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DECEMBER 8, 2009

About Tim Smith

I was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up there. Initial thoughts of becoming a cocktail pianist faded when I realized I hated taking requests. I decided to study music history instead, and got a B. A. in that field from Eisenhower College in Seneca Falls, New York, and an M.A. from Occidental College in Los Angeles. After free-lance gigs for the *Washington Star* and the *Washington Post*, I worked as classical music critic for the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* during the 1980s and '90s, a period when I also ventured into radio, contributing to NPR and hosting a weekly show on a West Palm Beach station. Since April 2000, I've been classical music critic at the *Baltimore Sun*. Over the years, I've written occasional articles for the *New York Times*, *BBC Music Magazine* and other publications, and I'm a longtime, regular contributor to *Opera News* and the U.K. magazine *Opera*. You may still be able to find on the remainder racks my one and only book, *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to Classical Music* (Perigee, 2002).

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Met Opera's new "Hoffmann" production short on musicological scholarship

Although not nearly as controversial as its season-opening production of "Tosca," the Metropolitan Opera's new staging of "The Tales of Hoffmann" is generating diverse views on the singing (the distinctive sound of tenor Joseph Calleja, who has the title role, will probably always divide listeners) and the production concept by Broadway vet Bartlett Sher.

An additional element, the question of what edition of the score is being used, may not get all audience members as worked up, but it ought to, considering the extraordinary scholarship on Offenbach and "Hoffmann" over the years. The leading force for changing old perceptions and performance practices regarding this opera has long been Marylander musicologist Michael Kaye, who helped bring to light the composer's original intentions and a lot more about Offenbach and this opera.

That the Met chose to go with an outdated version of the score has, understandably, not gone down well with Kaye, who wrote a response to the new production that he shared with me. For those of you heading to New York to catch a performance of the Met's "Hoffmann," or to movie theaters for the HD broadcast on Dec. 19, or sitting home on the 19th to hear it on the radio, I think that Kaye's observations are well worth keeping in mind. Here's what he has to say:



I have devoted nearly three decades to establishing the landmark edition of Offenbach's "Les contes d'Hoffmann," which is now a co-edition with Jean-Christophe Keck, being published by a trio consortium of Schott Musik, Boosey&Hawkes, and Bote&Bock. For more than a year I have known that the MET will ignore our long-standing work on the opera in their new production.

They are promoting it's new production of HOFFMANN with some serious misinformation about Offenbach and it would be great if you would set the record straight.



I respect and acknowledge the fact that a stage director requires an artistic freedom to interpret the works he or she is charged with producing. However, in the recent press release from the MET about HOFFMANN, stage director Bartlett Sher says, referring to the early German romantic polymath whose stories are used for the opera's episodic plot. 'I'm more interested in why Offenbach, who had been a very popular operetta composer, was seeking to write a serious work to gain acceptance. Why, so late in his career, did he feel this need to be accepted? That led me to consider Offenbach's

sense of being Jewish and an outsider.

Whatever group he was in, he always appears as an outsider who never feels like he belongs, never feels like he's connected.' *The ambiguities and split identities of the characters figure in Sher's vision of the piece.* For any artist, ambition and paranoia are both always present. The door keeps opening and there are many Hoffmanns, identities that keep overlapping. I think the real artistic dilemma for Offenbach is the tension between the cover [sic] and the internal state, and that's what I hope to try to show."

That statement indicates that Mr. Sher has very little understanding of Offenbach at the time he wrote HOFFMANN, or of E.T.A. Hoffmann himself and how Barbier and Offenbach synthesized the essence of E.T.A. Hoffmann's life, works, and literary style in "Le contes d'Hoffmann." Neither Mr. Sher nor his designer were interested in receiving copies of the most important source materials for HOFMANN that I offered to send them (the final pages of the co-edition with the latest discoveries are still in unpublished proofs for formal publication).

The idea that Offenbach was looking for "acceptance" is really misguided. Yes, he wanted to write for the Paris Opéra and did so, but having composed more than 100 smash hits for the stage; being dubbed the darling of the entire Third Empire Paris; designated as "the Mozart of the Champs-Élysée by no less than Rossini; and able to return Wagner's hatred for Jewish artists with sarcasm and humor mocking the "composer of the future" with salvos in music and onstage is information available from the oldest biographies of Offenbach.

As for James Levine's statement quoted in the press release: "Maestro Levine says of the musical version, 'The music is so inspired, and I think we have made effective choices in the absence of an authentic, fully realized original version, using a great deal of the information that has come to light over the years.'" – that is total balderdash, inaccurate, and I'm really concerned that people might believe him!

