

A BEAUTIFUL MECHANICAL DOLL AN IRRESISTIBLE COURTESAN A visit from beyond the grave—or is it just an illusion? All these, plus an imaginative hero who never gets the girl, show up in the charming, creepy, deeply moving tales of Hoffmann. The Met’s new production of Jacques Offenbach’s masterwork has been inspired by a variety of influences that reflect the opera’s multiple dramatic layers—including Kafka, classic Hollywood cinema, and even Woody Allen.

Like Kafka and Allen, the real-life E.T.A. Hoffmann was a writer—the creator of the *Nutcracker* as well as the stories on which *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (“The Tales of Hoffmann”) is based. But in the operatic version, Hoffmann doesn’t simply write stories: he lives them. That’s why, beneath the enchantment and the quirky robotics, *Hoffmann* is a psychological drama. Tony Award winner Bartlett Sher (*South Pacific*) returns after the triumph of his Met *Barber of Seville* to direct. He calls Hoffmann a “magical journey in which the title character works out different manifestations of his psyche.”

Each of Hoffmann’s tales is a stop along the way, adding up to a complex narrative structure. “Rather than a linear narrative,” Sher explains, “the opera is made up of poetic representations of the state of the character’s mind.” Four villains, all played by the same performer, are obviously one: Hoffmann’s nemesis. The same may be true, psychologically, of the four women Hoffmann loves, though the Met’s production highlights their individuality, casting three singers in four roles. And then there’s Hoffmann’s muse, who, right at the beginning, announces that she’s going undercover as the writer’s young (male) sidekick.

The Met has assembled a first-rate cast for this new production. Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja sings the title role, opposite star soprano Anna Netrebko, who plays Antonia. Alan Held portrays the four villains, and the Met’s Music Director James Levine conducts.

This guide offers a peek into the “anything can happen” world of *Hoffmann*. It can also help you and your students examine the timeless concerns that power the tales. The full-length Classroom Activity investigates how the writers of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* created a formal innovation—by introducing ironic humor to opera. Shorter activities look closely at Offenbach’s creative decisions in setting E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tales to music. By familiarizing young people with the operatic Hoffmann, his exploits and his obsessions, the guide seeks to heighten their enjoyment of the Met’s *Live in HD* presentation.

THE WORK

LES CONTES D HOFFMANN

Composed by Jacques Offenbach
(1819–1880)

An opera in three acts, with a prologue and epilogue, sung in French

Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré based on stories by E.T.A. Hoffmann)

First performed on February 25, 1831, in Paris, France

NEW PRODUCTION

James Levine, Conductor

Bartlett Sher, Production

Michael Yeargan, Set Designer

Catherine Zuber, Costume Designer

James F. Ingalls, Lighting Designer

Dou Dou Huang, Choreographer

STARRING

Kathleen Kim (Olympia)

Anna Netrebko (Antonia)

Ekaterina Gubanova (Giulietta)

Kate Lindsey (Nicklausse The Muse)

Joseph Calleja (Hoffmann)

Alan Held (Four Villains)



Joseph Calleja



Anna Netrebko



Alan Held

Prologue Luther's tavern in a German city, early 18th century. The poet Hoffmann is in love with Stella, the star singer of the opera. Lindorf, a rich counselor, also loves her and has intercepted a note she has written to Hoffmann. He is confident to win her for himself. ("Dans les rôles d'amoureux langoureux") Entering with a group of students, Hoffmann sings a ballad about a disfigured dwarf named Kleinzach. ("Il était une fois à la cour d'Eisenach") During the song, his mind wanders to recollections of a beautiful woman. When Hoffmann recognizes Lindorf as his rival, the two men trade insults. Hoffmann's Muse, who has assumed the guise of his friend Nicklausse, interrupts, but the encounter leaves the poet with a sense of impending disaster. He begins to tell the stories of his three past loves...

Act I The eccentric inventor Spalanzani has created a mechanical doll named Olympia. Hoffmann, who thinks she is Spalanzani's daughter, has fallen in love with her. Spalanzani's former partner Coppélius sells Hoffmann a pair of magic glasses through which he alone perceives Olympia as human. Trio. ("Je me nomme Coppélius") When Coppélius demands his share in the profits the two inventors expect to make from the doll, Spalanzani gives him a worthless check. Guests arrive and Olympia captivates the crowd with the performance of a dazzling aria ("Les oiseaux dans la charmille"), which is interrupted several times in order for the doll's mechanism to be recharged. Oblivious to this while watching her through his glasses, Hoffmann is enchanted. He declares his love and the two dance. Olympia whirls faster and faster as her mechanism spins out of control, until Hoffmann falls and breaks his glasses. Coppélius, having discovered that the check was worthless, returns in a fury. He grabs Olympia and tears her apart as the guests mock Hoffmann for falling in love with a machine.

Act II Antonia sings a plaintive love song filled with memories of her dead mother, a famous singer. ("Elle a fui, la tourterelle") Her father, Crespel, has taken her away in the hopes of ending her affair with Hoffmann and begs her to give up singing. She has inherited her mother's weak heart, and the effort will endanger her life. Hoffmann arrives and Antonia joins him in singing until she nearly faints. Duet. ("C'est une chanson d'amour") Crespel returns, alarmed by the arrival of the charlatan Dr. Miracle, who had treated Crespel's wife the day she died. The doctor claims he can cure Antonia but Crespel accuses him of killing his wife and forces him out. Hoffmann, overhearing their conversation, asks Antonia to give up singing and she reluctantly agrees. The moment he has left Dr. Miracle reappears, urging Antonia to sing. He conjures up the voice of her mother and claims she wants her daughter to relive the glory of her own fame. Antonia can't resist. Her singing, accompanied by Dr. Miracle frantically playing the violin, becomes more and more feverish until she collapses. Dr. Miracle coldly pronounces her dead.



Costume sketches by Catherine Zuber for Antonia (above) and Hoffmann (below)



Act III The Venetian courtesan Giulietta joins Nicklausse in a barcarole (“Belle nuit, ô nuit d’amour”) A party is in progress, and Hoffmann mockingly praises the pleasures of the flesh (“Amis, l’amour tendre et rêveur”) When Giulietta introduces him to her current lover, Schlémil, Nicklausse warns the poet against the courtesan’s charms Hoffmann denies any interest in her Having overheard them, the sinister Dapertutto produces a large diamond with which he will bribe Giulietta to steal Hoffmann’s reflection for him—just as she already has stolen Schlémil’s shadow (“Scintille, diamant”) As Hoffmann is about to depart, Giulietta seduces him into confessing his love for her Duet (“O Dieu de quelle ivresse”) Schlémil returns and accuses Giulietta of having left him for Hoffmann, who realizes with horror that he has lost his reflection Ensemble (“Hélas mon cœur s’égaré encore”) Schlémil challenges Hoffmann to a duel and is killed Hoffmann takes the key to Giulietta’s boudoir from his dead rival but finds the room empty Returning, he sees her leaving the palace in the arms of the dwarf Pitichinaccio

Epilogue Having finished his tales, all Hoffmann wants is to forget Nicklausse declares that each story describes a different aspect of one woman Stella Arriving in the tavern after her performance, the singer finds Hoffmann drunk and leaves with Lindorf Nicklausse resumes her appearance as the Muse and encourages the poet to find consolation in his creative genius

A technical rehearsal for Act II
PHOTO: ALISON CHERRY, METROPOLITAN OPERA
TECHNICAL DEPARTMENT

