

Operaphoria™

METROPOLITAN OPERA LIVE IN HD

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Erin Morley as
Olympia

Les Contes d'Hoffmann, by Offenbach

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CINEMA NORTH



Jacques Offenbach was a prolific composer of operettas, but *Tales of Hoffmann* is his only opera. It is one of the great operatic oddities of all time, but also a remarkably popular feature in the standard repertoire. The Met has staged *Hoffmann* more than 260 times, in a variety of productions. The history of *Hoffmann* began in 1851, when two of that century's most popular playwrights—Jules Barbier and Michel Carré—wrote a play based

on the fantastic stories published by another contemporary writer—E.T.A. Hoffmann. In that play, Barbier and Carré wrote in a major role for E.T.A. Hoffmann, the author of the stories. That would be equivalent to someone in 1625 writing a new version of *Othello* that included a leading role for Will Shakespeare. Not only did Barbier and Carré manage to pull this off, successfully, but they enlisted the help of a young virtuoso cellist to conduct the incidental music for the play. That cellist was Jacques Offenbach.

Twenty-five years later, that same virtuoso cellist was now the most popular composer of operettas in the world, and he was looking for a libretto in which he could invest his full talents. He wanted to prove to the world that he was not just the composer of popular music, but was a musician to be taken seriously. He went back to the script for which he had conducted the incidental music, and asked the writer, Barbier, (Carré had died) to prepare an opera libretto based on the play. His final work would be his *magnum opus*.

While working on *Tales of Hoffmann*, Offenbach wrote five more operettas, just to pay the bills, but *Hoffmann* was his focus. Unfortunately, Offenbach never finished his last effort. When he died in 1880, he had composed a lot of material for *Hoffmann*, but he had not yet synthesized his efforts. It was confusing, and still is, even though several musicologists have offered reconstructions.

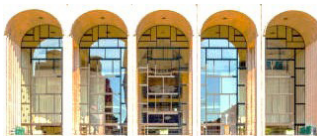


Photo: Metropolitan Opera

The story of the opera is basically Hoffmann's telling of three different failed love relationships, each one overlapping the other with parallel characters. Note that the reasons for the failures are rather atypical.

Nothing simple, like, "You had an affair!" Rather, his relationship with Olympia failed because she turned out to be a life-sized mechanical doll, but Hoffmann didn't notice, because he was wearing rose-tinted glasses. And his relationship with Giulietta failed because she stole Hoffmann's shadow in exchange for a diamond. And poor Antonia was under the influence of her mother's ghost, who encouraged her daughter to sing, knowing that singing would kill her.

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The three stories are bracketed by a Prologue and an Epilogue. The opera opens in Luther's, a Nuremberg bar, with a tribute to the numbing effects of alcohol. The opening lines of the chorus are, "Glug, glug, glug," sung by barflies called "The Spirits of Beer and Wine," who tell us that getting drunk is the way to forget our problems and have a good time. The poet Hoffmann enters, already drunk. He is in love with Stella, an opera star who, that very night, is singing Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Even though Luther's is attached to the opera house, it is a downscale bar with low-grade musical tastes. The barflies prod Hoffmann into singing a ditty about "Klein Zack," an oddly-shaped dwarf. While singing, he recedes into a reverie about his three lost loves, all of whom have something in common with Stella. In effect, they are parts of her.

The next three acts feature the three lost loves that devastated Hoffmann. In each case, an evil character is blamed for Hoffmann's failure in life and love. Finally, in the Epilogue, the Muse attempts to comfort Hoffmann with the observation that pain is good for the creative process. He might be a total failure in interpersonal relationships, but at least he has his poetry. The opera ends with Hoffmann clutching his poems, a caricature of an alcoholic artist who thinks alcohol or drugs can court the Muse.

So, what is this opera about? At the end of the opera the barflies are still singing about the glories of alcohol, and the Muse tells Hoffmann:

*Let the ashes of your heart
Ignite your genius once again.
The Muse will ease your blessed suffering.
Love makes one great.
Tears make us even greater.*

Which might not be true, of course. Tears do

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not make us greater. Certainly, how we handle our grieving can result in personal growth, but pain and suffering can take an enormous toll on us, and some of us don't survive it.



Rising star Benjamin Bernheim takes on the role of Hoffmann

However, there are real lessons to be learned from Hoffmann. The story of Olympia, for example, is not just a silly story about someone who falls in love with a robotic doll. Rather, it is another way for us to look at the archetypes of Tristan's Isolde, or Cyrano's Roxane. These women were fantasies generated by incomplete men who needed to believe that

attachment to feminine perfection is a way of saving themselves. Hoffmann does something similar. He has "rose-colored eyes," and sees in Olympia the woman he needs her to be, not the woman she is.

We also learn not to tolerate "the sale of our shadow" to anyone for any reason. In other words, we should not bargain with someone who wants to take away our identity, our sense of self, for their own personal gain. Nor should we fall in love with people who cannot support us, or who demand something from us that will do us harm.

Finally—perhaps an unintended lesson—maybe we should not drink so much. – GP

Production

Tales of Hoffmann, by Offenbach
Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024

Conductor: **Marco Armiliato**
Production: **Bartlett Sher**
Hoffmann: **Benjamin Bernheim**
Olympia: **Erin Morley**
Giulietta: **Clémentine Margaine**
Antonia: **Pretty Yende**
Nicklausse: **Vasilisa Berzhanskaya**
The Four Villians: **Christian Van Horn**

E.T.A.

