

The lyric coloratura soprano voice in Richard Strauss' works

Ariadne auf Naxos

- Abstract -

Introduction

Seen by singers, musicologists, and aestheticians alike as a true touchstone in the career of a coloratura soprano, an unusually difficult score in all respects, the role of Zerbinetta encompasses just as many qualities, all of which represent, in our opinion, sufficient reasons to make it the object of thorough research, which materialised in the study *The lyric coloratura soprano voice in Richard Strauss' works – Ariadne auf Naxos*.

Our relationship with the world of Strauss' music began during our formative years, since his lieder works represent one of the multiple sides of any singer's training, and culminated, so to speak, in our 2002 interpretation on stage of the role of Zerbinetta from *Ariadne auf Naxos* (staged for the first time at the Iasi Romanian National Opera). Since then, we have grown increasingly familiar with Richard Strauss' music, as evidenced by the numerous recitals and concerts in which "Strauss' magic" delighted the senses of the audience and to me, as an interpreter, offered the opportunity to get close, time and again, to the art of a genius.

As mentioned before, the difficulties that the coloratura soprano faces when she sets out on the long journey to the interpretation of Zerbinetta's role and the many details of vocal and interpretative technique to be discovered and applied represented the main argument for our research. The artistic means of this exceptional score are explained through the succession of the three thematic units of this thesis *I. The coloratura soprano in the history of the opera. History, typology, pedagogy, II. Richard Strauss' vocal works, presentation in a historical context, and III. The Opera Ariadne auf Naxos. Theme, aesthetics, language.*

Under the careful guidance of our doctoral supervisor, Professor Doctor Laura Vasiliu, these facets of our research developed into the ten chapters forming this thesis.

PART I

The coloratura soprano in the history of the opera. History, typology, pedagogy

Chapter I – History of vocal coloratura

The interest in achieving expressive singing with a beautiful intonation may be traced back to ancient times, but with the advent of bel canto and soloist singing, it reached a much larger scale. Its foundations were laid during the latter half of the 16th century, due to the need of educating solo voices for the transition from the 12-14th – d century polyphony to 18th century monody. An increasing number of works that highlight the qualities and virtuosity of the vocal or instrumental performer are born.

At the time, as Giulio Caccini and Jacopo Peri presented it in their treatises at the beginning of the 17th century, *el canto* was the art of singing a solo part in a noble manner. Its style was based on the voice's flexibility and homogeneity, on the ability to sing expressive vocal coloraturas and achieve the finest gradations, all resting on a noble vocal delivery and a sound of the highest quality.

Along with the representatives of the *Florentine Camerata* mentioned above, the chief representatives of *Belcanto*, such as Georg Frederick Händel, Nicola Porpora or Johann Adolph Hasse also contributed to the development of the new style. The former paid particular attention to the word in vocal music and promoted speaking through music and reciting through singing, creating the *Recitative (Recitativo)*. On the other hand, in order to foreground the human voice as well as possible, the representatives of *bel canto* paid particular attention to building and enriching the melodic structure with grace and lyricism, creating the *Aria*.

If in the early days of this new style of singing emphasis was laid mainly on the melodic reciting of the text, with the advent of the famous schools of singing from Bologna, Naples, and Venice, attention moved to the song and the performance of vocal acrobatics as impressive as possible. Thus, melody received a leading role, while text lost its importance, "becoming just a pretext for the melody", and the recitative became just a bridge between arias.

Over time, *bel canto* proved to be one of the most accurate ways of singing, being able to adapt to the style requirements of each age, from baroque, classical, and romantic music to that of national schools, and even contemporary music. By practicing it, interpreters develop special vocal abilities, from expanding their range with at least two octaves, through a perfect mastery of head and chest voice, to the possibility of rendering vocal dynamics and gradations over an entire colour palette.

Many of the principles of the *bel canto* tradition refer to the mastering of an artful singing technique. Therefore, to achieve perfect identification with the character, it is not enough to be just a charismatic performer. This quality needs to be perfectly intertwined with a well mastered vocal technique, which will often force the soloist to resort to his or her imaginative and associative abilities. Phrases such as “to sing with one’s eyes”, “to feel like yawning”, “to cultivate one’s inner smile”, “to sip the notes”, “to imagine oneself smelling a flower”, etc. are needed because many muscle groups involved in the singing technique cannot be controlled directly, but only through sensory or mental associations.

