

**The Jacques Offenbach Society**

**In Celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
of the Composer's Birth  
June 20, 2019**

**Present**

***Les Braconniers***

Opéra-Bouffe in Three Acts  
Libretto by Henri Charles Chivot and Alfred Duru  
Music by Jacques Offenbach

Premiere:  
Théâtre des Variétés, Paris  
29 January 1873

An MP3 Recording

Midi Programing and Notes  
by  
**Ralph Fischer**

# The Rediscovery of a Neglected Masterpiece – The Opéra-Bouffe *Les Braconniers* (*The Poachers*) by Jacques Offenbach

Introduction and MIDI Programming by  
**Ralph Fischer**

English translation by  
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The general belief that Offenbach did not continue as a successful composer following the Franco-German war of 1870/71 is just simply not correct. It is inconceivable that any composer who has been rejected by the public would be able to produce over twenty new lyric works in less than ten years (before passing on in 1880), many with considerable success and, in addition, see the successful revivals of several older works during the same period.

On 14 December 1871 Offenbach returned to the Bouffes-Parisiens in Paris with *Boule-de-Neige*, based on his earlier opéra-comique *Barkouf* (1860). It only managed to have a run of forty performances<sup>1</sup>, most likely because the beautiful work had a touch too much burlesque in it to be easily accepted by audiences so shortly after having lost a war. However, he had a resounding success on 5 January 1872 at the Théâtre de la Gaîté with *Le Roi Carotte*, even in spite of its open political allusions. And only two weeks later, on 18 January 1872, the Opéra-Comique gave the first performance of *Fantasio*, probably the most significant failure of Offenbach's entire career. The poetic masterpiece simply overwhelmed the audience, and his creativity has only now become fully appreciated.

With this, the pragmatic Offenbach had released three distinct trial balloons during the early winter following the war. He wanted to determine the direction in which the public's interest was developing under the new civil republic. Parts of all three works had been written before the war. *Boule-de-Neige*, definitely an example of the classic buffoonery, met with only modest support and its opposite, the melancholy, poetic *Fantasio*, was attacked mercilessly. However, *Le Roi Carotte*, standing between the two extremes, gave Offenbach a solid success. It determined the direction that opéra-bouffe, opéra-comique, and operetta would evolve over the coming decades. And not just for Offenbach, but for others such as Charles Lecocq (1832-1918), Robert Planquette (1848-1903) and Louis Varney (1844-1908) as well. The new direction appeared to be: modest satirical material with a touch of melancholy, firmly grounded in their current societal values, completely replacing the decadent champagne intoxication and ribaldry of *La Vie Parisienne* (1866) – after all, one did not have the option of sleeping late since he had to be at work early the following morning.

Vincent Adoumié decidedly captured the prevailing mood: “The defeat of the war and the new moral order created a rigidly conformist public, leading librettists to conceive projects that

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean-Claude Yon, *Jacques Offenbach*, Paris, 2000, page 438.

were cheerful—but not in a burlesque way—and comical—but not satirically so—as the basis for their works...<sup>2</sup>

A perfect model of the genre's new direction is that of the title character, the baker Margot, in Offenbach's *La boulangère at the écus* (1875). She suddenly finds herself wealthy, but is determined to maintain her business. She continues to deliver the rolls every morning, but now, instead of on foot, she is carried on a litter as she makes the rounds of her customers, enjoying a little bit of luxury.

However, it would be a gross misunderstanding to believe that such tendencies became viable only after the Franco-German war, or that they came directly from the works of Charles Lecocq. They were quite visible during the final phase of the Second Empire and can be seen in such works by Offenbach as *La Périchole* (1868), *Vert-Vert* (1868), or *La Princesse de Trébizonde* (1869). It does not detract in the least from Charles Lecocq's work to note that Offenbach continued to follow his own lead and did not try to imitate Lecocq's style. And we should also note that this shift in style was not really a novelty at all, but, rather, a revival of the standard opéras-comiques of the 1820 – 1850 period, for example, the work of Daniel François Esprit Auber (1782 – 1871) who was always a source of inspiration for Offenbach.

