

**STRAUSS *Ariadne auf Naxos*** • Karl Böhm, cond; Maria Reining (*Prima Donna/Ariadne*); Alda Noni (*Zerbinetta*); Irmgard Seefried (*Composer*); Max Lorenz (*Tenor/Bacchus*); Paul Schöffler (*Music Master*); Erich Kunz (*Arlecchino*); et al; Vienna State Opera Orchestra • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1027-3 (3 CDs 195:22) Live: Vienna, June 11, 1944

& ***Ariadne auf Naxos* (Opera portion)** • Clemens Krauss, cond; Viorica Ursuleac (*Ariadne*); Erna Berger (*Zerbinetta*); Helge Roswaenge (*Bacchus*); Karl Hammes (*Arlecchino*); et al; Großes Orchester des Reichsenders, Berlin. Live, Berlin, June 11, 1935

& **Irmgard Seefried Edinburgh Festival Recital, 1959** (w/Erik Werba, pn); Music by Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Richard Strauss. Live, Edinburgh, 1959

Review by Ken Meltzer  
Fanfare March/April 2020

Two unique and essential historic performances of the Strauss/Hofmannsthal masterpiece, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, are featured in a three-disc release from Immortal Performances. In both cases, the performances are reproduced in their finest sound to date, and in the bargain, are coupled with excerpts from a lovely Edinburgh Festival recital by soprano Irmgard Seefried. In short, this set is essential for fans of *Ariadne* and Richard Strauss. But for more information, I invite you to read on. First in the set is a June 11, 1944 Vienna State Opera complete performance of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, given in celebration of Strauss's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, with the composer in attendance. The conductor, Karl Böhm, had already led the world premieres of the composer's *Die Schweigsame Frau* and *Daphne*, and would distinguish himself throughout his career as a leading interpreter of Strauss's music. In November of 1979, I saw Böhm conduct a Vienna State Opera production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Böhm, 85 and extremely frail, needed to be helped to the podium. But once there, he conducted an *Ariadne* of such beauty and humanity that it will reside forever in my memory. On June 11, 1944, Böhm was just a few months shy of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and at the height of his powers. And of course, Böhm and the entire Vienna State Opera had to be inspired by Strauss's presence in the audience. I don't think I've ever heard the Prologue's orchestral Prelude, a musical portrait of backstage hustle and bustle prior to a performance, crackle with this kind of tensile energy. Paul Schöffler, a marvelous singing actor, is in superb form as the Music Master. Schöffler's earnest Music Master, the advocate for his student, the Composer, has the misfortune to deal with the Majordomo (a speaking role) of Alfred Muzzarelli, brilliant in his embodiment of a man reeking of ennui, disdain, and implacability. The Composer, a trouser role inspired by Mozart, is here sung by Irmgard Seefried, 24, and at the outset of her glorious career. Seefried, a great Strauss interpreter, and a master at transitioning from lyric soprano to lyric mezzo roles, is a Composer of one's dreams. She is in magnificent voice, and ever attentive to the character's mercurial changes of moods; from frustrated artist, to inspired creator, to an impetuous young man in love (both with his art and, for a bit, with Zerbinetta). The Composer's final apostrophe to his art is everything it should be, radiantly sung, and brimming with humanity. In the Prologue, Alda Noni's brightly sung and fetchingly characterized Zerbinetta proves a worthy foil. We will hear much more from her in the ensuing Opera. All of the subsidiary roles are beautifully performed, with special kudos to the Dance Master of Josef Witt, who sings

his brief aria with far more vocal heft and panache than is the norm. And soprano Maria Reining and tenor Max Lorenz are the embodiment of diva/divo attitude, as they haughtily react to the backstage chaos. Need it be added that the Vienna Philharmonic plays gloriously throughout? You could witness a lifetime's worth of *Ariadnes*, and not encounter a Prologue that achieves a similarly miraculous synthesis of talent and execution.

The performance of the Opera portion is on a similarly exalted level. Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic once again set the stage with a radiant Prelude. And the word "radiant" applies in equal measure to Maria Reining's Ariadne. Reining, in sumptuous voice, is able to create a sympathetic and warmly human character out of what can often be a stock figure (of course, Strauss affords the opportunity for the finer artists to transcend the norm). