

JDCMB

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In search of the spirit of Hoffmann

It's a fantasy world here in London this morning. Everything has turned white. A suitable setting for a fabulously fantastical evening courtesy of Offenbach, ENO, director Richard Jones and a cast headed by the doughty Barry Banks as ETA Hoffmann. But why do so many of the musical creations based on this seminal German Romantic author have so little to do with what he actually wrote? Is he just...too damn scary? [I have a piece about this in today's Independent](#). But below, please find the director's cut, in which Schumann comes to the fore rather more than Offenbach.

First, here's the trailer for tonight - it's a co-production with the Bavarian State Opera. I just hope the transport system holds up under our massive and alarming 2cm of snow.



View:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=y3kByskUTAU

Where would we be without the stories and novels of ETA Hoffmann? The German author's dazzling imagination underpins some of the world's most popular and enduring operas, ballets, and even piano music. Yet there's a real disconnect between Hoffmann's influence and the adaptations we see on stage. Few of them bear much resemblance to his originals. Indeed, the writer's absence from his own legacy is so striking that Richard Jones, the director of English National Opera's new production of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, has apparently recommended to his lead tenor, Barry Banks, that he need not read the tales by Hoffmann on which the opera is based.

That could seem surprising – after all, the hero of Jacques Offenbach’s opera is loosely modelled on the real Hoffmann. But perhaps it is a practical matter: so vivid and terrifying are these seminal works of German Romanticism that our star singer would risk having nightmares for weeks.

The opera – about to open at the Coliseum in a co-production with the Bavarian State Opera, Munich – features Hoffmann as a dissolute, drunken poet looking back over his thwarted love affairs and finally finding redemption in his art alone. Three stories are involved, each concerning one of three women, Olympia, Antonia and Giulietta, each with an ‘evil genius’ figure who puts Hoffmann through a series of supernatural tribulations. Olympia is an automaton, made to appear real when Hoffmann dons magic spectacles. Antonia dies in his arms after her mother’s ghost persuades her to sing, against medical advice. Giulietta, a Venetian courtesan, steals his reflection, and implicitly his soul. Every tale is based on a Hoffmann original. Yet Hoffmann’s actual writing is so disturbing that the operatic version, despite its gripping narrative and unforgettable music, can barely scratch the surface.

We seem little concerned with the real ETA Hoffmann today, beyond specialised academic studies, but his significance was multifarious and profound. His life – contemporaneous with Beethoven – was short, difficult and tragic. Born Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann in Königsberg in 1776, he adored music obsessively, to the point that he changed his ‘Wilhelm’ to ‘Amadeus’ in tribute to Mozart. His family background appears to have been unstable, rife with mental problems; perhaps his imagination was predisposed to become fevered. He lived a turbulent existence, moving between Germany and Poland, working variously as a clerk, a jurist and a music critic, writing and composing prolifically the while. He became “dissolute” and syphilis killed him when he was only 46. The writer George Sand said of him: “Never in the history of the human spirit has anyone entered more freely and more purely into the world of dream.”

So why do the popular adaptations of his works veer so far from the originals? *The Nutcracker*, that ubiquitous Christmas ballet, is a case in point. It presents a supremely simplified version of a tale in which the “world of dream” is deeply entangled with that of reality. For balletic purposes, the most potent and horrific elements of Hoffmann’s *Nutcracker and Mouse King* are stripped away; in their place the audience sees infinite sugar. Hoffmann himself had dreamed up, among other things, a seven-headed mouse king that sets gruesome traps for its own offspring. Not so great for family viewing, perhaps.

Then there’s *Coppelia*, second only to *The Nutcracker* in popularity: a sweet, frothy story about a youth who becomes infatuated with a doll, inducing his

girlfriend to take good-natured revenge. Set to irresistible music by Léo Delibes, it is based on the same Hoffmann tale as the Olympia episode in Offenbach's opera. Yet the original story – *The Sandman* – couldn't be less sweet and frothy if it tried. It involves murder, madness, blinding and the manufacture of eyes, as well as the recognition of the darkest and most destructive side of the human psyche, all of it conjured with imagery so potent that it impacts upon our subconscious at an almost primal level. It can be no coincidence that Sigmund Freud made considerable reference to this story in his essay *The Uncanny*, describing Hoffmann as “the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature”. Incidentally, Freud associated the terror of losing sight with the fear of castration.

The composer most faithful to the underlying spirit of ETA Hoffmann was Schumann, who did not use the actual stories at all – though this arch-romantic's tragic life, with its descent into syphilitic madness, reads almost like one in itself. He frequently took inspiration from the author: *Fantasiestücke*, *Nachtstücke* and *Kreisleriana* are all titles used by both creators. The turbulent, mercurial atmosphere of Schumann's piano cycle *Kreisleriana* catches the tone of Hoffmann to perfection, although there is no programmatic link.

Hoffmann had given the name 'Johannes Kreisler' to a sort of alter-ego that finally became a character in his last novel *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr) – in which the autobiography of a savvy feline is accidentally mingled with that of a temperamental and introverted musician. The young Johannes Brahms, another passionate Hoffmann aficionado, sometimes signed himself 'Joh. Kreisler Jun.' (Johannes Kreisler Junior), including on his official Op.1, the Piano Sonata in C major.

Offenbach's choice of Hoffmann as the basis for his last opera was a less personal matter, but no less telling. Towards the end of his life, though celebrated for his riotous and risqué Parisian operettas, he yearned for recognition as a serious composer. These stories provided the ideal medium. Perhaps, too, he was able to identify with a different aspect of the anguished hero; as a German Jewish immigrant in 19th-century Paris, he had perforce remained rather an outsider himself.

The opera involves a feast of musical joys – among them the brilliant coloratura aria of Olympia the doll, the hero's duet with the doomed Antonia, and Giulietta's seductive Barcarolle. Hoffmann's various loves are sung by the same soprano (for ENO, it is Georgia Jarman), while the three “evil genius” figures are likewise portrayed by one bass (Clive Bayley). Barry Banks, as Hoffmann, takes on a notoriously demanding yet rewarding role.

Sweetened for palatability, simplified for stage presentation and all but forgotten in the shadow of the great music they inspired, Hoffmann's stories and their profound psychological truths remain immortal in their own way. At least Offenbach gave him the credit he deserved. It is high time that we did so as well.

The Tales of Hoffmann opens at English National Opera on 10 February. Box office: 0871 911 0200

Posted by [Jessica](#) at [8:32 AM](#) 

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1 comments:



[ridinghood](#) said...

Jessica, I read your commentary (the Independent piece cannot be accessed), I am curious what you thought of the Hoffman production itself since the trailer looks very interesting - wild and outrageous but I could recognize every scene even with the sound off (my radio is playing the Cesar Franck sonata and I don't have the heart to stop it). The latest MET entry is dreadful, the director had absolutely no idea what he was dealing with in terms of telling the story and crammed it with stuff that makes zero sense... this new production looks much better. I'd love to read your assessment, I assume you have seen it in the meantime.

Kati

[9:43 PM](#)

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