

ARIADNE

AUF NAXOS

Music by Richard Strauss
Libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

Ariadne auf Naxos premiered at the Hoftheater (Kleines Haus)
in Stuttgart on October 25, 1912

ACT I BACKSTAGE

The “richest man in Vienna” has commissioned two pieces for the entertainment of his guests (with a grandiose firework display to follow). One is the heroic opera *Ariadne* by a young Composer whose debut opera this is - and the other a farce (in the Italian buffo style), *The Inconstant Zerbinetta and Her Four Suitors*. The Music Master is concerned that his pupil, the Composer, will never permit his opera to be performed on the same evening as a vulgar commedia piece. The Major-Domo replies that his noble master is the only one to permit or issue order in this house.

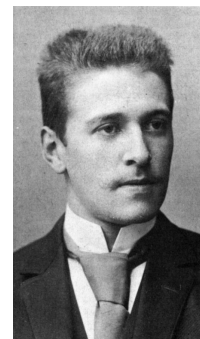


**Richard
Strauss**

The eager Composer is anxious to get in some last minute rehearsal, but finds the violinists are serenading the dinner guests, the Prima Donna is furtively pursuing various amorous intrigues, and the Tenor is magnificently dissatisfied with his wig. The troupe of comedians, lead by the flirtatious Zerbinetta, appalls the Composer with its vulgar antics and the prospect of its suggestive farce on the same program as his sublime *Ariadne*. The Prima Donna and the Tenor are none too happy either and, while Zerbinetta dismisses the whole tradition of opera seria as boring “rubbish,” her charms begin to intrigue the Composer.

An argument breaks out as to which piece should come first, but the situation is resolved in a completely unexpected way. The Major-Domo announces that the Commedia will neither precede nor follow *Ariadne*...they will be performed simultaneously, therefore allowing the fireworks to be set off at exactly 9 o'clock. He reminds the shocked group that they are all professionals and should be able to arrange such a minor change without much trouble. Everyone tries to figure out how to best cope with this new situation. The Music Master reminds the despondent and confused Composer of the generous commission fee; the Tenor and the Prima Donna both attempt to inveigle the young man into making cuts in the other's parts; Zerbinetta tries to grasp the story of the opera, which she feels could be made much simpler if *Ariadne* would just get over her lover Theseus and move on to a new man. Zerbinetta confers with the dancing master as to how to insert their commedia scenario into the plot of the opera - perhaps it would be best if they just landed on Naxos and cheered *Ariadne* up.

The Composer, smitten with Zerbinetta, agrees to devastating cuts and rearrangements, but when he actually sees the commedia troupe rush onto the set for *Ariadne*, he regrets his decision. It is too late however, for the curtain is rising...



**Hugo von
Hofmannsthal**

ACT II ONSTAGE

The curtain rises on the desert island of Naxos where Ariadne, deserted by Theseus, is exhausted by grief, and longs only for the purity and release of death. Her three attendant nymphs do not seem to be able to comfort her, nor can the members of the commedia troupe who attempt to cheer her up with a song and dance routine. Zerbinetta, grows tired of her fellow actors' futile gestures and, dismissing them, decides to tackle Ariadne on her own. She tries to point out that different as they are, they are both women and therefore have suffered desertion and betrayal and yet she, Zerbinetta, has never given up on men.

Ariadne will not listen to her and withdraws, but Zerbinetta continues to impart her worldly wisdom - Men are beasts but who can resist them? When she believed that she loved one truly and forever there always came another...a new and stealthy love... and the inevitable surrender to a new god. There is no response from Ariadne. Zerbinetta's companions return and vie for her favors, and she chooses her lover of the day, Harlequin.



Bacchus and Ariadne by Titian, at the National Gallery in London

The nymphs then excitedly announce the arrival of the god Bacchus. For a moment, Ariadne believes it is Theseus returning to her but then hails him as a messenger of Death come to take her away on his dark ship. Bacchus declares he is a young god triumphant in his new power, destined to bring her back to the freedom of life and the transcendent joys of love. Ariadne ecstatically embraces her new existence. Zerbinetta appears from the wings to remind the audience that she was right all along: when a new god comes we surrender without a word.