

The First *Geneviève de Brabant* (1859) An Introduction to a Forgotten Masterpiece

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The second version of *Geneviève de Brabant* (1867) is one of the better known operas by Jacques Offenbach. There are some recordings (more made by the ORTF, one by the BBC, etc) and sometimes the work is played on the stage. But the first version of the opera from 1859 is virtually unknown.

There are two reasons that the Society is offering a complete recording of this rarity (done via MIDI programming). First, we wanted to do something to commemorate the 140th anniversary of Offenbach's passing on 5 October 1880, and this is an ideal way of doing that. The event, although not as significant as the recent bicentennial celebration, is still worth some notice. And remember that we had celebrated that with a recording of another work, *Les Braconniers*. The other is that the first version of *Geneviève* has a great deal of wonderful music that was not included in the second edition, and it has not been performed or recorded for more than 150 years.

Also, we now have a basis for comparing the two versions of the opera and can see first hand that the first version has some problems in the libretto but the music is no less genial than the score of the well-known second version. The Society's web site has the DROP BOX link for downloading the MP3 recording which has all of the music on 19 tracks. Or you can type in the following:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/07vrhkoqybkuqcm/AABYqXwwiaKRnBB5PAWg3GHna?dl=0>

The last page of this article has the contents of the MP3 recording by track, score number, and playing time.

We are sure you will enjoy it.

The well-known problem of how to build on a great success in order to repeat it—or even to surpass it—can be found for the first time in Offenbach's work after the triumph of *Orphée aux Enfers*. On November 19, 1859, 13 months after the premiere of *Orphée*, its successor, *Geneviève de Brabant*, had its splendidly furnished first performance in two acts and six scenes. The original run of fifty 50 performances shows that the work was by no means a fiasco, but neither was it a great success. Offenbach did not go back to the proven writers for *Orphée*—Ludovic Halévy and Hector Crémieux— but, rather, turned to Adolphe Jaime fils (1824-1909) and Etienne Tréfeu (1821-1903). The choice seems reasonable because they had already collaborated on another medieval parody, *Croquefer*, which has an excellent libretto and was quite successful.

I.

The Genoveva legend, on which the opera is based, can be traced back to the 15th century.¹ The saga is about the virtuous Geoveva who lived during the 8th century and whose husband, Count Siegfried von Trier joined Karl Martell in going to Spain to fight the invading “Moorish Kings.” When she rejects the Court Minister Golo, who is actually supposed to be watching over her virtue, he initiates a plot in which Genoveva is imprisoned with the consent of Siegfried, who is far away from home. While there she painfully gives birth to their son. Abandoned in the forest, Genoveva and her child are supposed to be killed by two of Golo's servants, but they don't have the heart to do this on their own and spare pair. She lives in a cave for the next six years, feeding on herbs and roots; a doe breastfeeds her child. When Siegfried returns from battle, he has a bad attack of conscience. He searches for and finds Genoveva—God sends the doe to show him the way—and Golo's intrigue is revealed. Although the virtuous Genoveva generously pleads for him, Siegfried has him executed. Since she can no longer stand to eat the rich food at court, she leaves the castle three months later, piously following God's guidance.

During the 19th century, this edifying material enjoyed some popularity in the German speaking areas as well as in France. It was published and dramatized several times, including some burlesques for puppet theaters.² Note that even this short description of the legend shows that taking a comical approach with it is much more difficult than it was for the simpler, rather straightforward Orpheus legend, which can be summed up easily in a single sentence and which is also very easy to dramatize, e.g., Gluck only needed a cast of three for his opera. So the question became, could this material be retold without detracting from its actual dramatic core. It would not be so easy to do this with the Genoveva tale, especially not if, like Offenbach, you don't just want to satirize the material, but you also want to gain some human interest in the course of the new story.

