

# CLASS 12 : A CLASSIC HIJACKED

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## 1. Class Title 1 (end of Prologue at Glyndebourne)

There are many operas by **Richard Strauss** (1864–1949) less popular than *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and mainly for good reason; he could always be trusted to produce some sublime moments, but there could be a lot of padding in between them. *Ariadne* probably comes fourth in popularity, after *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Salome*, and *Elektra*. I chose it to end the course because it is something so far out there in left field as to have “Problem Opera” written all over it—yet it is a musical masterpiece, and something I happen to know very well from first-hand experience.

## 2. Scene from *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*

It all began with **Moliere’s** play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670). In 1912, fresh from their success with *Der Rosenkavalier* the previous year, Strauss collaborated with his librettist **Hugo von Hoffmansthal** (1874–1929) on a German translation of the play with copious incidental music by Strauss, in a tuneful 18th-century pastiche.

## 3. — the same, with music by Strauss

The play is about a wealthy but foolish merchant. M. Jourdain, who wishes to join the nobility. Molière’s original ended with a mock Turkish ceremony staged by the other characters to explode Jourdain’s pretensions. But Hoffmansthal was more ambitious. Instead of the *turquerie*, he ended with a full-blown opera in which the heroine is marooned on a desert island where there just happens to be a troupe of traditional vaudeville performers (based on *commedia dell’arte*), the low comedy mocking the pretensions of high art. Here are a couple of shots from traditional productions to explain the concept.

## 4. *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Seattle

## 5. *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Dresden

The production was staged by the great impresario **Max Reinhart**. But this two-headed beast proved too unwieldy to survive: it required an acting company, an opera company, some specialized dancers, and a medium-sized orchestra—let alone lasting over four hours in performance! So Hoffmansthal separated the Siamese twins, producing the play separately (with the Turkish ending), and writing a new Prologue for Strauss to set as a prequel to the opera. We are backstage in the house of “the richest man in Vienna.” The young **Composer** of *Ariadne* is shocked to hear that his masterpiece is to be followed by a lewd entertainment—and even more horrified when the **Major Domo** enters to announce his master’s wish that, to make time for the fireworks display at the end, the two entertainments, *opera seria* and *commedia*, must be presented simultaneously!

## 6. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, still from 1978 film

But the **Music Master** and **Dancing Master** (the Composer's teacher and the choreographer of the *commedia* troupe) are seasoned professionals and work out a compromise, while placating the lead soprano and tenor, each of whom wants the cuts to be taken from the *other* one's part! You can hear this in the prelude that Stauss wrote for the new version. After the tympani motif associated with the pompous Major Domo, we get the music of the ardent young Composer, then the long lyrical lines in which he composed his *opera seria*, then a snatch of the vaudeville music for the *commedia*.

7. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, orchestral introduction to the Prologue

8. Kate Lindsey as the Composer

Strauss and Hoffmannsthal argued over the casting of the young **Composer**, with Strauss insisting that on making it a trouser role for mezzo-soprano. He had already done this in *Der Rosenkavalier*, where his model was Cherubino in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Here, his model was clearly Mozart himself. Though not long, it is one of the greatest roles in the mezzo repertoire. He begins as an idealistic teenager with no experience of the practical world of the theater, as you will see from this scene from relatively early in the Prologue.

9. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Prologue, the Composer

10. The *commedia* group at Glyndebourne

The Composer (**Kate Lindsey**) is having a difficult enough time with the stars of *his* show; he has yet to meet **Zerbinetta** (**Laura Claycomb**) and her four sidekicks. But when he falls head over heel in love, it will move us into an entirely different emotional register. It is a wonderful contrast between the lovestruck teenager with absolutely no experience and the young woman who has seen it all, but is nonetheless touched by the other's passion. I'll play it as part of a much longer clip from the Prologue in a few minutes. But first, let me say something about Glyndebourne and this particular production we are watching.

11. Glyndebourne exterior

Glyndebourne, where I worked for four years and essentially learned my trade, is a house near the South-East coast of England, 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. Traditionally, people come down in their tuxes on a special train, watch the first act of the opera in the late afternoon, enjoy a picnic dinner in the gardens, then go back for the second act.

