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Introduction

Video productions of opera stagings are occasionally confronted with the awkward problem of what to do during the recurring and often lengthy orchestral interludes in the Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian repertoire. The standard solution is to film the conductor in the pit, with perhaps occasional shots of the orchestra. While the theatre audience sits in darkness, we peer into that usually invisible space as Claudio Abbado and the Vienna Philharmonic perform Berg's *Wozzeck* or James Levine and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra interpret Wagner's *Ring*. In the celebrated Chéreau–Boulez centenary *Ring* from Bayreuth, opera video producer Brian Large resorts to a combination of prerecorded footage (a journey up the hill to the Festspielhaus) and slowly zooming shots of the vacated stage. Other solutions include freeze-frame images from the staged action or panning shots of the score in an operatic version of the 'follow the bouncing ball' technique once popular in television.

All seem to obey that unwritten rule of film and video, that the screen should never go dark, that there should always be an image. It is a rule that stands at odds with the kind of experience that these operas celebrate, for although the interludes are occasionally accompanied by a scenic transformation or pantomime, they tend most often to be performed in front of a closed curtain or obscured stage. They are part of a musico-theatrical experience, partly inspired by Wagner's experiments at Bayreuth, that depends on a heavily darkened auditorium and a concealed or partially concealed orchestra pit. The result is a carefully manipulated environment based precisely on the withdrawal of the visual. The effect of this contrast is lost when translated to the more visual media of film and television, where the interludes really do seem to serve nothing more than that 'in between' function that their name implies, whether *interlude*, *Zwischenspiel*, *entr'acte* or *intermezzo*.

Orchestral interludes of this kind can prove as problematic for audiences as for producers. The closing of a curtain or the onset of a scenic transformation can serve as a cue to relax and lower attentiveness until the beginning of the next scene, a tendency that manifests itself in the form of a general audience 'buzz' and the rustling of programmes as spectators strain in the feeble light to make out a plot synopsis.

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Sir Thomas Beecham once berated English audiences for their inability to maintain silence during interludes, adding:

> What the public does not see it takes no interest in, and I would advise all young composers, if they wish their music to be heard, never to lower the curtain for one second during the course of the act.[1]

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that a scenic change, with its potentially disruptive noise, will often be taking place behind the curtain during the interlude. Siegfried Wagner illustrated the problem in the score of his opera *Der Heidenkönig* (1914), when he prefaced an orchestral interlude with the following instruction:

> During the interlude great care should taken to ensure that the piece, which the composer values highly, is not ruined by the noise of the scene change.[2]

Concerns such as these testify to a conflict between an understanding of music theatre as a concentrated, unbroken 'aesthetic' experience in which the orchestral role is integral, and more traditionally 'operatic' conceptions that tend to centre to a greater degree on voice and stage action.

Origins

As *entr'actes* and *sinfonie*, orchestral interludes had formed a traditional component of operatic form from its very beginnings in the seventeenth century. Within the context of the overall operatic experience, though, their function was (perhaps quite naturally) peripheral to the dramatic, vocal, and visual appeals of the staged scenes. They might have offered musical contrast or set a mood in the broadest sense, but they were equally likely to provide an opportunity to converse, to socialise, to gaze at that other operatic spectacle: the audience. In this capacity the orchestral interlude played a passive role, although one that had come to define part of what attending the opera meant. One of the recurring features of the history of opera, though, is the self-conscious attempt to reform and refine the genre, and in the late eighteenth century the question of the orchestra's role and the nature of the *entr'acte* came under scrutiny. In his famous dedication of *Alceste* (1769) Gluck articulated a desire that composers pay more attention to the dramatic potential of the orchestra:

> I considered that the sinfonia [overture] should inform the spectators of the subject that is to be enacted, and constitute, as it were, the argument . . . that

[1] Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943), p. 144.
[2] Piano-vocal score (Bayreuth: Carl Giessel, 1913).

