

OFFENBACH Les contes d'Hoffmann • Thomas Beecham, cond; Raoul Jobin (Hoffmann); Patrice Munsel (Olympia); Lily Djanel (Giulietta, Muse); Jarmila Novotná (Antonia); Lucille Browning (Nicklausse); Alessio de Paolis (Frantz, Pitichinaccio, Spalanzani); Martial Singher (Dapertutto); Mack Harrell (Lindorf); Ezio Pinza (Coppélius, Miracle); Metropolitan Opera Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1060-2 mono (2 CDs: 155:09) Live: Metropolitan Opera House, New York 2/2/1944

& Les contes d'Hoffmann: Vous me quittez. Zara Dolukhanova (Giulietta); Ivan Kozlovsky (Hoffmann) Recorded 1952

By James Forrest

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In his third season at the Metropolitan, Thomas Beecham added Offenbach's masterpiece (in the Choudens edition) and also Wagner's *Tristan* to his New York City repertory. Sadly, the latter was not broadcast, depriving us of Marjorie Lawrence as Isolde, but we do have this striking performance of Hoffmann from February 26, 1944.

World War II and the years running up to war cost the Met the services of some singers (Flagstad, Cigna, Caniglia, Favero, Gigli [who had returned briefly in 1939] come to mind), but those absences helped "make" the careers of such as Traubel, Varnay, Steber, Stevens (among Americans) and gave opportunity to such expatriates as Novotná, Djanel, Singher, Jobin, and Moscona who arrived in the late 1930s or even during the war, and who provide the nucleus of this strong cast. Even more to the advantage of Edward Johnson's tenure as head of the Met were the conductors who became available: Bruno Walter, George Szell, Fritz Busch, and for three seasons Thomas Beecham who, in addition to his few Wagner performances and an opening run of Rimsky's *Golden Cockerel* in English, quite galvanized the French repertoire. His efforts included three broadcasts of *Carmen*, two of *Faust*, *Mignon*, and the excitingly sung and played broadcast under review.

The conductor was fortunate to have such singers as Jobin, Djanel, and Pinza because the Canadian tenor and Belgian soprano were ideal, and the great basso, whatever his lapses of linguistic accent, and (rarely) style, was, in vocal terms, to the manor born. In general, Johnson was able to flesh out the casts of the French works with singers (such as here) who at least had the vocal quality and, in the case of Singher, everything for their roles. The baritone took all four characters two seasons later when Pelletier conducted, and, in the early Bing years (1955) under Monteux. I heard him sing the four roles in Chicago (a concert version, CSO Saturday night concert in the 1958-59 season), Singher still in excellent form for music he was born to sing.

The present performance has been quite readily available for some years, most easily found in a heavily Cedar-mastered issue from a now defunct label: The Radio Years. It is from those discs I have long known and enjoyed the broadcast.

Richard Caniell and his associates have now given us a release which will truly enhance the appreciation of listeners and one which can be heard with very little distortion or resulting aural fatigue. I will briefly list some differences which I found significant. My earlier copy has the voices rather in your face (ear!) and the orchestral tone is frequently harsh—noticeable in the very first bars of the score and whenever volume increases. What I did not realize, until I made a detailed comparison, was that the noise suppression had also changed vocal timbres. Jobin, who is in splendid voice here, particularly from the Venetian Act on, sounds more varied in tone in the new mastering, and Djanel, whose prismatic tone quality did not appeal to all tastes but which I love, is infinitely more impressive as her subtle vocal shadings can be appreciated. Also, more evident, are the vocal contrasts between singers: Djanel and Browning in the Barcarolle, and between Pinza and Moscona as Antonia begins her sad but pre-ordained decline. The improved sonics also bring out some few idiosyncratic interpretive touches (there are not many) which I had not noticed before. Beecham takes the “Kleinzach” Ballad at a really good clip, and, as a result of leaving the starting gate at such a pace, he can’t take the latter part much faster. Jobin manages quite well, but in comparison to his 1948 Opera Comique studio recording sounds a bit pressed here. The two student choruses in the Epilogue are similarly driven at top speed, and can be appreciated much more due to improved sonic clarity. Clarity also enables us to appreciate fully the truly magnificent climax Beecham makes of the ensemble in act II. He comes off a rousing and fully voiced duet between Djanel and Jobin, and Singher’s aria (which is, for once, truly scintillating!), and the septet (so-called) takes wing into a burst of harmony. It is always ironic that the music of dubious provenance, the ensemble likely not written by Offenbach, can bring down the house when performed such as here. The conductor is also masterful as he brings the scene to its subdued close.

