

PROBLEM OPERAS SOLVED



12. A CLASSIC, HIJACKED

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ARIADNE AUF NAXOS (1916) came to life under unique circumstances. The librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal had prepared a translation of Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* for which Richard Strauss wrote incidental music. In place of the Turkish farrago which ends the original play, Hofmannsthal imagined a full-blown opera, *Ariadne on Naxos*, with the twist that the desert island on which the heroine was marooned should also be visited by a troupe of *commedia dell'arte* players. But when he realized that this double-header would be impractical, he wrote an explanatory prologue to replace the play, and this Strauss also set to music. So while the resultant opera is thoroughly modernist (indeed even post-modern) in its combination of genres, it is one of a kind, never to be repeated. We shall watch it in a site-specific production that is also *sui generis*, adding extra layers to the original Strauss-Hofmannsthal confection.

A. THIS UNIQUE CONFECTION

Richard Strauss (1864–1949) and **Hugo von Hofmannsthal** (1874–1929) had just come off the success of their opera *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) when the librettist got the composer to write incidental music to his German translation of *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) by Molière. It is one of Strauss's most engaging compositions.

- **Strauss: *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, brief extract**

Molière's play is about a wealthy but foolish merchant. M. Jourdain, who wishes to rise in rank. It originally ended with a mock Turkish ceremony staged by the other characters to explode Jourdain's pretensions. But Hoffmannsthal was more ambitious. Instead of the *turquerie*, he ended with a full-blown opera in which the heroine is

marooned on an island where there just happens to be a commedia troupe, their low comedy mocking the pretensions of high art.

When repeated performances proved impractical, Hofmannsthal replaced the play by a prologue, showing the tribulations of a young idealistic **Composer** (modeled on Mozart) facing the pragmatic realities of the theater—especially when his patron decrees that his two entertainments, opera and vaudeville, be performed together! The young man, who like Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* is a trouser role for mezzo-soprano, is devastated until he falls in love with the leader of the commedia troupe, **Zerbinetta**.

- **Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, overture, brief extract**

We shall watch the 2013 Glyndebourne production by **Katharina Thoma**. Glyndebourne is a house in the South-East of England, that was bought in the Thirties by a wealthy opera-lover called **John Christie**. Wanting to provide a stage for his soprano wife, and also an outlet for the many brilliant musicians fleeing Nazi Germany, he started a Mozart festival, first in the hall of his house, then in a small theater he built nearby, and more recently in a larger one. Thoma simply takes us back to the prewar period when performances were still given in the house itself—though with a twist, as we shall see.

- **Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, extracts from the Prologue**

Kate Lindsey (Composer), Laura Claycomb (Zerbinetta), Thomas Allen (Music Master); Vladimir Jurowski (c), Katharina Thoma (d)

B. VARIATIONS ON A THEME

In Greek myth, Ariadne was the daughter of Minos, King of Crete. She fell in love with Theseus and helped him penetrate the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur. She eloped with Theseus, who however abandoned her on the island of Naxos; the reasons differ depending on the source.

Strauss's opera begins with **Ariadne** on the island, attended only by three **Nymphs**. [*In her first aria, she looks back on her union with Theseus*]; in her second, she looks forward to the arrival of Hermes, the messenger of death. A ship is sighted carrying the young **Bacchus**, recently escaped from the island of the sorceress Circe. Ariadne, however, greets him as

Hermes, expecting to die in his arms. It is only at the very end that both realize their love for each other, and Ariadne's island is transformed.

Hofmannsthal's principal variation on the theme is to add the troupe of comedians. After Harlequin has tried in vain to console Ariadne, the quintet perform a song and dance routine for her. This too fails, and **Zerbinetta** sends them away, addressing Ariadne as woman to woman in a 15-minute aria which is a showpiece of the coloratura repertoire. When this also fails, they are left to perform a scene among themselves, wherein all four men pursue Zerbinetta, but only **Harlequin** gets her.

- **Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Opera, part one**

Soile Isokoski (Ariadne), Laura Claycomb (Zerbinetta), Dmitri Vargin (Harlequin). Production as above.

Yet another variation is offered by director **Thoma**, who realizes that Glyndebourne, like so many other large houses, might easily have been requisitioned as a casualty hospital in the war. The three Nymphs are now nurses, and most of the characters of the Prologue reappear as patients. This makes a special sense of Ariadne's disorientation, and of Bacchus' manner as though he is coming out of a trance. It also gives a continued role for the Composer, who now no longer leaves the theater at intermission.

- **Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Opera, part two**

Sergey Skorokhodov (Bacchus). Production as above.

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/problem-operas/>

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