

# The voice of commerce

Étienne Jardin

Over a career spanning thirty years and more than a hundred works, Jacques Offenbach frequently focused on the world of commerce. Two productions of the 1870s illustrate this in their very titles: *La Jolie Parfumeuse* (The pretty perfume girl, *opéra-comique* in three acts, 1873) and *La Boulangère à des écus* (Margot the baker is in the money, *opéra-bouffe* in three acts, 1875 and 1876). There is nothing surprising in this fact. One of Offenbach's strengths lies in his ability to present the contemporary world with a mirror in which it could recognise itself and laugh at its own failings. Since the rise of commerce was one of the principal characteristics of nineteenth-century Europe, those involved in it naturally had their place in his works. However, Offenbach's relationship with the world of business was not limited to observation: as director of the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens and later of the Théâtre de la Gaîté, he played a full part in the entertainment industry of his time and found ever more astute publicity methods to promote his theatres (see the anthology *M. Offenbach nous écrit. Lettres au Figaro et autres propos*, ed. Jean-Claude Yon<sup>1</sup>). Armed with this insider's knowledge of the tricks of the publicity trade, how did he portray the business people of his time?



## MARKET CRISES

In 1858, the imperial authorities finally allowed 'secondary' theatres to show an unlimited number of characters on stage. This was a hard-won vic-

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<sup>1</sup> Arles: Actes Sud - Palazzetto Bru Zane, 2019.

tory that finally broke the historical monopoly of the Opéra-Comique over this type of production and enabled Offenbach to compete on equal terms with the official theatres. The new era that resulted began at the Bouffes-Parisiens on 3 March. The curtain rose on a set depicting the Fontaine des Innocents market at the time of Louis XV, as the chorus sang:

Ach'tez nos légum's et nos fruits,  
Ils n'sont pas chers, ils sont exquis !  
Vous n'pourriez pas dans tout Paris  
En trouver à plus juste prix.<sup>2</sup>

Although the action of the piece in question, *Mesdames de la Halle*, is set in the eighteenth century, Offenbach alluded to the practices of his time in order to depict the reality of the market. As Jean-Claude Yon and, more recently, Jacek Blaszkiewicz<sup>3</sup> have shown, the composer made use of *Les Cris de Paris*, a work by Georges Kastner published the previous year. In the first part, Kastner identified and transcribed in musical notation the various interjections heard on the markets before presenting them in combination, in the second part, in a 'grande symphonie humoristique'. Offenbach (who had the same publisher as Kastner) uses some of these cries to punctuate his opening chorus: 'Voilà l'plaisir, mesdam's, voilà l'plaisir', 'À la barque, à la barque, à la barque! Écaillèr', 'Chapeaux à vendre, vieux chap'' and so on.<sup>4</sup>

While the market scene had been a commonplace in productions of *vaudeville* or *opéra-comique* since the previous century, Offenbach – whether inspired by or plagiarising Kastner – focused on its sonic reality

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2 Buy our vegetables and fruit! / They're not expensive, they're exquisite! / Nowhere in Paris / Will you find any at a fairer price.

3 'Street Cries on the Operetta Stage: Offenbach's *Mesdames de la Halle*' in *Musical Theatre in Europe, 1830-1945*, ed. Michela Nicolai and Clair Rowden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), pp.63-89.

4 These street vendors sold, respectively, sweets for children, oysters and second-hand hats. (Translator's note)

and tried to project his audiences into an atmosphere familiar to them. The same device appears at the beginning of *Barkouf* (1860) and in the 1871 revision of the work, renamed *Boule-de-Neige*. The homorhythmic passages for the Russian vendors – ‘Voyez, voyez, achetez / Les produits les plus vantés’ (See, see, buy / The most highly praised products) – and the buyers – ‘Regardons de tous côtés / Les produits les plus vantés’ (Let’s see, all around us, / The most praised products) – are punctuated by solo interventions from vendors offering oranges, glass, fabrics and carpets. By placing these choruses at the very beginning of the work, Offenbach’s librettists were able to characterise the protagonists of the impending action by placing them in situation from the outset. It should be noted, however, that the composer could have chosen to leave these passages as spoken dialogue; by taking them as the basis of large-scale musical numbers, he appears to demonstrate his interest in one of the most rudimentary forms of advertising: street vendors’ cries to indicate their presence to passers-by.