Throughout, in addition to Beecham’s leadership, which, other than the few times noted, does not call attention to itself, we have some notable vocal assumptions. Jobin is at his very best in the Giulietta and Antonia Acts, and gauges his concluding lines in the Epilogue well. As noted, Djanel is the most seductive of courtesans, a trifle rough at the opening of the scene but the voice quickly gains focus. Her speaking voice, as she limns the lines of the Muse in the Epilogue is endless in both sympathy and acceptance ... and with a world-weary quality. Pinza is a huge presence in acts I and III, the voice more warmed up as Dr. Miracle. The roles tax his top range a bit but not seriously. The young Mack Harrell, one of America’s finest vocalists, now all but forgotten (father of cellist Lynn) makes a real presence of Luther. The veteran Ludovico Oliviero, who formerly sang all the tenor character roles, here takes Andrès and Cochenille and does them with great flair.

Patrice Munsel, in her debut season, must have been an adorable Olympia on stage. The critics roasted her at her debut as Philine in *Mignon* earlier in the season but rather liked her doll when she appeared in the first Hoffmann performance. Others, Paul Jackson for one, have criticized her in this broadcast, but I do not find that she seriously lets down the side. Her singing is fluent, quite accurate, and tonally neat. There is not much wit, or sense of style, so your reaction will depend

on what you expect from a mechanical doll. The lack of style is a more serious loss in the case of Lucielle Browning, who replaced the more experienced Herta Glaz, the opening night Nicklausse. I like Browning's tone (a healthy, not overly large lyric mezzo—a very “American” sound). She was most noted for Suzuki over a considerable period at the Met and her French is not very specific. So, again, without spoiling the performance, she does not add as much to it as would have a more subtle, expressive singer.

For Antonia, we have one of my favorites, a soprano who for many years was hailed (along with Lina Cavalieri—earlier—and Lisa Della Casa—later) as one of the three most beautiful women in opera: the Czech, Jarmila Novotná. Novotná was the toast of Vienna in the 1930s, owned the role of Giudetta (in Lehár's very grand operetta), and made her San Francisco debut as Butterfly and her Met debut as Mimí. Her Met broadcast debut was as Violetta, alongside Jan Peerce in his house debut. Those roles would indicate a rather different kind of artist than she, in fact, turned out to be. I'm not sure the Met entirely knew how to use her, but she excelled as Euridice early on, and found great success as Cherubino and Octavian, roles she alternated until 1951 or so with Stevens. In addition to four Met broadcasts as the hero of R. Strauss, she moved, late career, her top notes having receded, to the Orlovsky of J. Strauss. In 1944, she had all the notes for a moving and finely sung Antonia. Even if most of the rest of this performance were not so enjoyable, the broadcast is indispensable to me for her performance: tonally beautiful, dramatically touching. Again, Beecham builds the act to quite a climax and Novotná's singing with her Mother's voice—a future Brünnhilde, Margaret Harshaw—is not to be missed. Also not to be missed is the star turn Alessio de Paolis, then in his fifth Met season, provides as Spalanzani, Pitichinaccio and Frantz—he makes those couplets not just bearable but a delight.

We can let it rest at that. The greatly improved sonics of this remastering enable us to enjoy a vocally and, for the most part, dramatically apt cast in a performance strongly welded but guided with subtlety by one of the greatest operatic conductors of his or any day. One more time: Not to be missed!

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OFFENBACH Les contes d'Hoffmann

By Henry Fogel

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This is a treasure. Those familiar with Beecham's unique way with this score from the famous film version will find this infinitely more gratifying. The singing here is much superior, and although there are still a number of cuts and the version used is what was available back in 1944, the opera is far less mauled than it was for the movie. Immortal Performances has managed an edition vastly preferable to earlier releases of this performance on Myto and Melodram (I never heard the Beecham Society LPs, which served as the source of those CD versions). Pitch has

been corrected (it was inconsistent, to say the least, on the other versions), and dynamic compression has been overcome to the extent possible. Producer Richard Caniell used ABC transcriptions and acetates from the Jobin collection in Canada.

