

DLA Thesis

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Aesthetics, dramaturgy, innovation in Richard Strauss'
opera *Intermezzo*

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Doctoral Program

Budapest

2010

I. Research Background

In my doctoral dissertation I have analysed Richard Strauss' opera, *Intermezzo*, for its novelty of aesthetically definitive selection of theme and dramaturgy, also for the composer's striving for textual understanding as his artistic goal.

Despite of its numerous showing and production in the 1920's and 30's, this opera did not get its place in the repertoire of major opera houses. This fact also limited the number of scientific publications dealing with this subject. Deeper analyses can be found in the following books: Norman Del Mar: *Richard Strauss. A Critical Commentary on his Life and Works*. Volume II. (London, Barrie & Rockliff, 1969); William Mann: *Richard Strauss. Das Opernwerk*. (München, C. H. Beck Verlag, 1967); Katharina Hottmann: *Historismus und Gattungsbewusstsein bei Richard Strauss*. (Tutzing, Hans Schneider Verlag, 2005).

Thanks to the Strauss monographers, Imre Fábíán and András Batta, that we can read meaningful evaluations of *Intermezzo* in the Hungarian language. Batta brings to attention the genre-creating effect of *Intermezzo* on the *Zeitoper*-style of the Twenties. Regarding the Budapest premier of the opera on November 12, 1929 – other

than the following day's newspapers – only Tibor Tallián's article, "Nemzetközi repertoár" is referring to it in Géza Staud's book *A Budapesti Operaház 100 éve* (Budapest, Zeneműkiadó, 1984).

II. Sources

The guidelines to the analysis of Strauss' life-work are documents containing Strauss' writings, notes, memoirs as well as the composer's existing extensive correspondence. My dissertation has taken the two Forewords to *Intermezzo* by the composer – important evidence of Straussian operatic aesthetics – from Richard Strauss' book *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Willi Schuh hrsg., Zürich, Atlantis Verlag, 1957). The road of the opera composer – the ever growing primacy of text against symphonic considerations – can be followed, other than through his works, through Strauss' correspondence with Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Hermann Bahr, Joseph Gregor and Clemens Krauss. In my dissertation I considered it important to support my observations and findings with the thoughts of the composer and his fellow composers.

The starting point to the autobiographical background of *Intermezzo* was provided by an article, Ernst Decsey's "Die fatale Mücke", in the October 26, 1924 issue of *Bohemia*. I have found further help to my work in the latest research into the composer's life, the calendar-like chronicle of Franz Trenner: *Richard Strauss. Chronik zu Leben und Werk*. (Wien, Verlag Dr. Richard Strauss GmbH & Co. KG., 2003).

My approach to the dissertation was also influenced by valuable observations and reminiscences of participants of *Intermezzo* productions. Prominent among them is the lead female singer in the original production, Lotte Lehmann's book, "Singing with Richard Strauss" (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1964), also part of an interview with Christof Loy, director of *Intermezzo* in the Viennese Theater an der Wien in 2008, which appeared in the production's program under the title "Was tut eine in jeder Hinsicht begabte Frau in einer durchschnittlichen Umwelt?", in addition to an article by Erich Graf, member of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, "Die Bedeutung von Richard Strauss' *Intermezzo*", which appeared in 1963 in the 18/6 issue of the *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift*.

I have analysed the 1929 Budapest premier based on the reviews as appeared in the November 13, 1929 issues of *Magyar Hírlap*, *Pesti Hírlap*, *Budapesti Hírlap*, *Népszava*, *Esti Kurír*,

Magyarország, Magyarság, Ujság as well as the *Pester Lloyd*. The best analysis is by Géza Molnár in the latter.

The dissertation also analyses the following *Intermezzo*-recordings: Orchester der Wiener Staatsoper, Conductor: Joseph Keilberth, *Christine*: Hanny Steffek, *Robert Storch*: Hermann Prey, 1963; Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Conductor: Wolfgang Sawallisch, *Christine*: Lucia Popp, *Robert Storch*: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, 1980; Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien, Conductor: Kirill Petrenko, *Christine*: Carola Glaser, *Robert Storch*: Bo Skovhus, 2008.

III. Methodology

I have investigated the object of the dissertation both as an opera singer and as an orchestral musician. The first chapter of the dissertation shows *Intermezzo*, foretelling the 1920-s *Zeitopers*, through the media's reaction to the Hungarian production of the opera. Such method of analysis provides an opportunity to evaluate the – occasionally not understandable – reception. The next chapter deals with the unusually open, obviously autobiographical background. The third chapter centers on the dramaturgic conception,

the fourth on the instruction of the two Forewords to achieve perfect text understanding. The fifth chapter puts the opera's musical themes, motives, as well as musical quotations by Strauss' and other composers' works side by side. The final chapter compares specific interpretations of *Intermezzo* recordings, according to points of view as discussed in previous chapters.

IV. Results

The “Prima la musica, poi le parole” – operatic art's basic tenet – has challenged the carrier of Strauss as an opera composer for five decades, the obvious reason being that, during orchestral or operatic performance, one can not understand the words as expressed by the singers. The composer first resolves this problem in *Intermezzo*, which I can appreciate both as an opera singer and as an orchestral musician. The dissertation shows in great details the dramaturgical concept, created by the interplay between the opera's new vocal style and the orchestra, the unabashedly confessional, autobiographical nature of the work, as well as the composer's striving for textual understanding as the objective of his artistic goal. The dissertation is the first to publish important details in the Hungarian language from

the “non-public” (“nicht veröffentlichtes”) Foreword. It also adds further important excerpts to the “public” Foreword’s details, as previously published by Imre Fábíán and András Batta. This dissertation is the first to deal with the media response to *Intermezzo*’s November 29, 1929 Hungarian production, also to conduct heretofore unavailable comparative analysis of important *Intermezzo* recordings.

During my work I was mainly sustained by a hope: sooner or later there will be a need in Hungarian opera production for those Strauss operas, the existence of which we barely noticed in the last 70 years, to come into the circle which presently closes with the knowledge of *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*. With this goal my doctoral dissertation may open a road heretofore untraveled by the local reception of Richard Strauss.

V. Documentation of the actions related to the dissertation domain

Richard Strauss: *Salome* Cappadocier

February 3, 2003, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Duisburg;
conductor: Ira Levin,

March 5, 12, 2003, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Düsseldorf;
conductor: Hans Wallat

April 4, 2003, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Düsseldorf;
conductor: Ira Levin

Richard Strauss: *Salome* 1. Soldat

April 30, May 4, 2005, Hungarian State Opera;
conductor: Will Humburg

Richard Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos* Perückenmacher, Lakai

December 27, 2002, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Duisburg;
conductor: Andreas Stoehr

February 13, 2002, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Düsseldorf;
conductor: Wen-Pin Chien

Richard Strauss: *Capriccio* 5. Diener

December 6, 8, 15, 2002, Deutsche Oper am Rhein,
Duisburg; conductor: John Fiore

April 13, 19, 23, 25, May 7, 11, 14 2003, Deutsche Oper am
Rhein, Düsseldorf; conductor: Andreas Stoehr

Richard Strauss: *Im Spätboot, Der Einsame*

May 18, 2008, Verein „Freunde der Klavierkunst” Johannes
Brahms-gasse 1, Pressbaum, Wien; piano: Elena Larina

Performed several Richard Strauss pieces as a member of the Budapest Festival Orchestra since 1994.