

JACQUES OFFENBACH

A CENTENNIAL SKETCH

By GABRIEL GROVLEZ

JACQUES OFFENBACH was born in Cologne on June 21st, 1819, according to musical dictionaries, a date which must, for the purpose of reference, be adhered to, although there is some doubt as to its accuracy. The composer's biographer, M. de Mirecourt, declares the date to be July 20th, 1822, and according to Offenbach's own assertion it is supposed to fall in the year 1821.

He was the son of a chorister of the Synagogue at Cologne, whose real name was Juda Eberscht, and who published, in 1830, a volume entitled "Allgemeines Gebetbuch für die israelitische Jugend." Young Offenbach showed from his earliest childhood surprising musical gifts. He had scarcely begun to talk when his fingers were already becoming acquainted with the keyboard of a piano. At the age of five he played the violin, and he wrote his first song when he was six years old. From his father he learnt the rudiments of musical notation, but he was very soon able to teach something of the art to his master, and his musical education was entrusted to one Alexander. The young musician's health being delicate, his father, who was not opposed to his choosing a musical career, would not allow him to play the violoncello, for fear that the practice of this instrument might impair his physical development. However, Jacques Offenbach had such a passion for the violoncello, that he practised it clandestinely. One night, when he was ten years of age, he happened to be with some friends who gathered once a week to play chamber music, when the 'cellist, who should have taken part in a Haydn quartet, was unable to be present. Jacques Offenbach offered to replace him, and, to everybody's astonishment, he surpassed him. This incident formed the topic of conversation in Cologne for a whole month. At the age of thirteen, the young virtuoso was regarded as a consummate musician, and he played in public pieces of his own composition, the technical difficulties of which terrified his master. He was in his fifteenth year when he, together with his brother—a musician like himself—left for Paris, with no other belongings than his ambition and a letter of recommendation for Cherubini, who then directed the Conservatoire. He

entered, if not officially, at least as a kind of human contraband, the violoncello class of Verlin, for at that time foreigners were excluded from the courses. He was admitted, at the same time, into the orchestra of the *Opéra-Comique*, where he and his colleague at the desk, Seligmann, were notorious for countless jests. One of their fancies was to play, by turns, every other note of their parts, and it can easily be imagined what the effect of this must have been in quick movements. The best part of Jacques Offenbach's salary was absorbed in fines. He played at private parties, at concerts, here, there, and everywhere, and never failed to show his love for parody and excentricity. He was fond of all kinds of trickery on his instrument, upon which he performed imitations of the violin, the hurdy-gurdy and various toy-instruments, and he exploited to an inordinate degree a certain bag-pipe effect, which invariably provoked unbridled enthusiasm.

On his return from a tour in England, he married, under most romantic circumstances, Herminie de Alcair, a general's daughter-in-law. At that period he seems to have been prone to folly and restlessness, bordering on a state of giddiness, and in appearance, thin and nervous-looking. The events of 1848 brought trouble to Offenbach, and he went to reap a harvest of florins in Germany; but in 1849 he returned to France and, thanks to Arsène Houssaye, attained to the post of conductor at the *Comédie-Française*. During this time he composed waltzes for the famous "Julien," settings of La Fontaine's Fables, and numerous operatic scores which, however, in spite of their merit, were all refused. The only work of his which was staged between 1846 and 1855, at the *Varités*, was *Pepito*, and that was a failure. As he did not succeed in getting his works produced, he resolved to open a theatre of his own. During the Universal Exhibition of 1855 he obtained the lease of the *Bouffes-Parisiens* in the old *Salle Lacaze* at the *Carré Morigny des Champs-Élysées*. The Ministry at first allowed but two players, later increased to three, and soon success was turned into triumph. The good old days of the *Théâtre de la Foire* seemed to have returned. From this moment dates the ever-growing fame of Jacques Offenbach, musician of the second Empire, though certainly not *the* musician. Fortunately, the period from 1852 to 1870 has known other instances of musical glory. However, it is an indisputable fact that the operetta, a species of art of which Offenbach was past-master, if not actually the creator (for it must be remembered that it was the Frenchman, Florimond Hervé, who created the operetta as distinct from the *café-concert*), was born and flourished

during the Empire. Jules Lemaitre was justified in saying that *Orphée aux Enfers*, *La Belle Hélène* and *La Grande Duchesse* are brilliant examples of the only new species of dramatic art produced during the second half of the nineteenth century, the first half having evolved the romantic drama. The operetta seems to revive at the present moment and to regain public favour. Curiously enough, that form of entertainment, so greatly favoured round about 1870, occupies a unique place in theatrical history. It flourishes immediately before and after great national convulsions. It seems as though the operetta encouraged the heedlessness of a frivolous and indulgent generation, living in ignorance of the blows about to fall, and that it acts as an alleviation of the sufferings endured.

