

## Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* in Boston

By Charles Jernigan, June 24, 2019

Boston, among America's big cities, was for a long time not considered an "opera town." A first class symphony and great chamber music and recitals—yes. But not opera. Maybe it was the proximity to New York, the theory ran. That is not true any more. Any town that can present, on the same night, a rare Steffani baroque opera in an extraordinarily fine production and one of Offenbach's rarely done operatic satires is an opera town in my book. That's what happened the other night (June 14) when the Boston Early Music Festival was presenting Steffani's Orlando at the Cutler Majestic, and a few blocks away Odyssey Opera was performing Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* at the Huntington Avenue Theatre.

Odyssey Opera is a relative new-comer, formed by Artistic Director Gil Rose with the strong financial support of Randolph J. Fuller from the ashes of Opera Boston after the sudden collapse of that company in 2012. They seem to have settled on thematic seasons. This year, the first half of the season celebrated the 200th anniversary of Gounod's birth with lesser known works by that composer—*La Reine de Saba* and *Le Médecin Malgré Lui*, followed by operas on the theme of Helen of Troy—Gluck's *Paride e Elena*, Strauss' *Die Ägyptische Helena* and Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*. Next season will offer six operas around the theme of "The Tudors": Saint-Saëns' *Henry VIII*, Pacini's *Maria, Regina d'Inghilterra*, Rosner's *The Chronicle of Nine* (a world premiere), Rossini's *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra*, Britten's *Gloriana* and Edward German's *Merrie England*. Since the first season (2013-2014) not a single opera presented has been a frequently performed standard repertory piece. Obviously, Odyssey Opera intends to educate and promote repertory—old and new—that is unknown to most opera lovers.

The last of this season's works was *La Belle Hélène, or The Beautiful Helen*, since it was performed in a new English translation by Richard Duployen. Of Offenbach's 110 or so

operas or operettas, this is one of several which are delicious satires aimed at the excesses of the Second Empire under the Emperor Napoleon III. In 1858 Offenbach had a huge success with *Orphée aux Enfers*, which satirized events and figures in his contemporary Paris through the guise of Greek myth, and now he and his librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (the same pair who would write the libretto for *Carmen* a few years later), decided to recreate the success with another Greek myth/Second Empire satire, premiered in Paris at the Théâtre des Variétés on December 17, 1864.



The problem with performing these operas and operettas today is not the music—Offenbach is unfailingly tuneful and *La belle Hélène* boasts some of his most memorable melodies—but our unfamiliarity with the people and events he is satirizing. Not very many people today know much about the problems and people of Second Empire France (1852-70) under Napoleon III and his Spanish-born wife, the Empress Eugénie. Alas, it is also true that today

fewer and fewer people know much about classical mythology. In Offenbach's day, almost everyone in the audience had studied ancient myth and literature, and they certainly understood the jokes around the story of Paris and Helen, and would have recognized the figures of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Orestes, Paris and Helen.

Offenbach also frequently uses musical parody to complement the political, social and literary satire. An "intelligence" contest in Act I is accompanied by music announcing the song contest from Wagner's *Tannhauser*, premiered in 1845 and performed in its revised Paris version only three years before *La belle Hélène*, in 1861. The finales of Acts I and II are both parodies of the Italian concertato finale as popularized by Rossini, Verdi and others—the second act finale occasioned by Menelaus catching Paris and Helen in flagrante delicto. A "patriotic trio" in the last act mimics the great patriotic trio from Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. Dedicated opera lovers today might recognize these musical parodies, as would audiences of the 1860's, but most attendees will need to have them explained, just as they will need explanations of Second Empire follies and Greek myth in order to "get it."

