

No looking back

NIGEL SIMEONE looks forward to future volumes in a ground-breaking critical edition

ORPHÉE AUX ENFERS was first produced as an *opéra-bouffon* in two acts at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens on 21 October 1858; it was Offenbach's earliest full-length work to be performed there. A few weeks later a piano-vocal score of the work was published by Heugel, as were several individual songs. In May the following year *Orphée* had already reached its 150th performance, and this tremendous box-office success was further nourished by attacks on the piece from the likes of Jules Janin, who denounced it as sacrilege and a desecration of classical civilisation. Other critics were outraged by the irreverent treatment of Gluck's *Orphée*, a work viewed by these unsmiling guardians of artistic decency as an inviolable icon of operatic excellence. The reaction to remarks of this kind was both pleasing and predictable, and it was neatly summed up by Alexander Faris: 'The public, intrigued by the rumpus and its attendant publicity, began to flock to the Bouffes and *Orphée* became not only a triumph but a cult.' A couple of months later in 1859, when the Emperor's troops came back from victory at Magenta, they marched to tunes from *Orphée*.

So within a year of its premiere, this music had made such an impact that it was being taken up by France's victorious armies; it was this kind of institutional acceptance which led directly to Offenbach's own acceptance as a French citizen: his official naturalisation papers are dated 14 January 1860. In April the same year, a gala performance of *Orphée* was given at the Théâtre des Italiens for the Emperor Louis-Napoléon. By the time Offenbach expanded the work into a four-act '*opéra-féerie*' in 1874, France had been through the trauma of the Franco-Prussian War, the horrors of the Siege of Paris and the Commune and, ultimately, the establishment of a new Republic. Things were never the same again for Offenbach, but the new success of the revised *Orphée*, in a spectacular production, maintained the composer's place in the public's affection; it is the 1874 four-act opera which subsequently established itself as the standard version of the work, especially in France.

This new edition of *Orphée aux enfers* is an impressive publication in every way, and an important one too. Here, for the first time ever, is a full score, any full score of the work, beautifully printed and handsomely bound. It is the first volume of the projected 'Offenbach Edition Keck', a complete edition of his works, edited by Jean-Christophe Keck.

This enterprise could not have wished for a better start. While *Orphée* is more familiar in Offenbach's revamped 1874 version (this will appear as vol.IV/1 of the Keck edition in due course), it was an inspired decision to publish the 1858 version: less well-known but arguably tougher and fresher in its two-act format. Certainly it is a good deal shorter: the original Heugel edition of the 1858 version runs to 147 pages of vocal score, whereas the 1874 vocal score issued by the same firm weighs in at over double that length at a hefty 301 pages. For the 1874 revival, Offenbach added the opening chorus ('Voici, voici la douzième heure'), the enchanting 'Couplets des regrets' ('Ah! quelle triste destinée'), the 'Valse des petits violinistes', the numbers including policemen, the trial scene, and a lot of ballet music (much of it delightful), as well as expanding some other numbers.

Otherwise, however, the first version contains many of the familiar songs, but is a good deal more compact: instead of a substantial overture and the opening chorus, the opera begins after a much shorter overture ending with a brief passage of melodrama introducing L'Opinion publique with Euridice's first song ('La femme dont le coeur rive'). Most of the other big numbers were in the 1858 version: the Orpheus and Euridice duet with violin obbligato, the 'Fly' duet (Euridice/Jupiter), the wonderful finale to Act I (or Act II in 1874) with its send-up of a triumphal chorus, 'Gloire, gloire à Jupiter', followed by the jauntiest imaginable journey to Hell – one early production had the cast travelling the length of a bus route from the Champs-Élysées to the Barrière des Enfers during this scene; the Revolutionary chorus, John Styx's song (of which more in a moment), and the 'Galop infernal', much better

Jacques Offenbach:
Orphée aux enfers:
opéra-bouffon en 2
actes et 4 tableaux:
version de 1858
Edited by Jean-
Christophe Keck.
Bote & Bock/Boosey
& Hawkes (2001).
Full score, £85.00,
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commentary, libretto
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Piano-vocal score,
£24.99.



