

Massenet: *Ave Maria sur la Méditation de Thaïs*

Both the “Intermezzo sinfonico” from Pietro Mascagni’s opera *Cavalleria rusticana* (1889) and Jules Massenet’s “Méditation” from his opera *Thaïs* (1892–93/98) remain two of the most popular intermezzos in the history of opera. Music publishers, too, soon reacted by bringing out arrangements for various resources, most of them intended for domestic consumption, and it was these arrangements that helped to popularize these two intermezzos.

Mascagni’s Intermezzo, too, was soon provided with words, so that it could be performed by singers. The *Ave Maria* (or *Sancta Maria*) that is based on his “Intermezzo sinfonico” continues to be heard in the concert hall and on records in the most varied arrangements. Less well known is the fact that Massenet arranged his “Méditation” for solo voice, violin, organ and piano or harp. It, too, was titled *Ave Maria*. The words, however, were those of the original prayer familiar from the Western Church and not, as with Massenet, Piero Mazzoni’s version of the text. This is by no means an absurd or even blasphemous idea since the original version for solo violin, choir and orchestra very quickly became known as his *Méditation religieuse* in keeping with its characterization and performance marking, “Andante religioso”. The “Méditation” marks a significant shift in the action of the opera and takes place against an equally religious backdrop.

The libretto to Massenet’s *comédie lyrique* is by Louis Gallet (1835–1898) and is based on the historical novel of the same name by Anatole France (1844–1924), a novel immensely successful in its own day. The action is set in Egypt in the fourth century AD during the early days of Christianity and tells the tale of the conversion of the Alexandrian courtesan Thaïs at the hands of the coenobite monk Athanaël. The story has a basis in history in the legend of Saint Thaïs, the patron saint of repentant prostitutes, who was converted to Christianity by Paphnutius the Ascetic († c360 AD) and who lived as a hermit until her death. One of the earliest writers to retell the legend was Roswitha of Gandersheim (c935–after 973) in her Latin drama *Paphnutius*. This dialogue contains an obvious allusion to Thaïs, the legendary hetaera of Alexander the Great who lived in the fourth century BC. During the “Méditation” in Massenet’s opera, Thaïs finally decides to follow Athanaël and renounce sin. After converting to Christianity, she lives as a hermit in the wilderness.

In the case of Mascagni, too, a vocal version of his Intermezzo using the words of the *Ave Maria* is by no means arbitrary. Here, too, the music unfolds within a religious context. We hear an offstage Easter service – hence the organ in the orchestra. In his autograph piano score Mascagni wrote the words “imitando la Preghiera” at the start of his Intermezzo, in that way underscoring his intentions. And he takes up the opening bars of the *Regina coeli* sung by the congregation in the village church in the previous scene, headed “Scena e Preghiera”. It is clearly entirely legitimate, therefore, to turn this Intermezzo into an *Ave Maria*.

Scenes involving prayers – frequently prayers to the Virgin Mary – are often found in opera and take the form of calm and contemplative arias reflecting the taste of the age. At the same time they were part of the Catholic Church’s Marian devotion. As a result both Mascagni and Massenet were later able to turn their operatic intermezzos into *preghiere* for the concert hall and create pieces that continue to move audiences to this day. To dismiss them simply as kitsch is to ignore the aspirations of their creators.

Massenet rearranged the solo violin part for the vocal line in a few places in such a way that the voice and violin are in harmony. It may be mentioned as well that he himself prepared an arrangement of the original version for solo violin, enabling it to be performed from the outset in the concert hall. All of the pointers in the printed score to the positioning of oboe, english horn and

choir are already found in the autograph score, together with the alternatives when a choir is not available. If a choir is used at a concert performance, Massenet recommended either eight choristers or four soloists seated within the orchestra.

The present editions are prepared for use in the concert hall and are scored for solo voice, choir, organ and orchestra. Although it does not go back to any of Massenet's surviving autographs, it may well have met with his approval – perhaps also because misprints have been eliminated. The two-bar introduction may be missing from the operatic score but has been taken over into these editions: it is, after all, a part of Massenet's vocal versions. The retention of the chorus with closed mouth for the vocal performance is fully in keeping with the original aim in the opera, where it functions as an imaginary *preghiera* and, as it were, as a silent prayer.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Wieland Reissmann for his valuable advice in the editing of this publication.

MSp

Translation: texthouse

Composer: Massenet, Jules (1842–1912)

Lyricist: Anonymous

Edition/Transcription: Spindler, Matthias (*1963)

Opus: **Ave Maria sur la Méditation de Thaïs** (Concert Version) – First Edition

Scoring: Mezzo-Soprano – Choir (SATB) – Organ (ad lib) – Solo Violin – Orchestra

Instruments: 2 Fl · 1 Ob · 1 EHn · 2 Cl (A) · 1 Bs Cl (B♭) · 2 Bsn · 1 CBsn – 4 Hn (F) – Timp – Hrp – Str

Key: D major

Duration: 06:00

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