

INTERVIEW WITH BARRIE KOSKY

How subversive is a can-can?

Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) is considered the first real opera in history, while Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) is thought of as the original operetta. Is it pure coincidence that these two works are dedicated to the same mythological figure: Orpheus?

It couldn't get better. Monteverdi set out to reinvent Greek theatre using the seminal Greek myth about music! And Offenbach started the entire operetta tradition by using the same myth. Now, he didn't do it because Monteverdi did it, at least not consciously. It's an extraordinary thing that Monteverdi, who initiated the *entire* history of opera, and Offenbach, both used the same myth.

Orphée aux enfers is your third Offenbach production. Do you have a special connection to this composer? What is it about this operetta in particular that attracts you?

Offenbach crosses so many interesting cultural pathways. He was the son of a klezmer musician who was a cantor in a synagogue. I've always said that in Offenbach's music, like Kurt Weill's – because Weill's father was also a cantor – you hear the melodies of the synagogue in all of their music. You listen to your father all your life and you end up putting that music into sexy operettas.

I'm not necessarily saying that it's Jewish music. All I'm saying is we know that Offenbach sang in a synagogue choir in Paris when he was a student at the Conservatoire. His Judaism unconsciously, naturally, organically went into his music.

Of course, you can talk about Offenbach's connection with Mozart, but I think you also must always talk about the idea of Jewish melody. I always point out that his subversiveness comes from his Jewishness and also from his Germanness. He was a German Jew in Paris and I find that very interesting. It's connected to Heinrich Heine. They both had a wonderful sense of humour and were very much part of that French-German discussion and that Jewish-German discussion.

And what could be more subversive than what he does with Orpheus? In the original version of the myth, Orpheus's singing allows him to go into the underworld. But in Offenbach,



everyone's complaining about Orpheus and his music. You've got that duet where Eurydice is begging him not to play the violin because it's so awful.

While other composers can make the stones weep or the wind stop with their music, Offenbach's genius is that he puts a smile on your face, even in the most stoic, misanthropic person. You just can't help smiling.

The premiere of *Orphée aux enfers* in Paris was a scandal. What remains of this radicalism today?

This is a radical piece and I think there are two things you can pick up from Offenbach's time and bring into our own. Firstly, you have the outrageousness of satirizing music itself. He starts out with the quintessential myth of music, but everything that is held sacred about that myth, including the loss of his wife in the underworld, is mocked. Not only do we *not* get the sacred marriage between Orpheus and Eurydice and the idea of his sacred music, but also she can't stand him! She can't stand his music! She loathes him!

So Offenbach turns the whole idea of the power of music in the Orphic myth on its head, plays with it but then celebrates it. And where better to do this than in Salzburg, where you can play with the idea of *holy* music. *Orphée aux enfers* is not *Parsifal*!

And the second thing he subverts is the whole idea of heteronormative marriage. What does marriage mean? And you see this in Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as in Jupiter and Juno. The genius of Greek and Roman mythology is that they made marriage so dysfunctional.

**'Orpheus, you have the soul of a common fiddler!'
- 'Wife, your verdict is very harsh.'**

Unlike in most arrangements of the Orpheus material, Offenbach's Eurydice is not the faceless wife, but has a distinct opinion of her own. Is she actually the protagonist of the piece?

This presentation of these amazing strong women really interests me. It became even more developed with *Hélène* and the *Grand Duchess of Gérolstein*. These female characters are decades ahead of anything any composer was doing on the opera stages. We must remember that we don't see these women in 19th-century French, Italian, German or Russian opera.

In everyone else's version, she dies and Orpheus journeys to the underworld – a horrible place – attempts to bring her back and loses her a second time: that famous turn of the head. And he goes back up to earth, is ripped apart by the furies and his body goes down the river and becomes music. Wonderful, powerful, mythic material.

Not in Offenbach. Here, Jupiter makes him turn around because Jupiter and Pluto want Eurydice to remain in the underworld. But she says, I don't want either of you and don't make me go back to that Orpheus! And she jumps into the arms of Bacchus.

In the end she wants her freedom and her independence. Where in serious operas of the time do you get a female character choosing independence of marriage and male tyranny?

Can you tell us anything about your production, the set design and the costumes? What kind of world are you taking us to?

I can't tell you details, because they get worked out during rehearsals. But it's always the case with Offenbach that we need to realize we don't live in his time. We can't replicate the extraordinariness of what it must have been like to sit in these gas-lit theatres with these half-naked dancers and this outrageous political satire where the very audience he was satirizing was sitting there, laughing at themselves.

It was a mixture of political satire, porn and variété. So we can't even begin to imagine what it was actually like. All we know is it was very hot in those tiny theatres, which must have been part of the experience: sweaty and dirty.



