

REFLECTIONS ON ARIADNE AND MAVRA

FREDERICK JACOBI

ON December 5th the Juilliard Graduate School gave the first performance in New York of Richard Strauss' opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The performance was, in many respects, remarkably fine. Written in 1911, *Ariadne* has had more than the usual number of vicissitudes; it followed immediately on the heels of the highly successful *Rosenkavalier* and one should have imagined its presentation in every operatic center to be assured. But it was from the first a "child of sorrow" and time has made it clear why librettist and composer found such difficulty in casting this work into suitable mould.

After *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Rosenkavalier* Strauss felt himself in need of a composer's holiday, a sort of intermezzo in the succession of his works. He had in mind a new type of opera or rather the reversion to an older type—that of the "Nummer Oper" which contains set pieces for the singers—arias, duets, trios, etc.—as opposed to the then prevalent type of the more-or-less Wagnerian music drama with its never-ending "Melos" and its avoidance, at almost all costs, of every perfect cadence except that accompanying the final curtain of each act. He was thinking of something which would revive interest not only in song but also in the element of the dance. These things are, of course, precisely what Hindemith, Krenek, Kurt Weill and others have done in later days; but it is interesting to note that Strauss has here again led the way in an innovation not generally credited to him. (Have we forgotten the extraordinarily "advanced" and and truly moving harmonies of the Klytemnestra scenes in *Elektra*?)

Hofmannsthal, that genuinely gifted poet, so typical of the mellow and cosmopolitan, if somewhat futile, culture of pre-war Austria, had been haunted by the idea of a work which should

present a heroic, mythological subject (as seen through the Baroque eyes of the eighteenth century), interwoven with the Buffo element of the Italian Commedia dell' Arte. Does this all sound very "pre-war" and artificial? Let us remember that works greater than *Ariadne* have sometimes found their origin in conventions still more arbitrary than these! In any event, it was from an esthetic view-point such as is indicated by the above that composer and librettist started work on the hybrid creation which was to become *Ariadne*.

It was felt from the first that the work must be short; it would not be able, dramatically, to stand by itself and a justification must be devised for the arbitrary combination of Harlequin and Ariadne. They would insert the opera, in place of the original *Cérémonie Turque*, in Molière's comedy, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* of which Hofmannsthal would make a new translation and for which Strauss would also write incidental music. And Jourdain's stupidity would offer the excuse for the conceit which lay so close to Hofmannsthal's heart. But all of this became extremely cumbersome when put into action and after performances on several German stages it was found that *Ariadne* must be completely re-vamped. The second version omits Molière; and the "justification" becomes still more tedious in an act devoted entirely to itself. It is the second version which was given at the Juilliard School.

But why, after all these years, (it will be asked) so much to-do about a work which was never quite a success and which contains within itself the elements of its own failure? Because, in spite of its defects, it is, in some respects, a culminating point in the career of Strauss as an opera-composer and as such it holds a unique place in the list of his varied works. Certain it is that since *Ariadne* Strauss' output has fallen off precipitously and steadily; we hear more and more of the banality, of the formulae which he himself has worn so threadbare, and less and less of the brave, authentic qualities which the early Strauss promised so copiously. *Ariadne* has, indeed, its vulgar phrases, its general air of costliness. But in it Strauss has integrated his various gifts as perhaps in no other work. It has the wit and bourgeois charm of *Eulenspiegel*: the quality of burlesque which is so much a

part of the Strauss make-up. Its sentimental melodic-line derives from his earliest songs and its tenderness and poetry are worthy of the best pages from *Rosenkavalier*. It has a shining, youthful quality which one had not heard since *Don Juan* and there are moments of nobility and high dramatic poignancy such, one feels, as could not have been written had not the composer given us *Elektra* first.

And there is about the whole a sense of "theatre" which one finds in scarcely another living composer, a genius for the stage in which, among his contemporaries, Strauss has had only one rival: that of the master showman, Puccini. One may protest the unreality, the theatricalism of Strauss' emotional expression; but this is, after all, the theatre! A scene such as that of the entrance of Bacchus is, from the musico-theatrical standpoint, unsurpassed. The tact and fine theatrical feeling with which he has handled the two opposing elements in their arbitrary juxtaposition is almost unique. And as for the orchestration, it is a pure marvel. Writing for small combination, after the very large apparati which he had used in almost all of his earlier works (here again Strauss ushered in an epoch: that of the "chamber-orchestra," though he wrote for it so differently than did his successors), Strauss appears the virtuoso; his palette is subtle and sure, and though his mixtures may be too rich for our present more ascetic tastes he accomplishes with small means what many could not do with the largest. There are moments—the entrance of Bacchus again—where one cannot believe that the sonority—so exciting, so brilliant and so powerful—can be emanating from a group of players only thirty-seven strong! How pitiful, then, that from a height such as this Strauss should have fallen to the opulent aridity of a *Josephslegende* and thence downward to the shamelessness of *Schlagobers* and *Intermezzo*! For he among the very few of our day possesses that rare combination which alone creates great art: a "daemon" which goads him on and a mastery which will permit its possessor to speak with freedom and authority.