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[the orchestra] should not break up a sentence non-sensically, nor interrupt the force and heat of the action inappropriately.[3]

Gluck's statement, itself heir to a long tradition of reformist thought in France and Italy, is a call to rethink a tradition of orchestral music that has little relevance to the dramatic aim, that hampers the goal of a 'beautiful simplicity', and that fails to contribute to a unity of 'expression'.[4] David Charlton has chronicled the experiments with the role of the *entr'acte* in the *opéras comiques* of Grétry during the 1780s and 1790s, experiments that included orchestral rearrangements of earlier vocal numbers, anticipation of an aria to be sung when the curtain opens, and musical representations of action imagined to be taking place between the acts.[5] Anxious to stress the implications of these developments for operatic reform, Grétry declared proudly in his 1797 *Mémoires*:

I was the first to suppress the orchestral piece known as the *entr'acte*, in order to substitute another which would have greater connection with the preceding or succeeding action of the drama.[6]

In fact, as Charlton points out, Grétry's experiments followed earlier explorations of dramatically relevant *entr'actes*, such as those in Philidor's *Tom Jones* (1765) and Gossec's *Les pêcheurs* (1766). By the 1790s thematic quotations from the main body of the opera were common features of overtures, and the idea of a programmatic anticipation of the plot, already demonstrated in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), seems to have been further encouraged by – and to have in turn demanded – technical refinements of wind instruments and the expansion of opera orchestras, particularly in *opéra comique* of the Revolutionary period.[7] In Méhul's *Mélidore et Phrosine* (1794), with its vivid built-in *entr'acte* to the third act, we can already see the outlines of nineteenth-century preludes in

[3] Patricia Howard (ed. and trans.), *Gluck: An Eighteenth-Century Portrait in Letters and Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 85.

[4] Much of the dedication addresses itself to Italian opera and its vocal biases, but the remarks on the orchestra suggest French opera, and particularly the *tragédies lyriques* of Rameau, as both target and model: 'target' in the sense that the copious *symphonies de danse* and other forms of *divertissement* in Rameau's operas exemplify Gluck's charge of 'inappropriate' orchestral music, and 'model' in the sense that his descriptive symphonies (storms, battle scenes) and programmatic overtures (such as the overture to *Zoroastre* of 1749) demonstrate how the orchestra might be drawn into a very direct dramatic role.

[5] David Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 308–10.

[6] A.-E.-M. Grétry, *Mémoires*, vol. III (Brussels: Publication of Belgian Govt., 1925), p. 191, trans. in Charlton, *Grétry and the Growth of Opéra-Comique*, p. 29.

[7] A particularly vivid programmatic overture is to be found in Méhul's *Le jeune Henri* (1797). The rejected overture to *Fidelio* (*Leonore* Overture No. 3) has often been performed as an *entr'acte* before the third act.

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which the ensuing act's plot developments and dramatic mood could be established musically. In other words, it is not only in the extent but in the nature of the orchestra's dramatic involvement that this repertoire seems to anticipate nineteenth-century practice. Summarising theoretical and critical responses to the opera orchestra in France in the late eighteenth century, Charlton concludes:

> [T]here is evidently a public acceptance that orchestras and instruments embodied narrative capacity, even within instrumental movements; and an expectation that the interior life of operatic figures would be completely symbolised by orchestral means . . . to the extent that their consciousness, inner contradictions and imaginations might be depicted from moment to moment so clearly that we might envision them as separable characters.[8]

So there was a shared understanding not only that the non-vocal musical discourse might participate dramatically with the voices, but also that the unstaged, textless orchestra might have access to 'interiority', a quality central to the nineteenth-century understanding of the opera orchestra.

