

Overture to *Orpheus in the Underworld*—Jacques Offenbach

Offenbach, in many ways, was the model for today's famously scandalous and widely admired pop musicians. One has to remember the essential differences between the nature of the nineteenth-century (and earlier) musical public and what it heard, on the one hand, and today's fragmented, vivid, and incredibly diverse musical tastes. There really wasn't much of anything like "popular" music until the advent of musical theatre, and other influences, like ragtime, sheet music publication, and the early Edison machines later in the century. No one may be said to have had as singular an influence in effecting this new addition to the musical scene as that of Jacques Offenbach and his operettas. His devilish skill at skewering icons of culture with sparkling, witty, and adroit caricatures was unparalleled in French comedic theatre at the middle of the century, and more or less established him as one of the most important creators of operetta. Needless to say, the critics and moral guardians of the time were outraged by his broad and biting satires of "sacred" and dignified topics—including unabashed appropriation of other composers' tunes. You might think of him as an unlikely precursor of Florenz Ziegfeld, George Gershwin, and Meredith Willson all wrapped up in one.

Orphée aux enfers (Orpheus in the Underworld) was first performed in Paris in 1858, and enjoyed immediate success. Earlier works of his had been restricted by law to short, or one-act, shows, and *Orphée* was a longer, more substantial work. It was typical of the composer's approach in that it broadly satirized the ever-popular opera, *Ofeio*, by one of the most important composers of the eighteenth century, Gluck. The overture was added to the 1860 production in Vienna, cobbled together by a local composer and arranger, Carl Binder.

Opening with a dramatic fanfare, the overture soon moves to a virtuoso cadenza for the solo clarinet, other attractive solos ensue, gleaned from the show. Contrasting sections appear leading to an especially winsome and famous solo for the concertmaster in slow waltz time. Finally, the tune we've all been waiting for arrives—the Can-Can! But of course, at that time, the melody was not associated with the licentious dance of flouncing skirts at a place like the *Moulin Rouge*. Rather, it was simply called a *Galop infernal* ("Infernal Galop"). But later it served its famous dance perfectly.

How Offenbach got away with a lifetime of international hits that nastily took down French politics, social conventions, and beloved cultural icons is impressive, but he clearly became one of the most admired and popular musicians of the nineteenth century. It is telling that when the organizers of the great 1876 Centennial of the birth of the American nation decided to hire the "most famous musician in the world" to conduct the great orchestral concerts in Philadelphia—it wasn't Wagner, nor Verdi, nor Brahms. Of course, it was Jacques Offenbach, with whom else but John Philip Sousa serving as concertmaster! In fact, the musical style of the "March King" clearly owes more to the tunes of Offenbach than to any military tradition—but that's another story.