

E. T. A. Hoffmann
By David Mitchell

Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822) was a German artist, composer, author, and jurist. He made his living as jurist and indulged his eclectic artistic interests in his spare time. His first love was music, but his most significant achievements were in the field of literature. Hoffmann's literary works include music criticism, two novels and fifty short stories. His music criticism helped define the Romantic period of music, and his stories interested literary critics, composers, and psychiatrists throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Hoffmann's diverse talents and contributions make him one of the most important figures in the early period of Romantic music and literature.

Hoffmann's stories were shaped by his life experiences which included both triumph and tragedy. Through his own life, Hoffmann developed an understanding of human nature that he used to his advantage in his short stories. His life was peppered with tragedy which is reflected in his stories that are often about the dark side of human nature. According to William Kumbier, Hoffmann is "known for his stories in which supernatural and sinister characters move in and out of people's lives, ironically revealing tragic or grotesque sides of human nature."¹

Hoffmann's youth was marked by tragedy. He was the youngest of three siblings. The middle brother died at a young age. His family separated when he was two years old. Hoffmann's father took his older brother and moved away and the brothers lost touch with each other.

As an adult, he had a number of frustrating love interests. Eventually he married Marianna Tekla Michalina Rorer and they had a daughter who died at the age of two.

Hoffmann's career was frustrating. He lost his job as a jurist when Napoleon took over Prussia and immediately fired everyone who would not swear allegiance to him. After losing his job, Hoffmann became a professional musician. He wrote eight vocal works, thirteen works for stage, and ten

¹ William Kumbier, "Composed Composers: Subjectivity in E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'Rat Krespel,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2004), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb297/is_2_43/ai_n29118874/ (accessed 21 September 2009).

instrumental works. His most successful composition was his opera *Undine*. During his career, he “held several positions as conductor, critic, and theatrical musical director in Bamberg and Dresden until 1814.”² He lost his theatre position when he was fired after an argument with the owner. After this setback, Hoffmann put aside his music career, and he turned his attention to literary composition instead.

Hoffmann delved into the dark core of human nature and wrote about it with compelling imagery. His soul searching insight and vivid imagery are irresistible fodder for literary critics, psychiatrists such as Sigmund Freud, and composers like Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Wagner, Offenbach and Hindemith.

Hoffmann’s story, *The Sandman*, inspired Sigmund Freud to write an essay entitled “The Uncanny.” In *The Sandman*, there is a lifelike doll named Olympia. This doll is so lifelike that it is uncanny. As a result, it fills the reader with dread. Freud examines the psychological reasons for the feelings associated with this doll. He theorized that the uncanny nature of the doll is a result of the portrayal of a living inanimate object. Living and inanimate are two contradictory terms, but they are embodied in the doll in Hoffmann’s story. Freud wrote, “I cannot think — and I hope most readers of the story will agree with me — that the theme of the doll Olympia, who is to all appearances a living being, is by any means the only, or indeed the most important, element that must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of uncanniness evoked by the story.”³

Although Hoffmann’s compositions are not widely known today, his music criticism had tremendous impact on the history of music. Author James McGlathery states, “he (Hoffmann) also enjoys a reputation in music circles as a key figure in formulating and popularizing Romantic theory on music through his review essays for the influential *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* during the Napoleonic period.”⁴ His review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony was important. Hoffmann wrote, “Beethoven’s music sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, of pain, and awakens that

² Kumbier, “Composed Composers”.

³ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Abstracts of the Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by Carrie Lee Rothgeb (New York: Jason Aronson, 1973), 315.

⁴ James M. McGlathery, *Mysticism and Sexuality: E. T. A. Hoffman* (Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1981), 14.

infinite yearning which is the essence of romanticism."⁵ The influence of Hoffmann's short stories on the course of music history is at least as great as his critical reviews. Hoffmann and his stories were set to music by some of the most prominent composers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Some of the most famous 19th century settings include Tchaikovsky's setting of Hoffman's story *The Nutcracker*, Offenbach's opera *The Tales of Hoffmann* based on the life of Hoffmann, Schumann's piano piece *Kreisleriana* based on Hoffmann's character Johannes Kreisler, and Wagner's libretto for *Tannhauser* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

An important 20th century example of settings from Hoffmann's collection of short stories is Hindemith's first full-length opera *Cardillac*, named for the main character in Hoffmann's novella *Das Fräulein von Scuderi*. According to author Giselher Schubert, *Cardillac's* plot features "the obsessed, driven actions of the goldsmith Cardillac, the epitome of a kind of Romantic artist, who regains possession of his works by murdering those who buy them."⁶ A type of plot that was irresistible to Romantic period composers. It is packed with emotion and lends itself well to musical interpretation.

⁵ Kumbier, "Composed Composers".

⁶ Giselher Schubert. "Hindemith, Paul." In *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, 2001. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/13053> (accessed September 21, 2009).