One manifestation of these perceptions of the orchestra as dramatic agent was an increasing use of recurring motifs and themes that carry specific dramatic associations.[9] Usually heard at pivotal moments of the drama, these so-called 'reminiscence motifs' arguably form too skeletal a musical framework across the opera as a whole to be considered in relation to the (instrumentally centred) concepts of musical unity and organicism then beginning to emerge. What they do imply is a more thorough *dramatic* integration of the orchestral discourse, an integration that reflects the conscious drive towards a general aesthetic cohesiveness and wholeness in opera. Earlier eighteenth-century opera had thoroughly demonstrated the capacity of the orchestra to contribute to drama without reminiscence motifs, but the self-advertising quality of the motifs could perhaps be seen to have focused awareness on the potential of the orchestra as a medium that extended the drama's representational and narrative means while pulling its musical and theatrical components closer together in ways that contributed to the opera's perceived integrity.

These developments and the reformist views of Gluck and Grétry have nevertheless to be weighed against the realities of the theatrical environment. Repeatedly, the drive towards opera as 'legitimate', unified drama (based on appeals to classical ideals) had conflicted with

[8] David Charlton, ' "Envoicing" the Orchestra: Enlightenment Metaphors in Theory and Practice', in *French Opera 1730–1830: Meaning and Media* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 31.
[9] A feature of many turn-of-the-century *opéras comiques* (Grétry's *Guillaume Tell* of 1791 is a notable example), the technique was in a sense codified by Louis Spohr when he prefaced his *Faust* (1813) with an explanation of his method and intentions.

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a conception of opera, reinforced by theatrical tradition, that unapologetically embraced its appeals to social occasion and spectacle. It was a conflict that the nineteenth century would inherit and further problematise. Accounts of audience behaviour in early nineteenth-century Paris tell a story of a struggle between the demand from some for silence and sustained concentration and the tendency for audiences to tailor their attentiveness, as they had done in the eighteenth century, to what were considered musical and dramatic highlights. The result was noise and activity that competed with the musico-dramatic spectacle and that represented either its natural complement or a disturbance, depending on the point of view. Judging by the reaction of one English visitor to the Opéra in 1815, the norms of audience behaviour in European theatres were far from universal: he was surprised to see members of the audience leaving and arriving throughout the performance, to hear doors slamming and people 'talking, laughing, and exchanging compliments' over the music.[10] But Parisian audience behaviour was changing, as reflected in the critical and anecdotal accounts of operatic performance in the 1830s. James H. Johnson has shown how silence and constant attention (or at least its appearance) were increasingly becoming the norm, as new definitions of musical experience and meaning gained currency in Parisian cultural life. Shaped in part by the changing social make-up of opera audiences and bound up with the Parisian reception of Beethoven's music and the ideas it generated, the new attitudes would gradually transform the identity of the operatic experience there, as they would in other parts of Europe.[11]

By seeking to exclude what were considered trappings, decoration, and distraction from the properly 'aesthetic' core of the musico-dramatic experience, these new definitions of music theatre marked a shift away from opera defined in terms of practices, settings, and occasion towards a concept of the 'work' that implies a form independent of its actual theatrical realisation. Critical to that notion was the impression of completeness and unity, implying a cohesive identity that would assert itself over the circumstances of performance rather than submitting to or depending on them. In this way the 'work' would draw the audience 'into' its coherent and always meaningful space rather than catering to the fragmenting effects of momentary and variable audience appeal. Writing in 1817, Weber declared that this would have to become the defining feature of German opera:

[10] Anon., *Memorandums of a Residence in France, in the Winter of 1815–16* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816), p. 289, cited in James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 170.

[11] Johnson, *Listening in Paris*.

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Whereas other nations concern themselves with the sensual pleasure [*Sinnenlust*] of isolated moments, [the German] demands a self-sufficient work of art, in which all the parts make up a beautiful and unified whole.[12]

One of the sensual pleasures to which Weber undoubtedly alludes is the role of the voice in opera, an issue that pitted the new operatic ideals against the supposedly debased practices of Italian opera. Here opera's reliance on vocal music turns on the distinction between the sublime dignity of instrumental music and the all too earthly basis of the voice. Berlioz exemplifies this attitude when he characterises 'modern Italian cantilena' in terms of a 'voluptuous sensation' and contrasts it with the extraordinary effects of the instrumental music of Beethoven and Weber:

These are not at all what one experiences in the theatre: there one is in the presence of humanity and its emotions; here a new world is opened up to view, one is raised into a higher ideal region, one senses that the sublime life dreamed of by poets is becoming a reality.[13]

It is against the background of this polarisation of the vocal and instrumental that the orchestral role in opera expanded, a development that ultimately assumed the character of a redemption of theatre from its materiality.

