

JACQUES OFFENBACH AND THE MAKING OF MODERN CULTURE

Offenbach's operas were a significant force for cultural change, both in his own time and in the decades to follow. In this book, Laurence Senelick demonstrates the ways in which this musical phenomenon took hold globally, with Offenbach's work offering an alternative, irreverent, sexualized view of life which audiences found liberating, both personally and socially. In the theatre, the composer also inspired cutting-edge innovations in stagecraft and design, and in this book he is recognized as a major cultural influence, with an extensive impact on the spheres of literature, art, film, and even politics. Senelick argues that Offenbach's importance spread far beyond France, and that his provocative and entertaining works, often seen as being more style than substance, influenced numerous key artists, writers, and thinkers, and made a major contribution to the development of modern society.

LAURENCE SENELICK is Fletcher Professor of Drama and Oratory at Tufts University and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His numerous books include the award-winning *Gordon Craig's Moscow 'Hamlet'* (1982), *The Age and Stage of George L. Fox* (1988), *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre* (2000), and *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (2006).



Portrait of Offenbach surrounded by his creations, in honor of the re-opening of the Bouffes-Parisiens. Wood engraving by Gustave Doré; *Le Monde illustré* (14 Sep. 1867). Only Shakespeare and Dickens are more frequently depicted amidst their characters.

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Laurence Senelick

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LAURENCE SENELICK

Tufts University, Massachusetts



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*To the memory of Virginia Scott, a lover of Paris who reveled in
what it had to offer and a scholar of Paris who delved into
what it concealed.*

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

Daudet declares that there's a fine book to be written: *The Century of Offenbach*, asserting that this whole era is descended from him, his joking, his music ...

Edmond de Goncourt¹

This book is an effort to realize Daudet's suggestion. It seeks to trace the ways in which Offenbach's operas influenced his age and those that followed on a worldwide scale. Despite his neglect or underestimation by historians both of music and of culture in general, he is, like Woody Allen's Zelig, popping up wherever something of importance is happening in the realm of art from 1855 to our own times.

Offenbach's music delighted, influenced, stimulated Rossini, Nietzsche, Nestroy, Strindberg, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Thackeray, Gilbert and Sullivan, William Dean Howells, Eça de Queirós (otherwise Queiroz), Machado de Assis, Karl Kraus, Paul Klee, Richard Strauss, Bertolt Brecht, Joseph Cornell, and Hans Bellmer. He angered and upset Wagner, the Goncourt brothers, Émile Zola, and the Nazis, confounded the Frankfurt School, and was shunned by a host of conservatives and moralists. He can be shown to be, for two decades, the most produced composer in the world. Adventurous theatre practitioners from Max Reinhardt, Nemirovich-Danchenko, Sergei Eisenstein, Joseph Urban, Walter Felsenstein, and Josef Svoboda drew on him for their experiments. Offenbach's operas provided opportunities for innovation in film and multi-media, his tunes were adopted for the U.S. Marines Hymn and an anthem of the International Workers of the World. Offenbach's comic operas were the first Western theatre pieces performed in Japan and Indo-China, and the libretto for another was the first play published in Arabic. His music accompanied

¹ Edmond de Goncourt (5 Jan. 1887) *Journal*, ed. Robert Ricatte (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), III, 4.

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the coronation of the King of the Belgians and the inauguration of the Austro-Hungarian double monarchy. It was performed in frontier fit-ups and concentration camps.

This is not a book for musicologists, since Offenbach's music is not subjected to close scrutiny. An extended study of Offenbach without such analysis is conceivable because he was the consummate *homme de théâtre*. Offenbach, unlike many other composers, lends himself to a metamusical approach. His operas were not composed in such close collaborations as those of Gilbert and Sullivan or Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito, in which a pre-existing libretto is set to music. In those cases, alterations may occur over the course of composition and even after the premiere, but the work soon takes on a stable and canonical status. Offenbach was involved from the inception: Throughout his career, he took a hand in ordering and revising his libretti, conducting, casting, staging, and even choreographing his works, managing his theatres, and devising their publicity. Different versions might be produced for different cities; *Geneviève de Brabant* underwent two distinct revisions. Two-act operas were enlarged to four acts. Musical numbers were transferred from one work to another. He was an all-round *homme de théâtre*, whose enormous success created an upheaval in the world of performance equal, in the words of his best-informed biographer, to those "of a Scribe, a Dumas, a Verdi or a Wagner."² The close-knit nature of the music to the satiric shafts of the "books" and the innovations in the staging produced a powerful effect on the public.