So, the voice “sits” on breathing, on a column of air. In singing, breathing is fundamental and learning to control the airflow correctly is essential to a *coloratura soprano*. This ability is acquired gradually, requiring much time to study, and it consolidates with each new role learned. Only practice is able to lead to a spectacular end result, delightful for both the performer and the audience.

Etymologically, the term of “soprano voice” originates in the Italian word “*sopra*” meaning above or high, thus designating a high-pitched voice, which is above the other voices in a song.

In vocal musical practice, according to the Fach system developed by the German opera houses in the late 19th century, there are 25 types of voices classified by their sound qualities (timbre, colour, weight, range, flexibility, individual technical possibilities, consistency, etc.).

Chapter II – The soprano voice. Qualities, classification, typology

The nine subtitles that make up the second chapter of the thesis put forth, as shown by the title, an overview of all the types of soprano voices and of the way in which they are ordered (according to the Fach system – a German late 19th century system) depending on the qualities their sound: timbre, colour, weight, range, flexibility, individual technical possibilities, etc. To back all this information, each chapter contains tables with the most important works (showing roles, arias) in which these voices can be found.

By the end of the first part, the natural course our research made use address some important aspects relative to vocal technique, and in **Chapter III – Study on the voice of the *coloratura soprano*** we tried to present systematically the most important aspects of the art of singing, considering the multitude of techniques currently in use (e.g. the *appoggio* technique, the technique of costal or pancostal breathing).

Breathing techniques for singing have been studied, analysed and well documented by numerous vocal trainers, starting with Francesco Lampert, who published his treatises on the art of singing in 1880. Most of them say that breathing, or breath management, is a crucial technical element in opera singing, being the foundation of correct vocal emissions correct and healthy vocal

techniques. Most specialists believe that acquiring a healthy vocal technique requires for both the student and the teacher to understand the mechanisms of breathing, which means learning about the anatomy and physiology of the respiratory and vocal system. Special attention should be paid to the breathing cycle or the respiratory system. Without proper breathing, we cannot speak of a healthy phonation or voice emission. Although they agree on the crucial role of breathing, vocal coaches do not share the same views regarding technique of using it efficiently.

Although much research has been devoted to various breathing techniques, only a few studies have discussed the possibility of a connection between various factors that could influence the different types of techniques a singer could adopt naturally. For example, is there a connection between body type and the type of breathing that the singer uses naturally, before starting formal training?

Many specialists share the same theories about the need to expand the ribcage in the breathing-in phase, but disagree on the best method to perform phonation, or the breathing-out phase. It is disagreement over what happens during the breathing cycle that led to so many different techniques. Three of these are currently in use: the *appoggio* technique, *pancostal breathing* and *costal breathing*. Each focuses on the use of different muscle groups during phonation.

The paper provides several examples of vocal exercises, but not before emphasising the importance of continually controlling the constancy and the duration of the circulating airflow, and the force with which it is emitted. The quality of each sound provides clear information on the proper use of breathing. Since our research does not focus on the study of various breathing techniques or on vocal training, the technical details (and some types of exemplified vocalizations) that are found in the pages of this thesis are schematic in nature.

PART II

Richard Strauss' vocal works, presentation in a historical context

The second part of the thesis presents a detailed analysis of the great composer's lieder and operatic works (**Chapters IV – VII**), and looks at the composer's relationship with the librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal (**Chapter VII – “Hugo von Hofmannsthal and his collaboration with Richard Strauss”**), all of these being needed in order to support the scientific side of our research. While the focus is clearly on the scores for coloratura sopranos, as far as his operas are concerned (see **Chapters V – VI**), we could not ignore completely those devoted to dramatic and lyric sopranos or, in some cases, to mezzo-sopranos.

