

RICHARD STRAUSS' FOREWORDS TO *INTERMEZZO*

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SUMMARY. The study centres on the instruction of the two Forewords written by Richard Strauss to his opera *Intermezzo* to achieve perfect text understanding. The obvious reason writing that, during orchestral or operatic performance, one cannot 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.

Keywords: *Intermezzo*, Forewords, opera, text, understanding, instructions

Strauss points out the importance of dialogues – in the context of character depiction – in his Foreword² to the scores of his opera *Intermezzo*. It is the paced dialogues that offer the best chance for character presentation in the opera, so the author's most important task, as per Strauss, is to make these dialogues understandable.³ In this Foreword supplying instructions to the singer, the director, the conductor, and even the orchestra musicians, we glimpse the most relevant manifestation of the Straussian opera aesthetics focusing on the relationship between text and music.

This issue preoccupied Strauss to such extent that he eventually replaced his Foreword to the scores originally written in early 1924, perhaps because he did not find it sufficiently factual and relevant. The previous

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² „In keinem anderen meiner Werke ist aber auch die Bedeutung, die dem Dialog zukommt, grösser als in dieser, der sogenannten Kantilene nur wenig Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten bietenden, bürgerlichen Komödie." RSVI, p 145

³ „[...] der Zuhörer muss dem natürlich fliessenden Gespräch ununterbrochen folgen können und die im Stücke dargestellten Charaktere in ihren feinsten Regungen deutlich sich entwickeln sehen, soll nicht unerträgliche Langeweile die Wirkung einer Aufführung sein, in der einerseits durch ungenügendes Textverständnis die Handlung nicht in allen Details aufgefasst werden kann, andererseits das musikalische Ohr in sinfonischen Orgien keinen genügenden Einsatz findet." RSVI, p 146

version is known from his volume entitled *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*,⁴ posthumously published by Willi Schuh.⁵ Comparing the two writings we may feel that the first has a more readable style, but it does not contain as many specific recommendations as one would expect from such a foreword. The revised version, dated 28 June 1924, submitted to the Fürstner publishing house,⁶ however, allows so much insight into the inner workshop that its openness and bareness can be measured to the text of the opera. This one is double in length, and it is unparalleled in importance in German music literature, with the exception of Gluck's Foreword to his *Alceste* (1767).

Strauss did everything he could to fulfil the "contextually aware" instructions in the Foreword provided for good intelligibility, and here by context we mean the audience, the performers, and the theatre as resonant (by taking maximum advantage of their abilities and aptitudes, and not contaminating the audience's ears or the vocal cords or the musical instruments by redundant symphonic mass or inhuman throat-challenging tasks). However, the author obviously intended the piece to be about more than just one compositional device.

The Proportion of Sound in Terms of Volume – a Distinction

For a text to be properly perceivable by the public it is essential to have the correct ratio between the singer and the orchestra.⁷ The *mezza*

⁴ Willi Schuh (1900–1986) Swiss musicologist and critic, a friend of Strauss as well as his biographer Strauss himself appointed. From 1928 onwards he worked for decades as a colleague of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*.

⁵ This so-called non-disclosed Foreword is found only in the second, 1957 edition of the volume.

⁶ It was the Berlin-based Fürstner Verlag to publish Strauss' operas up to 1935, with the single exception of *Guntram*. After the owner, Otto Fürstner (1886–1958) had emigrated to London in 1935 to escape from the National Socialist regime, his rights were taken over by the Oertel Verlag, then later, in 1942, by Boosey & Hawks, and in 1986 by the Mainz-based Schott.

