

Opera Intermezzi

(& Ballet Music)

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Opera Intermezzi: Introduction

THE TERM "INTERMEZZO" comes from the Italian, literally meaning "in the middle", and refers in one of its specifically musical senses to an instrumental piece in the middle of an opera – for example, the orchestral music written either for the transition between scenes while the stage is empty or to accompany some action on-stage. The skill of the opera composer lies not only in writing for the voice; it is also in his ability to utilise the orchestra to prepare the listener for these changes in scene or mood, or to provide appropriate purely orchestral interludes to colour a scene.

The "Dance of the Hours" from Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (The Joyful Girl) is a balletic divertissement in an opera about unrequited love during the Inquisition. The plot is taken from a story by Victor Hugo. In the final Act of the opera we are presented with a delightful sequence of dances representing the hours from Morning through to Night.

Like Ponchielli, the youthful Schmidt also went to Victor Hugo for the subject of his only opera, *Notre Dame*. This *verismo* work is set in the great Parisian cathedral and a hunchback is its tragic hero. Its lushly orchestrated intermezzo is suggestive of gypsy music and is associated with Esmeralda, the object of Quasimodo's desires.

Adriana Lecouvreur by Cilea is likewise set in Paris. The intermezzo is brief but contains many rich harmonies. It comes in the second Act of a tragic love story whose eponymous heroine is an actress who dies before the final curtain.

Wolf-Ferrari's *I gioielli della Madonna* (The Jewels of the Madonna) is a tale of love and death in which the dashing Rafaele undertakes to steal the jewels from a statue of the Virgin Mary to prove his love for Mariella. The intermezzo of the final Act is based extensively on the melody of his earlier waltz-like serenade, "Aprila, o bella, la fene-strella".

The intermezzo of Mascagni's one-act opera *Cavalleria rusticana* (Country Chivalry) is taken from the *Ave Maria* of a *Sacra Musica* written nine years previously. In a full-blooded story of betrayed love and a jealousy which ultimately leads to a duel and death, this famous intermezzo, only 48 bars long, is played between the opera's two scenes to an empty stage.

L'amico Fritz (Friend Fritz), also by Mascagni, is quite unlike his *Cavalleria rusticana*. It is a light comedy, set in the countryside of Alsace, in which the beautiful young Suzel, a farmer's daughter, finally captivates the wealthy landowner Fritz Kobus, a confirmed bachelor. The intermezzo begins Act III and is based around the violin tune which Fritz plays offstage before his first entrance.

The intense intermezzo of *Pagliacci* (Players) by Leoncavallo links two sections of this smouldering drama, a *verismo* tale of love and death set in Calabria in south Italy among the rivalries of a troupe of travelling actors. The intermezzo makes use of a passionate theme heard first in the tenor aria "Si può? si può?".

Ancient Egypt is the setting for Massenet's *Thaïs*. The exquisite "Méditation" is a perfect blend of the sensual with the

mystical. The plot revolves around Thaïs, a courtesan, and the priest who converts her to religion although he loses his soul in the process. The "Méditation" occurs between the second and last Acts and is an inspired piece for solo violin.

The intermezzo of Puccini's poignant one-act opera *Suor Angelica* takes place as night falls in the garden of a 17th-century convent. Sister Angelica, learning of the death of her illicitly conceived child, gathers herbs with which to poison herself. The basis of this music is the earlier heard aria *Senza mamma*.

The harmonically expansive intermezzo of Puccini's early opera *Manon Lescaut* plays between the last two Acts. Manon has been wrongly accused and exiled to America. Some of the material of the intermezzo is taken from the love duet "Tu, tu, amore tu!", which Puccini extends to an intense climax, moving through a constantly shifting harmonic series.

Fedora by Giordano is set in Russia. It is the story of the doomed love of the revolutionary Count Ipanov for Fedora from the imperial family Romanov. Its intermezzo uses material from the Count's soaring aria "Amor ti vieta".

Also set in Russia, though in the court of Peter the Great in the 17th-century, is Mussorgsky's masterpiece *Khovanshchina*, a tale of political intrigue and religious conflict. The solemn intermezzo of Act IV accompanies the emptying of the stage of the troopers and the people after Prince Khovanshchina's assassination.

During the "Bacchanale" of Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, Delilah and the Philistines rejoice in the defeat of Samson with a drunken orgy accompanied by distinctively exotic melody lines. Although blinded and apparently helpless he will, in fact, escape to pull the roof of the temple down around them.

The intermezzo from Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffman) links Act III and the Epilogue. It is a version for orchestra of the duet "Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour", the rocking barcarolle sung by Nicklausse and Giulietta as they float in a gondola.

Rachmaninov's graduation piece *Aleko* is a tale of love, jealousy and murder within a camp of seemingly carefree gypsies. Aleko, inconsolable as he realises that Zemfira is being unfaithful to him, turns his thoughts to revenge. In the one-act opera's intermezzo, night turns to day as Zemfira consummates her love with another. This oddly restless intermezzo only resolves to the tonic in its last bars.

The intermezzo of *Tiefland* (Lowland) by d'Albert plays as the moon rises following Marta's fraudulent marriage to Pedro. It is set in the Pyrenees. The theme was heard previously in the duet between Marta and the manipulative Sebastiano, "Ja, ja, ich bin bereit". D'Albert was known as a composer who would tackle subject matters that others would not.