

# Les Contes d'Hoffmann

opera fantastica in un prologo, tre atti e un epilogo  
dal dramma omonimo di Barbier e di Michel Carrè e da E.T.A. Hoffmann  
musica di Jacques Offenbach, libretto di Jules Barbier

## **Prologue.** *Luther's tavern in Nuremberg.*

Among the dancing spirits of wine and beer in the empty tavern is the muse of the poet Hoffmann. Lindorf enters with Andrès, who works for Stella, the Italian opera singer engaged in a performance of Mozart's Don Giovanni in a theatre near the tavern. Lindorf has fallen for Stella and knowing she has had an affair with Hoffmann, bribes Andrès into giving him a letter in which the opera-singer arranges a nocturnal rendezvous with the poet. Anxious to conquer the diva, Lindorf decides to go to the appointment instead of Hoffmann. Meanwhile Luther tells his regulars that the first act of Don Giovanni is drawing to an end and that Hoffmann's arrival is imminent. A chorus of students applauds Luther and the entrance of Hoffmann accompanied by Nicklausse. The students then convince the two to join in singing the "legende de Kleinzach". But Hoffman's mind wanders from the singing to day-dream about Stella. Lindorf then rebukes Hoffmann and challenges him to reveal the flame of his secret love. Hoffmann accepts the challenge and begins to relate the "wild stories" of the three women he has loved. The first is Olympia.

## **Act one.** *The laboratory of the scientist Spalanzani.*

Spalanzani proudly admires Olympia, his artfully made mechanical doll which perfectly resembles a human being. He even considers the doll to be his daughter. Hoffman arrives in Spalanzani's laboratory and immediately falls in love with the beautiful Olympia, despite Nicklausse's admonishing against this latest folly. Coppélius, who helped Spalanzani create Olympia, inveigles Hoffmann, asking him for money to see Olympia again. At this point Spalanzani enters, and Coppélius announces they must settle "their business". Alone with the inventor, Coppélius demands to be paid for his part in making Olympia. Spalanzani agrees but pays him with an out-of-date cheque.

The inventor then sets off for a party in Olympia's honour: to the great admiration of the guests, Spalanzani's beautiful daughter sings while her father accompanies her on the harp. Hoffmann is entranced by the voice of the woman-automaton, and despite Nicklausse's warnings, has not the slightest inkling of her real nature. The girl then draws the poet into a wild waltz, leaving him exhausted but elated. Coppélius, however, to get his own back for the trick played on him by Spalanzani, smashes the doll to pieces. The forlorn Hoffmann realizes he has been in love with a mechanical doll and in despair rushes out muttering "An automaton! An automaton!".



**Act Two.** *A bizarrely furnished room in Crespel's house.*

Antonia, the daughter of the violinmaker Crespel and of a famous singer sits at the cembalo and sings the melancholy air “Elle a fui, la tourterelle...”. But her father interrupts her, begging her not to sing, otherwise a mysterious illness will kill her. Nicklausse and Hoffmann enter. The poet and Antonia are in love, but Hoffmann knows nothing of the mysterious illness and they sing a love duet together. The deceitful Dr. Miracle then enters and asks to examine Antonia in an attempt to cure her from her illness. But he really wishes to destroy her and beseeches her to sing and not to abandon the “demon of music” and possible glory.

Having realized the risk Antonia is running, Hoffmann implores her to give up singing and art to ensure their love may have a future. But Dr. Miracle again tries to convince her to sing and to do so retells the life of her mother, whose voice is then heard inviting Antonia to sing. Accompanied by Miracle's fiddling, the young woman sings a heart-breaking romance and then collapses in agony, while Miracle disappears. The anguished Crespel vainly attempts to save her. Then, accusing Hoffmann of having caused the death of his daughter, tries to attack him with a knife. Nicklausse intervenes to save his friend and the heart-broken Hoffmann desperately calls for a doctor: Miracle reappears and, in the manner of Mephistopheles, holds up Antonia's hand and announces her death.

**Act Three.** *A sumptuous drawing room in a palace on the Grand Canal, Venice.*

The beautiful courtesan Giulietta is holding a large reception in a Venetian palace. Among the many guests, sitting beside Giulietta, are her lover Schlémil, Nicklausse and Hoffmann. Nicklausse and Giulietta sing the famous barcarole “Belle nuit, O nuit d'amour”. Hoffmann then quietly begins to flirt with Giulietta. To thank her, he accepts an invitation to sing a song, in which he expresses his enchantment with his beautiful host.

But Giulietta is actually in the power of the diabolical Dapertutto, who asks her to seduce Hoffmann so the poet may come under his evil influence. Giulietta declares her love for Hoffmann but is overheard by Schlémil, who demands an explanation from Hoffmann, while Giulietta makes off. Schlémil challenges Hoffmann to a duel, but the poet wins thanks to a magic sword has been given by Dapertutto. Giulietta informs Hoffmann that she must leave Venice immediately. When he opposes her departure, she bewitches him and encourages him to make a gift of his reflection – and therefore of his soul – thus delivering him to Dapertutto.

**Epilogue.** *Luther's tavern in Nuremberg.*

Hoffmann has concluded his fantastic tales, and while the end of the performance of Don Giovanni is announced, the poet reveals that the three women he vainly pursued were none other than three different personifications of his beloved Stella. He has thus turned to wine for consolation from the bitter realization that love can never be attained. Stella, Nicklausse and Lindorf enter. But, following Nicklausse's warnings that Stella can only be the muse for his art, Hoffmann relinquishes his love for her and lets Lindorf - the personification of the three evil characters in the tales (Coppélius, Dapertutto and Miracle) - carry her off.