Answering the call

Weber's appeal to the concept of a 'self-sufficient work of art' constitutes a challenge to German artists to uphold a national ideal of art and to realise it in operatic form. His article was addressed to the 'art-loving' citizens of Dresden on the occasion of his appointment as court Kapellmeister, and it was one of those citizens who would ultimately present himself as answering the call. Wagner not only inherited but further intensified Weber's nationalistic operatic idealism, and a through-composed orchestral discourse was to become central to his response. In the operas up to and including *Lohengrin* we encounter a whole range of issues surrounding the orchestra's role in opera: Wagner writes programmatic overtures and extended preludes and takes full advantage of the possibilities of reminiscence motifs. He also intensifies a long-standing tension between closed numbers and large, continuous scenes, between traditional forms and a tendency to blend those

[12] Carl Maria von Weber, 'An die kunstliebenden Bewohner Dresdens', *Dresden Abend-Zeitung*, 26 January 1817, in Georg Kaiser (ed.), *Sämtliche Schriften von Carl Maria von Weber* (Berlin and Leipzig: Schuster and Loeffler, 1908), p. 277. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[13] Hector Berlioz, article in *Le Correspondant*, 22 October 1832, trans. in Julian Rushton, *Berlioz: 'Roméo et Juliette'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 90.

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numbers into longer through-composed structures against a continuous orchestral backdrop. It is a tendency already evident in the finales of late eighteenth-century opera, but it reaches an unprecedented scale in the chains of scenes in Revolutionary *opéra comique* (linked by recurring motivic material and orchestral sonority), in the grand, orchestrally centred scenes in the operas of Spontini, and in early German through-composed operas such as Weber's *Euryanthe* and Spohr's *Jessonda*, both premiered in 1823.

For all the blurring of divisions between individual numbers and the gradual abandonment of spoken dialogue in the comic genres, *caesurae* nevertheless remain common in these scores, both between numbers and between scenes. Writing shortly after the premiere of *Der fliegende Holländer* in 1843, Wagner acknowledged the prevalence of these operatic traditions in order to distinguish his own achievement: 'From the outset I had to abandon the modern arrangement of dividing the work into arias, duets, finales, etc., and instead relate the legend in a single breath.'[14] For all the self-promotion evident here, Wagner's claim cannot be dismissed entirely as hot air. *Holländer* does indeed seem to be marked by an extraordinary and sustained effort to elide numbers and scenes. Particularly striking is the opera's original version (1841), for not only do numbers and scenes tend to follow one another without a break, but the three acts are linked with orchestral interludes. When in 1901 Cosima Wagner presented *Holländer* at Bayreuth for the first time, she revived this version, no doubt hoping to emphasise its historical and stylistic links with the later music dramas. Wagner, however, had developed this continuous form from a draft scenario in one act submitted to the Paris Opéra as a possible curtain-raiser to a ballet. When the Opéra rejected the proposal, Wagner expanded the design, composing the music in the form of three linked acts. But for the Dresden premiere in 1843 he abandoned this plan and divided the opera into three discrete acts (the interludes were converted into act endings and introductions). The continuous version was less a first step in the unfolding of an as yet unconscious artistic destiny (as Bayreuth and Wagner himself later liked to imply) than an intermediary stage in the opera's transformation from curtain-raiser to main bill, and *Holländer* was not performed or published in this form during Wagner's lifetime. Even so, the temptation to interpret this early version as a taste of things to come is strong.

