

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Jacques Offenbach

Operetta

Orphée aux enfers

Johann Strauss II

Waltz

## SATYR PLAYS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Thus in Wagner's wake, as German opera became ever more apocalyptic (on the way to *Götterdämmerung*), and as grand opera became ever grander (on the way to *Don Carlos* and *Aida*), a contrarian strain began to appear: an opera that cut things down to size in pursuit of human (that is, personal) truth. The inevitable byproduct was a newly farcical and satiric breed of comic opera in which the symbolic butt of humor was opera itself. In a way this was a throwback to the very origins of comic opera, the *intermezzi* that had functioned as “satyr plays” between the acts of courtly extravaganzas. But the new genre consisted of full-length pieces (albeit modest ones) pitched at a bourgeois public that tended to find opera at once sublime and ridiculous. Giving an outlet to the tendency to mock the genre's ridiculous side—that is, its pretensions—the new genre actually protected the sublimity of the prototype.

The man who crystallized the new genre was Jacques (originally Jacob) Offenbach (1819–80), a German-born Jew whose father, a synagogue cantor, had brought him to Paris at the age of fourteen to perfect his technique as a virtuoso cellist. After some years spent conducting at various Paris theaters he began producing one-act farces, which he first called by the ordinary name *opéras comiques*. Beginning in 1855, he started dubbing them *opérettes*, a term that seems to have been coined by Louis August Joseph Florimond Ronger (1825–92), called Hervé, an organist and singer who in the early 1840s began producing one-act *vaudevilles-opérettes* and *parodies-opérettes* in little boulevard theaters. The term simply means “little opera,” but it stuck to the Hervé-Offenbach genre and came to designate its special brand of frivolous buffoonery.

Offenbach himself reserved the term *opérette* for the one-act type. When he began writing full-evening works he called them *opéra bouffe* (a term that Musorgsky knew, as we have learned from his letter about the “peasants” in *Boris*). As the genre spread to central Europe (particularly Vienna) and England, however, the word operetta served to designate longer works as well. What they all had in common was the compulsion to josh opera, the genre on which operetta was parasitic.



**fig. 12-7** A caricature of Jacques Offenbach surrounded by characters from his three greatest hits: *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858; revised 1874), *Fair Helen* (1864), and *The Grand Duchess of Gérolstein* (1867).

Out of the ninety-eight *opérettes* or *opéras bouffes* that Offenbach churned out in the course of his thirty-three-year career, one stands out as emblematic of the whole genre: *Orphée aux enfers* (“Orpheus in Hades”), his first two-act show, produced in 1858 at Offenbach’s own theater, the *Bouffes-Parisiens*, and later (1874) expanded into a four-act extravaganza. Together with *La belle Héléne* (“Fair Helen of Troy”; 1864), it was his wildest success. The two of them, in their very titles, show to what an extent operetta relied on opera for its basic plots and situations, however twisted in the retelling.

Orpheus was present, we may recall, at the very creation of opera. Several of the earliest *favole in musica*, the “musical tales” that adorned north Italian court festivities in the early seventeenth century, were based on his myth, including Monteverdi’s masterpiece. The Orpheus myth was a myth of music’s ethical power, the supreme article of faith for all serious musicians. Since Monteverdi’s time it had been revived, most famously by Gluck, whenever the need was seen to reassert high musical ideals against frivolous entertainment values.

So there could scarcely have been a more calculated slap at sanctimony (or a more deliberate middle-class slap at aristocratic taste) than an Orpheus opera that was all frivolous excess, asserted in the teeth of high artistic ideals. In Offenbach’s version, Orpheus is a hack violinist whose wife, Eurydice, cannot stand either his music or his dreary personality. She prefers a neighbor, the farmer Aristaeus. To remove his rival from the scene, Orpheus plants snakes in the farmer’s field, but of course it is his wife who gets bitten. Aristaeus reveals himself to be Pluto in disguise. He takes Eurydice, now delighted to be dying, down with him to reign over the underworld. Good riddance, thinks Orpheus, until a character called Public Opinion (standing in for the Greek chorus) comes onstage to persuade him that for the sake of appearances he’d better try and rescue his wife.

