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Music

Les Contes d'Hoffmann, Royal Opera House, London – review

This production of Offenbach's opera offers old-style, colourful entertainment



From left, Vincent Ordonneau, Christine Rice and Vittorio Grigolo in the Royal Opera's 'Les Contes d'Hoffmann'
© Catherine Ashmore

35 MINUTES AGO by: **Richard Fairman**

Hanging on to the old production of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* has put money in the bank. Dating from 1980, it is a reminder of times past, an evening of old-style, colourful entertainment, conceived by the late film director John Schlesinger and regularly revived over the years.

It is looking very dusty now, though an atmosphere of faded grandeur is not inappropriate for Hoffmann's beer-soaked recollections of unfulfilled dreams and loves lost. Offenbach's opera, three tales in one, provides many roles. This revival's star singers shine more brightly than most.

The performance took time to get going, but that was no fault of Vittorio

Grigolo's Hoffmann. Grigolo does not know what halfhearted means. He throws body and soul into every role and sings his socks off. As Hoffmann, he is good at portraying a man of many parts, from the eager young suitor to the down-and-out poet mired in his past. He pushes his voice to the limit, when he does not need to, but the blazing ardour of his singing reveals the poet Hoffmann as a life force, burning brilliantly till the last drop of energy is spent.

The three women in his tales are well cast. Olympia, the mechanical doll, is sung with neat precision by Sofia Fomina. Christine Rice is the vocally firm and seductive courtesan Giulietta. It is a luxury to have fast-rising soprano Sonya Yoncheva as Antonia, the fragile young singer, a role for which Yoncheva has voice and charisma to spare. When she and Grigolo are going at full throttle, the performance soars.

In the distant days when this production was new, other roles were cast with multiple singers, too. This time Thomas Hampson plays all four of Hoffmann's arch-rivals, fielding an engagingly saturnine personality and a dash of black humour, though Dappertutto's "Scintille, diamant" stretches him now. Kate Lindsey sings a trim, clear Nicklausse, a bit overpowered by some of the voices around her. In his multiple roles Vincent Ordonneau flies the flag for French style. The performance would benefit if the conductor, Evelino Pidò, could impose more drive. By the end, though, Schlesinger's old *Contes d'Hoffmann* has roused itself to life once more.

★★★★☆ To December 3, [roh.org.uk](http://www.roh.org.uk) (<http://www.roh.org.uk>)

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