Under the sign of intense searches and transformations, Strauss' vocal creation illustrates, in a profound manner, the completeness of the composer's artistic sense. Occupying an important

place, both in time and in his life (if we think of the period of more than ten years committed, almost exclusively, it could be said, to opera), and representing a constant (if we are allowed this expression), as far as lieder are concerned, we can say with no fear of being wrong, that Strauss' compositional technique accomplished its expressive qualities in the universe comprised by the human voice.

His work meant a separation from the spell of the personality that marked the creation of so many composers, Richard Wagner. Although already individualized by his symphonic works, Richard Strauss felt the need to continue on Wagner's path, at his first encounters with this genre, and maybe precisely because some great failures in this field (as shown in our research) we are able today to discover his genius in works such as *Elektra*, *Salome*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, etc.

Chapter IV

Richard Strauss' lieder

In the previous paragraphs, we said that lieder represented a constant also because the lied may be considered both the beginning and the end of the composer's creative self ("Weihnachtlied" Op. 2, 1870 and "Vier Letzte Lied", are composed only a year before his death).

Strauss lived among singers all of his life; in his childhood he listened to his aunt Johanna Pschorr – a talented amateur mezzo-soprano – and saw his father, Franz Strauss, a horn player in an orchestra, accompanying some of the greatest singers of that age. Richard Strauss' wife – Pauline Ahna – had already been a professional singer when they married. In this context, it was inevitable that his sense of poetry and his emotional experiences be also expressed in vocal music.

Except for an interruption of 10 years (1906-1917), which marked a hiatus in his lieder compositions, Strauss composed works pertaining to the miniature genre throughout his entire life, from 1870 and almost to his death in 1949, publishing more than 200 pieces belonging to the standard miniature repertoire. The vocal line of his pieces is declamatory, dramatic, and lyrical, while the accompaniment has a rich texture. In his orchestral lieder, Strauss takes advantage of the expressive colours of the instruments and with their help he manages to highlight the most important aspects of accompaniment. In his lieder, the composer used poems written by over thirty authors, mostly poets from the late stages of the *Munich school* (Gilma, Dahn, Schack), the great pre-Romantic and Romantic German writers (Goethe, Rückert, Heine, Lenau, Brentano), some creators from the *Jugendstil littérature et socialisant* (Bierbaum, Henckel), and only on rare occasions foreign poets (Michel-Ange, Shakespeare, Calderón). Yet, it is surprising that Strauss neglected the poetry of his most talented librettist – Hofmannsthal.

In his lieder, the composer sings about love, natural beauty, and the nostalgia for past times. Many of them were written for the great voices – especially female – of his time: his wife Pauline de Ahna, Elisabeth Schumann, Viorica Ursuleac, Maria Jeritza, Elena Gerhardt, the basses Paul Knüpfer and Michael Bohnen, as the composer chose the poems based on the singers' musical skills. The variety of his musical language allowed him to emphasize the lightness or darkness of words through symbolic vocal and instrumental figurations, through fascinating harmonies, with subtle and sudden modulations and delicious changes in sound colour that do not destabilize the essential tonal guide marks.

Thorough analyses of the two cycles of lieder our research focused on (Brentano and Vier Letzte Lieder) are found in the subsections of this chapter (**IV.5.1 – IV.5.3**). In this abstract, we wish to highlight only some aspects, the most important, from the analysis of two lieder (*Amor* and *Lied der Frauen*). They were chosen because of their similarity, in terms of composition – and we consider here both the voice and the accompaniment – with the character of Zerbinetta from *Ariadne auf Naxos* and, respectively, *Salome* or *Elektra* (in the homonymous operas).

Therefore, the lied *Amor* is a reference to Zerbinetta, suggesting the vanity of the 18th century through an outstanding supply of runs, roulades, and trills. This explosive show is completed by the piano's acrobatics and its bold harmonies. At the poetic level, we are told the love story of the god of love, Cupid, now shown as a sly child. Sound is made dynamic by the *Heiter* (*Merry*) tempo, as well as by the glittering resonance of the **G major** chord that allows for a jovial melismatic vocal outburst. The singer is given a broadened range of two full octaves (D1-D3), and the compositional writing capitalizes on the artful technique of the coloratura soprano.