In the middle acts there is a subplot involving Jupiter and his attempt, in the guise of a fly, to seduce Eurydice. The traditional story is resumed in the fourth act, which also contains the broadest musical satire. It opens on a Bacchanale, a feast in honor of the god of wine, in the midst of which Orpheus comes to claim Eurydice. Pluto, only too happy to be rid of her (for she has been behaving toward him just as shrewishly as she had toward Orpheus in act I) lets her go with the standard proviso (the reason for

which Pluto says he has forgotten) that Orpheus not look around at her until they have reached the opposite shore of the river Styx. When it looks as though, egged on by Pluto, Orpheus will succeed, Jupiter hurls a thunderbolt at Orpheus's rear end, causing him involuntarily to turn around. Eurydice is lost to him—and to Pluto as well, as Jupiter transforms her (to her renewed delight) into a Bacchante, a priestess of Bacchus the wine god.

The end of the opera contains the most famous music. At the height of the Bacchanale, Jupiter calls for “a dainty minuet, as in the days of the Sun King.” After a couple of minutes’ minuetting, though, the ballroom explodes spontaneously into what the assembled gods call a “galop infernale,” but which the audience could not help recognizing as a cancan. The fastest of all polka- or quadrille-type ballroom dances, it had come to France from North Africa in the 1830s and had by the 1850s migrated from the ballroom to the dance hall, where lines of girls entertained men with their high kicking and splits, both of them excuses for the display of frilly bloomers and bare legs.

After the cancan, Orpheus approaches, fiddling the familiar strains of Gluck's chaste aria of lament “Che farò senza Euridice,” at the sound of which Eurydice runs for cover. The finale consists of Eurydice's glum submission to Public Opinion, who is heard giving Orpheus his final marching orders, a choral commiseration at the unhappy spouses’ reunion, the thunderbolt in the rear (to—what else?—a Meyerbeerian diminished-seventh chord), and Eurydice's song of delight at her new status as Bacchante (and, it goes without saying, novice concubine to Jupiter). This last, preceded by a stunning roulade up to high E, is a reprise of the cancan in which all join in (Ex. 12-11). The curtain, as almost always in an operetta, falls on a general dance. It is that final dance frenzy—the predestined victory of mindless celebration—that validates operetta's claim as the ultimate escapist entertainment of its day. Like the earlier music trances of Schubert they envelop the audience—but in orgiastic exuberance rather than “inward” contemplation. The calculated licentiousness and feigned sacrilege, which successfully baited the stuffier critics, were recognized by all for what they were—a social palliative, the very opposite of social criticism. That is why, in an age when serious art was seriously policed (and nowhere more so than in the France of the despotic if affluent “Second Empire”), the cynical operetta could seemingly get away with anything. The spectacle of the Olympian gods doing the cancan threatened nobody's dignity; all it “said” was that as long as times were good, nobody cared who did what. That is hardly satire, as classically defined. It communicated tolerance, not resentment, of vice.

Eurydice

Ah! ah! ah! Bac -

Tempo I

chus, Mon à - me lé - gé - re. Qui n'a pu se fai - re

*rit.* *a tempo*

Au bon - heur sur terre, As - pire à toi, di - vin Bac - chus! Re - çois la prêt -

tres - se, Dont la voix sans ces - se Veut chan - ter Ti - vres - se A tes é - lus!