Facing the new 1872/73 winter season, Offenbach sought to produce works that corresponded to the current tastes of his audience. The previous winter he had returned to the Bouffes-Parisiens, the Gaité and the Opéra-Comique. For the new season he returned to the Théâtre des Variétés with *Les Braconniers*. This was the theater in which he had enjoyed considerable success during the 1860s after temporarily leaving the Bouffes-Parisiens as the result of a dispute: his appearances there started with *La Belle Hélène* (1864) and ran through *Les Brigands* (1869). Offenbach had good reason to believe that he would be welcomed there with open arms.

Surprisingly, that is not how things worked out. Working with Eugène Bertrand (1834-1899), the theater's manager, proved to be quite difficult, and the general mood of the rehearsals was not good. After a confrontation with the stage director Eugène Rousseau (no error, there were two Eugènes), Offenbach wrote to Bertrand: "I've decided to stay away from rehearsals, and will only attend the dress rehearsal. I will be there if you want, but only under the condition that every bit of advice that I consider important enough to mention is not rejected. Rousseau is quite capable, however, he is too quick to forget that the author is the absolute authority regarding his work and the director is not entitled to any other task but assuring that the scene meets the author's expectations. I ask you to have a word or two with him, to avoid any new confrontations between us."<sup>3</sup>

These are golden words that every modern stage director should have hung over his bed!

Although the premiere of *Les Braconniers* on 29 January 1873 was a grand success and the piece brought in good receipts, the mood did not improve. A problem developed between Offenbach and Bertrand over a 500 franc commission payment, and the manager closed the successful piece after only 58 performances<sup>4</sup>. That Offenbach accepted the financial loss shows just how difficult things had become. As with many such situations in the theater, Offenbach and Bertrand were usually able to reconcile quickly, but it was not until 1877 that the composer would return to that theater with a new work, *Le Docteur Ox*. He encountered the same problems with

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Adoumié, *Von der Kunst zur Industrie. Die Entwicklung des Librettistenstandes in Frankreich zur Zeit Offenbachs* (From the Art to the Industry. The Development of Librettist Status in France During Offenbach's Time), translated from the French by Peter Hawig, Bad Ems Hefte N0. 170, Bad Ems, 1997, page 21.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Luez, *Jacques Offenbach. Musiciens européens*. Anglet, 2001, page 242 ff.

<sup>4</sup> See Yon, op. cit., page 459.

Bertrand all over again and, this time, it resulted in closing a successful work after only 39 performances<sup>5</sup>.

The fact that Offenbach revised *La Vie Parisienne* in 1873 and *La Périchole* in 1874 for very successful revivals at the Variétés—and from which both he and Bertrand profited greatly—even after these difficulties, shows that they were still willing to work with each other<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, for the 1873/74 winter season, Offenbach moved to a new stage, the Théâtre de la Renaissance, and enjoyed a solid success with *La Jolie parfumeuse* (1873). In addition, the composer also began planning for assuming the management of the Gaîté (which, as you know, turned out to be a very bad idea).

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The libretto for *Les Braconniers* was written by the skilled duo of Henri-Charles Chivot (1830–1897) and Henri-Alfred Duru (1829–1889). Offenbach had already worked with them on *L'Île de Tulipatan* (1866), and they would go on to provide him with the scripts for two of his most successful works, *Madame Favart* (1878) and *La Fille du tambour-major* (1879). However, for *Les Braconniers* they were very restrained in the application of their talents. The story concerns a gang of poachers during the time of Louis XVI (1754–1793) and their continuing problems with the foolish and despotic governor. The leader of the gang, Rastamagnac, is actually the disguised daughter of a man who had been ruined by the governor in the past—guaranteeing gender complications. There is also an interrupted wedding night that almost appears ambiguous. Too many characters appear and reappear in new disguises over and over again, without any clear exposition regarding who is who, what, or why. Chivot and Duru had already done much of this in their work with *L'Île de Tulipatan*, and *The Poachers* has much in common with the already well-known *Les Brigands*.

