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Press Text: Terrace Talk *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*
“A mix resembling life itself.”



Marc Minkowski (conductor), Mariame Clément (director)

(SF, 7 August 2024) Jacques Offenbach's opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* has only been presented twice in the history of the Salzburg Festival. This is a fact which Artistic Director **Markus Hinterhäuser** notes at the beginning of the talk, pointing to the last two series of performances, in 2003 and 1982. He is particularly pleased about two debuts: director **Mariame Clément** as well as conductor **Marc Minkowski**, who leads the Vienna Philharmonic for the first time at the Festival.

Mariame Clément emphasizes the complexity of the work: “The challenge is that there are many high points, but at the same time, the narrative approach is very convoluted. Apart from the framework tale, there are three pieces within the piece – it's really four operas in one evening.” Therefore, it is important to find a narrative stringency, a red thread, while remaining close to the figure. “As a title figure, Hoffmann is omnipresent, both as a narrative figure and on a meta-level. He is a participant and observer in one. To us, it was important to create empathy and elicit compassion for him as a character,” Clément explains.

Marc Minkowski has conducted many Offenbach works. “I share Mariame's enthusiasm for Offenbach. After many explorations of comic tales, it was always his goal to achieve success in the field of romantic opera as well. In this combination of comedy and tragedy – a path he

already pursued in his *Rheinnixen* – his music is even more expressive. As a composer, he embraces his audience and his performers equally,” he says.

Two figures are portrayed in this opera on several levels; as one of them, Kathryn Lewek will embody not only Stella in this new production, but also Olympia, Antonia and Giulietta. “We decided together to have only one performer [for these roles]. Kathryn is doing an outstanding job. In general, the female figures in this piece are a great challenge.” The true narrative perspective is that of Hoffmann; the female roles are merely projections based on this. “Given this background, achieving a change of perspective, towards the female figures’ viewpoint, was important to us.”



Mariame Clément (director)

Asked about the casting of Stella with a dramatic coloratura soprano, Minkowski says: “Offenbach originally wrote the role of Stella for a dramatic soprano and that of Hoffmann for a baritone. Only later, because of the requirements of the Opéra Comique in Paris, where the work was subsequently performed, did Stella become a coloratura soprano and Hoffmann a tenor. For today’s Stella, one needs a flexible voice which is comfortable in the high range, a singer who can sing the arias in the original keys. She also needs a mix of virtuosity, bel canto emotionality and dramatic power. She must be able to deliver coloratura fireworks, but also to articulate the vowels and consonants well in the orchestral recitatives.”

Clément describes the Hoffmann character: “In his person, various layers and stories are mixed which really have nothing to do with one another. We resolve this discrepancy by emphasizing the fact that the artist’s life and work are necessarily interwoven. The individual acts are neither mere narration nor pure biography.” This demands working very precisely with the libretto, so that every scene makes clear whether it’s reality or fiction. She describes the singers as very willing to shape the narrative of the scenes. “As Hoffmann, Benjamin Bernheim passionately defends his character – it resonates within him. He and Kate Lindsey contribute to finding solutions because they think independently, and think ahead,” she reports on the rehearsal process. She considers it an advantage that Bernheim is already well familiar with the role. This allows him to empathize with it even more. His commitment and enthusiasm allow his character to undergo a touching development, leading the viewer to suffer with him.

Regarding the recitatives as a stylistic means of narration, Minkowski explains: “Originally, they were spoken dialogues. At the time the work was performed at the Opéra Comique in Paris, that was still the rule. When the unfinished work was completed posthumously, recitatives with orchestral accompaniment – a hallmark of romantic opera, already the more successful genre by then – were added. This also means that singers who are not native speakers of French can deliver a more homogeneous performance.”



Marc Minkowski (conductor)

Mariame Clément describes the fascination Offenbach's music holds for her: "What touches me about this opera is that he has poured his entire soul into this work – contrary to his reputation as an entertaining operetta composer. He had an incredible talent for melody. Despite all its tragedy, *Hoffmann* also has funny moments; there is something one could call an ironic distancing from the title figure. This mix of tragedy and comedy resembles life itself." However, she also points out that this tension between comedy and tragedy also carries great risks.

Neither wants to reveal too much before the premiere, but Minkowski says about the end: "The ending is a bit like a philosophical lesson. The title hero understands that he has arrived back in reality, and that experiencing sorrow is a path towards dealing with one's own existence. The end leaves open a certain window for further development." In his work with the Vienna Philharmonic, he leads a kind of double life, drawing upon his broad experience as an expert in historically informed performance practice with his own ensemble and as a guest conductor of other orchestras: "We find a shared path towards different dynamics and stylistic approaches; we try things out, and we find a compromise between a full, rich sound and a kind of sonic 'acupuncture'."

Photo link: <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/photos/les-contes-dhoffmann-2024>

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