Speaking of the can-can: detail from the Salzburg Festival costume department

So if we now say that Offenbach is just a satire of the bourgeoisie and do it like that, it doesn't work, because what are we doing then? Would it mean making the Salzburg audience laugh at itself? Well, that joke would wear thin within minutes. I'm not doing a hard-hitting social critique. If I wanted to do that, I would do *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. If I want to make a comment about society, that's not *Orphée aux enfers*.

In my production, I'm taking you to a surreal fantasy world that has elements of different time periods. We are not doing a 19th-century reconstruction and we are not doing a contemporary production. We are mixing – the world is a hallucination of elements of Offenbach's world seen through the eyes of the 21st century. Like all operetta, it must have opulence. It's a Kosky production, so we're using silent film techniques and gender-bending and variété. It's an Offenbach Panopticon. I'll give you one more hint. We have Swarovski sponsoring part of the can-can.

Speaking of the can-can, anyone who thinks of *Orphée* and Offenbach will inevitably have that tune in their head. There is hardly a more famous operetta melody. Everybody expects a big explosion on stage? How do you deal with it? Will there be an explosion?

You know, when you see many productions of *Orphée aux enfers*, they don't even do the can-can. But you *must* do it, because all the Dionysian energy in *Orphée aux enfers* is encapsulated in that dance. But what is the can-can? How you do the can-can? How subversive is the can-can? These are all very important questions. There are so many interesting levels you can work on this piece and play with it.

The can-can is an incredible dance thing started by men and eventually taken over by women, initially in the dance halls and the variétés of Paris, without underwear. Then they put underwear on the dancers, but it had a slit. It was a bit like belly dancing with your crotch.

There are two versions of this operetta. Which will we see in Salzburg? And how do you deal with the spoken dialogue?

We're singing it in French and speaking in German. There was a discussion about whether we should do it all in German, because there's a tradition, going back at least to Max Reinhardt when he did all his famous Offenbach productions, in German.

When we did *Barbe-bleue* and *La Belle Hélène* in Berlin, we did them in German. In Salzburg, there's a mix, but it's a mix that works because Offenbach was German-French. And I think that this mixing of French and German is authentic to Offenbach's DNA.

And we'll be adapting the dialogue, because we're turning the role of John Styx into Death itself. In Offenbach there is a dance between Eros and Thanatos, a tango between death and the erotic. It was my idea that the piece should be narrated by death. So Max Hopp (as Styx) has a larger role than he would otherwise.

The conductor is Enrique Mazzola, with whom you have already worked a lot. What do you appreciate about him and this collaboration?

The Vienna Philharmonic is going to play. There is need for a conductor who can give speed and wit. Markus Hinterhäuser and I came up with Enrique Mazzola because of his experience with Rossini and Donizetti and because his Meyerbeer at the Deutsche Oper Berlin was sensational!

Have you already worked with some of the singers in the Salzburg cast?

I was very involved in the casting process, which isn't usual for a festival like this. And I had to have clowns. Offenbach only works when you have clowns as performers. I can't teach someone to be funny and I can't teach someone to be able to do this style. And I know that the performers we've found will be able to do it. We have two fabulous young singers as Orpheus and Eurydice. Joel Prieto has sung Tamino in my production of *Die Zauberflöte* in Madrid. He's great and he can sing, dance and act. We have Kathryn Lewek, who was a sensational Konstanze at the Deutsche Oper Berlin and I think is the best Queen of the Night in the world.



Joel Prieto (Orphée)



Kathryn Lewek (Eurydice)

And it was important to have as Pluto and Jupiter two performers who could be “schräg” and eccentric and sing the roles well. One of them is Martin Winkler (Jupiter), who is one of the most extraordinary people I’ve ever worked with. As Pluto, we’ve got Marcel Beekman, who’s a Dutch singer and a brilliant performer.

With this production, you are making your debut at the Salzburg Festival. What does it mean to you to stage this work in the Haus für Mozart?

I think it's great that on Offenbach's 200th birthday, the Salzburg Festival is honouring the composer by putting his work alongside Mozart. He was, of course, called the "Mozart of the Champs-Élysées". And he adored Mozart. So to perform *Orphée aux enfers* in the Haus für Mozart is the best birthday present and memorial that you can give Offenbach. I think he'd be grinning in his grave.

Offenbach is a revolutionary composer and a genius who sits in the pantheon, not only because of what he did in his own time but because of the influence that he had and the radical, revolutionary things he did on his stage. He was a theatre man from head to toe.

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Orphée aux enfers

Opéra-bouffon in two acts and four scenes (1858)

Libretto by Hector Crémieux and Ludovic Halévy

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Dramaturgy **Susanna Goldberg**

Aristée / Pluton **Marcel Beekman**
Jupiter **Martin Winkler**
Orphée **Joel Prieto**
Eurydice **Kathryn Lewek**
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