I also don't understand why maestro Levine would permit the MET's press department to make statements that negate the existence of totally complete manuscript sources for the opera (much more than sketches, including the complete score of the way the opera was first performed in Paris and, in particular, the full manuscript of the Giulietta Act – including the final scene of that act – published for the first time in my editon. Many of those manuscripts, previously unknown to other editors of the score, were fully orchestrated and rehearsed at the Opéra Comique before Léon Carvalho (impresario of that theater and stage director of the premiere) decided to eliminate the Giulietta Act from the opera.

I think it is admirable that Maestro Levine can prepare new scores by Gunther Schuller and Elliot Carter, and (his recent serious health issues aside) shocking that for years maestro Levine has refused to restudy

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Comments

After reading this preachy screed, what is one to think? Should we decide not to attend the Met "Hoffmann" because of this alleged inattention to "scholarship"? Should we choose not to attend a performance of Mozart's Requiem because the performers choose to use something other than Mozart's "original" score? What do we make of the various versions of "Boris Godunov"? There are times when a little knowledge counts as TMI. This sounds like one of them.

Posted by: Bob Thomas | [December 8, 2009 4:42 PM](#)

An uncut Hoffmann would be longer than many Wagner operas!!! - bring it on, right?

Of course, there are recordings that contain a lot of the music omitted by the MET, though perhaps not everything that Mr. Kaye published - due to the fact that they were made before the score was published (the Cambreling and Tate versions come into mind.)

Plus, as I pointed out before, Hoffman is not even Offenbach's first opera!

Posted by: Don Ciccio | [December 9, 2009 9:05 AM](#)

This may not be the impression that Mr. Kaye intended, but if I were reading this "cold", the tone of his statement strikes me as one of sour grapes. It may be justified, but it frankly comes off as unappealing nonetheless. I happen to know one of the singers in the Met production, and I am planning to see the HD-transmission, scholarly concerns aside.

Besides Zurich, is Mr. Kaye's version to be used in the Santa Fe Opera production scheduled for next summer?

Posted by: Geo. | [December 9, 2009 12:37 PM](#)

As a singer, I appreciate knowing what the composer actually wrote, and not what various directors, producers, and conductors cut out for whatever reasons took their fancies.

As a dramatic coloratura soprano, I really appreciate the idea that I could sing all the heroines in this opera, and not just Olympia and Antonia, because Giulietta is supposed to be a coloratura soprano.

Yet we have a mezzo doing the role! No wonder there were issues with the Barcarolle at the MET opening night (according to the Times review); two mezzos muddying up the waters when Offenbach never wrote such a thing.

Intellectual laziness should be a quality that is never seen at such an august house as the MET. And since someone else has gone to the trouble to do all the work, the laziness could even pass unnoticed, if the MET would use Kaye's edition. Really, what good reason do they have for not doing so?

Posted by: Elise Curran | [December 9, 2009 7:29 PM](#)

Bravo, Michael Kaye! I will wait to form an opinion of the new "Hoffmann" after seeing the 12/19 HD transmission, but it's refreshing to know some of the "truth behind the curtain", i.e., the Met didn't want to use Mr. Kaye's scholarship. "Hoffmann" is one of the most unusual pieces in the standard rep and can sustain a varied outlook pertaining to staging. We shall see. P.S.> Is there a way to get Mr. Kaye's comments on a website?

Thanks for commenting. I don't have an answer, alas, to your question at the moment. TIM

Posted by: Thomas | [December 10, 2009 12:28 PM](#)

This is hardly a question of sour grapes but a legitimate demand for accuracy and respect for scholarship. It is hard to believe that an institution as formidable as the Met would choose to disregard the findings of a respected musicologist who has brought to light the true intent of Offenbach, and go off on a path of Offenbach's need for "acceptance." There is something decidedly wrong with this picture.

Posted by: Susan Holaday | [December 11, 2009 6:34 AM](#)

It's hard to understand why the Met would choose to go down this path and it does appear to be "intellectual laziness" and disrespect for recognized scholarship that brought to light Offenbach's intent for the opera.

Posted by: Susan | [December 11, 2009 6:37 AM](#)

I find this information very disturbing. The MET is wasting millions on very poor "Director Driven" productions of operas. These are some of the worst stagings I have ever seen and demonstrate the directors' ignorance of the material.

I was very impressed by Sher's production of South Pacific, but his staging of August Wilson's Joe Turner last season was terrible. No one dares to criticize him.

Posted by: Tim Kjer | [December 11, 2009 7:19 AM](#)

It seems to me that in what is supposed to be one of the world renowned opera houses, one should be able to expect both the best scholarship as well as the best voices, music and staging. It is not always possible to present excellence in all of these regards but if we cannot expect it from the MET at the outset of a production, it is a sad moment indeed.

Posted by: Kathleen Jordan | [December 11, 2009 10:23 PM](#)

First off, bravo Mr. Smith for a well-written article, a knowledgeable, level-headed, and very human piece of writing that dares to address a topic which most critics ignore. It is clear from the fact that Smith actually took

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