Lied der Frauen is a piece that is very similar to *Salome* and *Elektra*. With a strong symphonic side, the lied needs the voice of a full lyric soprano, who can sing the four tumultuous stanzas and can transmit the entire dramatic effect of the text, especially in the final part of lied (*The Lord gave and the Lord took, Holy be His Name*).

Chapter V

Richard Strauss' operas. Presentation in a historical context

In the fifteen operas that have remained in history and the current repertoire of opera houses, we can see the almost staggering path followed in the transition from classical-romantic to modern opera. The constant tribulations of composers, in the imposition of their own personality through their art, did not spare Richard Strauss either. Although with a strong Wagnerian flavour in its first operatic attempts (*Guntram* – 1884 *Feuersnot* – 1901), Strauss continues to enriching his aesthetic and musical language, as all his works, be they lieder, operas or symphonies, represent the conflict between his Wagnerian epigonism and own affirmation. As we have already mentioned, our

analyses exceeded the scope of the roles for coloratura sopranos. Their complexity is obvious in all their constituent elements: music (melody, harmony, integration into orchestral ensemble), the vocal technique (Strauss did not fully observe the limits of the natural voice, subjecting the sopranos from all categories to true vocal acrobatics) and interpretation (both musical interpretation, with its obstacles to overcome and the actual, physical performance on stage). The composer's long-standing collaboration with Hugo von Hoffmannstahl assured him a resounding success in the field of the opera (*Elektra* – 1908), opening his path to much desired or sought for musical-stylistic transformations (*Der Rosenkavalier* – 1911, *Ariadne auf Naxos* – 1912, 1916, *Die Frau ohne Schatten* – 1919, *Arabella* – 1933, etc.).

As a result, the end of Part II is an overview of Post-Wagnerian German opera and of Strauss' creations in this genre (**V.1 Post-Wagnerian German opera, V.2. Richard Strauss' operas – general presentation**) and, last but not least, of the scores devoted to sopranos in these works (**Chapter VI – Soprano scores in Richard Strauss' operas**).

Going beyond the technical difficulties to be surmounted by any performer when preparing for a show (and in the case of Strauss' scores they are not few), the singer engaging in performing Strauss' music on stage will constantly feel that invisible bond between her and the audience, that "tension" that unites the souls in one experience. This is all the more difficult to do as the singer, finding herself under the spell of the themes with a great psychological impact that R. Strauss and H. Von Hofmannsthal put forth – memory and time, restoring lost trust, metaphysical transformation and love – needs to find within herself the power to remain sensible so as not to be fully subdued by the role she is playing.

PART III

The Opera Ariadne auf Naxos. Theme, aesthetics, language

The last part of the thesis comprises the Chapters VIII to X and presents a detailed analysis of the role of Zerbinetta from *Ariadne auf Naxos* (in its two versions, of 1912 and 1916). However, this could not have been done without having studied an important feature of Strauss' creation, which we presented in **Chapter X** under the title **"Metamorphosis as a dramaturgical-musical principle in Richard Strauss"** or **"On imagination and the artist's conscience in Ariadne I and Ariadne II"**(**Chapter VIII.2**).

As we have already stated, **Chapters VIII (The Opera Ariadne auf Naxos)** and **IX (Structural and interpretative analysis of the role of Zerbinetta)** are a case study of the role of Zerbinetta, considered in all its aspects. Even if we were to refer only to the libretto of this

opera, which is “a refined and very stylish mix of the most special and incommensurable embodiments of a character”, as Hoffmannsthal himself said in one of his letters to the composer, our research would occupy a large number of pages. Composing music for a play-within-a-play show is, from the start, a colossal action, due to the necessity of “presenting” the characters in a multi-faceted way; the interpretative effort, in its double valence (musical and stage-directorial) is considerable, not to mention the technical difficulties that the sopranos must overcome. These are just some of the elements that have raised, for this interpreter, just as many question marks, and the answers are to be found (hopefully, by the success of our mission) in these last chapters devoted to a complex role par excellence.

