

Offenbach, Jacques (1819-1880): Overview of his Writings

Jacques Offenbach maintained a special relationship with the French language for the length of his life. Born in the Jewish community of Cologne, he learned French as a foreign language but upon his arrival in Paris in 1833 at the age of 14, it became a sort of second mother tongue. French was necessary for him to compose, as can be seen by the fact that when he wrote for Vienna (*Die Rheinnixen*, *Die Schwarze Corsar*) or London (*Whittington*), he needed a French text. His very name shows this attachment, with the Francization of his first name and the pronunciation “ac” (attested to be his own) of the final syllable of his last name. In reading his correspondence, alas widely dispersed and partially lost, one can see how easily he handles the French language, with his epistolary talent echoing the comic distortions created by his music in his stage works for the words provided by his librettists. A large part of this correspondence (which also includes letters mixing German and French, in particular those written to Viennese correspondents) is professional in nature and tells a great deal about the genesis of his works and his activity as a theater director (at the Bouffes-Parisiens from 1855 to 1862 and at the Gaîté from 1873 to 1875).

Offenbach, however, did not much like talking about his art and only very rarely accompanied his works with texts. Although he cultivated a presence in newspapers, he did so more to create a media personality. Indeed, Offenbach understood early the need to be talked about in order to “break through.” Already in 1837, *Le Ménestrel* published an article (no doubt written by Offenbach himself) that depicted him in amusing terms. When he founded the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens in 1855, he forged an alliance with *Le Figaro*, created the previous year by Hippolyte de Villemessant, making it, a sort of “official newspaper” of Offenbach and his theater. 110 articles by or relating to Offenbach can be found in *Le Figaro* between 1854 and 1880. This alliance was not exclusive, however, and a thorough investigation in the Parisian and Viennese press of the nineteenth century would likely turn up other texts. When Offenbach started an operetta competition in 1856, his text announcing the program was published in [several newspapers](#). The need to establish a new genre and a new theater led him to write his only truly theoretical text. But, three years later, it was *Le Figaro* alone that allowed him to exchange with the critic Jules Janin, creating controversy and assuring the success of *Orphée aux Enfers*.

Offenbach rarely resorted to writing to assure the safe passage of his works, which makes his texts [on Barkouf](#) or [on Les Bergers](#) all the more important. At the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, in August 1870, it was again *Le Figaro* that allowed Offenbach to affirm [his position on the conflict](#) which opposed his native and adopted countries. In May 1873, Villemessant also offered Offenbach the

opportunity to present his plans as the future director of the Gaîté in what may well be [one of the first interviews of a musician to appear in the French press](#). Despite his numerous contacts with the press, Offenbach did not want to become a music critic, perhaps fearing that the activity might interfere with his career as a composer. He only wrote as a critic in [four articles](#) published in *L'Artiste* from January to March 1855, during a period when he was working to receive authorization to open a theater. These texts reveal an artistic character quite different from the dramatic composer he was about to become.

In the 1870s, after the trauma of war, Offenbach seemed increasingly drawn to writing. Although he had often participated in the elaboration of his libretti in the past, he now wrote two of his own (*Der Schwarze Corsar*, *Maître Péronilla*) as well as [a remarkable preface](#) (1875), a meditation on the passage of time and the rhythm of theatrical life, for *Les Soirées parisiennes d'un monsieur de l'orchestre* by his friend Arnold Mortier. *Histoire d'une valse*, also dates to this period, a tale of the sort that seems drawn from a collection by E.T.A. Hoffmann, published with the waltz [Dernier Souvenir](#) by Choudens in 1872 and [in Le Figaro](#) in 1878 (with the score). Text and music form a whole in this story where Offenbach examines his youth. His state of mind is quite different in his [Notes d'un musicien en voyage](#), published in January 1877, six months after his return from the United States where he had been on tour for three months. The only book published by the composer, this *Offenbach en Amérique* (the book's alternative title) paints an insightful portrait of the United States after the Civil War and shows that the composer of *La Vie parisienne*, far from being an artist of the past, was resolutely turned toward the future. The last important text published by Offenbach, a [contribution to the charitable publication Paris-Murcie](#) was an occasion for him, almost from the perspective of a last will and testament, to affirm his artistic credo one last time, in opposition to Wagner, his "best enemy."

Whether through his prolific correspondence (which a collaborative digital project could make more accessible) or his numerous media interventions, Offenbach constantly offered himself in writing. His letters to his collaborators are precious for understanding his work habits and emphasize the man of theater more than the musician, strictly speaking. His interventions in the press, most of which are linked to his two stints as a theater director, reveal a sharp awareness of the media system of his time and his ability of using it to his advantage. Whether addressing a librettist, a journalist, or more generally, his public, Offenbach always manages to have people laughing with him while showing an empathy that is anything but artificial. The texts of the 1870s are more personal, as though, marked by the war and illness, the composer no longer hides behind his wit like he had in the past. It is already more the Offenbach of the *Contes d'Hoffman*, his posthumous opera, who expresses himself, than the man who wrote the antic comedies of the previous decade. In any case, Offenbach's writings, an extremely varied corpus, the breadth of which is only beginning to be considered, are an indispensable source, not only for understanding his life, but also his works, the satiric nature of which has too often masked their great complexity.

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Further Reading:

Jacques Brindejoin-Offenbach, *Offenbach, mon grand-père*, Paris, Plon, 1940 [a book which reprints many of Offenbach's letters].

M. Offenbach nous écrit. Lettres au Figaro et autres propos, gathered and presented by Jean-Claude Yon, Arles, Actes Sud / Palazzetto Bru Zane, 2019 [a book which collects the main texts published by Offenbach in the press].

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