

Ariadne auf Naxos

opera in a prologue and one act

music by Richard Strauss, libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Vienna, the end of the nineteenth century.

Prologue

In the palace of the wealthiest man in Vienna preparations are underway for a performance of an opera based on the myth of the abandoned Ariadne, written especially for that evening by a young Composer, a pupil of the Music Master who teaches in that house. It is a generous offer of the owner of the house to entertain his guests.

Much to the Music Master's disapproval, the Major-Domo (spoken) informs them that his Master has decided there is to be some Harlequinade entertainment after the serious opera. When he objects indignantly, the Major-Domo – who regards musicians as the most inferior of servants – replies dryly that the Master will not accept any orders: the programme for the evening is not to be altered in any way.

Preparations for the two performances continue. A lackey takes an officer to Zerbinetta, the tenor who is later to play Bacchus mistreating the Wig-maker. The composer meets Zerbinetta and is immediately fascinated by her, but the Music Master is quick to warn him that she is the very person who will lead the comedians in the unwelcome farce later. For their part, the comedians are also displeased with the idea of having to perform after a boring serious opera. They therefore ask if their Harlequinade may start the evening. Once again the Major-Domo intervenes changing everything: the Master wants both the opera and the Harlequinade to be performed at the same time so that the firework display afterwards can begin at nine on the dot. To the Composer's dismay, the Music Master opposes the decisive question of payment. This is observed also by the company's Dance Master, who remarks that it is certainly not the first time that a composer lowers himself to accept such a compromise. The Music Master is coping with the Prima Donna and the Tenor, assuring the former that he has cut the part of the other and vice versa.

Meanwhile, the Dance Master is explaining the plot of the serious opera to Zerbinetta. Princess Ariadne has been abandoned by her beloved Teseo on the island of Naxos and such is her despair that she only wants to die. Despite the Composer's objections, who wants to make her understand the heroine's nobility, «unique in a million» women, Zerbinetta reflects on how the comedians could participate in this dramatic story – on their way across the desert island, they will offer to cheer the princess up. Zerbinetta then confides in the Composer, who becomes increasingly indignant and shocked, that despite her superficial appearance, she is really searching for the man she can always be true to. With this she takes her leave, leaving him alone to evoke the nobility of musical art. He is brought back to earth by a whistle – the performance is about to begin. Crushed by the vile acceptance of compromise, the young composer flees in desperation.



The Opera.

Outside a cave, a Naiad, a Dryad and the nymph Echo are watching Ariadne who is unable to find peace, even when asleep. When she awakens, she remembers what has happened with anguish. Harlequin begins a song, encouraging her to find strength – life is worth living. His words seem futile and Ariadne goes from the delirium of memories to rejoicing in death. All the comedians then take part – Brighella, Scaramuccio, Harlequin and Truffaldino – and they try to cheer her up by reminding her that time heals all pain. Ariadne does not appear to hear this either, so Zerbinetta bids the others to go away, leaving the two of them alone. The carefree comedian remarks that when it comes down to it, their fates are similar since they are both women and all men are traitors. Ariadne does not reply to this either and goes inside the cave. Zerbinetta then thinks about herself, torn between her desire to be independent and the love she feels for every man. Her love is renewed, sincere and intense with each new lover so that she believes them to be almost god-like. Harlequin laughs at Zerbinetta's unsuccessful attempt to cheer up Ariadne and competes with the other comedians as to who is to court the young carefree woman, and she chooses him as her lover that day.

With great excitement, Echo, Naiad and Dryad announce the arrival of Bacchus on a ship. They tell his story – son of Jupiter and Semele and brought up by nymphs, he was kept prisoner on the island by the sorceress Circe who transformed all his lovers into pigs. He saved himself thanks to divine intervention. While the God's voice can be heard in the background, the nymphs ask Ariadne to come out of the cave. Amidst explanations and misunderstandings a wonder takes place: remaining true to their own memories the two know what they have to do and immediately fall in love. Singing their love they withdraw while Zerbinetta repeats her firm belief to the audience – each new lover always arrives like a god.

