

November 5, 2020 - Jacques Offenbach's *La Vie Parisienne* & *La Belle Hélène*

Join me tonight for the Thursday Night Opera House's broadcast of a pair of *operas bouffe* by Jacques Offenbach: the delightful and scintillating "can-can" operetta *La Vie Parisienne* (*Parisian Life*) and *La Belle Hélène* (*The Beautiful Helen*), a spoof of the classical legend of Helen of Troy.

Set in Belle Époque Paris to a libretto by Henri Heilhac and Ludovic Halévy, *La Vie Parisienne* was first performed at Paris's Théâtre du Palais Royal on October 31, 1866. Like the best of Offenbach's works, it combines hilarious political and cultural satire with witty grand opera parodies.

The two rakes Gardefeu (tenor **Michel Sénéchal**) and Bobinet (baritone **Michel Trempont**), who used to be friends, are no longer on speaking terms since they know that they are in love with the same woman, the coquettish Métella (soprano **Régine Crespin**). When both accidentally want to meet her at the train station at the same time, she has her arm around another man. The two cuckolds are reconciled. In the future, they want to avoid the expensive demi-monde and look for affairs in the upper circles of society. At that moment, a wonderful opportunity alights from the train, accompanied by an elderly gentleman. She is the Baroness Gondremarck (soprano **Christiane Chateau**) and her husband from Sweden (baritone **Luis Masson**), who are wanting to enjoy life in Paris for a couple of days, and are looking forward to the many attractions the city offers during the great world exhibition. As these naive provincials see that fair of grand illusions for the first time, they are welcome victims for the plan Gardefeu quickly designs. He bribes his old servant Joseph (actor **André Batisse**), who meets the lady and gentleman from the station as a guide from the Grand Hotel. He then takes over Joseph's role and directs the unsuspecting couple to his elegant bachelor apartment which he cheekily declares to be an annex of the luxury hotel. Gardefeu even manages to make the two sleep in separate rooms and, with Bobinet's help, to produce invitations for noble circles of society for the adventurous baron. Thus he is free to seduce the baroness. But, sophisticated as Gardefeu's intrigue may be, all the gentlemen hungry for life and love eventually get ensnared within it and almost break their necks.

Michel Plasson conducts the Toulouse Capitole Orchestra and Chorus in this 1988 digital remastering of the 1976 EMI Classics recording, CD 7471548.

From the December 18, 2007 performance of *La Vie Parisienne* at the Lyons Opéra, here's the operetta's finale: <https://youtu.be/iDm5ONWjNLk>.

With music by Offenbach and text by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, *La Belle Hélène* parodies the story of Helen's elopement with Paris, which set off the Trojan War. It premiered at Paris's Théâtre des Variétés on December 17, 1864.

In Sparta, the beautiful Helen (soprano **Jane Rhodes**) waits anxiously and impatiently for Venus to keep her promise to the handsome shepherd Paris (tenor **Bernard Plantey**), who is to receive as his reward the love of the world's most beautiful woman. The wife of Menelaus (tenor **Jean Giraudeau**) can lay claim to that title, but she knows her virtue wavers. And when Paris brings back proof "intended for things of the mind", the lightning bolt is inevitable: poor Menelaus has to depart immediately for Crete, as decreed by Jupiter in person. Succumbing without much resistance to the fate that causes her virtue to "collapse", Helen gives herself to Paris in the sweet illusion of a dream. The lovers are surprised by Menelaus's return, and Paris must leave, but he vows to come back! In reprisal, Venus inflicts an epidemic of marital infidelity on Greece, which leads the divine Calchas (baritone **Bernard Demigny**) and Agamemnon (baritone **Jacques Doucet**) to beg the reluctant husband to give his wife to Paris to save the country's honor. The handsome shepherd, disguised as Venus's envoy, manages to carry Helen off in a boat that sets sail to the great despair of Menelaus. The Trojan War will indeed take place.

Manuel Rosenthal conducts the Orchestra and Chorus of the Opéra-Comique, Paris, in this 1993 remastering of a 1966 Philips recording, CD 442237.

As a bonus, we'll hear a trio of excerpts from *Pariser Leben*, the German-language version of *La Vie Parisienne*.

Next Thursday, November 12th, join me for Alexander Borodin's sweeping Russian masterpiece *Prince Igor*, which tells the story of Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversk (**Mikhail Kit**), who in 1185 set out from the Ukrainian town of Putivl with his son Vladimir (**Gegam Grigorian**) to battle the Polovtsians, leaving his wife, Yaroslavna (**Galina Gorchakova**) in the care of her treacherous brother, Prince Galitsky (**Vladimir Ognovienko**). Defeated and captured by the benevolent leader of the Polovtsians, Khan Koncak (**Bulat Minjelkiev**), Igor is offered an alliance but chooses to return instead to his wife; son Vladimir marries the Khan's daughter, Konchakovna (**Olga Borodina**). **Valery Gergiev** conducts this 1995 Mariinsky Theatre production.

The Thursday Night Opera House is heard at 7:00 p.m. Eastern on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We're also streamed online, and you can listen as well on WCPE's Android or iPhone apps.

Bob Chapman

W. Robert Chapman, Host of the Thursday Night Opera House