

Heck on Senelick (2017)

Senelick, Laurence. *Jacques Offenbach and the Making of Modern Culture*. U of Cambridge P, 2017, pp. 354, ISBN 978-0-521-87180-8

Adeline Heck, Princeton University

The present study is the first English-language volume to be devoted to the works of Jacques Offenbach and their reception. For specialists of nineteenth-century France, this belated recognition may seem rather puzzling, surely the product of traditional scholarly qualms concerning popular genres. The author himself acknowledges that “The nature of history, including literary, musical, and dramatic history, is to gravitate to high seriousness and to grant more significance to the grave than to the gay. *Il penseroso* receives higher marks than *l’allegro*” (3). While the object of analysis—operetta—may appear to be frivolous, the methods used by Laurence Senelick certainly are not. The scope of this book is dazzlingly ambitious, with international reviews and documents extending into the current era of stage performance. Besides giving Offenbach the academic scrutiny he deserves, it contains a stunning iconography—caricatures, illustrations, and photographs—that makes this volume a significant contribution to nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural studies.

Senelick addresses Offenbach’s legacy as a composer not just in Western Europe, but also in a global context, a feat made possible by his admirable engagement with international scholarship. The book is divided into two different parts, the first attending to Offenbachian premieres in Europe, Russia, and the New World, while the second focuses on twentieth-century productions by famed directors such as Max Reinhardt, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and Jean-Louis Barrault. Far from contenting himself with the retelling of anecdotes, Senelick has derived a pattern from these various adaptations of Offenbach:

First, some of his one-acts are staged, either in French or in translation. Then French touring companies show up and inspire the local talent to imitate or adapt or even plagiarize Offenbach’s more extended work. These versions become imbedded in the culture, sometimes for decades, and serve to liberate composers and librettists from conventional genres and styles. (165)

To reprise the book’s title, Offenbach’s main contribution to modernity may have been a cheerful questioning of both dramatic form and social mores, one that paved the way for theatrical experiments with distanciation in the twentieth century.

Few pages are dedicated to Offenbach’s career in France, nor does Senelick get into great detail when it comes to his transformation into a revered classic in the second half of the twentieth century. Notable contemporary productions, such as Laurent Pelly’s 1997 *Orphée aux Enfers* for the Opéra National de Lyon, or *La Belle Hélène* by the same director for the Théâtre du Châtelet in 2000, both of which did much to rouse a new wave of interest, are surprisingly not analyzed. However, the first chapter proposes a highly condensed summary of Offenbach’s trajectory, necessary reading for anyone studying the wider history of French musical theatre.

As a performance studies expert, Senelick devotes little attention to the specifics in Offenbach’s scores, and much more to their interpreters. His elegant writing nonetheless succeeds in conveying the contagious ebullience of Offenbach’s melodies while simultaneously imparting a sense of delight that befits his topic. In the process, he makes a convincing case for the long-lasting appeal of Offenbach and shows why these light operas were resurrected at various critical moments in history. In times of uncertainty, these lighthearted dramatic works have provided “a logical conclusion in the irrational,” to paraphrase a lecture by Karl Kraus quoted by the author (95). Be it driven by the necessity to assert the merits of French culture in face of intense American cultural rivalry in the 1930s, or due to a need for escapism from East Berlin, the sharp satirical edge of these *opéras bouffes* has demonstrated its pertinence as a form of underlying cultural and political commentary. Arguably, their mixture of *bons mots*, charming melodies, and occasional poignancy has found even greater resonance now that these works are no longer viewed through a moralizing lens.

The question of Offenbach and his librettists’ alleged indecency is another major issue examined in the book. Repeatedly, we are treated to critics objecting to the sexually scandalous nature of these light operas with their adulterous plots and behind-the-stage intrigues, from Victorian commentators who believed that the libretti had to be bowdlerized for English consumption, to the Goncourts, who saw the *Bouffes-Parisiens* as a locus of promiscuity and moral decadence. But nowhere perhaps is the criticism as biting as with Émile Zola, who not only denounced operetta’s alleged vulgarity in various newspapers, but also in *Nana*: “Its sexual provocation—what he [Zola] calls its ‘nervous erethism’—must debilitate the younger generation” (47). Zola’s angle is uncharacteristically conservative and points to an enduring stereotype, one that has permanently associated Offenbach with the Second Empire, his *joie de vivre* translating the superficial ethos of that era.

Fortunately, that myth is debunked very early on in Senelick's introduction and the portrayal of Offenbach that emerges in its stead is more arresting. If these *opéras bouffes* did indeed rely on sexual innuendo for laughs, they never pandered to bad taste; rather, they subtly undermined bourgeois values. In this regard, the rivalry between Wagner (a composer who was accused of sexual immorality on the stage and in his personal life) and Offenbach, to which the second chapter is dedicated, takes a new dimension. While the first promoted a reverential reception of his works based on the notion that the artist ought to have the last word, the other encouraged input from his collaborators and the audience. Their conflict, which can be characterized as one of immutability vs. flexibility, further highlights Offenbach's anticipation of modernity as an age in which both sexuality and theatrical productions are fluid. In conclusion, Offenbach's theatre is worth being taken seriously if only for its cheeky challenging of gender norms, a topic that should be of interest to scholars investigating the intersection of gender and theatre in nineteenth-century France.

Volume: 47.3–4

Year:

- 2019