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Gorgeously sung *Ariadne* in Cincinnati

09/07/2019

 United States R. Strauss, *Ariadne auf Naxos*: Soloists, Cincinnati Opera/Jun Märkl (conductor), School for Creative and Performing Arts, Cincinnati, Ohio. 11.7.2019 (RDA)



Liv Redpath as Zerbinetta in *Ariadne* at Cincinnati Opera (Photo: Cincinnati Opera)

Cast:

Prima Donna/Ariadne – Twyla Robinson
Tenor/Baccus – Kyle van Schoonhoven
Zerbinetta – Liv Redpath
Composer – Olivia Vote
Music Teacher – Morgan Smith
Dancing Master/Scaramuccio – David Walton
Harlekin – Luis Alejandro Orozco
Officer/Brighella – Jason Vest
Lackey/Truffaldin – James Eder
Najade – Alexandra Schoeny
Dryade – Ellen Graham
Echo – Melissa Harvey
Major-Domo – Thomas Hammons
Wig Maker – Zane Hill

Production:

State Director – Omer Ben Seadia
Scenic Designer – Ryan Howell
Costume Designer – Ryan Park
Lighting Designer – Thomas C. Hase
Wig and Make-up Designer – James Geier

The Cincinnati Opera production of Richard Strauss' 1916 *Ariadne auf Naxos* sets the action in Cincinnati, in the home of one of the wealthiest patrons of the arts in the Queen City, where a dinner for his opera-loving friends is to take place. The year is 1950.

The host with a desire to impress—and absolutely no idea how—has hired not one but two groups to provide the after-dinner entertainment: the first is a song-and-dance troupe led by triple-threat Zerbinetta; the other, a quintet of opera singers.

When the dinner threatens to run overtime because of various issues, the host's main manservant announces to the entertainers that the two acts that were planned will now be reduced to one, and like it or not, the show must and will go on.

The operatic prima donna and her leading man are furious, and the composer of the esoteric opera about Princess Ariadne is beside himself, but the comedians are game for anything as long as there is a nice paycheck waiting for them at the end of the gig.

Combining showbiz goings on with the formality of an opera is a nice premise, which worked well 's in 1916 when Strauss gave up on the impracticality of tacking on his *Ariadne* at the end of Molière's play *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, which would have endlessly held an audience ransom for six hours straight.

This version of Strauss' comic romp is neatly compact and runs a couple of hours plus intermission. Thanks to conductor Jun Märkl's vision and his firm pacing of a chamber ensemble (members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra), the time passed quickly.

Dig below the glittering surface of this comedy of bad manners and you'll find Hofmannsthal and Strauss winking with razor-sharp commentary about the divide between "high" and "low" art and reminding audiences that life and art often interconnect and imitate each other in strange ways.

The young and imaginative Israeli director Omer Ben Seadia validates each and every aspect of her concept in a nimbly executed staging. She is greatly aided by designer Ryan Howell, whose humorously over-the-top set is a celebration of nouveau riche bad taste. Ryan Park's costumes are period-perfect, and James Geier's wigs and makeup are a hoot. Tomas C. Hase's lighting bathes the singing actors in showbiz glare.

The opera's first act sports stretches of spoken dialogue interspersed with snippets of sung passages. Mixing back-to-back German and English can at times become wearisome and disconcerting. These days non-purists like me would have the whole opera sung in English. But whether German or English or both, this cast is spectacularly good. Coloratura Liv Redpath sang her show-stopping 12-minute 'Grossmächtige Prinzessin' with uncanny ease and accuracy. Her seemingly limitless top voice—coupled with great looks and spontaneous acting—poises her on the brink of a major career.

To get to the singing of Ariadne and Bacchus, one must come back after intermission to enjoy glorious music that in lesser throats can turn into a scream-fest—so punishing is Strauss' writing. Twyla Robinson's Ariadne was regal and formidable, her 'Es gibt ein Reich' a vocal gem. Kyle Van Schoonhoven, a true-blue heroic tenor with a clarion sound, dispatched the relentlessly difficult Bacchus passages with no hint of strain.

Mezzo-soprano Olivia Vote was impassioned and convincing as the underappreciated composer. David Walton, Jason Vest, James Eder, and Luis Alejandro Orozco made a first-class quartet of singing comics. Baritone Morgan Smith was a comically pompous and sonorous music teacher, and veteran Bass-baritone Thomas Hammons stole every scene he was in, as the boss's manservant. Alexandra Schoeny, Ellen Graham, and Melissa Harvey were a top-tier trio of nymphs.

Ariadne is an opera about opera, poking fun at the excesses of an art form that often appears to be on the verge of extinction and yet lives on. More than 100 years ago, Strauss and Hofmannsthal had a go at the odd mix of idiocy and brilliance of their art form. Cincinnati's superbly funny and gorgeously sung version continues its good-natured satire of opera's flora and fauna for three additional performances on the intimate stage of the School for Creative and Performing Arts.

Rafael de Acha

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