

Opera Essay : Les Contes d'Hoffmann

By Peter Dundas

After Jacques Offenbach returned to Europe from his American tour in 1876, he entered the last four years of his life in declining health and growing operatic ambition. Although he was famous for his string of gay and sinful operettas, he yearned to write a real opera that would perpetuate his fame. He regarded Les Contes d'Hoffmann, "The Tales of Hoffmann," as his last chance for recognition as a composer of serious and dramatic musical theater.

The opera is based on bizarre stories by the poet, musician, and philosopher E T A Hoffmann. Designated an Opera Fantastique, it is a blend of tragedy and farce that combines German Romanticism with French irony. The poet Hoffmann himself is the central figure in each of the story's episodes.

In 1810, at the age of 34, Hoffmann met the woman who inspired the noblest and most intense of his many love-affairs: it was an unfulfilled romantic encounter that weaves through almost all of his stories, becoming the emotional and psychological leitmotif for Offenbach's opera composed in his name.

Hoffmann's mysterious love was Julia Marc. She was 15 years old when Hoffmann, a married man, became her teacher, musical mentor, and intimate friend. Although Hoffmann hesitated and initially negated the possibility that their relationship would evolve into romantic passion, he nevertheless became possessive toward Julia while he formed her musical taste, and dedicated vocal compositions and serenades to her. Julia is reputed to have possessed a beautiful voice: they worked together and sang together, Hoffmann falling hopelessly in love with her, and ultimately, having to subdue that love and return to the service of his art.

Offenbach's opera, taking the sum total of its three acts, mirrors Hoffmann's amorous adventure with Julia Marc. Julia appears as the three women in the opera: she is the dancing doll, Olympia, the courtesan Giulietta, and the frail and doomed Antonia, Hoffmann's last and purest love.

Hoffmann's affair with Julia came to a sudden and painful end when a marriage was arranged between Julia and a wealthy merchant. The tormented and despairing Hoffmann departed and never saw her again. Nevertheless, her image remained engraved in his psyche and dreams for the rest of his life. All of Hoffmann's personal life experiences appear in variously metamorphosed and magnified forms in his writings, which reflect his richly imaginative, hypersensitive, and ego-centric persona. Many also center around his relationship with Julia: its tension, desire, and ultimately, its failure to be fulfilled.

In 1851, twenty-eight years after Hoffmann's death, two young French dramatists, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, wrote a play that was based on his writings, "Les Contes Fantastiques d'Hoffmann," ("The Fantastic Tales of Hoffmann.") Hoffmann, the charismatic hero and central figure in their play, was portrayed in successive scenes as he pursued his adventures in quest of an ideal woman. Both the play and the opera demonstrate an astonishingly detailed knowledge of Hoffmann the man, as well as Hoffmann the writer and artist. The opera contains many subtle associations with Mozart's Don Giovanni, the real-life Hoffmann's quintessential "opera of all operas." Hoffmann has a Leporello-type character at his side (Nicklausse); Hoffmann pursues three loves just as

Don Giovanni pursued Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Zerlina; and Hoffman has a supernatural "Commendatore" awaiting his soul: Nicklausse transformed into Hoffmann's Muse.