

A Strauss Fixation

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It is perhaps understandable that the muted reception of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* would have prompted Strauss to retreat temporarily from the world of high mythology and turn his attention to the vicissitudes of modern domestic life; but the semi-biographical *Intermezzo* remains a curious outlier in the canon. Von Hofmannsthal refused to work on it and, without the poetic humanity of his regular librettist, Strauss let his penchant for irony and cynicism get the better of him. If the opera's situations are the stuff of stock comedy, the mean-spirited portrayal of the wife and the apparent saintliness of the husband make for an uncomfortably one-sided critique of a turbulent marriage. Had Pauline Strauss ever wished to file for divorce, *Intermezzo* would have made superb evidence of her husband's cruelty.

Tobias Kratzer's new production at the Deutsche Oper Berlin did little to dispel the unpleasantness behind *Intermezzo*'s ostensible comedy. The staging was elegant, passingly witty and technically unassailable, but its dazzling surface of up-to-the-moment modernity and winking meta-textual reference only amplified the unlikeability of the characters and the implausibility of the situations, leaving us with a battle of the sexes in which neither side deserved to come out on top. Even the excellent performance of Maria Bengtsson in the thankless role of Christine and the presence of some delightful orchestral interludes could not transform the opera into anything more than a frivolous confection with an extremely bitter centre.



Kratzer, *Intermezzo* © 2024 by Monika Rittershaus

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Deutsche Oper Berlin. Strauss: *Intermezzo*. Tobias Kratzer, director. Philipp Jekal (Robert Storch), Maria Bengtsson (Christine), Elliot Woodruff (Franz), Anna Schoeck (Anna), Thomas Blondelle (Baron Lummer), Clemens Bieber (Stroh), Markus Brück (Notary), Nadine Secunde (Wife of the Notary), Joel Allison (Commercial Advisor), Simon Pauly (Legal Advisor), Tobias Kehrer (Kammersänger), and Lilit Davtyan (Resi). Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor

Mr Kratzer, who directed a very good production of *Arabella* for the Deutsche Oper last season – and who is scheduled to direct *Die Frau* next year – has an undeniable knack for presenting conceptually complex stagings in ways that are easily accessible. Where some directors revel in dense clusters of arcane imagery and high theory, Mr Kratzer's web of reference and allusion is constructed in such a way as to make

Strauss: *Intermezzo*. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor. Tobias Kratzer, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, April 2024. © 2024 by Monika Rittershaus.

us feel that we're in on the joke, that we can, indeed, congratulate ourselves for having 'got it'. His facility with concept is matched by a command of technology – especially live video – and stage management that yield highly controlled stagings of great visual appeal.

Mr Kratzer's *Intermezzo* was unfailingly clever from beginning to end, but it also seemed hopelessly enamoured of its own cleverness. The setting was updated to a recognisable present-day of Emoji-filled DMs and slightly awkward zoom meetings; live interactions took place within a long, low space at the bottom of the stage while the top half was left blank to accommodate both live and pre-filmed video projections that (for the most part) related directly to the stage action. The zoom call between Christine and the notary's wife was given extra verisimilitude by the slight latency between voice and projection, and when Franzl appeared on stage glued to the glow of a computer screen, the video projections revealed that he was, in fact, watching his father on an Arte live-stream.

The staging's knowing evocation of the immediate present was a feat of disciplined technology and ingenious stage design – although someone might have pointed out that the Berlin opera scene already went through its 'realistic-looking cars on stage' phase seven years ago – but its web of references designed to blur the lines between stage and reality (as well as biography and fiction) was perhaps the greater achievement. In the staging, Storch the famous conductor and Strauss surrogate was on his way not to Vienna but to the Deutsche Oper Berlin to conduct the première of a new production of *Intermezzo*, while Christine's dalliance was transformed into adultery in a scene suggesting that the libretto approached the idea of 'dancing' in the same way that Hays-Code Hollywood used 'kissing'. The explicit infidelity and the fact that Christine's final lines of contrition were not spoken from the heart but read from the score made the uncomfortable suggestion that the opera was less a domestic comedy than a revenge fantasy.

Whether or not there is biographical justification for such a reading, the presence of Strauss loomed large over the production. In the first act Christine attempted to seduce the Baron with some Strauss-themed role-play, and the course of a long and awkward scene the two ended up dressed as characters from *Daphne*, *Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne* and *Salome* (Christine later appeared as Elektra); and in perhaps the opera's most misguided scene, the stage action of Christine packing her bags was accompanied by black and white clips from filmed Strauss productions (including some footage from Mr Kratzer's own *Arabella*). The clips were a delight, but the twin games of name-that-soprano and guessing which scene they were singing proved so distracting that it became all but impossible to concentrate on the stage.

Yet even in the moments that didn't quite work, one was never left with a sense that anything had been left to chance. There were plenty of visual easter eggs for those willing to look – the bizarre ostrich painting in the background of one first-act scene was



Strauss: *Intermezzo*. Sir Donald Runnicles, conductor. Tobias Kratzer, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, April 2024. © 2024 by Monika Rittershaus.

referenced in the logo of the airline to which the Pratergarten scene had been transferred (the name of the fictional carrier: Strauss Airlines, of course) – and the neatness with which the visual cues and constant cross-references resolved themselves left one in no doubt of the imagination and intelligence that had gone into the staging. The manic cleverness, combined with a propensity for broad comedy, created such an aggressively impressive surface that it became almost impossible to discern the lack of real characters and emotions behind it.



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If the staging presented Christine as a series of extremes – perfectly tailored to each scene but not always connected to a central thread – Maria Bengtsson did an admirable job of weaving the character’s occasionally contradictory moments into a credible whole. The combative banter in the opening dialogue with Storch had just enough affection to keep the scene ambiguous, yet the prickly exterior vanished almost immediately when she first came in contact with the baron; her outrage at the discovery of her husband’s suspected adultery was comedically outsized, but the resignation in her final scene suggested the impossibility of true reconciliation. Ms Bengtsson conveyed the score’s most beautiful passages with appropriate clarity, but the great strength of her performance was the ease with which she navigated the diverse demands of the opera’s various scenes.

As Storch, Philipp Jekal started the evening in a mode of distracted irritation at odds with the mythology that the staging constructed around the character. His performance grew more impassioned as domestic turmoil threatened to undermine his comfortable life – his contribution to the “Pratergarten” scene was excellent – and a subtle but palpable hint of condescension in the final scenes introduced traces of bitter irony into the reconciliation between husband and wife. And Thomas Blondelle gave a skilfully balanced reading of Baron Lummer, managing to convey the essence of a man with no appreciable qualities without effacing the character entirely.

The orchestra under Sir Donald Runnicles gave a performance of the score that favoured carefully controlled dramatic momentum over exaggerated opulence. The waltz interlude of the first act was never overplayed and emerged – as Strauss surely intended – more as scenic illustration than actual dance music; the storm of the second act was commendably vigorous; and the interlude between the fifth and sixth scenes of the first act, played with reverent clarity, came as a reminder that even situations of domestic banality couldn’t prevent Strauss from crafting moments of disproportionate beauty.