An opera-within-an-opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* benefits from various means of expression; on the one hand, the ancient theme and, on the other hand, the social theme that has a humorous caricature side, which gives Strauss the opportunity to combine all the musical procedures, from polyphony to the traditional representative style, from the *bel canto* of the *opera seria* to Wagnerian declamation. After *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, the opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* is the third successful work produced by the couple Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. It was originally conceived as a short entertainment that was to be presented at the end of Hofmannsthal's adaptation of a play by Molière – *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

The first performance took place at the Hoftheater, Stuttgart, on October 25, 1912, being directed by Max Reinhardt. The mix of a theatre – play with an opera proved to be a failure, and the audience that had come there to see an opera left the show before the end.

Hofmannsthal himself uses the word *bizarre* to highlight the contrasts theatre – opera or theatre within an opera, tragic and comic, superficial and deep, honesty and irony, life and death, thus reaching the central theme, which for him is the contradiction between love, as a temporary result, and loyalty, an ever-changing constant. This entire apparatus is not seen in the traditional way, as an opposition between the terms, but as a very flexible balance between them.

After a century-old history of staging the opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*, one can discern constant shifts, a *perpetuum mobile* of movement and reception both of the work and of its the key characters, especially Ariadne, as they seem to adapt to the shape and the demands of society and times. Also, because the reviewers were those who shaped the performances, in time, the female characters have taken over features assigned to them from the outside.

This opera, which led to conflicts between Strauss and Hofmannsthal, is different from various other forms of performance, both by presenting multiple feminine typologies and two diametrically opposed conceptions about existence, the way to approach life. The strength to remain loyal to the death to a person or principle is questioned.

In *Ariadne auf Naxos*, we are shown in contrast the type of the sad, unhappy woman and that of the more superficial, but also happier woman, who lives her life – Zerbinetta, a dancer, comedian, and artist.

In this abstract, we limit our presentation, as far as the detailed analysis of all the aspects of Zerbinetta's aria, to just a small part of all the problems raised by this role.

One of the first things apparent at a first "reading" of the score is the use of the entire vocal register. It is well known (and we have already shown this in our research) that Strauss did not fully observe the natural range of the human voice, imposing, by the musical compositional requirements of different roles, that it be used to the extreme. Thus, the jumps from the high-pitched (or even super-high-pitched) to the low-pitched register are one of the most common problems that the soprano has to overcome. It is time therefore to remember (all of this is already mentioned in the pages of this thesis) that, in addition to a fruitful command of the *bel canto* technique, it is good for the soprano to have, *a priori*, enough flexibility in her voice to help her achieve them.

Richard Strauss was a true follower of Mozart's, Donizetti's or Rossini's schools of composition in terms of the variety of the ornamentations introduced into the arias of coloratura sopranos (but not only – the other female voices did not escape the "curse" of them being used in their scores). More or less "embellished" arpeggios and scales, staccatos, trills, etc. – here are just some of the combinatorial elements used by the composer, all of them juxtaposing over or, rather, being complemented by an entire palette of colours (often highly contrasting), wonderfully arranged on a complex musical score (interval jumps; dissonant harmonies; the orchestral apparatus present to its full extent to provide imagistic support to the work), everything intertwined to conceive that astounding colouring so specific to Strauss' musical art.

Strictly speaking, the soprano is required beforehand (when preparing for such a role) to be in top physical condition (let us take into account the effort required by modern staging), not to forget for a moment, especially during show, about all the technical elements that need to be employed to carry out the representation and, last but not least, to give to the audience, by a type of singing that uses diverse colours, full access to the most nuanced and subtle facets of the characters sketched so lovely by the couple composer – librettist (Strauss and Hofmannsthal).

But as strange as it may seem, lyricism occupies an important place (we could say primary) in Strauss' creation. Superimposed over all the elements mentioned above, the singer (and the audience as well) discovers the lyrical valences of a strictly designed melodic line, which is meant, first of all, to serve the text and then the character and the interaction with the ensemble.