⁷ „Da jedoch beim Theater nur selten mit solchen Idealaufführungen zu rechnen ist, sah ich mich immer mehr gezwungen, den Ausgleich zwischen Sänger und Orchester von vornherein so sicherzustellen, dass auch bei weniger vollkommener Ausführung vor allem die Handlung wenigstens in ihren wesentlichen Grundzügen sichtbar und gemeinverständlich, das Werk also nicht direkt entstellt oder missverständlich zur Darstellung gelangen werde.“ *RSVI*, p 141-142 This responsibility of the conductors is witnessed in the *Ten golden rules* addressed to conductors, which Strauss handed over, after the *Intermezzo's* performance in Munich on 6 November 1926, to Hans Knappertbusch who had just conducted the evening.

1. Remember that you are making music not to amuse yourself, but to delight your audience.
2. You should not perspire when conducting. Only the audience should get warm.
3. Conduct *Salome* and *Elektra* as if they were by Mendelssohn: Fairy music.
4. Never look encouragingly at the brass, except with a brief glance to give an important cue.

voce singing required in the Foreword allows for the compensation of the imbalance in volume.⁸ Full vocalization decreases the clarity of the text, particularly that of the consonants. Therefore, *mezza voce* is required, which – in addition to the opportunity it gives for more dynamic colour shades – also motivates the orchestra to play more quietly. Strauss often helps this by means of orchestral bars with translucent instrumentation.⁹

This translucently sounding chamber bars will assist Christine who, in the following few bars, starts singing in a deeper range. This viola, piano and three woodwind instruments – whose register is not high either – give all the necessary assistance to maintain the sound balance in terms of volume:

5. But never let the horns and woodwinds out of your sight. If you can hear them at all, they are still too strong.

6. If you think that the brass is now blowing hard enough, tone it down another shade or two.

7. It is not enough that you yourself should hear every word the soloist sings. You should know it by heart anyway. The audience must be able to follow without effort. If they do not understand the words, they will go to sleep.

8. Always accompany the singer in such a way that he can sing without effort.

9. When you think, you have reached the limits of *prestissimo*, double the pace. (Amended in 1948: Today I should like to amend this: take the tempo half as fast.)

10. If you follow these rules carefully, you will, with your fine gifts and your great accomplishments, always be the darling of your listeners.

⁸ „Als Hauptregel für die praktische Ausführung des «Intermezzo»-Dialogs wäre zu beherzigen, dass alle rein dialogischen Partien – wo sie sich nicht vorübergehend zu lyrischen Gefühlsergüssen erheben –, also alles Seccorezitativen durchwegs *mezza voce* vorzutragen ist. [...] Also, meine lieben Sänger: wenn ihr auch gute Schauspieler sein wollt, *mit halber Stimme singen* und *deutlich aussprechen* [...]“ RSVI, p 147

⁹ The “Besetzung” in the orchestral score of *Intermezzo*: 11 first violins, 9 second violins, 5 violas, 5 cellos, 3 double basses, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, piano, harp, timpani, cymbal, tabor, tambour, tinker, triangle, harmonium (together 57 instruments). This figure reflects a significant decline – with the exception of *Ariadne* – compared to the orchestra headcount of Strauss’ operas composed prior to 1924.

E.g. 1

The musical score is for a scene from Richard Strauss's opera 'Die Frau ohne Schatten'. It features the following parts:

- 2 Fl. (Flutes)
- 1 Ob. (Oboe)
- 1. B Klar. (Bass Clarinet) - marked *pp*
- II. Fag. (Bassoon)
- Klavier (Piano) - marked *pp*
- Die Frau (Vocal) - lyrics: "zu die-sen leicht - sinnigen Wei - bern, die nurh - re Klei - der und Hü - te spa - zie-ren tra - gen"
- Solo Br. (Solo Trombone) - marked *pp*

The tempo is marked "Met. $\text{♩} = 72$ ". The dynamic markings are *pp* and *p*.