In addition, the work includes one of the most popular opéra-bouffe scenes of the 1870s. It was initiated by Lecocq and Offenbach had borrowed the idea for his *La Jolie parfumeuse* (1873). This is, of course, the interrupted wedding night. However, in most of these cases, the bride is abducted, but not here. This literary convention met the needs of the bourgeois public for some harmless titillation where something a little more graphic would not have been acceptable. Libertine actions such as those by Métella in *La Vie Parisienne* were simply unthinkable at that time<sup>7</sup>.

While *Les Braconniers* takes place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it includes another clearly post-war characteristic: delight in the historical and the glorification of the past (for example, earlier when Bismarck had been quite concerned about the future of his un-unified country). Contemporary material would eventually become important again in the development of operetta and vaudeville in the years after 1880. Offenbach's satirical piece *Pomme d'api* (1873) is a rare exception and “only” a one-act work.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 58.

<sup>6</sup> This is rather reminiscent of the Ferengis (*Star Trek Deep Space Nine*) who firmly believed that anyone who put personal feelings above profit should not be trusted.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Pourvoyeur, “*Jacques Offenbach. Essay zur Rehabilitation eines Komponisten*” (“Jacques Offenbach. Essays on the Rehabilitation of a Composer”), translated and published by Peter Hawig, Fernwald, 2009, page 135. The success of the older works in revival clearly shows that, in spite of all the restrictions imposed by the current demands of civil virtue, the bourgeois audiences of the Third Republic still sought “fun” and good jokes.

The first act takes place in a rural area of France during the time of Louis XVI. The mule seller Marcassou is about to marry Ginetta, the niece of the barber Carmagasse. The innkeeper Gabastou helps and collaborates with a gang of poachers (Braconniers) who are fighting against the governor of Bigorre province, Lastécouères de Campistrons. The gang is led by the much feared Rastamagnac who is, in reality, Bibletto, the disguised daughter of Monsieur de Birague who had been ruined by the governor in the past. Bibès is her faithful lieutenant. In the evening, just after the wedding has taken place, the poachers come to take game from the inn's cellar where they also lock up Marcassou. Lastécouères, who also arrives at the inn, tries to stop the wedding feast, believing that he is capturing the poachers.

In the second act, Ginetta has gone back to Argelès and has taken refuge in the barber shop of her uncle Carmagnasse. She is quite upset because she believes that Marcassou has abandoned her. In order to cover up the problem she introduces Bibletto as her husband. This leads to a great deal of confusion when the real Marcassou arrives. The situation gets even more confusing after Bibletto drops the male disguise and appears as Bibletta, his self-styled twin sister, and Éléonor, the son of Lastécouères, falls madly in love with her.

The third act finds the protagonists at the governor's magnificent castle where Marcassou has been named steward. The young man is very jealous of Bibletto until he learns that he is actually a woman. Bibletto resumes her true identity in order to marry Éléonor – and thus end the long feud between the Campistrons and the Biragues. Marcassou and Ginetta forgive each other and are completely reconciled. The work ends on a happy note after many comic scenes of misunderstanding and identity confusion<sup>8</sup>.

The confusing libretto probably is responsible for more than just the abrupt end to the work's first run: it also had a negative effect on the spread of *Les Braconniers* to other cities. The fact that the publisher Choudens put out two versions of the piano-vocal score—the latter one showing several cuts in the musical numbers—is a clear indication that Offenbach and his librettists revised the work sometime after its premiere. Tesse published a libretto for the work in 1879, and it is a combination of the two piano scores. Remarkably, the libretto and revised piano-vocal score is missing the marvelous waltz-quintet (No. 11). Offenbach featured themes from this number prominently in the overture and it was later used in the very clever pastiche *Christopher Columbus* (1976) by its authors Don White and Lorrain Thomas as the *Trio of the Three Wives* (No. 5)<sup>9</sup>. One can only wonder just how much Offenbach had to do with making this bizarre cut of one of the score's best numbers.

In any case, this musically beautiful work gradually spread out to other venues. It reached the Theater an der Wien (Vienna) on 22 November 1873 as *Die Wilderer* but ran for only 22 performances. It should be noted that the prime time of French opéra-bouffe had passed in German speaking countries after the war: this had an impact not only on Offenbach but on other French composers as well. The non-French appreciation of these works shifted significantly to the English speaking world.

It is also interesting to note that the opera obtained some success in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). It was originally given there on 6 November 1958 under the title *Die listigen Frauen* (*The Sly Woman*) in a new version by Jan Möhnwald (book) and Guido Masanetz (music) at the Stadttheater in Rudolfstadt, and was still listed in the official

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<sup>8</sup> See Yon, op. cit., page 458.

<sup>9</sup> Also, note that the serenade in No. 8 of *Les Braconniers* was used as No. 3 in *Christopher Columbus*.

GDR list of operettas being performed in 1986. Thus, we can say that the work did enjoy a certain presence in the repertoire, even if not in its original form<sup>10</sup>.

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The score of *Les Braconniers* includes an overture and 20 musical numbers. This holds true for both editions of the piano-vocal score. The cut passages missing from the shortened piano score are (the page numbers refer to those in the complete edition):

- No. 8 – Act 1 Finale: No. 8 C – Scène (starts on page 85), and No. 8 D – Sérénade (starts on page 94).
- Entr’acte to Act 2, cut (starts on page 113).
- No. 11 – Quintette: No. 11 A – (Waltz) Scène (starts on page 131), No. 11 B – Couplets (starts on page 142), and No. 11 C – Chanson à boire (starts on page 151).
- No. 13 – Romance (starts on page 171)
- No. 14 – Act 2 Finale: part marked *allegretto* (starts on page 189), and the *stretta* (starts on page 205).
- No. 16 – Quartet: the parts that begin on pages 243 and 251.
- No. 19 – Duet et Boléro: section starting at the *allegretto* sign on page 270 and the one starting on page 273.

With the deletion of No. 13, they maintained the total of 20 numbers by splitting the Act 2 Finale into two: No. 13 – Final and No. 14 – *Stretta*. To accommodate this, a coda was added just before the start of the *stretta* (pages 148 – 149 in the shortened edition), and a longer orchestral prelude was placed at the beginning. The fact that essentially 65 pages were cut from the original piano-vocal score shows that the work was shortened considerably. These cuts do not in any way improve the work, but deny us some very beautiful music such as the significant waltz scene, a very lovely Tyrolian in the Act 2 Final, and an enchanting Ariette in No. 19 – Duet.

The score for *Les Braconniers* is one of the most beautiful written by Offenbach during the post-war period. Each act begins with an extensive and well-developed introduction (Nos. 1, 9, and 15), and the first two acts have dramatic and extensive finales (Nos. 8 and 15). The *stretta* ending the second act finale is a typical rousing Offenbachian galop, and here it takes up a full 16 pages of the piano score, considerably longer and more complex than other similar finales. Also note that the voices sing in accented triplets over a good portion of the number: this is rhythmically gorgeous but adds an additional complication in performance. A theme from this galop also ends the opera (No. 20). In addition, other large ensemble scenes, such as the already noted No. 11 – Quintet and the wonderful waltz theme are among Offenbach’s most beautiful compositions.

The score is also rich in effective solo numbers, including: Maracassou’s fascinating couplets in the Introduction; the equally brilliant entrance song for Giletta (No. 2); and the couplets sung by Éléonor with Bibletto (No. 7). The final number (No. 20) includes a reprise of the enchanting serenade for Bibletto that is originally heard in the Act 1 finale (No. 8). The introduction to Act 3 (No. 15) has some absolutely lovely couplets for the (female) hunt-guards.

