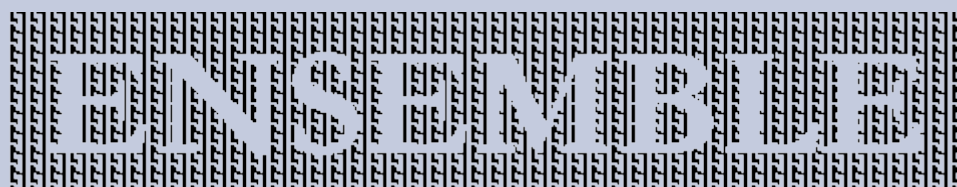




Inspired by the world première of Anthony Payne's elaboration of Elgar's sketches for a third symphony, **Robert Anderson** embarked on a voyage of discovery of the influences behind many of Elgar's major works. Available now from **elgar.org**



Unmistakably French

Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*,
reviewed by GIUSEPPE PENNISI

In Jacques Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, the protagonist (a poet and a would-be womanizer, but with very little luck) tells his love stories to a group of drinking buddies while awaiting his latest conquest, the singer Stella with a lead role in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the nearby theatre. The stories he tells are more bitter than sweet; in each act, he unsuccessfully courts a different woman. When *Don Giovanni* is over and Stella arrives, the fellow is totally drunk. Of course, she goes out to dinner (and what not) with some other chap. Some time ago, I reviewed the English National Opera / Munich National Theater joint production (*Innovative Dramaturgy, 6 August 2012*). Last year, a new production began touring small provincial theatres such as those of Pisa, Livorno, Lucca and Novara (*Unlucky in Love, 13 February 2014*). This season, two additional productions are touring Italy and France. The first started its travels in Rouen. After a stop at the Royal Theatre of Versailles, it is visiting Pavia, Como, Jesi, Cremona and Brescia, for more than thirty performances. The second will debut in Piacenza in January 2015, and after stops in Modena and Reggio Emilia, will reach Toulon and other French cities. There are major economic advantages no doubt in terms of sharing costs and having a larger number of performances.

In this specific case, there is an additional bonus; whilst the Munich staging was quite British and many productions seen in Italy had an Italian flavor, the performance I saw in Jesi on 29 November 2014 was unmistakably French. The director (Frédéric Roels) and set and costumes designers (Bruno de Lavenère and Lionel Lesire) are French, the conductor (Christian Capocaccia) is Italian but with much international experience (including in France) and the main singer

(Michael Spadacini) is Belgian but of Italian descent. The others are mainly an international group, mostly trained in the well-known opera school in Como. All had perfect French diction.

Les contes d'Hoffmann should not be confused with the operettas often associated with Offenbach's name. It is a sweet-and-sour apologue about loneliness and passion. Regrettably, the composer died before completing the opera. The three acts are self-contained (and each normally named after the woman Hoffmann is wooing). They are preceded by a short prologue and followed by an equally short epilogue. Normally the director has a certain freedom in the succession of the acts. Whilst the Olympia act has a touch of operetta and requires very agile coloratura and the Giulietta act is pure French melodrama, the Antonia act has music of real tragic passion. Very rarely are they sung by the same soprano, as they require very different vocal textures.

The three main sopranos were young (in their twenties) products of the Como School: Bianca Tognocchi (an Italian coloratura soprano), Maria Mudryak (a Kazak lyric soprano), and Larissa Alice Wissel (a German dramatic soprano). All three were superb. In one of the performances that I did not attend, Larissa Alice Wissel sang all three roles and reportedly acquitted herself very well.

Michael Spadacini took the title role. He is a generous tenor who acts like an acrobat but is accustomed to larger theaters; he ought to have softened his volume and provided a more elegant emission. Abramo Rosalen (in the role of the 'bad guy' taking the women away from Hoffmann) and Alessia Nadin (in the trouser role of the poet's Muse) were perfect.

Christian Capocaccia conducted the Milan orchestra I Pomeriggi Musicali competently.

This was the first time that *Les contes d'Hoffmann* had been staged in Jesi, and the audience was enthusiastic.

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JACQUES OFFENBACH

ITALY

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