The peculiarity of the above example lies in the dynamic shading involving *pianissimo* instead of *piano* for the clarinet. Strauss cannot sufficiently emphasize the importance of following these and similar dynamic or performing instructions precisely in the Foreword.¹⁰ The clarity of the text is preserved, to a great extent, due to the fact that dynamic shifts do not occur simultaneously in the vocal and the orchestral parts. The stress or *fortepiano* placed in the orchestral parts under the one-quarter break of the vocal part do not suppress the initial consonants or vowels:

¹⁰ „Bei dieser Gelegenheit sei auf die ganz besondere Art meiner Orchesterdynamik hingewiesen, die sich oft nicht mehr darauf beschränkt, die Stärkegrade *pp*, *p*, *f*, *ff* für das ganze Orchester anzufordern, sondern die gleichzeitig einzelnen Gruppen, ja sogar Instrumenten die verschiedensten Zeichen vorschreibt, deren genaue Innehaltung – das Haupterfordernis für den richtigen Stil des Orchestervortrags meiner Partituren – allerdings eine heute noch etwas ungewohnte Orchesterdisziplin voraussetzt, aber die Grundbedingung dafür ist, dass meine Partituren auch wirklich so erklingen, wie sie von mir gedacht sind.“ *RSVI*, p 143

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E.g. 2

Musical score for Richard Strauss' *Intermezzo*. The score includes parts for 3 Hörner (F), II., II. Pos., Posaunen, Die Frau (soprano), I. Viol., II. Viol., Br., 4 Celli, and Kirb. Solo. The vocal line for Die Frau has the lyrics: "nie ei-ne Bit - te ab - ge - schla - gen hat? Sie und d - strei - ten wir ein biß - chen, wirst du". The instrumental parts include markings for *calando* and *a tempo*. Blue dashed boxes highlight specific notes in the vocal line and corresponding notes in the instrumental parts.

The same is seen in the following three bars, where *fortepiano* is positioned on the target note of the downward nona steps of the so-called marriage scene:

E.g. 3

Musical score for Richard Strauss' *Intermezzo*, showing three bars. The score includes parts for 2 Fl., I. Ob., Engl. Horn, I. B. Klar., 2 Fag., I. III., 3 Hörner (F), II., Harfe, and Die Frau. The vocal line for Die Frau has the lyrics: "Kurz, er erfüllt mir e - ben je - den Wunsch." Blue dashed boxes highlight specific notes in the instrumental parts and the vocal line, corresponding to the *fortepiano* marking.

The *glissandos* of the two violin parts and the viola *tutti* part also start under the dotted quarters with an eighth pause, so these so-called late entries also allow us to hear as the words start:

E.g. 4

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and orchestral piece. The vocal part is titled 'Die Frau' and has the lyrics 'treu - - e ar - - beit - sa - - - me Frau'. The instrumental parts include I. Viol., II. Viol., Solo Br., 2. 3. Pult (Violins), Solo Celli, and 2. 3. Pult (Celli). The score features several *gliss.* markings in the violin and viola parts, which are highlighted with blue dashed boxes. The vocal line starts with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth rest, and the instrumental parts enter with *gliss.* markings at the same time.

The culmination of the orchestral volume often does not coincide with the vocal peaks – the members of the orchestra should constantly make themselves aware of this. So, the dynamic markings for the singers and the orchestra do not occur at the same time, and are not even necessarily identical. Often, we tend to fall into the trap of trying to take the instructions for the other parts, or the accompaniment, as our starting point, if there is no dynamic instruction in our parts. This idea is sometimes appropriate; however, it may be quite detrimental to the clarity of the text. The *pianissimo* indicated for strings certainly does not apply to the f^1 note of the phrase in the climax of Robert's argumentation:

E.g. 5

The image displays two pages of a musical score. The left page features the vocal line for 'Der Mann' with the lyrics 'das... ist Kopf an bellt und'. The right page shows the vocal line for 'Die Frau' and 'Der Mann' with the lyrics 'die sollte eigentlich ein Ver-gaessen sein: für mich ist sie so wirklich.' The score includes various instruments such as Flutes, Clarinets, Bassoon, Horns, Trumpets, Trombones, Violins, Violas, Cellos, Double Basses, and Piano.

