

# “Dream Melody Intermezzo: Naughty Marietta”-- Victor Herbert and His Orchestra (1911)

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Essay by Alyce Mott (guest post)\*



*Victor Herbert*



*Arthur Hammerstein*



*Oscar Hammerstein I*

## *A Masterpiece Arises*

Victor Herbert's 1910 "Naughty Marietta," America's finest operetta, contains the most famous 16-measure melody ever written by an American composer, "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life." That song was first available to the public as sheet music and then on a very early recording device: an Edison Blue Amberol Cylinder No. 1775, under the title, "Dream Melody Intermezzo," recorded by The Victor Herbert Orchestra, under the baton of Herbert; it was made in January, 1911. The original of this American recording treasure is included in the National Recording Registry.

The work is labeled an "intermezzo," meaning "in the middle," which refers to any composition which fits between other musical or dramatic entities, such as acts of a play, an opera or an operetta. It is normally a light instrumental composition and is complete, allowing it to stand alone. In the operetta "Naughty Marietta," set in New Orleans in 1780, this intermezzo was used to cover the set change from the Act II, Scene 1, scenery of the Marionette Theatre, to the Act II, Scene II, scenery of the Jeunesse Dorée Club. The work lasts approximately 4:09 minutes. It is the only time during the operetta that the entire melody is heard before the Finale Ultimo. The music weaves throughout the entire operetta as Marietta struggles to find someone to finish the melody she hears in her mind. She hums it, she vocalizes it without words, but only in bits and pieces. The audience hears the entire song once in the "Dream Melody Intermezzo" and, finally, with words in the Finale, as Captain Dick discovers the answer and sings to Marietta. The gist of the lyrics? "Love is the sweet mystery of life."

Enthusiasts are often unaware of the circumstances that surrounded the creation of "Naughty Marietta." Given the early 1910 business relationships between Victor Herbert, Oscar

Hammerstein I, and Arthur Hammerstein, common sense hints that this stunning creation may well have been simply “payback” for a catastrophic mess in which these three found themselves during the early spring of 1910. Oscar Hammerstein I had spent four years ballyhooing his commissioning of the first American Grand Opera. It was to be composed by Victor Herbert, then the reigning American theatrical composing superstar. It obtained great press across the nation, and expectations were at a fever pitch among most Americans who were largely immigrants from the Old Country and huge opera fans.

Imagine then everyone’s embarrassment when Oscar Hammerstein I and his Manhattan Opera Company went bankrupt in January of 1910. Herbert’s Grand Opera “Natoma” was ready for rehearsals. Arthur Hammerstein, having sent his father overseas to remove any possible temper tantrums, was forced to negotiate the end of his father’s opera company with the Metropolitan Opera Company. That agreement not only cost the Met \$1.25 million, but also banned both Hammersteins from producing anything “opera.” That would be another story entirely titled the Opera Wars of 1906 to 1910. Suffice it to say, Arthur had an irate composer on his hands.

Appeasement was made possible only when music publisher Isidore Witmark loaned a promising young female librettist, Rida Johnson Young, to Arthur to shift Herbert’s Irish fury from his newly-orphaned opera to a new project. That new creation was “Naughty Marietta,” which miraculously arose out of chaos within four months from contract in May to first rehearsal in September. Its components were (1) the coloratura Emma Trentini, tenor Orville Harrold, and 130 members (20 principals, 40 chorus personnel, 65 orchestra members and 5 artistic staff) of the proud four-year-old, suddenly defunct, Manhattan Opera Company; (2) the brilliant mind of an angry composing genius, Victor Herbert, and (3) the producing talents of Arthur Hammerstein, who needed to solve the havoc he had inadvertently created. Yes, you read correctly. While Oscar Hammerstein I’s name is and has always been on the production as producer, it was actually the very first project guided entirely by Arthur Hammerstein. Chaos quickly gave birth to a masterpiece.

Herbert was very adept at knowing exactly what his public wanted and often wrote works with future use in the back of his mind. The “Dream Melody Intermezzo” is a perfect example of such composing. A piece created to cover a large scenery change was composed as a stand-alone work of the most famous melody Herbert had ever written.

Victor Herbert always had a performing ensemble from 1893 to 1924. His first American conducting post was with Gilmore’s 22<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Band. That was followed by his appointment as conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony from 1898 to 1904. His last permanent conducting stint was with his own Victor Herbert Orchestra, from 1904 through July 1924, two months after the conductor’s passing.

Not surprisingly, the “Dream Melody Intermezzo” ended up in the Victor Herbert Orchestra’s set of bound encore books. The musicians prided themselves on being able to play any Herbert composition the audience might call out for as an encore. These books (one for each member of the orchestra) reside today in the Library of Congress’s Victor Herbert Collection. As orchestra parts do not have a long life, there are four distinct versions of each book: two black sets, one green set and one red set that was in use at the end of the orchestra’s life. These bound books

contain 80-90 songs that might be requested in an encore situation. The books contain only two selections from “Naughty Marietta”: “The Italian Street Song” and the “Dream Melody Intermezzo.”

It makes perfect sense then that when Herbert and his orchestra first began recording, for Thomas Alva Edison’s National Phonograph Company, from 1909 to 1911, the “Dream Melody Intermezzo” would be among the first cylinders created. On an important side note, as a matter of integrity, Victor Herbert refused to record any work until after the Copyright Law of 1909 was enacted, giving all composers mechanical rights.

*Author Alyce Mott is the publisher of VHSsource, LLC, a source of digitalized original performance materials created from the handwritten scores of Victor Herbert. For the past 11 years, she has served as author of monthly newsletters focused on Victor Herbert and his peers, the first five years of which are gathered together in the e-book, “Full Foundations, American Entertainment from 1830 to 1930.” Ms. Mott is also founder and artistic director of the Victor Herbert Renaissance Project LIVE!, the only theatrical company devoted solely to the works of Victor Herbert, now in its seventh season in New York City.*

*\*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.*