Odyssey Opera tried to overcome these problems in Frank Kelley's clever production by placing it all in a Second Empire setting, with costumes mostly from that era (although a few were sort of ancient Greek and there were two evzones—those distinctive Greek guards one sees today outside the parliament in Athens) and scenery which recalled painterly views of France in the 1860's. The setting of Acts I and III looked like the beach at Trouville in a Boudin painting (although officially Act III is set on the beach at Nauplion, in Greece). There were also reproductions of actual paintings lowered into view (like Manet's 1863 "Olympia") and "recreations" on stage of Degas dancers and Manet's "Déjeuner sur l'herbe" complete with a female nude sitting at a picnic along side three well dressed men (Menelaus, Agamemnon and Calchas). The character of Menelaus was made up to look like Napoleon III, complete with goatee and long, twirled, waxed mustache, while Hélène was reminiscent of pictures and photos of Empress Eugénie. So there was a real attempt to place the farce in the Second Empire and visually to point out the satiric correspondences so that the mockery of corruption and loose morals in the Second Empire made sense, but who knows if most of the audience "got" it.

The story follows the myth of Paris and Helen, beginning after Paris has judged the beauty contest between Minerva, Venus and Juno and has been granted the love of the "most beautiful woman in the world," aka Helen, who unfortunately happens to be married to Menelaus, King of Sparta. The course of action follows Paris' seduction of Helen and the deception of Menelaus, the greed of Calchas, the High Priest, here dressed as a Catholic clergyman complete with crucifix necklace. Oreste is a party boy (sung by a woman). Ajax 1 is complemented by Ajax 2 like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, sharing the same toga or bathing costume. Achilles is a pretty boy fitted out with special leg brace for his heel. The parody of these great heroes of Greek myth is itself an ancient tradition going back to the very origins of comedy, as Offenbach's very literate librettists certainly knew.

The new Duployen English translation of the libretto might have been funny (like Jeremy Sams' racy translation of Orpheus in the Underworld), but mostly it was unintelligible, at least when sung. And it was certainly more ponderous than the light, tripping French lyrics, and the sexy wit in Halévy and Meilhac's French, which so horrified Victorian critics across the Channel in England, did not come across. One might laugh at the farcical goings-on and the acting (which was often funny), but not so much at the satire, the parody or the wit.



Fisher, Costa-Jackson

Still, it was a fun and often well-sung evening. Best of all was the Hélène of Ginger Costa-Jackson. Her rich mezzo was as delightful as her stage presence, and she is pretty and young enough to bring off Helen. She carried off the over-the-top role with great panache in spite of a gown which would not zip up properly in Act II. The lower-voiced men were also quite good, and funny, especially Chalcas (Ben Wager), Menelaus (Alan Schneider) and Agamemnon (David McFerrin). Jaime Korkos as the partying, champagne-swilling Oreste was funny too. The minor characters (Stephen Goldstein, Ajax 1; Gregory Zavracky, Ajax 2; Christian Figueroa, Achilles; Mara Bonde, Bacchis; Felicia Gavilanes, Loena; Rachele Schmiede, Parthoenis) were all good. The weak link was Adam Fisher as Paris. He looked great (a young Alan Ladd, if you remember him), but his tenor could not really carry the day, especially in the higher register. His voice strikes me as more appropriate for musical comedy (perhaps miked) and his enchanting Act II couplets, “Je la vois, elle dort” requires high, soft singing; neither it nor the love duet “C’est le ciel qui m’envoie” came off as well as they should have. Likewise, the refrain of his Act I song describing the Judgment of Paris, which requires leaps up to B flat on the word “Evohé.”

Gil Rose directed the 30-strong the orchestra, which kept those seductive waltzes and comic arias going. A surprise highlight was the men’s patriotic trio “Lorsque la Grèce est un champ de carnage” in Act III, neatly sung, perfectly choreographed and delightfully funny. Marjorie Folkman did the choreography; Brooke Stanton was Costume Designer; Janie Howland was Scenic Designer and Karen Perlow did the lighting.

All in all, it was a delightful evening. Now if I could just get those Offenbach tunes out of my head!