At its core, the legend tells the story of a woman who was unjustly banished, persecuted and escaped death by the skin of her teeth, and this poses a considerable challenge for a comical-satirical reinterpretation. One reviewer expressed his discomfort with the work on the occasion of a German-language performance:

“It is dangerous to scoff at sentimentality and then immediately become sentimental yourself, to ridicule the stunning effects of grand opera while dishing out the most sophisticated musical effects.”³

Mind you, it is “dangerous,” not impossible. Offenbach proves this seven years later with the masterpiece *Barbe-Bleue*, another “medieval parody,” that is a stunning example of what a musical and lyric work should be. The *Geneviève* libretto, on the other hand, has major weaknesses.⁴

Jaime and Tréfeu move the work to the fictional Principality of Rosencrac, where Genèviève is completely bored with her marriage. Count Palatine Sifroid, on the other hand, must father an heir within two years after the marriage, otherwise his crown could be taken away and given to another—which is what the nasty Golo

¹ There is a comprehensive presentation of the background in Peter Hawig and Anatol Stefan Riemer, *Musiktheater als Gesellschaftssatire. Die Offenbachiaden und ihr Kontext* (Musical Theater as Social Satire. The Offenbachiade and its Context), Fernwals 2018, pp. 95 ff.

² Ibid., p. 96 ff.

³ See Anton Henseler, Jakob Offenbach, Berlin 1930, p. 302.

⁴ Hawig pointed out that the libretto originally submitted to the censors was a lot more cohesive than the one that was finally printed and performed (see Hawig, Riemer, op. cit., p. 108 ff). Some of the problems with the text noted below were caused by the revisions that were required by the official censors (see. ibid., p. 111).

hopes will happen. Unfortunately, Sifroid is interrupted every time he attempts to meet the requirement, which is why the son has yet to appear. (There is something a bit strange in this context, however. He allegedly leads a rather lively extramarital love life. A display of masculinity?) A miracle cure from the alchemist's kitchen is suggested to rectify the problem, and it looks very promising at first. However, Golo has sprinkled sneezing powder into Sifroid's wig and, instead of a loving tête-à-tête with his wife, there is a collective courtly sneezing attack. At the same time, Charles Martel is recruiting men for his crusade to Palestine. For some incomprehensible reason, Sifroid disregards the completely innocent Geneviève and gets on the train (!) to Palestine at the Gare du Nord!

In the second act, Geneviève is living in a cave where she receives a visit from a certain Isoline. Her son Arthur is rather concerned that their diet of roots and herbs will ruin their stomachs. Isoline is actually Golo's abandoned wife and had already developed a relationship with Geneviève while maintaining various disguises: the page Gratoso, the alchemist who brewed Sifroid's potency elixer, and as the Black Knight. By the way, Arthur is a rented child (!), which probably explains his strange behavior. Initially, Isoline throws a big party for the depressed Geneviève which is interrupted when Golo appears and tries to seduce her. Geneviève resists, whereupon Golo instructs the mute servant Almanzor to murder her. He, in turn, reveals himself to be a certain Reynold de Flandre, Geneviève's ex-lover. Disguised as a "gypsy," Isoline and the others return to the court where Golo is having a grand time making the resident puppets dance. At the same time, Sifroid returns from Turkey. Golo is held accountable and Geneviève takes the throne.

Even in this brief synopsis, the problems with the libretto are clearly evident. In Peter Hawig's opinion: "*The characters are blandly two-dimensional with nothing distinguishing about them. This is particularly noticeable in the women, surprising because Offenbach generally creates vivid, strong female characters: Geneviève is indifferent, bored, and without any depth, Isoline gets lost in her various disguises.*"⁵ And: "... (the) weak ending, which does not really resolve anything, not even in a burlesque sense, is another shortcoming of the work (...) What will happen to the marriage of Geneviève and Sifroid and the much-needed heir? [Will Reynold play a bigger role in Geneviève's life in the near future? Why is she appointed ruler at all, and with what legitimacy? R.F.] *Will Golo be punished? Does he have to follow Isoline back into their marriage?*"⁶

There are further problems: Where the *Orphée* libretto is short and sweet, the *Geneviève* is in parts rather chatty with a lot of dialogue. In the second act there is even idling in places which, as Peter Hawig notes, degrades some of the music numbers to mere interludes.⁷

Was Offenbach and his librettists aware of this? The final sixth scene of the libretto, with its abrupt, illogical conclusion to the plot looks as if the authors had put it together at the "last minute." The contemporary piano reduction in the vocal score⁸ also seems to have been created in a great hurry: the identification of the musical numbers is chaotic⁹, the accompanying libretto cannot always be synchronized with the musical text.¹⁰ Apparently there simply was not enough time available to complete the work.

After the premiere, Offenbach made the usual improvements on the musical scenes that did

⁵Hawig/Riemer, op. cit. p. 105.

⁶Ibid., p. 104 ff.

⁷See *ibid.*, p. 105..

⁸Jacques Offenbach, *Geneviève de Brabant*, Paris 1860 (Heugel et Cie).

