editions will be discussed in more detail in the pages that follow; however, a brief sketch will serve to introduce their salient features. The version published in 1907, which amounted to another recomposition, was created at the Théâtre de Monte Carlo by composer/impresario Raoul Gunsbourg, together with librettist Pierre Barbier and orchestrator André Bloch, and this version far surpassed Guiraud's efforts to repair the work's deficiencies. Gunsbourg and his collaborators removed Dapertutto's *chanson*, "Tournez, miroir," assigning it (with new text) to Coppélius in Act II, and they supplied Dapertutto with a new aria, "Scintille diamant." They were also responsible for "Italianizing" the Venetian act, for they added the *pezzo concertato* finale, a septet with chorus ("Hélas, mon coeur s'égare encore") in which Hoffmann and all the Venetian characters respond to the loss of Hoffmann's reflection. During the twenty-five years after its opening night, then, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* had gained—or regained—an entire act, a

## 12 INTRODUCTION

palimpsest of music by Offenbach, music in imitation of Offenbach, and one number, the septet, that had no connection at all with Offenbach. It was in this form, already several stages removed from that of its 1881 Opéra-Comique premiere, that *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* entered the international repertory.

Despite its widespread acceptance, however, this version had certain dramatic and musical weaknesses. It lacked an aria for Giulietta; Hoffmann's spontaneous declaration, "Giulietta, je t'aime!" seemed improbable without a song or even dialogue to trigger it; and the final note of Dapertutto's new aria "Scintille, diamant" lay high in the baritone range, making the role musically inconsistent with those of Lindorf, Coppélius, and Dr. Miracle. Furthermore, anecdotes from the time of the opera's premiere suggested that spectacular things had been lost with Carvalho's initial cut; Martinet, for example, had referred not only to "three sets and one hundred costumes," but also to a shadow-play and a fantastical duel scene.<sup>11</sup> Behind Gunsbourg's version and the earlier versions by Guiraud and Carvalho hovered an increasingly mythologized *Urtext*, the never-performed version that Carvalho had cut and that Guiraud had decided not to publish in full.

Since the publication of Gunsbourg's version, innumerable performing versions have been assembled, and two scholarly editions have appeared. Fritz Oeser's 1976 edition drew on newly discovered manuscript sources, together with Barbier and Carré's original play and Offenbach's *Die Rhein-Nixen*. Oeser not only added previously unknown music throughout the opera, but also insisted that the Venetian act, rather than the Antonia act, should be the climax of Hoffmann's evening of storytelling.<sup>12</sup> Between 1992 and 1995, Michael Kaye reconstructed the opera again on the basis of sources that were unknown to Oeser, including the censor's libretto of 1881 and rehearsal materials from the period leading up to the Opéra-Comique premiere.<sup>13</sup> The Venetian act presented in these two editions, particularly the version prepared by Kaye, has rendered the traditional version's master plot increasingly untenable, by shifting both the distribution of national styles in the score and its balance of tragic and comic, sincere and ironic elements.

---

The arrangement of the chapters that follow roughly imitates the content and shape of the opera. The first chapter, like the opera's prologue, introduces the narrator-protagonist. It takes up the eternal question of how "Hoffmannesque" this opera is, contending that as a story about storytelling and an opera about singing, *Les Contes* is true in its fashion to E.T.A.

## INTRODUCTION 13

Hoffmann's self-reflexive narrative style. Chapter Two takes Dr. Miracle and his diva/patient Antonia as a case study in how the parallel nineteenth-century discourses of theater and "mental science"—including mesmerism, *magnétisme animal*, hypnosis, and other proto-psychoanalytic treatments—constructed the female voice as an object to be conjured up and manipulated by male authorities. Mesmeric performances frequently involved music, both in the theater and the clinic, for Mesmer believed that animal magnetism was "communicated, propagated and augmented by sound," and that music facilitated the magnetic trance. Both the singing of musical clairvoyants and the *speech* of mesmerized women took on a quasi-supernatural status, possessing the same uncanny presence attributed to music in the Romantic imagination. Yet the popular conception of Dr. Miracle as a proto-Svengali is not entirely convincing, and the chapter concludes with an alternative reading of Antonia's story and her fatal song, based on nineteenth-century testimony that the image of the conjurer-doctor-therapist controlling his inert trance-maiden was an elaborate deception, impossible to sustain without the "backstage" participation of the women involved. Perhaps, contrary to the interpretive tradition that began with Hanslick in 1881, Antonia's fatal song is not a helpless submission, but a choice, for in "succumbing" to Dr. Miracle, this female artist rebels against a domestic/paternal order that would silence her.

Antonia's choice between song—at the price of her own death—and silent bourgeois life thus becomes an allegory of the choices facing women musicians in nineteenth-century Europe, and the third chapter explores this conflict in more detail, introducing Antonia's artist-mother and her influence as another factor in the father's and doctor's struggle over the daughter's voice. If the spectacular elements of Antonia's story derive from stage conventions of mesmerism and magnetism, her family relations have more in common with those of nineteenth-century hysterics: Antonia is an archetype of the daughter on the brink of womanhood, unconsciously—and violently, often self-destructively—acting out her conflicts over desires that male authorities have declared off-limits. The seductive phantom song of her mother and the music of Miracle's violin manifest the disorderly and imperfectly repressed elements in Antonia's fictional psyche.

