

**Opera at Severance Hall:
Ariadne auf Naxos (Jan. 13)**

by Daniel Hathaway



“In first impressions,” writes David Wright in his Severance Hall program book notes, *Ariadne auf Naxos* “can feel like little more than impassioned music filled with an ever-flowing river of non-sequiturs.” But on Sunday afternoon, Richard Strauss’ fervent score — superbly sung and played by a top-notch cast and The Cleveland

Orchestra under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst — paved over the gap between high art and comedy, making the opening performance of *Ariadne* an event to remember for a long time.

The lengthy genesis of this collaborative work, which reflects the contrasting personalities of the composer and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, as well as the caesura between the worlds of serious opera and *commedia dell’arte*, is



fascinating. But if you end up not quite understanding Hofmannsthal's original concept, it's comforting to learn that Strauss didn't get it either — at first.



Ariadne in its final form falls into a Prologue and an one-act Opera. The former finds everything in chaos behind the scenes at the house of the richest man in Vienna, where an opera cast and a comedy troupe are preparing for sequential after dinner entertainments.

But dinner has gone on too long, and the Major Domo

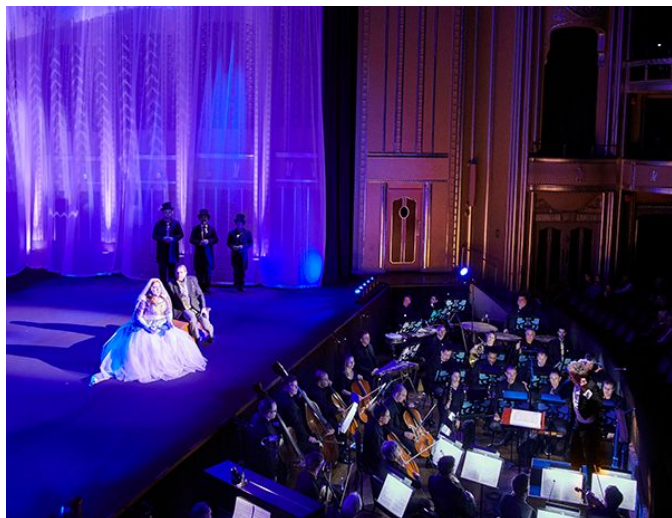
orders that the opera and the comedy be performed simultaneously in order to end in time for fireworks. That pitches everyone, but especially the composer (mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey) and Zerbinetta, the leader of the comedy troupe (soprano Daniela Fally), into an artistic row, and sets up an impending collision between competing art forms.

When the curtain rises on the opera, *Ariadne* is languishing on the island of Naxos, abandoned by her lover Theseus, accompanied only by three nymphs, and longing for death. The comedy troupe arrives and tries to perk her up, but nothing doing. Sub plots abound, but to make a complicated story short, Bacchus sails in on a ship, fleeing from Circe, and through the power of love, ascends with *Ariadne* to spend eternity in the firmament.



During the Prologue, 35 members of The Cleveland Orchestra, dressed in street clothes, were tuning up onstage surrounded by pre-production pandemonium. After intermission, the efficient stage crew had relocated the instrumentalists in the orchestra pit, where the players were

decked out in concert black. Diaphanous white drapes covered the stage walls and a staircase led to a gap in the organ façade.



The opera cast were clad in proper stage dress (the jilted Ariadne still in her wedding dress), while the comedy troupe took their sartorial cues from the Marx Brothers and the Three Stooges. Projections of images from Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton films underscored the *commedia*. A coffin became both a tragic and a comic prop.

Strauss's score is superb, full of ravishing melody, enchanting harmonic progressions, enthralling textures, and beguiling solo moments for flute (Joshua Smith), oboe (Frank Rosenwein) and cello (Mark Kosower). Welser-Möst led a supple, expertly paced performance brilliantly played by The Cleveland Orchestra.

There were no weak links in the uniformly excellent cast. Tamara Wilson played a thrilling Ariadne, her clarion voice every bit the match for Andreas Schager's stentorian Bacchus. Soprano Daniela Fally (Zerbinetta) contributed a show-stopping coloratura aria on Naxos, and mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey (the Composer) perfectly inhabited her rock-star role in the Prologue.

Actor Wolfgang Brendel rose from his front-row seat to play a commanding Major Domo, and Hanno Müller-Brachmann (Music Master) and Jonas Hacker (Dance Master) handsomely



filled out the cast in the Prologue, supported by Conor Brereton (Officer), Shawn Roth (Lackey), and Francisco X. Prado (Wigmaker).

The three nymphs of Naxos, Julie Mathevet (Naiad), Ying Fang (Echo), and Daryl Freedman (Dryad) sang and acted prettily, while Ludwig Mittelhammer (Harlequin), James Kryshak (Scaramuccio), Anthony Schneider (Truffaldino), and Miles Mykkanen (Brighella) constituted a lively *commedia* troupe.

Frederic Wake-Walker's direction and Alexander V. Nichols' projection, lighting, and set design, and Jason Southgate's costumes beautifully complemented the ambiance of the space. Ariadne's wedding dress and some of the projections even picked up architectural details of Severance Hall.



Collages, animations and video designed by Dominic Robertson and Lottie Bowater — important elements in the Opera portion of the show — were beautifully executed but a bit too ubiquitous. It's difficult to concentrate one's attention equally on music, stage action, and projections, and it's often the music that ends up in second or third place. When you're in the presence of a score as rich and detailed as Strauss's *Ariadne*, you don't want to be distracted by anything else.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni, courtesy of The Cleveland Orchestra.

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