⁹ Thus the score has two musical sections both identified as No. 7, the "Catalog thématique des Morceaux de la Partiton" on the cover does not include all of the musical numbers.

¹⁰ The libretto in the sixth scene provides for a spoken dialogue between the opening chorus and the appearance of the "gypsy" that cannot be accommodated in the musical text

not get a good reaction from the audience, but it was not possible to “save” the new work.¹¹ The basic concept already had flaws, for example with the main character. The marvellous mixture of humor and human tragedy that so distinguished *Orphée* could not be reproduced in this way.

However, from today's perspective, the libretto also has strengths that may have confused the contemporary audience even more. To let the early medieval cruiser company leave the hyper-modern Gare du Nord at the time the work was written, and to contrast this completely absurd invention with an absolutely serious farewell scene—when the wives being left behind kneel in front of Charles Martel and ask him to bring their husbands back alive (there is nothing funny about it!)—is a very modern-looking idea. And by the way, the author's personal favorite character is the rented child!

II.

Despite the problems with the libretto, Offenbach wrote music that was absolutely equal to that in *Orphée*, something that was well recognized by contemporary critics.¹² Thus, the new work was not viewed as an artistic step backwards. The score includes a prelude and 24 musical numbers (actually 25 due to the twice assigned No 7). The fact that the *Geneviève* score has 8 or 9 more numbers than the 16 found in *Orphée* does not mean that it is a significantly larger work: the first version (1858) of *Orphée* comprises 147 piano reduction pages, the *Geneviève* just twelve more.

Interestingly enough, Offenbach creates medieval coloring (or what he believed to be) through some deliberately archaic passages. This is seen quite early in the work. In the prelude there is a twelve-measure andantino passage which is based on a fifth on A and is intended to signal the “Middle Ages.” It does not use a typical church key, but is maintained in “classical” a-minor with the raised leading tone a G-sharp. Even the theme moving in parallel sixths is anything but medieval, yet the overall impression is such, especially when the theme modulates to A-Major and merges into a march that involuntarily reminds the listener of knights passing by.

Golo's Sérénade (No. 17), with which he tries to seduce Geneviève, is downright strange. To be sure, we do not expect any gallant seduction skills from this brutal villain, but what Offenbach musically allows him is a complete declaration of bankruptcy. Of the 18 bars (all in 9/8 time) sung in the Sérénade, the first twelve remain stubbornly in a-minor, the singing being accompanied by a mechanically knocking fifth that doesn't move a millimeter from the spot. Here the music decouples the singer and denies the declaration of love from the start. However, this composition also has something quite archaic about it. Whether Offenbach intended it or not is an open question.

As in the *Orphée*, Offenbach tries to link buffonary, satirical and parodic elements with moments of true human seriousness. Due to the shortcomings of the libretto, however, the individual elements often remain next to each other without forming an integrated unity. The idyllic moments of the *Orphée* material is missing, as is a convincing female role. The title heroine of Geneviève is not even assigned a solo number, which does not make the pale figure more colorful. An aria like Eurydice's death song can not be easily made.

However, Geneviève is only “formally” the main role. Isoline, who is omnipresent in her various disguises, is far more important. This is reinforced by the knowledge that the part of Isoline in the premiere was played by non-other than Lise Tautin, the first Eurydice. The lyrical climax of the score, the ballad No. 7 (the first number 7) is assigned to Isoline in the disguise of the page Gracioso. He presents it as a love song from the pen of Reynold de Flandre, for whom Geneviève's heart is still secretly yearning. Amazingly, Offenbach wrote the music using the 2/4 time signature, a rather unusual choice for such pieces. Nevertheless, the ballad in g-minor, the refrain of which alternates charmingly between G-Major and g-minor, is one of Offenbach's most delicate and beautiful inspirations.

Another highlight of the score—and of Offenbach's entire oeuvre—is the wide-ranging

¹¹ See. Jean-Claude Yon, Jacques Offenbach, Paris 2000, p.. 225.

¹² See Henseler, op. cit., p. 302.