Chapter Four provides a kind of intermission before proceeding on to the Venetian act and its restoration, a pause to consider Offenbach himself as a liminal figure: a foreigner in his two home countries, both before and after his death; a converted German Jew who became the voice of Second Empire Paris; a "gifted musician who hated music," as Debussy described him. *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* has since 1881 held a privileged place within Offenbach's *oeuvre*, and its status as his most serious and sincere work, and therefore his best, invites us to meditate on the categories of "serious

#### 14 INTRODUCTION

music” and “musical sincerity.” The special status of *Les Contes* was summarized by Edouard Hanslick in his review of the Viennese premiere in 1881:

Is this last work of Offenbach truly his best? Yes and no. His best in the sense that—to take a more elevated example—*Guillaume Tell* is Rossini’s best opera. But the *Barber* is even better. *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* is musically more profound and purer than the author’s earlier operettas; only its nightmarish content lacks the unique elements in which Offenbach’s peculiar talent really shone forth: comic, parodistic humor and gaiety. If what makes one a master is the thing that nobody else can do as well, what is uniquely one’s own, then Offenbach became Offenbach through musical jests and pranks.<sup>14</sup>

*Les Contes* was received from the very beginning as both a departure from and a culmination of Offenbach’s style. But perhaps Offenbach’s conflicting tendencies toward frivolity and seriousness, toward lowbrow and high-brow styles, had less influence on his last creation than did certain political and artistic prejudices in Paris after the Franco-Prussian war. As much as any artistic ideals, cultural politics pushed Offenbach to shape and promote *Les Contes* as a departure from and even a disavowal of his former style.

The final chapter, like the last of Hoffmann’s three tales, turns to Giuletta’s Venice, where the identities of the main character and of the opera itself dissolve and seem to become unrecoverable, as music and women pose alluring threats to the poet. Thanks to the polymorphous condition of the Venetian act, it is possible to interpret *Les Contes* itself as an undead object that challenges fantasies of and nostalgia for authentic or stable musical texts: since Offenbach’s death before the opera’s premiere, years of *ad hoc* performance solutions have made the plot and music of the Venetian act into a tangled web.<sup>15</sup> Reading this act leads to philosophical and semiotic speculations about the nature of the musical work; and to feminist analyses of identity itself as an impossible category, constructed only through repetition and imitation—that is, through performance.<sup>16</sup>

---

*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, together with Gounod’s *Faust* and Bizet’s *Carmen*, is one of only three nineteenth-century French operas that have achieved enduring international status, and where once it would have ranked behind those two in popularity, it might now be promoted to second place. If *Faust* has grown a bit stale, its charms a bit too picturesque and unavoidably Victorian, *Carmen* and *Les Contes* remain eternally modern, the former for its sexual politics and the latter for its post-Romantic portrait of the Romantic artist. *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, in so many ways a summation of nineteenth-century concerns, has grown younger with the

INTRODUCTION 15

passage of time, seeming more contemporary as the twentieth century gives way to the twenty-first. Like so much nineteenth-century fantastical art, this fanciful piece with its magic, illusions, and bogeymen prefigures modern psychology: are not these stories the protagonist's attempt at a "talking cure," trying to make sense of his mad loves? The episodic structure, recurring characters, and resemblances among the three plots remind us that our unfinished business, "the repressed," returns. Just as a life story is inevitably more and less than the sum of its episodes, the interior tales and their framing narrative, with its ambiguous conclusion, add up to more and less than a whole opera. As Hoffmann's mistress is really "trois maitresses . . . trio charmant d'enchanteresses," so this opera comprises three operas in miniature: three related works with characters in common, three variations on basic themes. The tales re-create the conventional elements of Romantic opera "through the looking glass," rendering the obligatory love triangles, death scenes, *diablerie*, and climactic high notes in distorted fashion. With its neurotic antihero and mechanized prima donna, it anticipates twentieth-century attitudes toward operatic plots as nonsense, operatic emotion as a set of conventional gestures, and operatic singing as extravagant and mechanical. *Les Contes* revisits and ironizes Romanticism's central themes: the place of the artist in a hostile and worldly society, the imaginary conflation of Music and Woman, and above all the artist's search for an ideal Presence, metonymized as an elusive ideal Voice.

This work's unfinished and disorderly condition have made it inexhaustibly rich for both performers and critics. Whoever wants to perform it must first resolve—at least for the duration of a performance—its inconsistencies and ambiguities. One cannot simply sit back and let this work speak for itself: it compels each new team of interpreters, even the most traditional, to decide what it means and how. Demanding reinvention every time, *Les Contes* resists ossification into a colorful museum piece. For the same reasons it challenges the critic/interpreter: how conclusively can one read an unfinished text? With the composer's authority thus compromised, half-realized intentions, fragments, revisions, and posthumous interpolations all jostle against each other with their competing claims. Reception cannot be separated from composition because the two processes were enmeshed from early in the work's genesis, and its "afterlife" of revisions, performance editions, multiple critical editions is simply its life. But if this throws us into a kind of interpretive free fall, it is also a liberation. Each generation of readers and performers brings its own concerns, obsessions, and desires to the work—which being incomplete, being undead, continues to change in response to our needs.

The unfinished masterpiece both fascinates and frustrates, its delights never untainted by thoughts of what might have been. And if the unfinished work has something elegiac about it, is this not part of the ephemeral

## 16 INTRODUCTION

charm of any music? The desired object vanishes before we can take hold and fix it forever; a sound barely grasped in the present instantly slips into the past. Music, always already part of the silent past, waits to be brought to life again . . . like Euridice, it waits to be called back up to the surface even for a moment. Maybe the allure of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, this tantalizingly partial and self-contradictory work, does not after all differ so dramatically from the allure of any piece—maybe all music sleeps in a green casket until we raise the lid and peer inside at the rich treasures that our imagination, our creative energy (as performers, readers, editors, audiences) will animate once more.