This is clear evidence that Offenbach, as he admitted, was not composing for posterity. He had a sharp sense of his public at any given moment, and, without pandering to it, gratified its tastes and captured its mood. Both the texts and the music are studded with topical jokes and tuneful parodies. This is also true of the Savoy Operas, but they had the protection of newly introduced international copyright and an institution, the D'Oyly Carte Company, which could preserve its traditions in aspic. The "downside" of this is that Gilbert and Sullivan remain primarily an English-language phenomenon, despite the occasional German production. Offenbach, from the 1860s, was an international hit, produced all over the world (as this book hopes to demonstrate), saturating and nourishing the host cultures to an extent rarely seen.

² Jean-Claude Yon, *Jacques Offenbach* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 417.

In writing about Offenbach, one runs up against the issue of nomenclature. He himself was very precise in the subtitles he chose, which range from operette or “musiquette” to opéra comique to opéra bouffe to opéra féerie to bouffonnerie musicale. The list of works he published in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* (1880) includes as well “foire musicale,” “vaudeville,” “chinoiserie,” and even “anthropophagie musicale.” An opéra comique or an opéra bouffe might be one act with three singers and a small orchestra or two or three acts with numerous soloists and a full orchestra. Or it might not. *La vie parisienne* is denominated a “play in 3 acts mixed with songs,” perhaps because the cast imposed on him at the Palais-Royal had more actors than singers.³

A contemporary made an effort to clarify the distinctions by declaring that “Those only are genuine operas-bouffes in which the characters are taken from mythology, history, and poetry, and are presented under ridiculous aspects” (i.e., *Orphée*, *La belle Hélène*, *Geneviève de Brabant*). Those in which the plot and characters are entirely imaginary should be classified as comic opera, with three subdivisions, pure Comic Opera (*La Périochole*), Farcical Opera (most Gilbert and Sullivan), and Opera-Bouffe (*Barbe-bleue*).⁴ The arbitrariness of these definitions is patent. In the face of these contradictions, I have played fast and loose in my narrative, using opera as shorthand with recourse to operetta, comic opera, or *opéra bouffe*, as the context suggests.

Researching and writing about Offenbach is a pleasure in itself, but the pleasure is doubled by the ability to thank all those who aided my work and play in this regard. I received financial support from the Research Fund of the American Society for Theatre Research and was granted a research year at the Center for the Humanities, Tufts University. I am indebted to numerous libraries and librarians: former curator Jeanne Newlin and former reference librarian Annette Fern of the Harvard Theatre Collection; Nora Probst of the Theatersammlung, Cologne; Mario Kramp, Curator of the Cologne Stadtmuseum; Gisela Fleckenheim, Cologne Stadtarchiv; Claudia Blank, Frau Angelaeas, and Frau Hauer, Munich Theatermuseum; Kate Dorney, former curator of the Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and Scott Krafft, Special Collections Librarian, Deering Library, Northwestern University. The staffs of the Bibliothèque

³ Anton Henseler, “Chronologisches Verzeichnis der Werke,” in *Jacques Offenbach*. Musik-Konzepte Heft 13, Ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1980), 103–10.

⁴ Henry Hersee, “Opéra-bouffe,” *Theatre* (London) (1 Nov. 1878), 281–84.

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An early version of the chapter on Offenbach and Chekhov appeared in *Theatre Journal*; an expanded version of the section on Jules Verne in *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*; that on Wagner and Nietzsche in *New Theatre Quarterly*, and my translation of Bertall's description of the opening night of *Vert-Vert* in *The Jacques Offenbach Society Newsletter*. I thank the editors, especially David Mayer, Robert Folstein, Maria Shevtsova, and Simon Trussler, for their encouragement.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. The late Aya Mihara provided translations from the Japanese. Milena Connolly did the same for Czech, Peter Bilton for Danish, and Calvin Champlin for Portuguese. meLê yamomo of the University of Amsterdam responded to my request for traces of Offenbach in the Pacific Rim. My research assistant Patrick King has been indefatigable and ingenious in procuring obscure articles and references; an aficionado of musical theatre, he has also added his own knowledge of cognate phenomena. So has Brian Valencia of Yale and Florida State Universities, who shared his research on early American musical comedy.

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When Cambridge University Press first accepted this project, the editor was Vicki Cooper. She was supportive even when it ran roughshod over its deadline. My current editors Kate Brett and Sophie Taylor have carried on the tradition and deserve much thanks for putting up with habits both dilatory and expansive.