“Ronde de Jeu” (No. 16) which is sung in the second act by Isoline. In terms of the text, the librettists also break out of the work's somewhat poor literary environment. The rondo, presented during the feast organized by Isoline for Geneviève, deals with gambling, “... *the game god to whom one sacrifices and builds altars, the pale, tired mummies at the gaming tables, the feverish eyes, the drinking. Everything is gambled away: understanding, money, women, and honor.*”¹³ Offenbach, who himself liked to bet a few (or more) francs at the gaming tables of Europe's casinos, knew what he was setting to music. Here the buffonery not “only” tips into the tragic, but also into the uncanny. The piece clearly fortells the coming of *Barbe-Bleue*.

The song itself demands a lot from the singer. After all, it comprises almost 300 bars to be performed in allegro vivo. Tonally it changes between a-minor, F-Major, and E-Major (stanzas) and A-Major (refrain). The orchestration of the second verse is particularly note worthy; it characterizes a roulette ball that is rotating faster and faster.

The comic highlight of the work is Sifroid's Chicken Song (No. 4), which symbolically represents the onset of the potency elixer. The clucking chorus is hilarious. The grand finale of the 2nd scene (the second number 7), in which Sifroid would like to take action regarding the production of an heir, comes to nothing because of the sneezing powder that Golo has put in his wig. The powder infects the entire court and instead of intimacy we get sneezing. Here Offenbach composes an irresistibly comic ensemble. The bolero (No. 9) – a second bolero!—in which Charles Martell calls for a crusade—is one of those powerful melodic inventions from Offenbach that will stay in the mind of the listener forever.

The departure of the crusaders from the Gare du Nord was already mentioned, and this number closes the first act after Sifroid had previously, and with no reason, repudiated Geneviève (No. 10 and 11). Here the grotesque and tragic flow into one another in such a strange way that it is still disturbing today. The appearance of a group of medieval knights at a Paris train station, from which they are leaving by train for Palestine (Offenbach even composes the whistle of a locomotive to the music), a gigantic leap in time of around 800 years, is in itself completely absurd. And it becomes completely bizarre when this scene is not used for something comical but for tragedy. In a musically moving moment, the knights' wives fall to their knees and ask Charles Martell to save their beloved men from death. Offenbach is not parodying the Grand Opera here – rather, he composes Grand Opera, completely serious and without a hint of parody, as if it were not unusual for absurd people from the Middle Ages to be standing on the platform of the Gare du Nord in 19th century Paris. The finale ends with a huge walk off by the entire ensemble, musically reminiscent of a distorted galop (“Le clairon qui sonne”) and reminiscent of the first act finale of *Orphée*, in which the gods set off from Olympus and with which the later operetta-style of departure finals were established (even with Offenbach, people often break out at the end of the line). Nevertheless, the *Geneviève* finale, in which the combination of the absurd and grotesque is carried to an extreme, is probably unique in the opera literature of the 19th century.¹⁴

Also parallel to *Orphée*, the last—here the sixth—scene of *Geneviève* begins with a “revue sequence” which is part of a larger “thoroughly composed” arc in which five musical numbers merge into one another. The arc begins with the duet for Geneviève and Almanzo, which concludes the fifth scene. In it she recognizes her beloved Raymond, making this the only actual love duet of the opera, albeit a little short. The duet goes directly into a longer waltz entr'act, which serves as scene-changing music and takes up the theme of Arthur's stomachache couplets while also preparing the festive mood for the upcoming scene. The entr'act then leads into the actual “revue sequence,” a waltz sung by the chorus with a scene (the appearance of the disguised Isoline, No. 20), her chanson (actually a rondo, No. 21), and a chœur de la danse (Tanzchor, No. 22), which is

¹³ Hawig, Riemer, op. cit., p. 106..

¹⁴ Offenbach, who was a great railroad enthusiast as a traveler, allowed himself a similar joke again in *La Belle Hélène*: here, Pâris has to guess the word “locomotive” in the first act—two thousand years before its invention! In the first act of *La Vie parisienne*, Offenbach brings us to another train station, here in the right time frame: and in *Le Roi Carotte* the railway is even depicted in a rondo (No.17) as the means to unite humanity.

actually a greatly expanded refrain from Isoline's chanson. This “Tasnzchor” is the counterpart to the *Galop Infernal* of *Orphée* and is certainly no less sparkling and harmonious, but it is richer and therefore not as easy to sing along. In addition, the “dance choir” cannot be easily separated from the overall structure of the opera, as it is closely linked to the chanson. Perhaps this has stood in the way of wider circulation of the composition.

The stage career of Offenbach's second multi-act work was only mediocre outside of Paris.¹⁵ But he was well aware of the quality of his music. He would edit the work two more times, and so extensively that we can speak of them as two new works.