Looking at the form of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, it becomes yet more difficult to challenge Wagner's self-styled image as radical reformer of

[14] Wagner, letter to Ferdinand Heine, August 1843, in Werner Breig, 'The Musical Works', trans. Paul Knight and Horst Loeschmann, in Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski (eds.), *Wagner Handbook*, translation edited by John Deathridge (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 416.

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opera. Although traces of the closed number tradition are still evident in the poetic text of the *Ring*, any impression of gaps is smoothed over with act-long spans of continuous music sustained by the orchestra, any jarring contrasts being subordinated to what Wagner proudly called his 'art of transition'.[15] In *Zukunftsmusik* (1860) Wagner complains of the 'painful' effects of the contrasts in number opera:

> [After the recitative] the full orchestra strikes in with its inevitable ritornello to announce the aria, the same ritornello that the same master has used elsewhere as a connecting or transitional passage so meaningful that we had accorded it an articulate beauty all of its own. Then it had given us the most telling insight into the heart of the situation, but what if one of these gems of art is now immediately followed by a number aimed at the most base artistic tastes?[16]

Ostensibly, the role of the orchestral interludes in music drama is to maintain musical continuity during scene changes, to mobilise the art of transition by dovetailing one scene into the next. But in so doing they take on a narrative-interpretative function that is reinforced by the expansion of reminiscence motifs to what Wagner called a 'tissue of principal themes'[17] (the leitmotif technique), and they can in fact assume pivotal, even climactic roles both musically and dramatically (the *Trauermarsch* in *Götterdämmerung* certainly fits this description). The result is a conflict between music that represents a stop-gap measure (literally and figuratively) and the prominent position to which it is assigned.

Drawing on years of conducting experience, familiarity with the latest refinements of orchestral instruments, and the orchestration of six operas, Wagner was well prepared to create impressive orchestral effects. But, as we shall see, nineteenth-century ears, from Hanslick's to Nietzsche's, were in no way prepared for what was felt to be the utterly overwhelming effect of his orchestra. Imbued with Wagner's musical affinity for impressions of sublimity, exaltation, and emotional intensity, it proved to be the most effective weapon in the arsenal of music drama, unleashed from the very beginning with the impressive preludes. Not content to offer the orchestra a new and augmented role, Wagner had to declare himself heir to the symphonic tradition of Beethoven, a tradition he interprets in terms of the primacy of thematic/motivic manipulation and development. From this perspective every aspect of the motivically laden orchestral discourse represents an organic component in a

[15] Richard Wagner, letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 29 October 1859, in Hanjo Kesting (ed.), *Richard Wagner Briefe* (Munich and Zurich: Piper Verlag, 1983), p. 405.

[16] Richard Wagner, *Zukunftsmusik* (1860), in Richard Sternfeld and Hans von Wolzogen (eds.), *Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (hereafter abbreviated as *SSD*), vol. VII (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1916), p. 134.

[17] Richard Wagner, *Eine Mitteilung an meiner Freunde* (1851), *SSD*, vol. IV, p. 322.

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symphonic argument, which, applied to the interludes, would seem to elevate them even further from their *entr'acte* origins.

To the extent that Wagner's symphonic claim forms another layer in the propaganda with which he surrounded music drama, we might treat it with some caution. And yet, when Wagner sought to reform the ways in which musical theatre would actually be presented and received, and built the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth to demonstrate his ideas, the symphonic claim – or rather, the lofty musical idealism associated with the symphony – found a place. This is where the darkened auditorium takes on such importance, as a means of minimising the distracting sight of the audience, of declaring the importance of every moment of music drama, including interludes. As for the invisible orchestra, it would eliminate what for Wagner was the most deflating aspect of the concert hall: the sight of musicians performing. In a darkened environment Wagner envisions the audience entering a dream-like state that he associates above all with the contrast between the ideal nature of sound and the all too mundane reality of the visual.[18] It is an attitude that is summed up in a comment quoted by Cosima Wagner in her diary: 'Having created the invisible orchestra, I now feel like inventing the invisible theatre!'[19]

