

"Tales of Hoffmann" from 2YA

On July 20 another complete opera, Offenbach's "Tales of Hoffmann," will be broadcast from 2YA by the Orpheus Musical Society, under the direction of Harison Cook, whose brilliant operatic career was outlined in this journal some months ago. Below, in an article specially written by Mr. Cook for the "Radio Record," appear some very interesting sidelights on Offenbach's life, and a short synopsis of the story of "The Tales of Hoffmann," which will be presented, in English, in a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue.

OF course, Offenbach wasn't his name, for his father's name was Juda Eberscht, but he will always be known as Jaques Offenbach and, in any case, it's a much easier name to remember.

He was born a German but, when he was 15 years of age, he went to Paris, and, contrary to all the rules and regulations of the Paris Conservatoire, which closed its doors to all foreigners, he managed to "wangle himself in" as a student. He eventually became "more Parisian than the Parisians," and, later in his life, he actually became a naturalised Frenchman.

He was what was known in those days as a "dandy," and was often seen dressed in a sky-blue coat, yellow waistcoat and trousers, grey gloves, a green hat and carrying a red sunshade. His light operas (of which he actually wrote about a hundred in 25 years), became the rage of Paris and the biggest box-office draws in the world. In fact, when Wagner tried to get "The Meistersingers" produced in Vienna he was told that they were far too busy producing Offenbach's operas to worry about his, and Wagner was so annoyed that he called Offenbach "that musical clown."

Offenbach's sparkling—there is no other word to describe it—music was so popular that numbers were taken from his works and introduced into pantomimes and burlesques in all parts of the world where such entertainments were given. His works are still popular. Some years before the War an English translation was made of "The Tales of Hoffmann" and was offered to Mr. Charles Manners, of the Moody-Manners Opera Co.—the only real opponents the Carl Rosa Opera Company ever had in opera—but he refused to take it because the copyright conditions required that two performances a week must be given of the work. It was then offered to Mr. Walter Van Noorden, then managing director of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, who snapped up the chance, and, incidentally, for many years Monday night and Saturday matinee usually, with the Carl Rosa, consisted of "The Tales of Hoffmann," very much to the financial benefit of the company. They are still playing the opera in their repertoire.

The sparkle in his music and the twinkle in his eyes seem to indicate that Offenbach extracted all the fun possible out of life, and even his masterpiece and last work, "The Tales of Hoffmann," is said to have been written to win a bet with somebody who said that he couldn't write anything but light, ear-tickling music. Experts also say that "The Tales of Hoffmann" was Offenbach's burlesque on all the grand operas, which were favourites at the time.

It is hoped that the following short summary of the story of "The Tales of Hoffmann" will help listeners-in to visualise the various scenes while listening to the music of the opera when it is broadcast from 2YA on July 20, and thus add materially to the enjoyment of the presentation.



Mr. Harison Cook.

The Prologue

The scene is laid in Luther's wine cellar beside the Opera House in Berlin (though for some reason the French librettists have made it Nuremberg).

Students are singing a drinking chorus, when Hoffmann and his friend Nicklaus enter and join them. They persuade Hoffmann to sing, and he sings "The Legend of Kleinsack." He then falls into a sentimental mood and tells them the story of his three great loves, to which they listen, ignoring the fact that the curtain is about to rise on the opera; "Don Giovanni," in the adjoining Opera House.

Hoffmann sings, "This first fond love of mine was called Olympia," and the curtain descends.

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The three "tales" are now presented, as if they were actually taking place, in three successive acts.

The First Tale —"Olympia the Doll"

The scene is a room in the house of Spalanzani, and is brilliantly lighted in preparation for a ball.

Spalanzani is a scientist, and Hoffmann becomes his pupil. Spalanzani's masterpiece is an automatic doll which he has constructed, and his partner, Coppilius, sells Hoffmann a pair of spectacles which make everything, no matter how unreal, appear real. While wearing these, Hoffmann immediately falls in love with Olympia, the doll (imagining that she is the daughter of Spalanzani), as she sings a song, and he fails to hear the sounds caused by winding up the mechanism of the doll when it twice runs down during the performance.

HE then dances with the doll, whose movements become so energetic that Hoffmann drops down exhausted, and Olympia disappears into an adjoining room.

Coppilius, who has been bought out of the firm by Spalanzani, who gives him a cheque, discovers that owing to the failure of "Elias the Jew," the cheque is worthless. He then rushes into the house again and breaks the doll into pieces, while the crowd laugh at Hoffmann for having fallen so madly in love with a mechanical doll.

The Second Tale—"Giulietta the Courtesan"

The scene is laid in the sumptuous palace of Giulietta, a courtesan, in Venice.

The curtain rises on the well-known Barcarolle, which is being sung by Giulietta and Nicklaus, the friend of Hoffmann. Hoffmann enters, but Nicklaus, to get him away from Giulietta, drags him into an adjoining room to play cards. Dapertotto, an evil magician, enters and requires Giulietta to obtain the reflection, or shadow, of Hoffmann in a mirror that he gives her for that purpose. (Concluded on page 2.)