

# Jacques Offenbach, the Cellist

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Series Director

Jacques Offenbach is today too readily identified – and quickly disregarded – as the composer of the *Can-Can*. This light, trivial, yet obsessive dance is just that: the *Can-Can* comes at a pivotal moment in Offenbach's comic opera *Orpheus in the Underworld* when Orpheus and his wife Eurydice are happily-parted from each other – in sharp contrast to the original legend in which the mythical lovers deeply mourn their tragic separation. Furthermore, *Orpheus in the Underworld* was a direct parody of Christoph Willibald Gluck's quite serious *Orfeo ed Euridice* – a French favorite – and caused a scandal upon its premiere in Paris in 1858.

In his own day, Offenbach was hailed as a genius of comic opera. *Orpheus in the Underworld* was just one of nearly a hundred operettas and other light works that Offenbach composed for the Parisian stage. Other notable works in this vein include *The Beautiful Helen* and *Parisian Life*. In retrospect, David Ewen has written "Few composers have been so successful as Offenbach in the writing of witty music, music full of chuckles and ironic amusement. His best works sparkle with life, salty satire, light-hearted gaiety." His operettas dominated Paris, and quickly found admirers in Vienna, London, and the United States – locales which would soon become centers for comic musical theatre traditions of their own. In his later years, Offenbach also devoted much time to a more substantial opera called *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

Offenbach's story did not begin on the Parisian stage, however. Jacques Offenbach was born in 1819 in Cologne, Germany, and in those days was known as "Jakob." His Jewish father Isaac Juda Eberst had moved to Cologne from Offenbach-am-Main, and eventually adopted the name "Offenbach" as his own surname. In Cologne, Isaac had become the cantor at a local synagogue, and saw to it that his three children received a musical education. Before long, young Jakob was playing cello, often performing alongside his brother and sister who played violin and piano. In 1833, Jakob and his brother Julius moved to Paris to study at the Paris Conservatoire. It was upon this move that Jakob took the French version of his first name "Jacques." Offenbach's time at the Conservatoire was brief though, and he soon joined the orchestra of the Parisian *Opéra-Comique* as a cellist. By 1838, however, Offenbach had also left this ensemble, instead embarking on a dual career as a virtuoso cellist and composer.

Offenbach had begun composing as a boy, yet he did not find success as a stage composer until 1855 when he was nearly forty years old. It was only natural then that Offenbach wrote most of his early compositions for cello considering his proficiency on this instrument – at one time, Offenbach was even known as the "Liszt of the Cello," referencing this pianist's formidable virtuosity. Offenbach, however, wrote less for solo cello as his theatre works began to win over audiences. Written while he was a young cellist in Paris hoping to make a name for himself, much of Offenbach's cello music makes considerable demands on its performers. These compositions often appeal to the fashionable genres of their time – popular waltzes and dance music that would have been heard in Parisian salons. These were the same genres that Chopin regularly employed in his familiar piano compositions of approximately this same time. Besides music for one or more cellos, Offenbach also wrote a few works for cello and orchestra including an extremely difficult *Concerto militaire* and a concertino.

Among Offenbach's many cello works are several series of duets for two cellos. These duets were usually intended as teaching aids for Offenbach himself to play alongside a student. The most extensive body of cello duets are contained in Offenbach's Opus 49 through 54 which he published as *Cours méthodique de duos pour deux violoncelles* in 1847. Five of the six duos heard on this evening's program are from this set, although this publication includes twenty-four in total. While the duets of Op. 49 are meant to be relatively easy, each opus listing features increasingly more difficult works. For example, whereas the Op. 49 duets can be played exclusively in first position and include only occasional double stopping, Opp. 50 through 52 expand all the way to sixth position; Opp. 53 and 54 are significantly more difficult than the earlier opus listings. In the *Cours méthodique*, both cellists play material that is technically demanding and musically interesting – they are equal partners.

Besides this set, other cello duos by Offenbach are found in Opp. 19 through 21, which the composer published as his *École du violoncelle pour deux violoncelles* in either 1839 or 1843 depending on the source. The remaining duet on this evening's program is No. 2 from Opus 21. The Op. 21 duets are moderately difficult and, like the *Cours méthodique* duets, they feature musically and technically equal parts for their two cellists. There are another three duets as part of Opus 34 (sometimes listed as Opus 43) and twelve etudes for two cellos listed as Opus 78. It is possible that some of these duets have been lost over the years: while some undiscovered manuscripts might still be floating around in Paris or the Library of Congress, many Offenbach manuscripts were

in fact destroyed with the collapse of the Cologne Archive a few years ago.

Despite the merits of Offenbach's works for cello, for the first hundred years after the composer's death in 1880, Offenbach was remembered only as a composer of stage music. Following the celebrations surrounding the centenary of his death, Offenbach's music for cello was gradually rediscovered and has witnessed a renewed interest by performers and scholars. Over the past thirty years, numerous recordings from this extensive body of music have been made. In 1996, The Jacques Offenbach Society was founded with the aim of returning all of Offenbach's music to the public consciousness.

Paul Christopher himself has been an important advocate for Offenbach's cello music. Mr. Christopher has dedicated approximately the past ten years to rediscovering and recording the cello duets of Jacques Offenbach. He and cellist Ruth Drummond's release in 2004 of the six Op. 49 duets was the first in a series on the Human Metronome label which plans to record Offenbach's complete duets. This in fact will be the first commercial recording of the complete Offenbach cello duets. Mr. Christopher has also given lectures and contributed journal articles on the duets of Offenbach, including a May 2007 article for the prestigious *American String Teacher* and several articles for *The Jacques Offenbach Society Newsletter*. A student of Paul Christopher for many years and now pursuing his master's degree with him, Milovan Paz joins Mr. Christopher this evening to perform these underappreciated duets.

Despite the efforts of The Jacques Offenbach Society, Paul Christopher, and others, much work is still to be done if Offenbach's cello music is to find a place in this instrument's standard repertoire. We hope you will enjoy this special program of cello music by Jacques Offenbach, as performed by some of its greatest advocates.

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