The shadow of Bayreuth

Wagner's goal of an audience utterly transported by his invisible orchestra realised itself not only literally, as early critical reactions suggest, but in a broader sense, through his extraordinary cultural and historical impact. For the orchestral practices of music drama proved a dominating, indeed overpowering influence on German and French opera into the twentieth century. It was enough that Wagner's handling of the orchestra seemed so unprecedented, so 'modern'; that Wagner's symphonic idealism addressed a sense of crisis over the identity of music with a persuasive rereading of the Romantic metaphysics of instrumental music; but all this was reinforced with the experience of Bayreuth, an experience that leading conductors such as Mahler were soon trying to duplicate as they experimented with techniques such as the thoroughly darkened auditorium, then still a novelty almost everywhere but Bayreuth. As one characteristic feature of music drama and of the Bayreuth experience,

[18] Richard Wagner, *Beethoven* (1870), *SSD*, vol. IX, pp. 75–9. Daniel Chua shows how the emphasis on music's invisibility emerged in Romantic aesthetics as a correlate to new constructions of subjectivity as autonomous and beyond the phenomenal world. See *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 191–8.

[19] Diary entry for 23 September 1878, in Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (eds.), *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: An Abridgement*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 324.

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the Wagnerian concept of orchestral interludes was widely adopted in musical drama from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the interwar years, a span that embraces the height of Wagnerism at the end of the nineteenth century, a prewar period characterised by an increasing problematisation of the Wagner question and (not always successful) attempts to break free from the shadow of Bayreuth, and the subsequent decline of Wagnerian influence through the 1920s as a conscious resistance to what was now considered a moribund legacy of the nineteenth century took hold.

Typical of the first phase are operas such as Felix Weingartner's *Sakuntala* (1884) and Ernest Chausson's *Le roi Arthus* (composed 1885–95, first performed 1903), in which a thoroughly Wagnerian approach to the orchestra is mirrored by Wagnerian subjects and imagery in the poetic text. Here the interludes often recall specific passages in Wagnerian music drama: the interlude in Act I of *Le roi Arthus* recalls all too clearly the prelude to Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*, while the Act III interlude suggests the transformation music in *Parsifal*. Ernest Bloch's *Macbeth* (1910) and Max von Schillings's *Mona Lisa* (1915) exemplify a freer response to the Wagnerian legacy, both musically and dramatically. Although still laden with leitmotifs in the Wagnerian manner, the interludes prove adaptable to new contexts, in Bloch's case symphonic poems of proportions far in excess of anything Wagner imagined, and in *Mona Lisa* a *verismo*-like shock climax intended to represent the tortured visions of divine judgement haunting the title figure, who has just murdered her husband.[20] By the time of Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919) the very obvious allusion to the *Ring* in the spectacular, supernatural appeal of the interludes seems to possess an ironic, retrospective value, while in the operas of Alban Berg the sense of continuity and smooth transition that the interludes had promoted in music drama is forced into an uneasy alliance with the very sort of closed forms they had once displaced. Reflective of the cultural trends of the 1920s are the interludes of Strauss's *Intermezzo* (1924). Here the fragmentary, cinematic quality of the numerous brief scenes casts the interludes in a

[20] Prominent *intermezzi* are characteristic features of the *verismo* tradition at the turn of the century. They suggest less the Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian interlude, however, than the *entr'acte* tradition. Although often musically connected with the surrounding opera through thematic quotation and dramatically integral to the operas, these interludes nevertheless resemble 'arias without words', intensely lyrical orchestral numbers, usually with a central impassioned climax that fades toward a peaceful conclusion. In this sense they have a self-contained quality, offering islands of reflection and calm amidst violent melodrama. See, for example, the *intermezzi* in Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) and *L'amico Fritz* (1891), Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892), d'Albert's *Tiefland* (1903), and Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1893), which, though not strictly a *verismo* opera, shares many of the features of the style.

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