The same may be seen in the *lieder* cycles. As we have already mentioned (and as we hopefully managed to show in our research), Richard Strauss did not use the voice (both in the voice and piano duo and in the orchestra) as a solo instrument (in the generally accepted sense) that

needs accompaniment. Together with the orchestra, if we refer to the last cycle of lieder (*Vier Letzte Lied*), the voice forms an amazing ensemble, whose most important purpose is general expressiveness, “drawing” the picture, transmitting the poetic-musical message.

Here too, the soprano is not exempt from a number of problems that need special attention and care to be resolved. As the support of the accompaniment (either piano or orchestra) is for a relatively small work compared with an aria or an opera role, and, in the case of Strauss, without compromising on certain principles, the singer has to be able to sustain wide melodic lines stretching over the entire vocal range, to look for the most diverse timbre colours, to be able to move easily from one register to another without changing anything in the emotion of the moment and even, when necessary, to take (and to support with her voice) the role of accompanist.

The *bel canto* technique remains even today the culmination of the development of the singing method, in spite of its being understood, as we have shown throughout this thesis, and taught in a variety of forms. However, the fact that having perfect command over it provides the singers with breathtaking possibilities of expression remains an irrefutable truth.

In place of conclusion

Although the performance of castrated singers represented, for a while, the “ideal” solution in the execution of various roles (or pieces), the continuous development of composition techniques, the need to use various vocal timbres, due perhaps to the emergence of librettos that expressed in new aesthetic, historical ideals, made possible a shift towards the diversified use of female voices, especially in opera shows. Composers such as Mozart, Donizetti, Rossini, V. Bellini, to mention only those who provided coloratura (and light lyric) sopranos with the chance to shine on the big stage, without forgetting the G. Verdi, G. Puccini, P. Mascagni and, last but not least, the huge R. Wagner, are just as many proofs of the perfectibility of vocal and interpretative techniques.

In this context, the birth of the operas *Elektra*, *Salome*, or *Ariadne auf Naxos* (with its *Zerbinetta*) is no longer seen as a “miracle”, nor is the long collaboration of two great thinkers (H. von Hofmannsthal and R. Strauss) a historical “curiosity”, since before us there lies now the long and sometimes the difficult road (if we consider the two people above mentioned) that the musical art in general, and perhaps the vocal-interpretative art in particular, had to travel to receive its deserved place in the archives of history.

Richard Strauss’ encounters with singers from the early stages of his musical formation meant for future composer (as in the case of many others) a complete understanding of the possibilities of the instrument and, at the same time, a permanent union with the musical genres it lends itself to. At the same time, it should be noted that the high level of difficulty in Strauss’ works is due in part to the fact that his pieces (be they lieder or opera roles) were devoted to the great

voices of his time, but not without proving to be true obstacles or challenges even for some of them (as shown in our study). Today the Strauss' operas are not easily addressed by singers either, the vocal, interpretative, and physical effort they suppose being, even now, a threshold that not everyone can easily overcome.

This is also the case with the role of Zerbinetta from *Ariadne auf Naxos*. To our delight, we had the opportunity to interpret this role in the two performances of this show staged at the Iasi opera house. Even so (in the concert version of the show), the technical and interpretative problems to overcome required the use of all our knowledge in the field. Afterwards, the ongoing interpretation of Zerbinetta's aria (*Großmächtige Prinzessin* in its 1916 version) at various concerts and recitals meant, above all, getting closer and closer to Strauss' universe, and understanding at a higher level how the entire physical-technical-interpretive conglomerate should be managed so that a work of this kind be carried through with a minimal strain.

Clearly, all these qualities as well as problems are present both in Strauss' *lieder* and in his operas, and they have been discussed, commented, and argued for with the help of morpho-stylistic analyses coupled with indications about the manner in which they could be solved. In the hope that this work will be useful to future singers, it also includes a number of voice training elements necessary for the preparation prior to approaching such a repertoire, our motivation having its source in the deficiencies observed in young singers at different stages of their training.

We want to end this review by emphasising once again the huge contribution that the role of Zerbinetta brought to the continuing development of the music devoted to the *coloratura* voice, to the vocal and interpretative technique that resides in it. And let us not forget the spiritual side, recalling the immense satisfaction that the interpretation of such a role offers both to the soprano and the audience present in the hall.