There are many aspects of this performance that bring pleasure, but at the center is Beecham's conducting. He clearly loved this opera, and conducted it regularly from 1910. The opera is a structural mess, whether in this version published by Choudens or even in the myriad "critical editions" that have been created since. What can make it work is a conductor with a sense of theatrical pacing, a deep belief in the value of the score, and the ability to get an orchestra and a cast to perform it with similar conviction. This is precisely what we have here. The sense of musical and theatrical ensemble is not just from the orchestra, and not just between singers and orchestra, but also among the singers themselves. Every singer is truly interacting with every other singer, communicating a rare degree of dramatic and comedic authenticity. *Les contes d'Hoffmann* is a work that veers between absurdity, drama, romance, tragedy, and comedy. Beecham captures all of those moods, and manages to meld them into a unified whole.

Jobin was a Canadian tenor who was a mainstay in the French repertoire at the Met between 1940 and 1950. He was also known for his Lohengrin and Walther, and in Europe sang other dramatic roles like Radamès. While his timbre lacks the uniqueness and beauty of his predecessor Georges Thill, it is still an extremely attractive voice, and he was a scrupulous musician, with impeccable diction, rhythm, and pitch. His Hoffmann is one of the finest on records. He and Beecham are perfectly in tune with each other, and the musical give-and-take in, for instance, "The Ballad of Kleinzack" is enchanting. Jobin knows the French style, and his comfort with the idiom contributes to the success of his performance.

*Les contes d'Hoffmann* should, in theory, be given with one soprano and one bass-baritone in the roles of Hoffmann's loves and his adversaries, since the characters are, in Offenbach's mind, all manifestations of the same obsession of Hoffmann. Although there have been singers who did assume all the roles, it rarely works out well because the vocal writing and character of the music require different vocal and dramatic skills. The Met's solution here is far more satisfying: an all-star cast with almost every singer perfectly suited to his or her role.

In his superb program notes, Dewey Falkner rightly observes that Ezio Pinza's French is less than idiomatic and he has some difficulty with the passagework written for Coppélius. But it hardly matters because, as Falkner puts it, "he has *voce voce voce*." The extraordinarily deep and rich timbre that Pinza brings to both Coppélius and Dr. Miracle provides us with something unforgettable. I have not heard anything like it since in either role.

Another standout is Jarmila Novotná as Antonia. The voice itself is ravishingly beautiful, her way of shaping phrases is particularly affecting, and she is extremely convincing in Antonia's shifting moods between fear, joy, sorrow, and determination. The Antonia act (placed here after Giulietta's act, not what

Offenbach intended but frequently done in those days) is extraordinarily effective because of Novotná, Jobin, Pinza, and Nicola Moscona's richly sung Crespel.

Martial Singher made his Met debut in 1943 as Dapertutto in this production, already an accomplished singer from Paris. He was one of the great French baritones of his era, not so much for the quality of his voice as for his intelligence and musicianship. He himself was quoted as saying, "My voice was of average quality, but it was versatile and capable of projecting character, I think." Indeed it was, and his is a superb version of "Scintille diamant."

The successes of the cast continue with Patrice Munsel, heard here in her first season with the Met, triumphantly getting through Olympia's coloratura challenges. Falkner notes that she isn't as "mechanically precise" as some singers impersonating this doll, but it is glorious singing and it makes more convincing Hoffmann's infatuation with her. Extravagant casting brings us Margaret Harshaw as the voice of Antonia's Mother and the wonderful Alessio de Paolis as Spalanzani, Pitichinaccio, and Frantz. Mack Harrell is also excellent as Lindorf. Only Lucielle Browning lets us down a bit in the role of Niklausse.

This is a case where the whole is even greater than the sum of its parts, as good as those parts are. I have rarely been so utterly swept along by Offenbach's inspired but unevenly constructed work. Beecham and his cast make you forget the flaws and simply propel you into Hoffmann's bizarre world.

As if all of that weren't enough, Immortal Performances adds a six-minute bonus—a truly gorgeous recording of the Hoffmann-Giulietta duet with two of Russia's superstars from the middle of the 20th century. Zara Dolukhanova and Ivan Kozlovsky are thrilling. I was familiar with Kozlovsky's recording of the Kleinzack Ballad, but had not heard this before. Apparently those two are all we have of his Hoffmann, and that is a real loss.

Immortal Performances' usual superb production values accompany these two discs. A 34-page booklet with, as noted, thoughtful and perceptive essays by Dewey Faulkner, a detailed synopsis, and evocative photos. Milton Cross's commentary from the broadcast is included, but tracked separately should you wish to skip it. For anyone who loves this opera, this recording is essential.