One has often reproached Offenbach with the disrespect he showed for the subjects chosen by him. But do we not nowadays see more savage, if less witty, caricatures of the things of the past than those by the authors of *Geneviève de Brabant* and *Barbe-Bleue*? Was not our army, for instance, subjected to far more irreverent pleasantries and less inoffensive banter than anything found in *La Grande Duchesse*? It is true that the authors of *Orphée* and *La Belle Hélène* ridiculed religion, but their arrows were directed at the Olympian gods, and, to quote Jules Lemaitre once more, "our holy religion escapes unscathed!" There is one sentiment, besides, which Offenbach never railed at—love. Underneath the musician's manner of the *boulevard*, there is always the Rhineland's sentimentality, the little blue flower he carried in his heart until death, a fact which might cause a Berlin journalist to say that "Offenbach's music, in spite of its French spirit, always preserves a German heart."

It was on July 3rd, 1855, that Jacques Offenbach began his career as director of the *Bouffes-Parisiens*. Among the artists he engaged might be mentioned the celebrated actor Paul Legrand, Mademoiselle Mariquita, and the poet Albert Glatigny. The opening production introduced *Les Deux Aveugles*, which had an astounding success and scored 400 consecutive performances. No doubt, if contemporaries may be believed, Pradeau and Berthelier were exceedingly funny in the scene of the two blind men, but the uproarious bursts of laughter they provoked found their stimulant, above all, in the music; the vital spark that kindled the gaiety of the public was Offenbach's genius.

Many young composers, like Delibes, Duprato, Lecocq, Bizet, Adam, and Rossini, found a brotherly and hospitable welcome at the *Bouffes-Parisiens*, but Offenbach himself was the

most prolific purveyor for his own theatre. *Le Violoneux* was produced in September, 1855, with the first appearance of Hortense Schneider, and in October of the same year *Madame Papillon*, an unspeakable farce, was given. Their Majesties wishing to hear *Les Deux Aveugles* at the Tuileries, Offenbach was allowed a fourth, and subsequently a fifth player, but owing to lack of space the Ministry soon granted the transfer of the *Bouffes-Parisiens* to the *Salle Comte*, Passage Choiseul, where, from December onward, Offenbach's enterprise, which had begun as a mere show and now grown into a little theatre, was at liberty to present acts instead of "turns." The new venture was inaugurated on December 29th, 1855, by *Bataclan*, a piece described as a "*chinoiserie musicale*," by Ludovic Halévy and Jacques Offenbach. *Bataclan* brought Offenbach the greatest success hitherto obtained by this kind of frankly comic style, which consisted of numerous little acts strung together. A new style, approaching comic opera, was attempted in *Mesdames de la Halle*, produced in March, 1858.

But the great battle engaged in by Offenbach dates from October 21st, 1858, when the comic opera, *Orphée aux Enfers*, in 2 acts and 4 scenes, on a libretto by Hector Cremieux, was first performed. It was an icy evening, the press was at first extremely severe, and *Le Figaro* published the worst possible criticism from the pen of Jules Janin. Offenbach was obliged to have the vocal score engraved at his own expense and to deposit it with an obscure dealer in the Passage Choiseul. At last the publishing house of Heugel consented to negotiate with the composer and to buy *Orphée* for the munificent sum of 300 francs. The enormous success of the opera did not begin until some fifteen years later, but then it was a veritable triumph. A performance before the Emperor, at the *Salle Ventadour*, brought in 22,000 francs and the agents offered 3000 francs for two boxes. The sovereign presented the composer with a bronze with this inscription: "L'Empereur à Jacques Offenbach." If the run of the piece was interrupted, it was only to present it before Queen Amélie at Orléans House. The libretto of *Orphée* overflows with spirit and humour and the score is full of sparkling wit and melodious charm. It is impossible to analyse adequately a piece wherein the sublimest idiocy and the most astonishing fancy clash at every turn. The overture is gay and lively. The recitative of the Shepherd Aristée is almost on a level with the one of Iopas in *Les Troyens* of Berlioz. The songs of Cupid and Venus are accompanied most comically by the snores of the sleeping gods,

and those of John Styx are masterpieces of fatuity and *naïveté*. The "Evohé" of Eurydice at the end of the work is the song of a vine-crowned bacchante, a fervent melody rising up to meet the resuscitated son of Zeus. And what is to be said of the infernal gallop? This famous "two-step" might quicken the dead, and it sweeps the hearer off his feet in a physical and moral trepidation. Offenbach never produced a more complete work.

