

# Synopsis

## Prologue

Backstage at the private theater in the house of the richest man in Vienna

## The Opera

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### Prologue

Vienna, 18th century. In the house of a rich man, preparations are in progress for the performance of a new opera seria, *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The major-domo enters to inform the music master that immediately after the opera an Italian comedy will be performed, followed by a fireworks display in the garden. The outraged music master replies that the composer, his young pupil, will never tolerate that, but the major-domo is unimpressed by his objections and leaves. When the composer appears, hoping for a last-minute rehearsal, a disdainful servant tells him that the musicians are still playing dinner music. Suddenly the tenor rushes from his dressing room, arguing with the wigmaker. The prima donna furiously comments on the presence of the comedy troupe and their leading lady, Zerbinetta. In the middle of the confusion, the major-domo returns with an announcement: in order for the fireworks to begin on time, the opera and the comedy are to be performed simultaneously.

General consternation soon gives way to practical reactions. The dancing master suggests cutting the opera's score. The music master persuades the despairing composer to do so, while the two lead singers independently urge him to abridge the other's part. Meanwhile, Zerbinetta gives her troupe a briefing on the opera's plot. Ariadne, they are told, has been abandoned by her lover Theseus on the island of Naxos, where she now waits for death. Zerbinetta, however, claims that all Ariadne really needs is a new lover. When the composer vehemently disagrees, Zerbinetta begins to flirt with him. Suddenly the young man finds new hope. Filled with love and enthusiasm for his work, he passionately declares music the greatest of all the arts ("Musik ist eine heilige Kunst"). But when he catches sight of the comedians, ready to go on stage, he realizes with horror what he has agreed to. He blames the music master for the artistic debacle and runs off.

## The Opera

*The Ariadne myth tells how Prince Theseus of Athens set out for Crete to kill the Minotaur, a creature half man, half bull, who was concealed in a labyrinth. Princess Ariadne of Crete fell in love with Theseus and gave him a ball of thread that enabled him to find his way out of the labyrinth after he had killed the Minotaur. When Theseus left Crete, he took Ariadne with him as his bride. During their voyage home they stopped at the island of Naxos. While Ariadne was asleep, Theseus slipped away and continued his journey to Athens without her. The opera Ariadne auf Naxos begins at this point.*

Ariadne is alone in front of her cave. Three nymphs look on and lament her fate. Watching from the wings, the comedians are doubtful whether they will be able to cheer her up. Ariadne recalls her love for Theseus ("Ein Schönes war"), then imagines herself as a chaste girl, awaiting death. Harlekin tries to divert her with a song ("Lieben, Hassen, Hoffen, Zagen") but Ariadne ignores him. As if in a trance, she resolves to await Hermes, messenger of death. He will take her to another world, where everything is pure ("Es gibt ein Reich"). When the comedians' efforts continue to fail, Zerbinetta finally addresses Ariadne directly ("Grossmächtige Prinzessin!"), woman to woman, explaining to her the human need to change an old love for a new. Insulted, Ariadne leaves. After Zerbinetta has finished her speech, her colleagues leap back onto the scene, competing for her attention. Zerbinetta gives in to Harlekin's comic protestations of love and the comedians exit.

The nymphs announce the approach of a ship: it carries the young god Bacchus, who has escaped the enchantress Circe. Bacchus's voice is heard in the distance ("Circe, kannst du mich hören?") and Ariadne prepares to greet her visitor, whom she thinks must be death at last. When he appears, she at first mistakes him for Theseus come back to her, but he majestically proclaims his godhood. Entranced by Ariadne's beauty, Bacchus tells her he would sooner see the stars vanish than give her up. Reconciled to a new existence, Ariadne joins Bacchus as they ascend to the heavens. Zerbinetta sneaks in to have the last word: "When a new god comes along, we're dumbstruck."

## In Focus

*Richard Strauss*

# Ariadne auf Naxos

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*Premiere: Stuttgart, Court Theater, 1912 (original version);  
Vienna, Court Opera, 1916 (revised version)*

Richard Strauss's operas cover a wide spectrum of styles, from tragic and heroic (*Elektra*) to comic and grand (*Der Rosenkavalier*) to intimate (*Capriccio*). In *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the composer and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, hit on a formula that allowed them to express several aspects of operatic storytelling in a single work. A prologue, set in the house of an unspecified "richest man in Vienna" in the 18th century, shows preparations for a great party. There is to be a serious opera on the subject of Ariadne from Greek mythology and a light entertainment by an Italian commedia dell'arte troupe, followed by fireworks. But the host upsets everything (and everybody) by announcing that, to save time, the clown show and the opera are to be performed simultaneously. The second half of *Ariadne*, the "opera" itself, presents the resulting combination of lofty and lowbrow entertainments. Comedy and myth complement each other as the practical flirtatiousness of the comedienne Zerbinetta contrasts with the morbid sentiments of Ariadne. Strauss's talents for both witty realism and soaring melody flourish throughout the work, in both the true-to-life prologue and in the subsequent dreamlike opera.

