

Orpheus

[Opera bouffe, in three acts; text by Cremieux. First produced at the Bouffes Parisiens, Paris, October 21, 1858.]

PERSONAGES.

Pluto, disguised as Aristeus. Jupiter, King of the Gods. Orpheus, the lutist. John Styx, the ferryman. Mercury, the messenger. Bacchus, God of wine. Mars, God of war. Eurydice, spouse of Orpheus. Diana, Goddess of the hunt. Public Opinion. Juno, consort of Jupiter. Venus, Goddess of love. Cupid, her messenger. Minerva, Goddess of wisdom.

The scene is laid near Thebes; time, mythical.

The best musical work of Offenbach undoubtedly is to be found in his "Orpheus aux Enfers," and the text which his librettist furnished him is in keeping with the music. It was a bold as well as droll conception to invest the Olympian gods and goddesses with human attributes and make them symbols of worldly departments of action and official life, to parade them in processions like the ordinary street pageant, to present them in banquets, to dress them in the most fantastically individual manner, and to make nineteenth-century caricatures of the whole Olympian coterie.

The first scene of the opera discloses Eurydice in the Theban meadows plucking flowers with which to decorate the cabin of Aristeus, the shepherd, who is really Pluto in disguise. Suddenly Orpheus appears, not with his tortoise-shell lyre, but playing the violin and serenading, as he supposes, a shepherdess with whom he is in love. His mistake reveals the fact that each of them is false to the other, and a violent quarrel of the most ludicrous description ensues, ending in their separation. He goes to his shepherdess, she to her shepherd. Shortly afterwards, Aristeus meets Eurydice in the fields and reveals his real self. By supernatural power he turns day into night

and brings on a tempest, in the midst of which he bears her away to the infernal regions, but not before she has written upon Orpheus' hut the fate that has overtaken her. When Orpheus returns he is overjoyed at his loss, but in the midst of his exultation, Public Opinion appears and commands him to go to Olympus and demand from Jupiter the restoration of his wife. Orpheus reluctantly obeys the order.

The second act opens in Olympus, where the gods and goddesses are enjoying a nap, from which they are awakened by the blasts of Diana's horn. Thereupon much slanderous gossip is circulated amongst them, the latest news discussed being Pluto's abduction of Eurydice. Pluto himself shortly comes in, and is at once taxed by Jupiter with his unseemly behavior, whereupon Pluto retaliates by reference to Jupiter's numerous amours with mortals. This arouses the jealousy of Juno. Venus, with Cupid's assistance, starts a veritable riot, which is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of Orpheus and his guide, Public Opinion. He demands that his wife shall be restored to him, and Jupiter not only consents, but agrees to attend to the matter personally.

The third act finds Eurydice in Hades, carefully guarded by John Styx. Jupiter is faithful to his promise, and soon arrives there, but not in his proper person. He appears in the disguise of a fly, and allows Eurydice to catch him, after which he reveals himself. When Pluto comes in, he finds her transformed into a bacchante of the most convivial sort. Other deities make their appearance, and finally Orpheus comes sailing up the Styx, playing his violin, and demanding of Jupiter the fulfilment of his contract. Jupiter consents, but makes the condition that he shall return to his boat, Eurydice following him, and that he must not look back. Orpheus sets out, but just before he reaches the boat, the cunning Jupiter launches a thunderbolt after him, which causes him to turn and lose Eurydice, much to the disgust of Public Opinion, but greatly to the edification of Orpheus, who is now at liberty to return to his shepherdess on the Theban plain.

The most striking numbers in this curious travesty are the opening aria of Eurydice, as she gathers the flowers, "Woman that dreams" ("La femme dont la coeur rêve"); the pastoral sung to her by Aristeus, "To see through the Vines" ("Voir voltiger sous les treilles"); the fascinating hunting-song of Diana, "When Diana comes down the Plain" ("Quand Diane descend dans la plaine"); the characteristic and taking song of John Styx, "When I was King of Boeotia" ("Quand j'étais roi de Beotie"), which in its way is as striking as the sabre song in "The Grand Duchess"; Eurydice's delicate fly-song, "Beautiful Insect, with Golden Wings" ("Bel insecte, à l'aile dorée"); the drinking-song in the infernal regions, "Hail to the Wine" ("Vive le vin"); and Eurydice's vivacious bacchanalian song which immediately follows it, "I have seen the God Bacchus" ("J'ai vu le dieu Bacchus").