Offenbach looks back

Review article

known as well – rather endearingly, in the critical report the word ‘can-can’ is mentioned just once, on page 40 of 43 pages of the English version, in a brief but stern paragraph which stresses that its transformation into one of the world’s most famous pieces of music thanks to the Moulin Rouge and the Folies-Bergère came some fifteen years after Offenbach’s death. No need to worry though: as the editor points out, the original ‘Infernal galop’ was a considerably more spontaneous and riotous affair (Keck likens it to a modern rave, but let us hope that opera directors resist the temptation).

KECK avoids the temptation to produce a composite, idealised, version of *Orpheus*, mixing the 1858 and 1874 scores: the 1874 ‘opéra-féerie’ is properly considered an entirely different proposition and will be published as such. More impressive still is that there is no attempt to resuscitate music which Offenbach himself cut or revised before the first night in October 1858. The editor here has complete faith in the composer’s musical and dramatic judgement and his explicit aim is to present the score as Offenbach intended it to be heard, including any changes made in rehearsals, in Autumn 1858. Such scrupulous editors (especially of famous French operas) are rarer than might be supposed.

One rejected setting is included (printed only in the vocal score, as an appendix), and most in-

teresting it is too: John Styx’s ‘Quand j’étais roi de Béotie’ began life as a completely different song, in F major, with a 3/8 time signature, marked Allegretto. It is splendid to have Keck’s reconstruction of it and it is characteristic of this editor that he makes such a modest claim for it: the whole *raison d’être* of this edition is to respect Offenbach’s theatrical instincts at the time of the premiere, and to celebrate the joyous masterpiece that was the result. The first Heugel vocal score has obviously been indispensable as a source, but so too have several manuscript copies of the full score (in Keck’s own collection, in the Bote & Bock archives, and in the Bibliothèque nationale de France) which seem not to have been examined in detail until now. Incidentally, the autograph manuscript of *Orphée* could not be consulted as its whereabouts is unknown, and it is presumed to be lost.

The full score is very clearly printed, with French text only, but without the dialogue – its omission being one of the few criticisms I would make of this edition. Editorial footnotes are in French, German and English and these are kept to a minimum in the interests of presenting a clean performing score. A few markings could do with explanation: in the Act I finale, bar 117 (‘Jupin, emmenez nous avec vous, s’il vous plaît’), the new score prints ‘(Meno mosso)’ without any apparent reason: in the 1858 vocal score there is no marking at all (so the same tempo as the preceding music is assumed), and in the 1874 score this passage is marked ‘Allegretto’. Presumably this is one of the markings which the critical commentary justifies as follows: ‘We have been obliged to add various tempo indications to this long finale simply in order to compensate for oversights made by the copyists (or perhaps Offenbach himself)’.

This is a rare instance in this publication of the editor appearing to know better than the composer: my own experience of conducting this passage (and, more importantly, the practice of such distinguished and idiomatic conductors as Jules Gressier in his wonderful recording from the early 1950s) is that no such tempo adjustment is necessary here. Four bars later, ‘Très animé’ is given as the marking – it appears too in both the 1858 and 1874 vocal scores but the editor’s explanation, that this means ‘più vivo’ is not necessarily helpful. (In many performances of this passage, including Gressier’s recording, the tempo remains essentially the same, but the delivery of the text becomes livelier and more animated).

Elsewhere in this finale, Keck has added several more helpful indications, and he has come up with a sensible solution to the bizarrely complex problem of distributing the voice parts, especially in ‘Gloire, gloire à Jupiter’ onwards (in places tenor and soprano lines were switched round in

the 1858 vocal score, and in other places it is difficult to know who should be singing what). The percussion parts have been treated with particular care throughout the work, and the parts for second and third trombone which Offenbach added in the early 1860s are given on small staves as an *ossia*. The delicacy and skill of Offenbach's orchestration (it is all the composer's own work) is something to relish while leafing through the pages of this handsome score.