### *The Creators*

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) composed an impressive body of orchestral works and songs before turning to opera. After two early failures, *Salome* (1905) caused a theatrical sensation, and the balance of his long career was largely dedicated to the stage. His next opera, *Elektra* (1909), was his first collaboration with Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), a partnership that became one of the most remarkable in theater history. Hofmannsthal emerged as an author and poet within the fervent intellectual atmosphere of Vienna at the turn of the last century. Their personalities were very different—Hofmannsthal enjoyed the world of abstract ideas, while Strauss was famously simple in his tastes—which makes their collaboration all the more extraordinary.

### *The Setting*

*Ariadne's* 18th-century Viennese setting is not as exhaustively mined as it is in Strauss and Hofmannsthal's previous opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*. It is, however, an

important background feature: the nostalgia for a legendary Old Vienna adds an additional layer of fantasy to the myths unfolding on the stage.

### *The Music*

After the gargantuan symphonic scale of *Salome*, *Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*, Strauss telescoped his symphonic powers into an ensemble of 37 players for *Ariadne auf Naxos*. This proved a perfect accompaniment to the conversational tone of the prologue as well as to the lyrical moments of the second half. For the dramatic climax of the final tenor–soprano duet, the composer draws an astonishingly powerful sound from this small-scaled ensemble. The entrance of the pompous major-domo (a speaking role) in the prologue is ironically introduced by an orchestral quote of the doltish giants' music from Wagner's *Ring*. The prologue also contains an aria for the composer, a ravishing piece of music that is both a parody of, and an homage to, the lofty ideals of the dedicated artist. The second half includes some of Strauss's most atmospheric music, especially in the scenes with the three nymphs who serenade the disconsolate Ariadne on her island prison. Ariadne herself delivers one of Strauss's most magnificent solos for the soprano voice, a soaring aria about her longing for death. In the spirit of this piece, however, this is followed by buoyant music for the commedia dell'arte troupe, including plenty of opportunity for physical comedy. But these comedians also sing, and their leader, Zerbinetta, has one of the most remarkable solos in all opera: counter-balancing Ariadne's serious monologue, she sings an extended aria of fiendishly difficult coloratura and dizzying high notes that is as challenging to the singer as it is gratifying to the audience.

### *Ariadne auf Naxos at the Met*

*Ariadne auf Naxos* was first performed at the Met in 1962, with Karl Böhm conducting Leonie Rysanek, Gianna D'Angelo, Kerstin Meyer, and Jess Thomas. Later, Lisa della Casa (1963–64) and Montserrat Caballé (1976) appeared in the title role. Roberta Peters (1963–64), Reri Grist (1970), and Kathleen Battle (1987–88) all sang Zerbinetta, and Elisabeth Söderström (1964), Evelyn Lear (1970), and Tatiana Troyanos (1976–88) sang the Composer. The current production by Elijah Moshinsky, designed by Michael Yeagan, premiered in 1993 with Jessye Norman as Ariadne, Ruth Ann Swenson as Zerbinetta, Susanne Mentzer as the Composer, Thomas Moser in his Met debut as Bacchus, and Ion Marin conducting. Memorable appearances since have included Deborah Voigt (1993–2003) and Nina Stemme (2010) in the title role, Susan Graham as the Composer (2005), and Natalie Dessay (1997 and 2003) and Diana Damrau (2005) as Zerbinetta. Teresa Stratas appeared in both productions as the Composer in eight performances between 1963 and 1994. James Levine has conducted *Ariadne* 41 times between 1976 and 2003.

## Program Note

Of all of Strauss's operas, none had such a complex genesis as *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The composer was at first uninterested in the project, and it caused friction with his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, that might easily have brought their collaboration to an end. Strauss had completed the full score of *Der Rosenkavalier* in September 1910 and was eager for more work. On March 20, 1911, Hofmannsthal came up with two ideas in one letter. One was "a 30-minute opera for small chamber orchestra...called *Ariadne auf Naxos*," combining "heroic mythological figures in 18th-century costume" with characters from the commedia dell'arte. The other was "a magic fairy tale with two men confronting two women, and for one of the women your wife might well, in all discretion, be taken as a model." The second project, which developed into *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, immediately attracted Strauss, who badgered his librettist to send him some of the text. But Hofmannsthal refused to be hurried. Meanwhile he went to Paris, where he saw Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. This gave him another idea: he would adapt the play, Strauss could provide incidental music, and in place of the Turkish ceremony with which Molière ends, M. Jourdain (the "bourgeois gentleman" of the title) would command an after-dinner performance of the opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*, "punctuated now and then by brief remarks from the dinner guests."

