

Offenbach, Jacques : Offenbach en Amérique. Notes d'un musicien en voyage (1877)

Composed at his wife's suggestion, based on letters and scattered notes written in the course of his lucrative American tour of 1876 (21 April-20 July), this volume consists of a rambling series of brief and highly amusing chapters. Having "sworn to speak as little about [himself] as possible" (pg. 242), Offenbach hints at his American successes only by way of a certain number of newspaper extracts. He prefers to pose as an observer and witness of the wonders awaiting the European traveller in New York or Philadelphia, those vast galleries of marvels: fascinated by American comforts, the luxury of its hotels, the modernity of its transportation, the feats of its industry, Offenbach nevertheless turns ironical when faced with the puritanism and prohibition reigning in the land of liberty, and is disappointed by the feeble place afforded the arts. America "has triumphed over matter", he concludes, "but forgotten to look after all that can charm the spirit" (p. 62).

Offenbach shows an ethnographer's curiosity, detailing American customs in food and fashion and describing the omnipotence of publicity, the New York theatres and newspapers, and his discovery of the music of the "minstrels". He reveals a genuine journalistic talent when sketching a series of portraits of musicians, drawing up a humorous typology of waiters, or recounting his farcical odyssey in the first sleeper trains. But he waxes polemical when calling for the creation of conservatoires and museums, even as he wields the art of satire as seen in the hilarious account of a disastrous performance of his *Jolie Parfumeuse*, in a vein worthy of Berlioz's *Grotesques de la musique*.

Emmanuel REIBEL

17/01/2023

Trans. Tadgh Sauvey

To quote this article: Emmanuel Reibel, "Offenbach, Jacques : Offenbach en Amérique. Notes d'un musicien en voyage (1877)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dicteco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 17/01/2023, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2187>.