ex. 12-11 Jacques Offenbach, *Orphée aux enfers*, Finale

Even in Russia this was true. The only exception the tsarist autocracy ever made to its monopoly on theaters was for the sake of operetta, deemed a useful public diversion at a time of mounting civic strife. During the 1870s, two private establishments were set up to regale St. Petersburgers with the latest amusements from Paris. The larger of them, the *Teatr-buff* (that is, *Théâtre bouffe*) was able to import productions direct from Paris with the original casts. The protests came only from “thinking realists,” puritanical radicals who were out to change society and did not want it to be diverted. Prince Pyotr Kropotkin, the utopian anarchist, recoiled in horror from what he called the “putrid Offenbachian current” that was “infecting all of Europe” and taking people’s minds off social problems.<sup>13</sup> Musorgsky, surprisingly enough, was an enthusiastic attender—or maybe not so surprisingly: in the Russian context the *Teatr-buff*, as the only theater that was not state-supported, had an antiestablishment cachet that it did not have in Paris.

At any rate, operetta never took hold in Russia as a homegrown thing. Its next great arena was Vienna. And in keeping with its strong association with social dance, it was fitting that its main protagonist there should have been Johann Strauss II (1825–99), the so-called Waltz King, who as the “k.k. Hofballmusikdirektor” (music director of the royal court balls) had long led the city's foremost dance orchestra.

Just as Offenbach had a forerunner in Hervé, Strauss had one in Franz von Suppé (1819–95), who—in one of those multiethnic tours de force only possible in the polyglot Austro-Hungarian empire—was born in what is now Croatia to a Belgian father and a Czech-Polish mother, and grew up speaking Italian. Suppé was a theatrical professional: that is, he was hired by Vienna's Theater an der Wien at the age of twenty-five (after ten years of flute-playing in pit orchestras) both to conduct and to furnish overtures and arias on demand for singspiels and farces. (One of the overtures from this period, to a play called *Dichter und Bauer*—in English, Poet and Peasant—became a favorite concert curtain-raiser). In the 1850s he began imitating Offenbach's one-acters, and beginning in 1860 produced “true” Viennese operettas, in the sense that the libretti were not mere adaptations from the French. Again, one—*Leichte Kavallerie* (“Light cavalry”), 1866—bequeathed its overture to the concert repertoire, and a couple of Suppé's later scores enjoyed good runs—especially *Die schöne Galathee* (“Beautiful Galatea”; 1865), an obvious knock-off from Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*.

But the Waltz King put him in the shade. Strauss's third “komische Operette,” *Die Fledermaus* (“The bat”, 1874), composed when he was almost fifty, established him as Offenbach's only viable rival. Its libretto was adapted from a play by the very team, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, who were responsible for Offenbach's own *Belle Hélène* (and Bizet's *Carmen* besides). But *Die Fledermaus* does not even pay lip service to social satire. It is a domestic farce about a rich husband and wife who each try to deceive the other and who find each other out at the end. Minor hypocrisies and lighthearted marital infidelities, it is assumed, are simply the way of the world and the only thing to do is wink.

The only real lampoonery is directed, predictably, not at morals but at music. The wife's lover, a tenor, is mistaken for the husband and arrested on an old misdemeanor charge. At the beginning of act III, before all the characters converge on the jail where the plot's tangles are to be sorted out, the tenor's real misdemeanors are committed, when his voice is heard from offstage warbling snatches of his favorite arias (all in Italian, including the one by Wagner). The drunken jailer, overhearing, garbles them all (“La donna è mobile” comes out “Die Donau a Moperle,” “The Danube at Moperle,” etc.).

The second act, set at a ball given by Orlofsky, a Russian prince, contains more operatic spoofing. Casting the prince, a young rake hopelessly jaded by wealth, as a contralto in trousers was an in-joke for older operagoers who could remember the heroic “musico” roles in Rossini; but the *travesti* role is now more epicene than valiant, in keeping with more modern (that is, “realistic”) gender stereotypes. This is the act that reaches its climax in the vertiginous dance without which no operetta was complete. Of course it is a waltz, which screamed “Vienna!” as loudly as the cancan yelled “Paris!” By this time Strauss was no longer writing actual ballroom waltzes, but this one is put together no differently from his famous dance hits such as *An der schönen, blauen Donau* (“The blue Danube”), op. 314 (1867), or *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald* (“Tales from the Vienna woods”), op. 325 (1868), to name two of the most famous. (Strauss's opus numbers reached almost 500.) As the “Fledermaus Waltz” (arranged by others), the act II finale lived a life of its own in the dance hall, and was also the featured tune in the operetta's overture.