The CD-Rom which accompanies this edition is a delight, and Mac users will be pleased to know that it works like a dream on my iBook and on the MT editor's iMac. (Computer-phobics, or those without access to a machine, should note that Boosey & Hawkes offer to produce, on request, a printed copy of the critical commentary, free of charge). As well as containing a commentary (in French, German and English) with a wealth of historical as well as textual detail, and numerous facsimiles of early editions and manuscripts, the CD also includes a complete libretto (again in three languages) and a wonderful gallery of early lithographs, photographs, posters and letters. In short, it is a rich and very satisfying critical apparatus which is also hours of fun to explore – and 'fun' is hardly an epithet which can usually be applied to critical commentaries.

As well as being an unmatched archive of illustrative material relating to the work, the material on the CD-Rom helps give substance to important aspects of the early performance history and publication of *Orphée*. First, Keck provides valuable information about the performing forces available to Offenbach at the Bouffes-Parisiens in 1858 (and, incidentally, also includes an engraving of the theatre's interior from 1855): the orchestra at the theatre was a small one and for the original *Orphée* it consisted of two flutes (the second doubling piccolo), one oboe, two clarinets, one bassoon, two horns, two cornets, one trombone, timpani, percussion (bass drum/cymbals, triangle), and strings (Keck speculates that the string strengths were probably six first violins, four second violins, three violas, four cellos, and one double bass – this is likely to be an absolute maximum given the size of the orchestra pit). The CD-Rom also includes an engraving of the theatre's interior from the mid-1850s.

Second, Keck describes, and even illustrates, an edition of *Orphée* which is all but unknown, though it has not escaped the notice of the ever-watchful James J. Fuld (see p.160 of Fuld's *The book of world-famous music*, fifth edition, 2000, especially footnote 2: 'a few [...] separate numbers from the opera were first published by E. Bertin'). The Heugel edition published soon after the premiere has usually been claimed as the earliest appearance of this music in print, but the work was first printed (at least in separate pieces) by the

firm of E. Bertin, whose offices at the time were at 65 passage Choiseul, in the same covered passageway as the stage door to the Bouffes-Parisiens. The CD-Rom illustrates the title page of one of these incredibly rare individually-printed songs, and this includes a thematic index listing fourteen numbers. The resolution of the facsimile at high magnification is not clear enough to see the detail of the incipits, but it is fascinating to discover more about this shadowy publication. Elsewhere on the CD-Rom, Keck reproduces a facsimile of the letter from Offenbach (undated, but presumably from Autumn 1858) informing Heugel that the vocal score had 'recently been published by Bertin'. Keck's commentary mentions this Bertin score, stating that it was never distributed; it has evidently eluded scholars and collectors so far, since it is not mentioned among the sources consulted.

A GREAT deal of care and thought has gone into the preparation of this edition, and the presentation is also of a very high standard. Given the musicological quality of the publication, the impressive production standards, the inclusion of the absorbing CD-Rom, and the fact that this is the one-and-only full score of *Orphée* (at least until Keck's edition of the four-act version comes along), the price asked represents excellent value for money. The companion vocal score is an essential addition, since it has all the spoken dialogue in the appropriate places (which, annoyingly for conductors, the full score does not print at all) and it also includes the suppressed version of John Styx's song. This vocal score is also keenly priced, and very well printed – another first in the bibliographical history of *Orphée*, several of whose earlier vocal scores look as if they might indeed have been engraved and printed *aux enfers*. My only regret is the absence of English singing text and dialogue, though with French and German already included, there simply isn't space to put it in. Perhaps an English-only vocal score could be produced in due course? Such an edition would be invaluable to student or amateur groups in Britain and the USA, and with a score so reasonably priced it should help operatic societies to kick the habit of staging botched, butchered and bowdlerised 'amateur' versions of the work. The CD-Rom does include a complete English libretto, and a printed copy of this is available from Boosey & Hawkes.

The 1858 *Orpheus* deserves reviving as it stands, and this outstanding edition makes such a prospect not only feasible, but also pretty well irresistible. Altogether a superb achievement, and the start of a series which merits the most enthusiastic support from scholars, libraries and performers alike.

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