

LES CONTES D'HOFFMANN

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Prologue: In Luther's deserted tavern, a chorus of spirits of wine and beer is heard, while inside the adjoining opera house Don Giovanni is being performed. Guests are expected to arrive later in the evening, among them the poet Hoffmann and the Milanese opera singer Stella, but it is Hoffmann's Muse who first appears. Knowing that fate decrees Hoffmann must choose this evening between his love for the Muse and his love for her rival, Stella, the Muse calls upon the spirits for help. Then she disappears to assume the guise of Nicklausse, Hoffmann's friend. Councilor Lindorf bribes Andrès, a servant of Stella, to intercept a note she has written to Hoffmann; it contains the key to her dressing room. Lindorf, confident of his power to achieve any goal, plans to keep that appointment himself. A crowd of noisy students fills the tavern. Hoffmann appears, accompanied by Nicklausse, and Lindorf spies them at a distance. Hoffmann is troubled; the students urge him to drink and sing, and he responds by starting the ballad of a grotesque dwarf named Kleinzach, only to digress into recollections of love. The punchbowl is lit, but the cheerful mood is broken by Lindorf, who goads Hoffmann into an exchange of sarcastic insults. Nicklausse finally interrupts, breaking the tension, yet the encounter leaves Hoffmann with a sense of foreboding. When the students tease him about his current infatuation with Stella, he offers to tell the story of three past loves....

Act I: Awaiting the arrival of his party guests, the inventor Spalanzani admires his most recent invention, the mechanical doll Olympia, with which he hopes to recover money he lost in the collapse of the banking house of Élias. Hoffmann, the first guest to arrive, discovers Olympia and falls in love with her. Nicklausse gently teases him. The mad scientist Coppélius arrives and sells Hoffmann a pair of magic glasses through which he alone perceives Olympia as human. Spalanzani and Coppélius haggle over their share of the doll's profits, the latter claiming he owns her eyes. When Coppélius agrees to sell his rights to Spalanzani for 500 ducats, the inventor gives him a check drawn against the house of Élias. Coppélius jokingly suggests that Olympia be married off to Hoffmann. After other guests arrive, Olympia captivates the crowd with a dazzling aria, accompanied by Spalanzani at the harp. Oblivious to the periodic running down of the doll's mechanism, Hoffmann is enchanted. When everyone goes to dinner, leaving the two alone, Hoffmann pours out his heart to Olympia. Believing she loves him as well, he kisses her; she whirls into motion and out of the room. Nicklausse suggests that Olympia might not be alive, but the poet refuses to listen. Coppélius returns in a fury, having discovered that Spalanzani's bank draft is worthless, and hides as the guests return from dinner for a waltz. They are joined by Hoffmann and Olympia, who whirl faster and faster, until Hoffmann falls and breaks his magic glasses. Seizing his chance for revenge, Coppélius grabs Olympia and tears her apart.

Act II: Crespel has fled with his daughter, Antonia, to Munich to end her love affair with Hoffmann. Sitting at the harpsichord, she sings a plaintive love song. Crespel begs her to give up singing: she has a weak heart, and the effort will endanger her life. He instructs his hard-of-hearing servant, Frantz, to allow no one into the house while he is gone. Left alone, Frantz tries to sing and dance. Hoffmann arrives, and Nicklausse, citing his past experience with love, tries to persuade him to devote himself solely to art. But Hoffmann resists, swearing eternal love to Antonia. Though she says her father has forbidden her to sing, she cannot resist asking if Hoffmann wishes to hear her. They join in a love song until Antonia nearly faints. Crespel returns and is alarmed by the arrival of the charlatan Dr. Miracle, whom he recognizes as an omen of doom: it was Miracle who treated Crespel's wife the day she died. While Hoffmann watches from a hiding place, the evil doctor inquires after Antonia and her overpowering love of music. Miracle questions the absent girl and describes her irregular pulse; when he commands her to sing, her

voice is heard. The doctor offers medicines to save the girl, but Crespel, knowing this means death for his daughter, forces Miracle out. When Antonia returns, Hoffmann begs her not to sing. She reluctantly agrees, and he leaves, promising to return the next day. Miracle suddenly reappears, taunting Antonia with prospects of fame as a singer. The girl cries out to the portrait of her Mother, a famous singer, to help her resist temptation. Conjuring the portrait to life, Miracle declares that the Mother, speaking through him, wants Antonia to equal the glory of her own fame. As Miracle fiddles wildly on his violin, Antonia sings more and more feverishly until she collapses. Hoffmann rushes in, only to find her dead.

Act III: In a Venetian palace on the Grand Canal, the courtesan Giulietta joins Nicklausse in a languid barcarole. Hoffmann abruptly changes the mood as he mockingly praises the pleasures of the flesh. Giulietta's current lover, Schlemil, jealously acknowledges her apparent affection for Hoffmann. Giulietta invites her guests to the gaming tables, but Nicklausse remains behind to warn Hoffmann against forming any attachment to the courtesan. The poet denies interest in her, declaring that should he fall in love with her, the devil may have his soul. Dappertutto, overhearing them, produces a large diamond with which he will bribe Giulietta to steal Hoffmann's reflection, just as she already has stolen Schlemil's shadow. Lured by the diamond, Giulietta agrees. She seduces Hoffmann, who is about to depart, and he falls in love instantly; during a passionate duet, she carries out Dappertutto's command. Schlemil returns, accusing Giulietta of having left him for Hoffmann. When Dappertutto comments on the poet's pallor, Hoffmann asks for a mirror and realizes with horror that he has lost his reflection, but he is trapped by his infatuation. As the guests depart, Hoffmann demands that Schlemil give him the key to Giulietta's room; when Schlemil refuses, Hoffmann kills him in a duel, with a sword proffered by Dappertutto. Taking the key from his rival, Hoffmann rushes to Giulietta's room, only to find it empty. Returning, he finds her leaving the palace with yet another admirer, the dwarf Pitichinaccio, whom she embraces....

Epilogue: Hoffmann has finished his tales and wants only to get drunk and forget. Nicklausse reveals that each story described a different aspect of one woman, Stella. Arriving in the tavern after her performance, the opera singer finds the poet confused and sneering; Stella prepares to leave with the triumphant Lindorf. Hoffmann interrupts their departure to sing one last verse of "Kleinzach," then collapses. Only the Muse remains behind with Hoffmann, who belongs to her at last.