
Ariadne auf Naxos: **A Troublesome Creation**

by Peter Dundas

Today *Ariadne auf Naxos* is the 4th most popular opera by Richard Strauss, performed at the MET in New York or Covent Garden in London, after *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Salome* and *Elektra*.

It was shortly after the success of Strauss and Hofmannsthal's *Der Rosenkavalier*, in Dresden on January 26, 1911, that the idea for *Ariadne auf Naxos* was born. Poet and composer were household names, with theaters rushing to produce their new comedy, and the time was right for a sequel. By March, 1911, Strauss was talking about the Moliere play. Hofmannsthal referred to it as "the 30-minute opera for small chamber orchestra" entitled *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

Although he began to work on the project, Strauss was not entirely convinced by the plan. "*Ariadne* may turn out very pretty," he wrote to Hofmannsthal, "however, as the dramatic framework is rather thin, everything will depend on the poetic execution." Hofmannsthal had provided what he called a "slight scaffold," but then went on to write a manifestly psychological version of the Greek myth of Ariadne, who has been abandoned by her lover Theseus on the island of Naxos.

The collection of letters written by Hofmannsthal and Strauss were generally frank and gave day to day information about the thoughts and feelings of these two great men. Unfortunately, Strauss was not made aware of Hofmannsthal's shift in mood until he received a pointed letter from Hofmannsthal in July of 1911. Like the characters in their opera, composer and librettist were not on the same page. Strauss, like the commedia dell'arte players, had imagined a short, comic divertissement, while Hofmannsthal had turned philosopher and, arguably, forgotten about the people Strauss referred to as "the dumb oxen in the audience."

Ariadne auf Naxos was premiered in Stuttgart on October 25, 1912. Here are a few reviews from the newspapers.

"Dr. Richard Strauss's work, "*Ariadne auf Naxos*" was given this evening for the first time in the smaller of the two new Court theatres here. a tastefully arranged hall holding scarcely 800 persons. The cosmopolitan gathering was undoubtedly impressed by the genius of the composer, but its members were also somewhat puzzled as to the meaning of the piece, and rather disturbed by the strangeness of the whole spectacle, so that undoubtedly the work counted as much less immediately successful than the

composer's earlier operas, as " Salome," " Elektra." and " Der Rosenkavalier." The audience was given a good deal of Moliere, something of Hofmannsthal, and a few scraps of Strauss. including, two delightful overtures, as well as most of the sensations of a Parisian "revue" before late in the evening the curtain went down on the opera proper, which is as once so dependent on and so detached from the "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" that preceded it."

London Evening Standard" October 26, 1912.

"Composer and librettist have made yet another new experiment and carried it through brilliantly. The novelty of the thing is that they have produced an opera which cannot shock anybody's susceptibilities, musical or moral, which uses only a very little orchestra and few singers (though both players and singers must be of the first order to make any effect in it), and yet which is wildly fantastic in idea and execution. Whatever may be the meaning the thing, whether their deep philosophy underlying it, whether merely a new exercise of ingenuity, the audience at the first performance took it very kindly.

"London Times" October 27, 1912

While there were wide variations of opinion in the reviews, a consensus emerged that may be summarized as follows: the work was an ambitious experiment but a failure, an unprecedented and hence unsatisfactory blend of forms, because Moliere's comedy was unrelated to the Hofmannsthal opera and vice versa.

Much of the criticism attacked Hofmannsthal's adaptation of Moliere; the verdicts ranged from the outrage of French critics at the desecration of a national masterpiece to the charge that the Moliere comedy, as modified by Hofmannsthal, lacked humor. Nevertheless, many critics agreed that they would be reluctant to forego the comedy, not for its own sake, but because of Strauss's beautiful musical interludes. The more hostile critics concentrated all of their antagonism on the libretto by Hofmannsthal. Some demanded, some urged, and others pleaded, but most agreed that Strauss should find a new librettist who could provide him with more suitable operatic material. Working together, Hofmannsthal and Strauss decided to replace the framing Molière play with a new Prologue of their own, in which the figures depicted in the opera would be seen preparing for its performance.

As in the Molière, the opera would remain a divertissement, mounted for the "richest man in Vienna," who, despite his affluence, consigns the performers to a grubby basement. He likewise has little patience for theatrical matters and so commands his Major-domo to ask the commedia dell'arte troupe and the singers to perform at the same time. Such a scheme made perfect sense of Hofmannsthal's original vision, in which he imagined the interweaving of buffo and heroic elements.

The first performance of the second version took place in Vienna on October 4, 1916. While this second version did not receive the outstanding popular acclaim previously accorded *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, it was enthusiastically received by the audience, mainly because of the singers and the production. The foreign reviews,

however, tended to repeat previous judgments. The music critic of the influential "Neue Freie Presse", Julius Korngold, retraced at length the history of *Ariadne* from the first version to the new one. He also included a lengthy digression on past versions of the *Ariadne* theme in opera to demonstrate that Hofmannsthal's idea for blending "commedia dell'arte" and classical tragedy was not new. Essentially, his viewpoint follows the consensus opinion of the first version; namely, that the opera consisted of a poor text and a beautiful score. (There are no London newspaper reviews of this new *Ariadne*, because of the War with Germany (1914-1918))

Despite all the problems connected with this troublesome creation, Hofmannsthal remained committed to *Ariadne* and repeatedly stressed his unshakable faith in the future of this opera to which he was "attached with heart and soul." As its success grew in various countries during the early twenties, and even before the great popularity of this work between 1924 and 1927, Hofmannsthal expressed his great pleasure in seeing his prediction for its promising future begin to come true: "*Ariadne* is, after all, my favorite among the children".