¹⁵See Hawig, Riemer, op. Cit., p. 107.

An Overview of the Music of the 1859 and the 1867 Versions

1859

1867

Introduction → *in Overture, some different*

Act 1, Scene 1

No. 1	Chœur des Savants	→	<i>begin in no. 1, some different</i>
No. 2	Rondeau (Mathieu Lansberg)	→	<i>in no. 2, some different in the middle</i>
No. 3	Chœur des Savants	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 4	Chœur	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 4 bis	Couplets de la Poule (Sifroid)	→	<i>No. 5</i>

Act 1, Scene 2

No. 5	Chœur de Jeunes Filles	→	<i>in no. 20 as ballet-music</i>
No. 5 bis	Accompagnement, récit en vers	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 6	Couplets de la Fille à Mathurin	→	<i>No. 7</i>
No. 6 bis	Serenade (Listed as No. 7)	→	<i>cut, replaced by no. 3</i>
No. 6 ter	Chœur (reprise of No. 3)	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 7	Duo and Final scene	→	<i>cut</i>

Act 1, Scene 3

No. 8 / 8 bis	Introduction - Entr'acte	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 9	Boléro de Charles Martel	→	<i>No. 11</i>
No. 10	Finale (Scène et septuor du Duel)	→	<i>No. 12, some different</i>

Act 1, Scene 4

No. 11	Départ pour la Palestine	→	<i>No. 12bis</i>
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Act 2

No. 12	Introduction - Entr'acte	→	<i>cut</i>
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Act 2, Scene 5

No. 13	Quatuor de chasse	→	<i>No. 24</i>
No. 14	Couplets de l'Enfant	→	<i>theme used in No. 16</i>
No. 15	Chœur	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 16	Ronde des Jeux	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 17	Sérénade	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 18	Duet	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 19	Entracte	→	<i>cut</i>

Act 2, Scene 6

No. 20	Introduction et Chœur	→	<i>cut</i>
No. 21	Chanson de la Bohémienne	→	<i>part of no. 21, La Farandole</i>
No. 22	Chœur de la danse	→	<i>second part of no. 21</i>
No. 23	Couplets du Retour de la Palestine	→	<i>No. 25</i>
No. 24	Hymne à Geneviève, Finale	→	<i>cut</i>

Geneviève de Brabant
 Opéra-Bouffe in 2 Acts and 6 Scenes
 Libretto by Jaimé fils and Tréfeu
 First Version, 1859

1.		Introduction	8:41
		Act 1, Scene 1	
	No. 1	- Chœur des Savants	
	No. 2	- Rondeau (Mathieu Lansberg)	
2.	No. 3	- Chœur des Savants	1:24
3.	No. 4	- Chœur	5:53
	No. 4 bis	- Couplets de la Poule (Sifroid)	
		Act 1, Scene 2	
4.	No. 5	- Chœur de Jeunes Filles / Chœur des Baigneuses	3:10
	No. 5 bis	- Accompagnement, récit en vers	
5.	No. 6	- Couplets de la Fille à Mathurin	2:42
6.	No. 6 bis	- Serenade	2:43
	No. 6 ter	- Chœur (reprise of No. 3)	
7.	No. 7	- Duo (Geneviève, Sifroid) – final scene	10:14
		Act 1, Scene 3	
8.	No. 8 / 8 bis	- Introduction - Entr'acte	2:13
9.	No. 9	- Boléro de Charles Martel	1:38
10.	No. 10	- Finale (Scène et septuor du Duel)	12:16
		Act 1, Scene 4	
	No. 11	- Départ pour la Palestine	
		Act 2	
11.	No. 12	- Introduction - Entr'acte	2:50
		Act 2, Scene 5	
12.	No. 13	- Quatuor de chasse	4:00
13.	No. 14	- Couplets de l'Enfant	1:42
14.	No. 15	- Chœur	6:18
	No. 16	- Ronde des Jeux	
15.	No. 17	- Sérénade	2:29
16.	No. 18	- Duet	4:50
	No. 19	- Entracte	
		Act 2, Scene 6	
17.	No. 20	- Introduction et Chœur	5:55
	No. 21	- Chanson de la Bohémienne	
	No. 22	- Chœur de la danse	
18.	No. 23	- Couplets du Retour de la Palestine	1:39
19.	Nr. 24	- Hymne à Geneviève, Finale	1:42