Tales of Hoffmann has been described as bizarre, and the description probably fits. However, E.T.A. Hoffmann was not bizarre simply for shock effect. There is great depth of searching inquiry in all his stories. Hoffmann himself was somewhat of an oddity, and the ditty of “Klein Zack” in the Prologue might be at least partly autobiographical. In his personal and social life, he was frequently in trouble, and he cultivated his antisocial image quite fearlessly. Nevertheless, along the way, “the ashes of his heart ignited his creative genius.”



ETA Hoffmann

In addition to *Tales of Hoffmann*, *The Nutcracker* ballet is based on one of his short stories. Also, the ballet *Coppelia*, is based on a story similar to that of Olympia in the first act of *Tales of Hoffmann*. In *Coppelia*, a dollmaker has created a doll so realistic that the villagers believe it is the dollmaker’s daughter, and Franz falls in love with it.

Hoffmann pushed the limits of reality to such a degree that it appeared to be a militant rejection of everyone else’s reality. A psychologist might observe that this is what people do when they cannot accept something about themselves. They create an acceptable reality. We have all seen examples of this in our social relationships, and in politics, where someone is struggling with paralyzing fears about what will happen if others discover the truths about their inadequacies. In the performing arts, good comedies often reveal greater truths, not necessarily humorous. There is no greater evidence for this than in the stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose bizarre fantasies might remind us to accept the realities about ourselves. – GP

Hard Work

We will not print the name of the author of the following quote here, because we are not being very nice to him. However, just to give our readers a little idea of how hard some musicologists are working to understand this opera, following are some fragments of an analysis of *Tales of Hoffmann* we found recently on the internet:

“(The opera) refers to concepts of intertextuality and intermediality.... In an eminent self-reflexive turn (these themes) are reflected and criticized. These aspects stretch from musico-literary poetological reflexions on models of production or artistry; concepts of the author and the (decentralized) subject, to critics of Enlightenment and materialism, questions on gender, and finally, to a de-reconstruction of romantic thought.”

Get it? Not to worry. This is an excellent, engaging, production of a fascinating opera. It is thoroughly entertaining, and supported by the best singing of Offenbach’s best music. – GP

All Three

The roles of the three failed love relationships in *Tales of Hoffmann* are usually cast and sung by three different sopranos, and that is the case with this production. However, a few sopranos with a wide range have sung all three roles in the same production, the same evening—a major achievement. Sometimes the opera has been presented as a vehicle for a soprano who wants to demonstrate she can do it.

Olympia is a high, light coloratura soprano. Giulietta is a dramatic soprano, and Antonia is a lyric soprano. For the 2015 production at the Met, the Russian soprano Hibla Gerzmava sang all three roles. Other notable examples are Joan Sutherland, and Beverly Sills at NY City Opera. – GP

The Met: Live in HD 2024-25 Schedule

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October 5, 2024

Les Contes d'Hoffmann, by Offenbach

Offenbach's only opera, fantastical and gloriously musical. The three heroines will be sung by Erin Morley, Pretty Yende, and Clémentine Margaine, with Benjamin Bernheim as Hoffmann and Christian Van Horn as the Four Villains. Vasilisa Berzhanskaya in her company debut sings Nicklausse. The Bartlett Sher production, with Marco Armiliato conducting.

October 19, 2024

Grounded, by Jeanine Tesori A Met Premiere

Emily D'Angelo stars as a hot-shot fighter pilot in an opera that takes on the psychological and emotional issues of modern warmaking. A powerful new opera addressing an important contemporary issue. A Michael Mayer production, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

November 23, 2024

Tosca, by Puccini

The phenomenal Lise Davidsen stars as the passionate diva in the revival of David McVicar's production. Freddie De Tommaso makes his eagerly anticipated company debut as Tosca's revolutionary lover, Cavaradossi. Quinn Kelsy is the sadistic chief of police, Scarpia. Maestro Xian Zhang conducts.

January 25, 2025

Aida, by Verdi

This is a new production by Michael Mayer, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. American soprano Angel Blue sings the Ethiopian princess torn between love and country, with mezzo Judit Kutasi as her rival, Amneris. Dramatic tenor Piotr Beczala is the conflicted lover Radames, who opens the heavens with his "*Celeste Aida*."

March 15, 2025

Fidelio, by Beethoven

Lise Davidsen returns to the Met, this time as Leonore, the faithful wife who risks everything to save her husband from the clutches of tyranny. David Butt Philip is the political prisoner Florestan, and Tomasz Konieczny is the villainous Don Pizarro. The classic veteran German bass, René Pape sings the jailer, Rocco. Susanna Mälkki conducts this simulcast.

April 26, 2025

Le Nozze di Figaro, by Mozart

This is a revival of the Richard Eyre Production, Conductor Joana Mallwitz makes her Met debut of this timeless comedy with a sparkling cast. Michael Samuel is the clever Figaro who will marry his beloved Susanna (Olga Kulchynska) if he can handle the contrary intentions of Count Almaviva (Joshua Hopkins) and Marcellina (Elizabeth Bishop). It all works out, of course, and everybody is happy at the end.

May 17, 2025

Salome, by Richard Strauss

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts a new production that promises to shed new light on the biblical story that was dramatized by Oscar Wilde. Elza van den Heever is Salome and Gerhard Siegel is Herod. Michelle DeYoung sings Herodias, and Peter Mattei is the victimized prophet Jochanaan.

May 31, 2025

Il Barbiere di Siviglia, by Rossini

This revival of the Bartlett Sher production completes the other half of the Figaro story and is conducted by Giacomo Sagripanti. Rosina is sung by Aigul Akhmetshina. Jack Swanson is Count Almaviva and Andrey Zhilikhovskiy is Figaro. Peter Kálmán sings the great comic role of Bartolo, with Alexander Vinogradov as Basilio.