Strauss's reaction was cool. "The first half is very nice...the second half is thin. For the dances of the Dancing Master, tailors, and scullions, one could write some pleasant salon music." Strauss at this point had not realized what a novel entertainment his collaborator was proposing: a juxtaposition of play-with-music and opera. The composer received the last part of the *Ariadne* libretto on July 12, 1911. He had already sent Hofmannsthal a plan of the set numbers, which shows that he originally intended *Ariadne* to be sung by a contralto. The role that immediately caught his fancy was that of Zerbinetta, one of the interpolated commedia dell'arte characters. For her, he wrote, he planned "a great coloratura aria and andante, then rondo, theme with variations and all coloratura tricks (if possible with flute obbligato) when she speaks of her unfaithful lover (andante) and then tries to console *Ariadne*: rondo with variations (two or three). A *pièce de résistance*." So it proved.

Hofmannsthal realized that perhaps he had not emphasized strongly enough the importance of Bacchus and *Ariadne* if the composer regarded Zerbinetta as the leading lady. He pointed out that the opera was about fidelity and that it had the same fundamental theme as *Elektra*: "the voice of *Elektra* opposed to the voice of Chrysothemis, the heroic voice against the human.... Zerbinetta is in her element drifting out of the arms of one man into the arms of another; *Ariadne* could be the wife or mistress of one man only, just as she can be only one man's widow, can be forsaken by only one man. One thing, however, is left even for her: the miracle, the god. To him she gives herself, for she believes him

to be death: he is both death and life at once.... But what to divine souls is a real miracle is to the earth-bound Zerbinetta just an everyday love-affair." And he added: "When two men like us set out to produce a 'trifle' like this, it has to become a very serious trifle."

What is now known as the first version of *Ariadne* was produced by Max Reinhardt in Stuttgart on October 25, 1912. It was a fiasco. "The playgoing public felt it did not get its money's worth," Strauss wrote many years later, "while the opera public did not know what to make of Molière." Strauss was by now convinced of the quality of the work, for which he had used an orchestra of only 37 players. When Hofmannsthal in 1913 decided that the Molière should be jettisoned and a new operatic prologue should be written in its place, Strauss was not interested. By that time, he was composing the ballet *Josephslegende* and after that he turned to *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

It was not until late 1915, when the war held up progress on Hofmannsthal's work on the Act III libretto of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, that Strauss decided to set the *Ariadne* prologue. It is based on a spoken scene that had originally linked the Molière play to the opera and in which the character of the young composer of the opera is introduced. In the new prologue, M. Jourdain is converted into "the richest man in Vienna." He has engaged an opera company and a troupe of comedians to entertain his dinner guests. But he wants the fireworks to begin precisely at 9 p.m. and therefore gives orders through his major-domo that the two entertainments be performed simultaneously. The composer is scandalized but agrees to cut the opera. Zerbinetta flirts with him, and the young man, momentarily transfixed by her charms, finds new hope. Meanwhile the tenor and soprano who are to sing Bacchus and Ariadne both plead for cuts in the other one's part. Zerbinetta calmly and professionally works out how the entertainment can be satisfactorily presented. The composer, on the other hand, at the end of the prologue is in despair over what has happened to his "sacred art."

In the music for the prologue, Strauss reverted to and improved upon the conversational recitative he had developed in *Der Rosenkavalier*. It is among his most scintillating compositions. The role of the composer—designated in the score for soprano but usually sung by a mezzo—has attracted the great Strauss singers of four generations in spite of its brevity. The two versions of *Ariadne auf Naxos* are different works, each with a distinctive style and flavor. The 1916 revision in particular is an astonishing display of Strauss's virtuosity as a composer—in the way the relatively small orchestra sounds both Mozartean and Wagnerian, but also in the variety of styles. The music effortlessly moves from the naturalism of the prologue to the mock-commedia dell'arte banter and dances of the comedians to the full-blown *Tristan*-esque romanticism of

the music for Ariadne and Bacchus. Hofmannsthal's lofty view of his theme and Strauss's down-to-earth approach are reconciled.

In his treatment of the commedia dell'arte element, Strauss was, as ever, up to date with or even ahead of contemporary fashion; 1912 was also the year of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, and the re-creations of 17th-century commedia by Stravinsky, Respighi, and Casella were to follow. *Ariadne auf Naxos* is as innovative and advanced an opera as any Strauss composed and serves as a complete refutation of the belief that after *Der Rosenkavalier* he went into decline. Far from it: *Ariadne* signals a new branching-out. —Michael Kennedy