

Dramatic pause: The interlude in opera

David Kettle

It should come as no surprise that some of the most evocative music in Strauss's *Intermezzo* comes not in its soaring vocal lines, but in the instrumental interludes between the opera's scenes. This is, after all, the composer who famously boasted (about his *Sinfonia domestica*) that he could depict a knife and fork in music – and differentiate between them. From the icy chords and sliding strings that evoke the snow and toboggan run before the second scene of Act I, to the delightful waltz that frames the scene at the inn, Strauss uses *Intermezzo*'s orchestral interludes to paint vivid tonal pictures, evoke moods, give hints to the audience about what they're about to see, or ruminate on what has just passed. On a practical level, of course, these interludes also allow time for set changes – something directors can only be grateful for, given the almost cinematic structure of short, ever-changing scenes that Strauss created for *Intermezzo*.

Yet in another way, the whole opera can be seen as something of an interlude in Strauss's output, a short, wryly humorous domestic tale nestling amid other, weightier, works. Even in its title, Strauss was making a conscious reference back to far earlier intermezzos – short, comic mini-operas inserted between the acts of Renaissance and Baroque stage works to provide light relief, which themselves had a big impact on the development of early opera.

Even from these influential beginnings, the orchestral interlude in opera has had a rich history, but it's in the 19th and 20th centuries that composers began to realise its full potential and harness it for artistic purposes. Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Bizet's *Carmen* and Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* all have their own interludes, and Wagner used instrumental music to great effect in many of his stage works.

The 'Méditation' from Massenet's *Thaïs* (1894) is perhaps one of the most famous interludes in all opera. Its soaring, blissful solo violin melody, now a mainstay of many a classical chill-out disc, in fact describes a specific moment in the opera's plot, when the heathen courtesan Thaïs is converted to Christianity by the priest Athanaël (who later takes a trip in the opposite direction, renouncing his religion after succumbing to Thaïs's physical charms). This gorgeous interlude isn't there just to cover a set change, though. Instead, it conveys in wordless music something that it would have been well-nigh impossible for any director to depict on stage – the internal drama of Thaïs's conversion.



Above: Adele Bloch-Bauer II, 1912 (oil on canvas) by Gustav Klimt (1862–1918).

The much-loved Humming Chorus from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904) serves a different function: to mark the passage of time. When we hear it in the opera, the US naval officer Pinkerton has already married the geisha Cio-Cio-San and, although he intends to abandon her, she patiently awaits his return. With the Humming Chorus, we are with Butterfly during her lonely night vigil: Puccini's masterstroke here is to telescope several hours of time into just a few minutes' music, and to use that music to evoke the heroine's fidelity and hope, while also hinting at the tragedy that is to come.

Unfortunately, at *Madama Butterfly's* chaotic premiere the poignancy of the Humming Chorus went largely unnoticed by an audience already unimpressed by the opera (the 90-minute length of the second Act, which Puccini later divided in two, didn't help). To heighten the sense of realism, its producers had (perhaps ill-advisedly) placed performers throughout the auditorium with bird whistles to join in with the evocation of the coming dawn. But this only served to provoke the already restive audience, who joined in with raucous animal calls of their own, reducing what was intended as a poetic gesture to something that sounded more like feeding time at the zoo.

Like Massenet's 'Méditation', the Sea Interludes from Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945) are now a well-established presence in the concert hall, and their original function was indeed simply to provide time for some complex set changes. But they achieve so much more than that, at once setting scenes, evoking moods, indicating characters' emotional states, and most of all emphasising the ever-present sea as a guiding force in the opera. The 'Dawn' interlude, for example, comes immediately after the Prologue's court scene in which we learn of Grimes's alleged killing of his apprentice, and paints a vivid sound picture of the brooding seascape, complete with keening birds and waves lapping against the shore, but also establishes an unsettling, expectant atmosphere. The later 'Storm' interlude, all surging strings and bellowing brass, depicts the sea in a violent, unpredictable state, also serving to describe the inner turmoil of Grimes's mind. Significantly, it is in the next scene that we first meet his doomed apprentice.

If these composers managed to combine practical necessity with artistic intention, it was perhaps Alban Berg who first produced opera interludes that are statements in their own right. In *Wozzeck* (1922), the lengthy interlude comes right at the end of the opera, just before the final scene, allowing the audience to reflect on the tragic events that have led to the protagonist's suicide (symbolised musically in a shift from 12-note dissonance to a clear D minor). In *Lulu* (1935), meanwhile, the interlude occurs at the precise midpoint of the opera and is itself a musical palindrome, symbolising the turn in fortunes of the work's horrendous central character.

So although instrumental interludes in opera might have originally been created to address practical needs, in using them to evoke mood, portray characters' inner thoughts and symbolise plot developments, composers, not least Richard Strauss in his evocative *Intermezzo* interludes, have highlighted music's overwhelming power to communicate – the very quality that makes opera such a potent art form in the first place.

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