

Comedy in Song



2. Cancan/Cachucha

September 24, 2025

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TWO OPERETTAS BY JACQUES OFFENBACH, BOTH ABOUT MUSICIANS. One is a spoof of the legend of Orpheus, the other a highly romantic view of a real-life singer in colonial Peru. With these and half-a-dozen others (though he wrote over 90 in all), the composer cemented his position as the founder of operetta and the man to be emulated, whether in Vienna by Strauss and Lehar, London by Gilbert and Sullivan, or Broadway by Romberg and Friml.

The obvious artifice of Offenbach's confections and the general flimsiness of his plots have led directors to tackle him with an unusual range of styles covering the gamut of taste. Which can make it hard to find good videos to show. But nothing can obscure his obvious musical craftsmanship, rhythmic verve, or gift for a good tune. *rb.*

A. Orpheus in the Underworld

Orphée aux enfers (1858) was Offenbach's first full-length operetta after numerous shorter shows, and was a great success. The composer blows a raspberry at the conventional idea of a semi-divine artist so devastated by the death of his young bride that he descends to Hades to charm Pluto into giving her back. *This* provincial married couple already hate each other, and Orpheus is only too glad when Pluto puts snakes into Eurydice's bed to carry her off dead. But Public Opinion persuades him to go after her, saying that it would look bad if he didn't.

Meanwhile in Olympus, Jupiter needs to assert his moral authority over the gods who are rebelling against a constant diet of ambrosia and indolence. So he too goes to the Underworld, finds Eurydice the bored prisoner of Pluto, and—true to form—metamorphoses into a fly so that he can slip through the keyhole and seduce her himself.

Eurydice, however, grows as tired of Jupiter and Pluto as she had of Orpheus. For now she has discovered the allure of Bacchus, god of wine and pleasure, and is entirely happy to continue her Underworld life as a party girl, kicking up her heels in the can-can!

Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Salzburg, 2019; Kathryn Lewek, *Eurydice*; Peter Renz, *Mercury*; Max Hopp, *John Styx*; Barrie Kosky, *director*; Enrique Mazzola, *conductor*)

— **Act 1/2:** entrance of Mercury

— **Act 2/1:** song of John Styx

Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers* (Aix-en-Provence, 2009; Pauline Courtin, *Eurydice*; Emanuelle de Negri, *Cupid*; Mathias Vidal, *Pluto*; Vincent Delau, *Jupiter*; Yves Beaunesne, *director*; Alain Altinoglu, *conductor*)

— **Act 1/2:** revolution and metamorphosis ensemble

— **Act 2/1:** Cupid changes Jupiter into a fly

— **Act 2/2:** final numbers

B. La Périhole

With *La Périhole* (1868), Offenbach was working with major collaborators. The libretto by Meilhac and Halévy was based on a short play by Prosper Mérimée—exactly the three writers who would give Bizet his *Carmen* seven years later.

The plot once more offers a mischievous take on an older story. The original Périhole (the name is untranslatable) was a Peruvian street singer who became the mistress of the Spanish Viceroy from 1761 to 1776. But Offenbach's Viceroy is an absurd figure who tries and fails to seduce her, and succeeds only in getting her married to someone else. This marriage is necessary because of a law that palace suites are only available to *married* woman, so the Viceroy must marry her off before carting her away. And the man his minions pick for the role of nominal husband turns out to be Piquillo, who has no idea of what is going on.

When Piquillo does find out, however, he refuses to regard his role as nominal at all, and so gets thrown into prison. We will watch the resultant dungeon scene (Act III, scene 1) almost complete, framed by short clips from the beginning and end of the show.

Offenbach: *La Périhole* (Opéra Comique, 2019; Stéphanie d'Oustrac, *Périhole*; Philippe Talbot, *Piquillo*; Tassis Christoyannis, *Viceroy*; Eric Huchet, *Don Miguel*; Lionel Peintre, *Don Pedro*; Valérie Lesort, *director*; Julien Leroy, *conductor*)

— **Act 1:** Périhole and Piquillo try to entertain the crowd

— **Act 3/1:** Dungeon scene (almost complete)

— **Act 3/2:** Finale

Ludovic **Halévy** (1834–1908, *French playwright*), Henri **Meilhac** (1830–97, *French playwright*), Prosper **Mérimée** (1803–70, *French writer*), Jacques **Offenbach** (1819–80, *German-French composer*)

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