In 1859 the composer staged *Le Mari à la Porte*, a piece wherein he strove in vain to adapt himself to the level of comic opera. If he failed in this endeavour, it was not because of any lack of musical science, but his peculiar talent was scarcely fitted to work of a certain depth. The Operetta was his sole congenial domain, as is proved by the failure of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Barkouff*. (The curious libretto of *Barkouff* is by Scribe, with a dog as the hero.) This failure was but partially redeemed by the *Tales of Hoffmann*.

Geneviève de Brabant, performed in September, 1859, and revived at the *Menus Plaisirs* and at the *Gaité*, was not nearly as successful as *Orphée*. Apart from the fact that the music is much less vivacious, this piece suffers from the excessively strained buffoonery of its libretto. There are, particularly, the songs of "the child who has eaten too much gingerbread," which are of more than doubtful taste. Later Offenbach staged a few more or less uninteresting works such as *Les Vivandières de la Grande Armée*, *Le Carnaval des Revues*, *Daphnis et Chloë* and *Le Pont des Soupîrs*. These were followed by *La Chanson de Fortunio*, the most extraordinarily successful first performance of that period. There was such a torrent of encores that the whole score was played through twice, and after the celebrated song the performance had to be interrupted for several minutes until the applause had subsided. On September 14th, 1860, the public was invited to hear *M. Choufleury restera chez lui le . . .*, the libretto of which was by the Duc de Morny, and whose success was enormous. The indefatigable composer produced new works without intermission, and, for the sake of completeness, I will mention a few whose fortune was less brilliant, such as *Apothicaire et Perruquier*, the music of which was written in three days by order of the Law Courts, as the result of an action by the author of the words, *Le Roman Comique*, *Monsieur et Madame Denis*, *Le Voyage de MM. Dunanan père et fils*, *Les Bavards*, *Il Signor Fagotto*, *Les Géorgiennes*, *Jean qui pleure et Jean qui rit*, and a comic opera, *Les Bergers*, which proved once again that Offenbach was never quite at home in anything but operetta, and that

only in the lighter style he could ever be wholly successful, in spite of some undeniable qualities found here and there in his more serious works. The composer suffered under the consciousness of his inability to forsake operetta, and after the hopeless condemnation of his *Barkouff* he wrote in *Le Figaro*: "Am I to be forbidden to walk in the ways shown me by my beloved masters? If I am not to succeed, well and good; but that I should not have the right to risk my neck in the endeavour, that is what I protest against."

With *Barbe-Bleue* (February 5th, 1866), a burlesque parody of mediæval customs, Jacques Offenbach partly recovered his former success, and this piece was at the same time the greatest triumph of Hortense Schneider. *La Vie Parisienne* at the *Palais-Royal* had the distinction of being sung by a company that did not boast of a single singer. Its score contains some delightful pages and the duet makes one almost think of Wagner in the scene between Hans Sachs and Eva.

April 12th, 1867, is a memorable date in Offenbach's life, for on that day he enjoyed one of the greatest triumphs of his artistic career, with the production of *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein*. There is no parallel to the astounding and enduring success of this work, which caused a revolution from which even the politics of the day did not escape. It was accused of having contributed to the disaster of 1870, and its popularity was such that at the *Bois* people no longer pointed out to each other Hortense Schneider, but the "*Grande Duchesse*." Never did theatre present so brilliant an audience. The Emperor, M. Thiers, the Princesse de Galles, the Duke of Edinburgh, Bismarck, the Tsar, the Kings of Bavaria, of Portugal, of Sweden, were all present. It is true that the music was delicious from the first note to the last. Offenbach never showed more spirit, more gaiety, and more youth. The operetta is orchestrated with a care and a refinement of detail never before encountered in this kind of work. "Offenbachism" flourished and had by this time spread as far as Hungary. On the day Francis Joseph was crowned at Budapest, *La Belle Hélène* was honoured with a gala performance in a Magyar translation. But alas, a few months later, the composer failed conspicuously with *Robinson Crusoe* at the *Opéra-Comique*.

Offenbach was inexhaustibly prolific. Between 1867 and 1870 he produced *Le Château à Toto*, *L'Isle de Tulipatan*, and *La Princesse de Trébizonde* at his own theatre, *Vert-Vert* at the *Opéra-Comique*, and *La Pêrichole* and *Les Brigands*, the last two considered to be among his best works, at the *Variétés*.

In 1869, Offenbach went to Baden to take the waters, and he was seen walking about in the most extraordinary attire—a yellow waistcoat and trousers, a sky-blue coat, grey gloves, a green hat and a red sunshade.

The composer's success was rudely interrupted by the war, and the year 1870 brought a blow to the German Offenbach, from which he never recovered.