12. The Organ Room at Glyndebourne

13. — the same with the *Ariadne* set

The center of the house is the Organ Room. This is where John Christie put on his original performances. When I first saw the *Ariadne* video, I immediately said "This is the Organ Room!" In fact, the similarity is not exact, but it is clear that this is the reference that director **Katharina Thoma** wants to make: the pictures on the walls, the color-scheme, and especially that big bay window. She moves the action to a

time when performances were still given in the house itself: 1940, the year of the Battle of Britain. Frankly, it adds extra layers to an already complicated plot, but it does so in such a brilliant and entertaining way that I simply had to show it. Thoma takes an already unique opera, and gives it a production that could only be done here. Hence my original title: “Sui Generis, and Site-Specific!”

Let’s finish the Prologue. The Composer was shocked enough at the beginning to learn that his stage would be occupied by vulgar comedians after the end of his serious opera. But the Major Domo comes back and drops his second bombshell: that the two must be presented *simultaneously!* So we get the horse-trading scene I mentioned earlier, followed by the emotional core of the piece, his scene with **Zerbinetta**, then his great aria about the power of music, and the last few minutes in which everything falls in around him—literally.

14. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Prologue, second half

15. The end of the Prologue

In the original, the Composer’s bubble is burst by an offstage wolf-whistle from Zerbinetta, summoning her four guys to their places; Thoma’s solution does not deny this, but makes it more specific. I have no idea if Glyndebourne in fact became a makeshift hospital in the Second World War; I am pretty sure it was not bombed. But, in SE England, it would have been close to the flight path of bombers coming over from occupied France, and many big houses were requisitioned in this way. Anyway, it gives a wonderful idea for the start of the Opera proper, with Ariadne concussed, disorientated, and under the care of Red Cross Nurses—the three Nymphs. Here is a small sample.

16. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, end of first Nymphs’ trio

17. — still from the above, with Pompeian fresco of Ariadne

Katharina Thoma’s hospital bed with the attendant nurses is her modern take on the many ancient representations of Ariadne marooned on the island of Naxos by Theseus, who rescued her from the Minotaur, eloped, and then grew tired of her. Ariadne sings an aria about the beautiful being there once was, called “Ariadne-Theseus” or “Theseus-Ariadne.” The Comedians enter, and **Harlequin** is moved enough to sing her a pretty little song, whose text is basically “Look on the bright side of life.” This is where we will pick it up. But **Ariadne** only launches into a second aria, this time longing for **Hermes**, the Messenger of Death, who will release her from her suffering. It is one of Strauss’ great lyrical creations, a real tune, a propulsive rhythm, and a splendid climax. The **Comedians** try a song-and-dance routine to cheer her up. These two numbers, the aria and the quintet, were the side of the LP set I came closest to wearing out when I first bought this opera sixty years ago!

18. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Harlequin, Ariadne, and first quintet

19. Class title 2 (Comedians)

Clearly, Zerbinetta shoos off her companions because she has an aria to sing. And how! But we will leave that until after the break.

When we left it, **Zerbinetta** was getting ready to sing an aria. The number, “Grossmächtige Prinzessin,” is 15 minutes long and one of the great showpieces of the coloratura repertoire—though I have to admit it is almost as difficult to listen to as it is to sing! Zerbinetta talks to Ariadne as one woman to another. She too has had this romantic notion of Mr. Right, but as each man comes into her life, he arrives like a god, only to be eclipsed by another, and yet another. Katharina Thoma does something at the end of this that I have never seen before, but I think it has some basis in history. Men might play the field, but when women did it it was labeled nymphomania, for which the woman required psychiatric treatment. Anyway, it leads nicely into the second quintet, in which all four men pursue Zerbinetta, but only Harlequin gets her.

20. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Zerbinetta’s aria and second quintet

21. — still from the above

The music runs continuously into my next excerpt, in which the Nymphs announce the arrival of **Bacchus** and give us part of his back-story. But it gives me a chance to take a breath and point out that Strauss made the role of Bacchus an almost impossible task, a *Heldentenor* singing almost constantly at the very top of his register. It is only 25 minutes long, but it can be harder to find a good Bacchus than a good Siegfried. This one, though, **Sergey Skorokhodov**, is very good indeed.

22. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, entrance of Bacchus

23. — still from the above

The scene between Bacchus and Ariadne takes about 20 minutes, so I had to cut the middle of it. She still thinks he is the Messenger of Death; he thinks she is the sorceress Circe. But gradually they realize who they really are, and there follows one of those transformation scenes—desert island to celestial palace—that were a specialty of baroque opera. Katharina Thoma handles this very simply, with the aid of a couple of electric fans and some excellent lighting, to make the most satisfactory ending to this opera I have ever seen—including my own two productions, and the previous one at Glyndebourne I worked on 55 years ago!

24. Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos*, ending

25. Class title 3 (transformation)