The naturalness of speech is provided by the melody following the cadence of the text while keeping the natural tempo of the speech¹¹:

E.g. 6

The image shows a single line of musical notation with German lyrics. The lyrics are: "Kommerzien-rat fertig? „Gleich, mein En-gel“ sagt er... hol dich der Sa-tan, denkt er. O-der: „ge-win-nen die Herrn?“". The melody is written in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat.

Where, however, vocal, and orchestral parts sound together, there the coincidence of the prosodic and musical stresses – that is to say, the correct adjustment of the stresses of the music to the rhythm and stresses of the text – also facilitates the singer's tasks. These two factors do not extinguish, but reinforce each other perfectly, serving a common goal:

¹¹ „Sinnvoller Deklamation und lebhaftem Tempo des Gesprächs habe ich immer, mit von Werk zu Werk sich steigendem Gelingen, die grösste Aufmerksamkeit angedeihen lassen.“ RSVI, p 141

E.g. 7

2 B Klar.
2 Fag.
I. II. Horn (F)
Die Frau
ur i al - les wür-de ver-kom-men und im Dreck er-sticken

If the vocal melody moves in the same direction as that of the orchestra, then one sharp deviation from that direction – such as a small differentiation to disrupt uniformity – makes the text understandable:

E.g. 8

I. Horn (F)
Die Frau
Der Baron
I. Viol.
das ist ja auch:
ruf des Na-tur-forschers!
I. Viol.

The graphical representation may also help in the presentation of the example in which the oboe almost goes around the final five notes of Christine's sentence, thus differentiating the fundamental similarity of the two parts:

E.g. 9

I. Ob.
2 B Klar.
I.
2 Fag.
II.
I. III.
3 Hörner (F)
II.
Fackel
Die Frau
ob? A-ber mer-gen sind Sie hoffentlich et-was fröh- li-cher!

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It is often the case with singers that they pursue beautiful sound formation at the expense of the intelligibility, the clear pronunciation of the text.¹² In such cases, even the launch of a more delicate sound may challenge the attention of the viewer (listener) who is following the plot, which at certain heights may be worsened by the vocal distortion as well:

E.g. 10

The image shows a page of a musical score for Richard Strauss's *Intermezzo*. It features vocal lines for 'Die Frau' and 'Die Jungfer' and orchestral parts for Violins I and II, Soli Br., Celli, and Ktrb. Solo. The vocal parts have lyrics: 'Die - se ew' - Gü - - te und !' and 'gut und nach-siebig!'. The orchestral parts include performance instructions such as 'poco rit.', 'a tempo Metr. d. 69', 'cantabile', 'espr.', 'm. Dpf.', 'pp', 'p', 'Solo', and 'f'. There are also markings like '(geteilt) weich' and 'cantabile' for the strings. A blue dashed box highlights a specific passage in the vocal line for 'Die Frau'.

However, the author's best intentions are to remain futile efforts on the score sheets when singers and orchestral musicians do not follow every vibration of the conductor's baton with the highest degree of vigilance, or they do not respond with open ears to what is going on in the other parts. One of the biggest threats to singers is when the orchestral parts are instructed to use *espressivo*. Even an experienced musician is carried away at the sight of such an instruction. A tutti player – who, in the best case, is

¹² „An den Dirigenten hinwiederum ergeht die Bitte, bei der Einstudierung des «Intermezzo» seine grösste Aufmerksamkeit all den zarten Übergängen vom rein gesprochenen bis zum gesungenen, halbgesprochenen Wort zuzuwenden, all den feinen Gesprächswendungen, wo Prosa zwischen Seccorezitativ und dem Stil des recitativo accompagnato schwankt und sich schliesslich in den sogenannten Bel Canto steigert, bei welchem endlich sogar die absolute Deutlichkeit zugunsten schöner Tongebung etwas zurücktreten könnte.“ *RSVI*, p 147

trying to keep his individuality and initiative over the years – sitting in the orchestra is required to demonstrate a high degree of self-control, and wisdom, so as not to ruin the aural ratio, and with it the clarity of the text, with a "break-out option" offered by such an *espressivo*.¹³