In 1872 he presented at the *Gaité* his first essay of a Fairy-Opera, *Le Roi Carotte*, written with the collaboration of the famous Victorien Sardou. The choice was not a happy one, and Sardou was completely lost in the fairy tale, based on Hoffmann's "Heroic History of Klein Zach, the celebrated Minister, nicknamed Cinnabar," the charm and the poetry of which he completely destroyed. Offenbach's music wavers between grand opera and the most vulgar ditties. He regained a certain measure of success in 1873 with *La Jolie Parfumeuse*, written for Théo, the idol of the day. The managing mania then took hold of the composer once more and he took up the reins of the *Gaité*. On February 7th he revived *Orphée*, which now had nothing more in common with the modest Operetta of the *Passage Choiseul*. When managing his own theatre, Offenbach was the man to get rid of a hundred fortunes; he tossed his gold recklessly right and left, astonished everybody by his luxurious life, and was never happy unless he could display his wealth in the most extravagant manner. Thus, although the receipts for the first hundred performances of *Orphée* reached one million francs, he perceived one day that the costs had swallowed up more than that amount. Ruin came quickly and he was obliged to relinquish his theatre to Vizantini. He bade farewell to his company in the following terms: "My children, you will be paid to the last centime. If I have been incautious, I shall at least be honour itself."¹ Such words might well be reflected on by many a manager and impresario. Offenbach was a man of heart, a man of the strictest sense of honour; his spontaneous generosity and his discreet and unsuspected charity were the accomplices of his ostentatious extravagance.

The remaining years did not bring any works of much value save *Madame l'Archiduc* with Judic as the principal star, and *La Fille du Tambour Major*, which seemed to open up a new era of success. Shortly after the celebration of the hundredth performance of the latter work, Offenbach passed away on October 5th, 1880. His last years had been cruel for him; he was tor-

¹In 1875 Offenbach went to America. His not very lucrative experiences he narrated afterwards in his book "Notes d'un musicien en voyage."—*Ed.*

tured by gout and by a dreadful cough, and his leanness had become proverbial. The will to live could alone preserve a remnant of existence for that poor, emaciated body,—the will to live (as he said), with only one wish in the world, that of witnessing the *première* of his *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, on which opera he had been working for years. In vain; the *première* did not take place until February 10, 1881, at the *Opéra-Comique*.

Some critics have reproached Offenbach with having damaged the interests of art by catering to the corrupt taste of the period, and with having pandered to the base instincts of the mass by providing for its gross appetite. Some even went to the length of asserting that he profaned music by transforming that noble art into a degrading parody.

I confess that I should willingly sacrifice much that is called "great music" for a few pages of Offenbach. They contain more art, more sincerity, more invention and greater science than many works by certain members of the Institute. The triviality of Offenbach's style may shock a sensitive hearer, but it cannot be denied that there are some finely artistic traits among this broad gaiety and this merciless vivacity. Whatever vulgarity there may be in these operettas is almost invariably to be found in the libretto; the "*coq à l'âne*" which is its base, dates from a long way back, from Piron, Panard and Collé, and from that *Caveau* which delighted the eighteenth century. Another essential element of the operetta is what the Parisian calls "*la blague*," his own particular delight in scoffing at and ridiculing all that humanity ordinarily respects and loves. All this is certainly found in Offenbach, but in an extremely refined form. He was one of the first composers who dared set things to music that did not seem to call for music at all. I might quote, for instance, the ditties in *La Vie Parisienne*: "Nous sommes employés de la ligne de l'Ouest," and "Son habit a craqué dans le dos." Nowadays such audacities appear quite tame, and men like Chabrier, Ravel, or Erik Satie, have gone much beyond them. In Offenbach's music a continual contrast between sensibility and buffoonery produces the most delicious effect. Look, for instance, at the song "Dis-moi Vénus" in *Orphée*, where the melody, tender and sentimental at first, is turned in the end into a light and fanciful strain. One might accuse Offenbach of repeating himself, but this is not so; the Master's Muse is arrayed in a robe of shot silk, which, though always the same, changes colour at every turn. Offenbach was, above all else, a musician, a real musician—I was almost going to say a great musician—who, perhaps, ridiculed music, but who

certainly ridiculed it musically. He always drew the musical caricature from the intimate elements of his own music. Sometimes he was coarse, but always witty and always original. His greatest attraction is his remarkably clear and vigorous sense of rhythm. Curiously enough the Rondo "Ah, que j'aime les militaires" in *La Grande Duchesse* is rhythmically exactly identical with the finale of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. Camille Bellaigue has actually said that he considers Offenbach's symphonic sense, with its well-ordered and organised frolic, akin to that of Beethoven. It might be said of Offenbach that with him order was fanciful, and fancy orderly. He has written music of a small kind—if it be possible to state where small music ends and great music begins—but he was a great artist, and none has yet surpassed, in his own sphere, the man to whom Rossini sent his photograph with the dedication: "Au Mozart des Champs-Elysées."