A “Strauss waltz” was actually a string or medley of waltzes (frequently equipped with an evocative slower introduction for concert purposes) in which the first often functions as a refrain. That format ideally suited the structure of the *Fledermaus* finale, in which a flirtation (between husband and disguised wife, it later turns out) is carried on during the episodes, against a background of general festivity represented by the main waltz tune and especially its second strain (“Ha, welch ein Fest”; “Oh, what a party”). The lines with which the guests react when the band strikes up the waltz could serve as the motto of the operetta genre: “Ja, ja, ein wirbelnder Tanz/Erhöht des Festes Glanz!” (Ah yes, a whirling dance, just the thing to bring diversion to its peak). As in Offenbach's infernal dance, the curtain music jacks things up even further with an abrupt transition from waltz to galop.

It is often claimed that operetta was an unimportant genre in music history (as opposed to social history) because it did not contribute to the evolution of musical style. The historicist bias implicit in that view (and the likely impoverishment of a music history that excludes social history) will be apparent to readers of this book, but in any case the work of Johann Strauss refutes it. There is one stylistic idiosyncrasy in particular that went from him into the general idiom of European (or European-style) music, and that is the freedom with which the sixth degree of the scale is harmonized, appearing as a functional consonance both within the dominant (where it adds a ninth to the chord) and against the tonic (where it is usually described simply as an “added sixth”).

The familiar opening strain of the “Blue Danube” waltz supplies perhaps the classic illustration, one that many readers will be able to summon to memory without even looking at Ex. 12-12.

**ex. 12-12 Johann Strauss, opening strain of the “Blue Danube” Waltz**

The “Fledermaus Waltz” also contains many examples. The “V<sub>9</sub>” occurs at the very first chord change (Ex. 12-13a), and the striking second phrase of the big choral refrain (on the highly charged line, “Liebe und Wein gibt uns Seligkeit!”; “Love and wine grant us bliss!”) place dominant after tonic beneath a repeated sixth degree (Ex. 12-13b). That mild “liberated dissonance” gives a sense of the rush the text evokes; it is a musical stimulant. Most graphically of all, and proof of the composer's self-consciousness in its use, when the chiming clock briefly interrupts the festivities with a jolt, it is represented by that very sixth degree (Ex. 12-13c), acting as a modulatory pivot (which of course implies its functional consonance).

ex. 12-13a Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act II Waltz Finale, ritornello

*rit. a tempo*

*f* Ha, wech ein Fest, wel - che Nacht voll Freud! Lie - be und

*f* Ha, wech ein Fest, wel - che Nacht voll Freud! Lie - be und

*f* Ha, wech ein Fest, wel - che Nacht voll Freud! Lie - be und

Wein gibe uns Se - lig - keit! Ging's durchdas Le - ben so flott, wie

Wein gibe uns Se - lig - keit! Ging's durchdas Le - ben so flott, wie

Wein gibe uns Se - lig - keit! Ging's durchdas Le - ben so flott, wie

heut', Wär je - de Stun - de der Lust ge - weih!

heut', Wär je - de Stun - de der Lust ge - weih!

heut', Wär je - de Stun - de der Lust ge - weih!

ex. 12-13b Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act II Waltz Finale, "What a party!"

ex. 12-13c Johann Strauss, *Die Fledermaus*, Act II Waltz Finale (the chiming clock is heard)

## Notes:

(13) Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), p. 209.



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