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Quite a different case is that of Stravinsky and his *Mavra*, which was delightfully produced, for the first time in America,

on December 28th by the Philadelphia Orchestra and a troupe of distinguished Russian singers under the expert leadership of Alexander Smallens.

Mavra, a one-act Opera-Bouffe, is dedicated to the memory of Pushkin, Glinka and Tschaikowsky; it is witty, ironic, parodistic throughout and the element of "grand pathos" is, of course, conspicuously absent. In the line of Stravinsky's works it comes between the *Symphony for Wind Instruments* and the *Octet* (also for wind instruments), having been written near Biarritz in 1922. In spirit it harks back to *Noces*, *L'Histoire du Soldat* and *Pulcinella*. It has something of the rustic quality of *Noces*, something of its (conscious) awkwardness and angularity, something of its very false simplicity. From *L'Histoire du Soldat* it has the quality of the bizarre, its quality of appearing (and how deceptive are appearances!) a sort of improvisation. The florid, the melodic, the Italianate element reminds one of *Pulcinella*.

In the *Symphony for Wind Instruments* (and later again in the *Octet*) we find Stravinsky's renewed interest in the element of harmony. *Mavra* is more harmonic, less contrapuntal than *L'Histoire* and, while neither counterpoint nor rhythm are lacking, it is decidedly the harmony and melody which give this work its very special flavor. Stravinsky, like Mozart, likes to "play" with music as he composes it; how delightful the quirks and turns through which he leads us (if we are wide-enough-awake to apprehend them) on this enchanting excursion into an absurd and unreal world!

Absurd and unreal it appears to us; perhaps, though, this is due to the fact that we are not Russian! *Mavra* seems, in any event, to be decidedly off the track of our general musical (and cultural) tradition; more so than any other of Stravinsky's works. Is it, perhaps, the Russian sense of humor, that humor which is so very much their own, the humor of the cultivated savage: funny indeed but ruthless and objective and lacking in mellowness and pathos (so far removed, for instance, from the sentimentality of the Viennese)! One is reminded of our own Indians of the Southwest who are so dignified in their relationships with each other (and even with us) and so charming and tender with children; and who delight in tying tin cans onto the



CHARACTERS AND SCENES FROM "MAVRA"
by *Serge Soudeikine*

Stravinsky completed this work for stage and small orchestra in 1922. It has occasionally been performed abroad and there is now a possibility that the Philadelphia production will be brought to New York in the Spring.

tails of their village curs and then watching the poor beasts with great glee as they rush barking about the place trying to free themselves of their sparkling appendages. The joke in *Mavra* lasts too long; the situation (a young Hussar, disguised as cook in the home of the parents of his beloved, surprised in the act of shaving himself as the family returns unexpectedly, to the general consternation of all present and particularly to that of the young lady's mother) is one which it is difficult to imagine any but a Russian using as subject for even an opera-bouffe.

To Stravinsky, the savage gentleman, this must have seemed droll. To Stravinsky, the musician, it was, perhaps, no more than an excuse, a thread along which he might wind the garlands of his fantasy. *Mavra* has thus far not had many performances and its fate at the hands of the critics has not been kind. It seems to me that it deserves more. Its musical value, the solidity of its structure, its highly ingenious and even beautiful use of the purely musical ponderables are far more important than they first appear. It is a work which is interesting as well as diverting, one which gains surprisingly on closer acquaintance. It has, by many, been considered excessively "slight" and as falling into the category of "one of Stravinsky's failures." The recent hearing makes one feel this judgment to be altogether wrong and we can only hope for further opportunities for becoming acquainted with a work which is so admirably made, so full of character, that one cannot help—no matter what else we may think of it—giving it our high admiration and respect. Certain it was that the audience the other day enjoyed it hugely.