

Class 2: Cancan/Cachucha

A. Orpheus in the Underworld

1. Class title 1 (Kosky *Orphée*)

My title this morning is just me being clever. The composer *de jour* is **Jacques Offenbach** (1819–80), and we will be featuring two of his operettas. *Orphée aux enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld, 1858) contains the famous **can-can**, as shown here. *La Périchole* (1868) is set in Colonial Peru, but although it contains a lot of *faux*-Spanish music, I don't actually think the **cachucha** is included. One other bit of false advertising: although the photo of the can-can from the 2019 production by Barrie Kosky in Salzburg is splendid as an icon of the show, the production as a whole is in rather bad taste, and I have decided not to use it, except for a couple of brief clips that you'll see in a minute. But first, let me give you a pocket biography of Offenbach.

2. Offenbach facts

Jacques Offenbach was born in **Cologne, Germany**, the son of a cantor. A musical prodigy and gifted cellist, he went to Paris at the age of 14 to study at the **Conservatoire**. They liked him, but he didn't like the academic discipline, so he dropped out, though stayed in Paris to eke out a living as a jobbing musician. Eking out at first, perhaps, but by his mid-thirties he had become internationally renowned as a cellist and conductor. He also began to compose—a total of over 90 operettas by the end of his life. The *Opéra Comique* was not interested, so he rented a theater on the **Champs Elysées** and mounted his own work. Most of this was in double- or triple-bills of shorter pieces, since the licensing laws at the time did not permit longer shows with more than four characters outside the official opera houses. But in 1858 the laws were lifted, and he produced his first full-length operetta, *Orpheus in the Underworld*. This was a spoof on classical myth, which he followed a few years later with *La belle Hélène* about the Trojan War. His other full-length pieces had a variety of subjects—Ruritanian romance, contemporary mores, or historical elaborations—ancestors to the flood of European operettas that would wow Broadway around the turn of the century.

3. Collage of earlier operas on the Orpheus legend

In choosing the myth of **Orpheus** for his first full-length piece, Offenbach was paying homage to a very old tradition. For Orpheus was the role-model of the perfect musician, who was so grief-stricken by the loss of his young wife on her wedding day that he journeyed to Hades to sing to Pluto and charm him into giving Eurydice back. He was the subject of some of the very earliest operas, and **Gluck's** 1762 version still held the stage of the Paris Opéra. Now enter Offenbach...

4. Transformation: *Orfeo to Orphée*

Offenbach was not so much paying homage to the tradition as blowing a raspberry at it! Orpheus, who is a provincial violin teacher, and Eurydice cannot stand each other, and both are pursuing extramarital affairs. So when Pluto leaves a snake in her bed so that he can carry her off to the Underworld, Orpheus is overjoyed. Until he is persuaded by Public Opinion—a character who serves as the moral guide events—that for sake of appearances he must go down to Hades and win her back.

5. Barrie Kosky's production of *Orpheus in the Underworld* (Salzburg 2019)

As Offenbach's style is farcical and his plots generally paper-thin, it appears to licence directors to stage his operas in bizarre ways. For instance, the 2019 **Barrie Kosky** production in Salzburg that I showed in my title. I called it tasteless; in fact, it is played as outrageous camp. The men are all grotesque caricatures, as you see here—these are Pluto and Jupiter. The women are plump and as unromantic as possible. Half the dancers are bearded men in skirts. But I will show you two clips for a couple of reasons. One is Kosky's clever use of the third actor shown here, a brilliant performer called **Max Hopp**, who does all the dialogue throughout the play, *and* the sound-effects, while the others lip-synch. The other reason is to give you a taste of two Offenbach musical specialties: the short **high-energy number**, such as the entrance of **Mercury (Peter Renz)** in Olympus, and the kind of **sentimental ballad** which shows Offenbach's gift for melody. First Mercury:

6. Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Salzburg), entrance of Mercury

What did you think of Kosky's dialogue-and-sound-effects idea? What about his use of the dancers? The Max Hopp character actually has a role in the show: he is **John Styx**, Pluto's butler appointed as the guardian of Eurydice in the second act. He is hopelessly in love with her (goodness knows why), and sings her a song about how, in his former life, he was a son of the King of Beotia. Comic figure though Styx may be, I find this quite touching.

7. Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Salzburg), John Styx and Eurydice

8. *Orphée aux Enfers* at Aix-en-Provence, 2009

For the rest of the hour I am going to turn to a 2009 production at the **Aix-en-Provence Festival**, directed by **Yves Beaunesne** with a young cast. It is not quite my favorite out there, but it is crisp and clean and beautifully sung. I'll play substantial excerpts from three of the four scenes in the operetta. First, Act I scene 2. After the death of Eurydice, we go to **Olympus**, where the gods are lying around bored out of their minds. The arrival of Pluto, munching a hot dog, makes them realize how much they have been missing, and they stage a revolution against Jupiter, demanding something more interesting than endless **ambrosia**. Hearing of Pluto's abduction of Eurydice, Jupiter tries to regain control by casting himself as a moral leader, but the others all say, in effect, "Who are you kidding?" and give him a run-down of all his **metamorphoses**—sexual conquests—to date. It is a quintessential Offenbach number and one of the best in the show.

9. Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Aix), scene from Act I, scene 2

We have already seen Eurydice—much prettier in this production—in Hades, where Pluto keeps her under lock and key. Jupiter, of course, wants her for himself, and Cupid tells him that he needs another metamorphosis, this time as a fly small enough to get through the keyhole. So we get one of the stranger seduction duets in the repertoire, with Jupiter's part consisting mainly of buzzing.

10. Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Aix), scene from Act II, scene 1

I wish I could play the whole of the final scene of the operetta, but it is too long, so I have to begin halfway through. The gods are having a party. Eurydice is no longer interested in either Jupiter or Pluto; offstage, she has encountered **Bacchus** who, as the god of wine and merriment, promises to show her a good time. Hoping to slip away with Eurydice unseen, Jupiter calls for a dance—a minuet—until the others demand something more lively, and come up with the famous **can-can**. Then Orpheus arrives with Public Opinion to get Eurydice back. Jupiter appears to concede, but makes the famous prohibition on looking back, knowing that he has only to throw a thunderbolt to distract him. Which he does. Orpheus loses Eurydice, but she is only too happy to stay in the Underworld as a follower of Bacchus. And the curtain comes down on a repeat of the Can-Can.

11. Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Aix), ending of the operetta

12. Class title 2 (“The Closing Can-Can”)

Offenbach actually called his piece the *galop infernal*. The association with the can-can began much later, when the Moulin Rouge adopted the music for its dancers, and also when somebody else made it the highlight of a much longer overture that used Offenbach’s tunes but was not by him at all.

B. La Périhole

13. Section title B (*La Périhole*)

With *La Périhole* (1868), Offenbach was moving into the big leagues. For one thing, it was backed by the same literary team as would be responsible for Bizet’s *Carmen* seven years later: a story by **Prosper Mérimée** (1803–70) and libretto by the go-to team of **Ludovic Halévy** (1834–1908) and **Henri Meilhac** (1830–97). For another, it was based—however fancifully—upon a real person, **Micaela Villegas**, an 18th-century Peruvian entertainer and the mistress of the Viceroy of Peru from 1761 to 1776. And being a continuous romantic story rather than a spoof or succession of episodes, it came closer to a traditional comic opera than any of Offenbach’s works before this.

14. Three productions of *La Périhole*

I mentioned that Offenbach’s silliness means that productions of his work are seldom straight. Here are scenes from three recent ones: at the New York City Opera, top left, at Offenbach’s original theater, the *Théâtre des Champs Elysées*, bottom left, and the one I am mainly going to use, from the *Opéra*

comique, on the right. I only have trailers of the two on the left, but I'll show you half a minute of each, just to give some idea of the range.

15. *Périchole* trailers

16. Three productions of *La Périchole* (repeat)

I showed these because **Valérie Lesort**, the director of the *Opéra comique* production, which was the only one I could get complete, does not go for the kind of stylish updating you saw in the others, but gives the entire show a deliberately amateur-theatre look—although this amateur effect is created by consummate professionals. I find myself comparing it to a similar aesthetic in the original Broadway productions of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Frankly, I found the big scenes a bit too silly, so after a short clip from Act I, I'll take you to the Dungeon Scene at the beginning of the third act, which is much more restrained. But first let me introduce the heroine and hero, **Périchole** and **Piquillo**, two impoverished street singers who do not have much success. Trying to extract money out of the crowd, they sing two numbers back to back: the first is a tune you have heard already and will hear again at the end of the opera; the second includes some fun choreography, with a great visual joke at the end! The singers are **Stéphanie d'Oustrac** and **Philippe Talbot**.

17. Offenbach: *La Périchole*, street songs

18. Tassis Christoyannis and Stéphanie d'Oustrac

But *Périchole* does attract the attention of the lecherous Viceroy (**Tassis Christoyannis**), who invites her to dinner, gets her drunk, and prepares to move her into his palace. But there is an obscure law that only *married* women can stay in the palace guest rooms. So the Viceroy gets his men to find *Périchole* a nominal husband. And of course they latch onto Piquillo, who has no idea what is going on. However, when he discovers in Act II that he has been married to his own girlfriend, he refuses to take his role as *nominal* husband nominally at all, and is thrown into prison. I'm playing the scene almost complete as an example of how solos, ensembles, and dialogues, all short, work together to make the typical Offenbach texture. The only thing I am leaving out is the opening, where an Old Prisoner breaks through the wall after chipping away for twelve years with a little knife; we will see him again.

19. Offenbach: *La Périchole*, dungeon scene

20. — still from the above

Interesting that the scene ends, not with music but with dialogue; after all, this is a musical *play*. But there is plenty of music in the final scene, in which the two escapees come to the furious Viceroy and beg for mercy. They sing so prettily that he grants it, even telling her to keep the jewels he had given her, and the curtain comes down quickly on a repeat of the first street song.

21. Offenbach: *La Périchole*, finale

22. Class title 3 (...so true love triumphs)