#### SALES PATTERN

Librettists did not wait for Offenbach to have the opportunity to compose choruses to offer him scenes portraying tradespeople. In *Le 66* (1856), Berthold introduced what was to become a recurrent type of character. As Frantz and Grittly – the two leading protagonists of this one-act operetta – are wandering the roads of Württemberg and imagining what they could afford if the lottery ticket they have in their pocket turned out to be a winner, a hawker appears, singing:

Voici le colporteur,  
 Venez à sa boutique,  
 Il sait, avec bonheur  
 Contenter la pratique...<sup>5</sup>

The hawker, who acts as a useful *deus ex machina* to advance the plot – because he knows the lottery results – is initially presented publicising his products. This device, already used for the market vendors mentioned above, reappears in *Lischen et Fritzchen* (1863). The Alsatian girl Lischen enters in Scene 2, singing:

P'tits balais,  
Je vends des petits balais.  
Qu'ils sont bien faits,  
Qu'ils sont proprets,  
Coquets !  
Achetez-moi des petits balais.<sup>6</sup>

Offenbach's attraction for the supernatural led him to reuse the figure of the pedlar in the 1870s, now with a new approach. The character of Caprice in *Le Voyage dans la lune* (1875) returns to the stage in disguise singing sales patter, but what moves the plot forward is the quack product he offers. It is a supposedly miraculous water:

This water, ladies and gentlemen, possesses every property, every virtue, every quality. It cures head colds, toothache and corns on the feet. It removes stains, replaces wax polish, and makes razors sharp... It makes hair grow and reduces beards, or makes beards grow and hair fall out, whichever is required. It makes thin people fat and fat people thin.

This miraculous elixir peddled on the streets might be regarded as an equivalent of the extraordinary objects offered for sale by Coppélius in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*: 'Des yeux, de beaux yeux' – the eyes that will enable

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5 Here is the pedlar! / Come to his shop. / He knows how / To make his customers happy.

6 Little brooms! / I sell little brooms! / How well made they are, / How neat, / How elegant! / Buy my little brooms!

Hoffmann to see the mechanical doll Olympia as he would like her to be. The passage in which he sets out his wares contrasts with the solemnity of the rest of the scene, since it is built on a cheerful ritornello. Long before the first radio commercial was heard, Offenbach showed how useful music can be in tempting the consumer to buy. However, the diabolical nature of the optical instruments Coppélius sells to Hoffmann indicates the danger of heeding such siren voices.



#### PÉRONILLA'S ADVERTISING SLOGAN

With the song 'Oui, je le dis, et m'en fais gloire' (Act One), the eponymous protagonist of *Maître Péronilla* makes his entrance, like the rest of Offenbach's tradespeople, characterising himself initially by what he sells. Unlike the previous examples, however, we are no longer dealing here with a direct transaction: the Spanish chocolate maker hymns the success of his business in order to justify his renunciation of the much more respectable profession of the law. To this end, he constructs his discourse by reference to the advertisement that appears 'in every newspaper': 'The best chocolate is Péronilla's.' Proclaimed twice at the end of each refrain, the phrase is used as a slogan: a formula that sums up the advertising message and is intended, by dint of repetition, to encourage the consumer instinctively to choose the products it designates.

In these two strophes, Offenbach – here his own librettist – also points up the commercial issues of concern to an expanding business: the need to conceive a product and to keep a wary eye on the competition. In the year of the Paris Universal Exposition, when the number of manufacturing patents filed increased at the same rate as the number of industrial copyright disputes, Péronilla's patter was bound to strike a chord with the public. It shows both sides of the coin: the confession of an industrialist who has sometimes sold chocolate containing no cocoa; and the need to persuade buyers to rely on his brand as a guarantee of quality. The two

lines of dialogue that follow the song in the original libretto also borrow from the advertisements of the time: 'Exiger la signature!' (Ask for it by name) exclaims Péronilla, to which Frimouskino adds: 'Se méfier des contrefaçons!' (Beware of imitations).

Following the first performance, Clément Caraguel recognised in this song 'allusions to chocolate makers more or less well-known in our time' (*Journal des débats*, 18 March 1878). And there does indeed seem to be a transparent reference here to Émile-Justin Menier, heir to the firm of the same name and an influential political figure in the early days of the Third Republic: for Chocolat Menier's slogan, in its advertisements of the 1870s, was quite simply... 'Éviter les contrefaçons' (Avoid imitations).



Advertisement published in *Le Tintamarre*, 19 July 1874.

While it fits perfectly with the industrial reality of its time, Péronilla's song also seems to be Offenbach's way of portraying himself. At the end of his career, as he saw the rise of works by a new generation of operetta composers, we can imagine him advising the public, like the chocolate maker, to 'ask for him by name' and 'beware of imitations'.



Costume design for Guardona.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Costume pour le personnage de Guardona.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France.