

Strauss Ecstasy

Notes by Steven White

Born in Munich in 1864, Richard Strauss belongs to a very select group of composers—a trinity of geniuses, if you will—whose musical accomplishments vault them into a club of which they alone are the members. I'll name them for you in chronological order: George Frederick Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and the gentleman we celebrate tonight, Richard Georg Strauss. In the case of Handel and Mozart, we're all familiar with so much of their non-operatic music—countless choral masterpieces, symphonies, concertos, chamber music, keyboard music—the list goes on and on. And Strauss, in addition to his share of concertos, ballets, symphonies and chamber music, just happened to write ten orchestral tone poems, in which he expanded the story-telling capacity of the orchestra to unimaginable limits. There's not a person here who hasn't heard *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, although many of us may know it as *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The point I'm going at length to make is that any one of these three composers, HAD THEY NEVER COMPOSED A SINGLE OPERA, would still be considered three of the greatest musical geniuses ever to live. But that alone is not what elevates them onto their unique triumvirate pedestal. It is the fact that they DID write operas—lots of them, and many of them are masterpieces that became archetypes of the artform! Handel wrote 42 operas, Mozart wrote 22, and Strauss wrote 16! So significant, influential and endearing are many of these great works, that we can say without exaggeration that HAD THEY COMPOSED NOTHING BUT OPERAS, they would still be considered three of the greatest musical geniuses ever to live.

Der Rosenkavalier was premiered in Dresden in 1911, and is perhaps the most beloved of Strauss's operas, if for no other reason than because the music is just so unbelievably gorgeous. His complete mastery of orchestral forces is astonishing, and while the music swims in Wagnerian harmonic overtones, its ethereal nostalgic glow is all Strauss.

Strauss wrote more than 200 songs over the course of his life, from his youth until just before his death at age 85. Strauss was in love with the human voice, most specifically, the soprano human voice. Like Mozart, he fell in love with, and married, his favorite soprano—I can think of some others who have done the same—and wrote many of his early songs for her.

These *Four Last Songs* are in a class of human accomplishment all their own. Composed in 1948, one year before his death, their poignancy, perfection and profundity are evident from every vantage point from which they can be viewed and absorbed. The music has a depth of beauty that imbues every precious word of the poetry with a sense of the eternal.

In the final song, *Im Abendrot* (At Sunset), it's not difficult to imagine Strauss and his wife, Pauline, after fifty-five years of marriage, walking hand in hand as they approach their final days on earth together. The last line of the song asks the question, *Ist dies, etwa, der Tod?* "Is this perhaps death?" The 84-year-old composer answers that question—not with words—but with a quiet musical quotation of the Transfiguration theme from his tone poem, *Death and Transfiguration*, a masterpiece he had composed sixty years earlier.

INTERMISSION

Ariadne auf Naxos is one of the strangest and most confusing operas ever composed! There, I've said it! But that confusion is all by design! I'll do my best to explain, as we set up for *Sein wir wieder gut*, the Composer's Aria that constitutes the final moments of the opera's Prologue.

Imagine that you are a young wunderkind of a composer in Vienna in the late eighteenth century (does that sound like anyone you've ever heard of?); and imagine that your composition teacher has just arranged for your new opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, to be premiered at the home of the richest man in Vienna! You're just a teenager, so this definitely represents THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITY OF YOUR LIFE! You have poured your entire being into your new opera, and you've chosen a profound tale of abandonment, loneliness and transformation: the mythological story of Ariadne and Theseus! (More about that later.)

Suddenly your excitement turns to dismay when you find out that a group of low-brow burlesque entertainers, led by the very saucy and extraverted Zerbinetta, has also been asked to give a performance. You consider this to be sacrilege! The very notion of your high art juxtaposed to such flimsy titillating nonsense! Just when you're sure things can't get worse, the Man of the House declares that there's no longer time to hear the performances one after another, so they must be performed SIMULTANEOUSLY! This makes you completely apoplectic, and you take out your anger on your teacher. But suddenly, you catch Zerbinetta's eye, and she captures your attention. Good Lord, she's beautiful. And she tells you of her own loneliness—playing the coquette on stage isn't all it's cracked up to be. You understand, and you feel that you have something in common, and for the first time in your life, you're smitten!

So, you run to tell your teacher that now you see things through different eyes! You feel such courage and you sing to him a great aria in praise of life and, above all, the Sacred Art of Music. At the very zenith of your rhapsodic ecstasy Zerbinetta and her rabble-rousing troupe come pouring back in with a great racket. You suddenly come back to your right mind and are plunged back into the throes of utter despair.

Strauss gave the role of the Composer to a mezzo-soprano, creating, just as he had for the title role of *Der Rosenkavalier*, one of the great "pants roles" in the literature. The use of this convention is an obvious reference and tribute to Cherubino from *The Marriage of Figaro*, and there is little doubt that Strauss sees both himself and Mozart as twin inhabitants of the role of this impetuous idealistic young genius.

Now let's move to the performance of the composer's mythological *opera seria*. We find ourselves on the island of Naxos, where Ariadne has been cruelly abandoned by Theseus, despite having helped him escape the Minotaur! Never has there been anyone as sad as Ariadne, for what she and Theseus had experienced was a love of indescribable beauty—until he decided that he wanted to move on. So now she lives in cave, and for recreation she occasionally comes out to sit on a rock and sing of her loneliness. The only positivity that she's able to muster is her ecstatic longing for Hermes, the messenger god of death, whose visitation she awaits. She pines for him to come and set her free from the scourge of life.

Now you'll remember that The Richest Man in Vienna has decreed that Zerbinetta will have to give her performance at the same time as the opera is going on. So Zerbinetta willingly obliges, jumping into the fray to give Ariadne a major tough-love pep talk, with a no-nonsense

dose of realism. She addresses her as *Großmächtige Prinzessin*, “Great, high and mighty princess,” and then proceeds to tell her that she’s no different from any other woman.

I’ve mentioned a couple of times already some of the common threads that bind Strauss and Mozart in interesting ways. Another important observation is that they both were miraculously well served by their librettists—Mozart by Lorenzo Da Ponte, and Strauss by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The worldly wisdom that Hofmannsthal imparts to Zerbinetta is brilliant and audacious, making her one of the smartest characters in opera. Strauss, in turn, took advantage of this opportunity to create one of the greatest of all show-stopping displays of vocal fireworks.

I mentioned earlier how much Strauss loved writing for the soprano voice—something that is already abundantly clear in what we’ve heard so far this evening. But he must have had something against tenors! The leading tenor role in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, while not the longest in the operatic literature, is universally acknowledged to be among the most difficult and taxing. And it is with his first entrance that we begin the glorious **Finale** of this strange and glorious work. From here to the end of the opera we find ourselves bathed in music of terror, mystery, tenderness, and otherworldly nobility. I believe you’ll agree that, in the end, Strauss was able to replicate what can only be called the music of the spheres.

Three nymphs announce that a ship is approaching the island. It’s Bacchus, the son of Jupiter and the daughter of Semele. He has just had an encounter with the enchantress Circe, who has given him a drink which has temporarily caused him to forget not only his own identity, but any number of other important details. When he appears, Ariadne at first mistakes him for Theseus, before concluding that he’s actually Hermes, come to take her to the Kingdom of Death. She asks him leading questions, by which he’s able to regain enough awareness to remember that he is, in fact, a god. Enchanted by her beauty, he tells her that he would sooner have all the stars fall from the heavens than have her ever leave his arm. Together they ascend to heaven, but not until after Zerbinetta sneaks in to make her “I told you so” moment: “When a new god comes along, we’re dumbstruck.”