
Prologue

The ballroom in the palace of a wealthy aristocrat in Vienna. A reception is to be held in the evening and will conclude with the performance of an opera. Amid all the bustle created by the workers putting up the stage, by temperamental singers, ballerinas and suitors, an elderly Music Master learns in dismay from a coldly contemptuous Major-domo that the opera seria *Ariadne auf Naxos*, composed by a young and gifted pupil of his, is to be followed by a vulgar farce in the Italian style. Feeling dejected, the Music Master wonders how he can ever persuade the Composer to accept such profanation.

While a pretty young lady flirts with a handsome officer (she is Zerbinetta, who plays the principal role in the farce), the Composer gazes at her in spellbound admiration. But when he realises who she is and why she is in their midst, he flies into a rage. It falls upon the poor Music Master, as if he hadn't already got his hands full trying to pacify the Primadonna, to console and convince the idealist Composer. A Lackey reminds the cast to get ready, since the guests have now finished their supper.

But the accidents are not yet over, either for the opera singers or for the comic actors. And sure enough, the haughty and querulous Major-domo announces to the assembled company that the time allocated to the two performances has now been drastically cut, because at nine o'clock sharp, not a minute later, the fireworks display will commence. The master of the house therefore commands that the opera seria *Ariadne auf Naxos* and the farce *Die ungetreue Zerbinetta und ihre vier Liebhaber* (*The Faithless Zerbinetta and Her Four Lovers*) be performed together. Amid general indignation the Composer cries out: "After all, what have we got to lose?". "Fifty ducats", comes the Maestro's resigned reply. But Zerbinetta, an artful and practical girl, and her Dancing Master know already that a solution does exist and that the performance, unusual and bizarre though it may be, can still be arranged. With affectionate warmth, part contrived and part sincere, the astute Dancing Master makes the young composer revise the score, by accommodating and cutting. Everybody gets to work with the utmost haste. To the comedians, who are already accustomed to improvisation, the Dancing Master explains in his own way the tale which they are to act. It tells the story of Ariadne, who has eloped with a certain Theseus, who then flees at night, leaving her bereft on a desert island. Zerbinetta interprets this as best she can and wishes: it is a love story, a betrayal, a new love, a happy ending. Just another story. In vain the earnest Composer tries to explain gently to the young girl the profound significance of a faithfulness doomed to death. But no, it is she, the mischievous Zerbinetta, who gives the naive young fellow a lesson in life. In any case, he mustn't take everything at face value: even a fickle girl may be tempted into longing for the one man she could love completely, and be forever faithful to. And so she gracefully takes leave of her new admirer and goes on stage. The Composer is deeply moved, won over, uplifted, and confides his enthusiasm to the astonished Music Master. But then, true to his moody and passionate nature, when he sees the comic masks approaching the stage, he vents his indignation on the Music Master and goes off in a fury.

The performance begins.

The opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*

After a solemn and dramatic prelude, the curtain rises on a desert island, in the ancient Greece of mythology. Three nymphs, Najade, Dryade and Echo, watch tenderly over and commiserate with the unhappy Ariadne whilst, almost fainting and delirious, she mourns her fate as an abandoned woman. All her memories are contained in a single name: Theseus, who has betrayed her. So deep is her despair that she confuses memories with thoughts. She desires and awaits nothing but oblivion and death.

Now from the wings enter Zerbinetta and the Italian comics: will they succeed in curing or at least alleviating so much sorrow? Harlekin makes an attempt with a graceful little song. But Ariadne does not even notice the well-meaning and festive party. In a long monologue, at first sad and then exalted, she awaits death and invokes Hermes, the god of transformations, calling upon him to carry her off and lead her into the shady kingdom of the dead. The comedians do not let themselves be discouraged and keep trying to dispel the noble lady's anguish with their melodies and dancing. But Zerbinetta observes that they are getting nowhere and chases them off. Now it is she who stands, alone, before Ariadne and speaks her mind, as one woman to another, as one betrayed woman to another. In this surprising and admirable passage, Zerbinetta, now prudent now candid now gracefully ironic, gives the sorrowful and indifferent princess the benefit of all her experience as a woman, actress and comedy character. In every disappointment we see the end of life, but with each new love life begins afresh! As the gloomy and vexed Ariadne vanishes into the cavern, Zerbinetta cheerfully resigns herself to defeat. Next begins the farce of courtship by the four men, Harlekin, Brighella, Scaramuccio and Truffaldin, all of whom have fallen in love with Zerbinetta. With jokes and bright ideas, pranks, promises and dances, they vie for her attention. She flirts with each one of the four and eventually goes off with her favourite, the good-looking Harlekin.

Suddenly cries of admiring amazement are heard, as the three Nymphs announce with emotion a prodigy, the arrival of a handsome boy, a young god! Approaching the island on a fast ship is the youth who has defeated the mortal magic of Circe. From a distance comes the serene and triumphant song of Bacchus. Bewitched by that voice, Ariadne emerges from the cave: could this unknown approaching figure be the herald of death? And when the handsome and shining god appears on the beach, Ariadne curtsseys to him in the belief that he is Hermes. Bacchus too, naive and astonished, believes that the beautiful lady is the nymph of the island, or its queen. Neither of the two realises, nor any longer recalls anything of themselves. An unknown feeling of fear and expectation confuses and transforms them. The young god clasps the transfigured woman to him and together they set off towards eternity. Zerbinetta's voice is heard intoning the motif of life renewed: "When a newer god approaches, / we surrender, silent, still".

(Traduzione di Rodney Stringer)