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<sup>10</sup> Otto Schneidereit, “Operette A-Z. Ein Streifzug durch die Welt der Operette und des Musicals” (“Operette A-Z. An Expedition into the World of the Operetta and the Musical”), Berlin (East) 1986, page 275 ff.

A particularly touching number can be found in the Act 1 finale (No. 8): the duet for Marcassou and Ginetta, “*J’aime j’aime j’aime j’aime tout en toi,*” one of Offenbach’s most stunning love songs<sup>11</sup>.

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This recording—which the Jacques Offenbach Society is offering to its members and friends to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the composer’s birth—is, unfortunately, only an electronically produced approximation of what a full, real production would be like. However, it is the first complete recording of *Les Braconniers* and offers an opportunity to rediscover the many unfortunately forgotten treasures in this masterpiece. Perhaps it will inspire some theatrical artists and musicians to consider performing the work and open the door to a hopefully long and solid stage presence.

I would like to thank Bob Folstein for opening his collection to me and providing the music cut to create the shortened version. This assured us the ability to create a complete recording.

Enjoy the music that is now, finally, available.

*Bon anniversaire, maestro!*

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To get the recording, go to:

[https://www.dropbox.com/sh/tt3n5ba4b189pcl/AADVRLxl\\_W5vdvPEYWfSpmaEa?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/tt3n5ba4b189pcl/AADVRLxl_W5vdvPEYWfSpmaEa?dl=0)

The Drop Box site will list the 21 distinct tracks of the recording. If you want to retain a copy, select or create a folder to copy them to, then click the first track (01 – Overture.mp3). That will take you to a new screen with a black box (<1 of 21>) indicating which track is ready to be downloaded. There will also be a blue screen with the download option. Click the download option, and, when prompted, enter the “save to” location. That done, go back to the black box and click on “>” to advance to the next track. Repeat the save routine, then advance to the next track. Continue until done.

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<sup>11</sup> The *Duettino* appears in the Offenbach compilation “Entre Nous – Celebrating Offenbach, Excerpts from Forgotten Operas,” published by Opera Rara (ORR 234) and directed by David Parry.

# *Les Braconniers*

MP3  
21 tracks, 133 MB, 1:36:15

MIDI programming by Ralph Fischer, November 2018

01 Overture ( 6 :14)

## **Act 1 (36:04)**

02 No. 1 – Introduction (Chœur, Scène, Couplets) ( 7 :10)  
03 No. 2 – Couplets, No. 2 bis – Musique de scène ( 2 :43)  
04 No. 3 – Chœur, No. 3 bis – Sortie ( 2 :21)  
05 No. 4 – Air ( 3:23)  
06 No. 5 – Choeur ( 2:10)  
07 No. 6 – Couplets et Choeur ( 3:09)  
08 No. 7 – Couplets ( 2:33)  
09 No. 8 – Final (Choeur, Duetto, Scène, Sérénade, Stretto) (12:35)

## **Act 2 (33:18)**

10 Entracte, No. 9 (Scène, Couplets, Rondo) ( 6 :16)  
11 No. 10 – Rêverie, No. 10 bis ( 1 :12)  
12 No. 11 – Quintet (Scène, Couplets, Chanson à boire) ( 8 :30)  
13 No. 12 – Quartetto ( 2 :44)  
14 No. 14 – Romance ( 2 :11)  
15 No. 14 – Final (12 :25)

## **Act 3 (20:49)**

16 Entracte, No. 15 (Chœur et Couplets), No. 15 bis ( 5 :11)  
17 No. 16 – Quatuor ( 5 :10)  
18 No. 17 – Couplets ( 1 :55)  
19 No. 18 – Trio ( 3 :19)  
20 No. 19 – Duo ( 3 :13)  
21 No. 20 – Final ( 2 :01)