E.g. 11

The image shows a page of a musical score for an opera or symphony. It includes staves for various instruments and two vocal parts. The instruments listed are 2 Oboes (2 Ob.), 2 Bassoons (2 Fag.), 3 Horns (F) (3 Hörner (F)), 2 Trumpets (2 Pos.), I. Violin (I. Viol.), II. Violin (II. Viol.), Trombones (Br.), Celli (Celli), and Ktrb. (Ktrb.). The vocal parts are for Die Frau and Robert. The lyrics for Die Frau are "Wer dann?" and "Das weiß ich". The lyrics for Robert are "falls! Du weißt, daß ich ganz schuldlos bin." The score features dynamic markings such as *p* and *espr.* (espressivo). A blue dashed box highlights a specific passage in the string parts, likely the one mentioned in the text as a "break-out option".

The orchestral material, in many places – in accordance with the composer's other works – have the same degree of difficulty as Strauss' symphonic poems, and require perfect ability to play one's musical instrument. It is often seen, especially during the rehearsal period, that the orchestral musician, when arriving at a more difficult, more virtuoso portion, for technical reasons, begins to pay attention not to the sound effect, but to the notes, and thus immediately starts to play louder. The orchestral artists,

¹³ „Besondere Aufmerksamkeit erfordert ein peinlich ausgeführtes *fp* und jedes *espressivo*, das einer einzelnen Stimme ein, wenn auch oft kaum merkliches Übergewicht über die Nebenstimmen zu verleihen fordert." *RSVI*, p 145-146

who are giving their best, must know their parts perfectly, and have to listen to the consonance, not letting anything to prevent them to do so. Should they find themselves in a part where they cannot give their best (replacing somebody to step in at a moment's notice), they had better skip the more difficult part that would require more practice, or they only play the important notes from that part, but at least they play those notes with good dynamics.¹⁴

However, the instructions in the Foreword do not degrade the orchestra to the role of mere accompaniment. They demand that orchestral musicians continuously play chamber music, which is the main message the Foreword bears to instrumentalists.¹⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that the Dresden premiere of the *Intermezzo* did not take place on the Staatsoper's main stage, but in the smaller Schauspielhaus.¹⁶

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RSVI: Strauss, Richard: „Vorwort zu «Intermezzo»”. In: *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*. Willi Schuh (hrsg.), Zürich, Atlantis Verlag, 1957, p 140-149.

¹⁴ Sándor Devich shared the idea that it is easier to detect good musicians from their sight-read than from their major exam. Devich Sándor, *Üzenetek*. (Budapest, 2007), p 7.

¹⁵ „[...] *müssen* in jeder Aufführung bei aller Ausdruckskraft des «Kammerorchesters» Ton und Wort des Sängers immer verständlich bleiben, sei der amtierende Dirigent noch so herzlos.” RSVI, p 145

¹⁶ „Die Lebensbedingungen des kleinen «Intermezzo» sind also: ein kleines akustisches Theater zu nicht über 1000 Personen [...].” Richard Strauss: „Nicht veröffentlichtes Vorwort zu «Intermezzo»”. In: *Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen*. Willi Schuh (hrsg.), Zürich, Atlantis Verlag, 1957, p 139 Before deciding about the location for the premiere, Strauss had conducted negotiations about a possible venue in Vienna, which would have been the Bürgertheater, in collaboration with the Vienna Opera Ensemble; however, as a result of an arrogant media campaign levelled against him, he eventually kept the "Premierstadt" in Dresden where four of his operas had successfully been staged by this time (*Feuersnot*, *Salome*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Elektra*).

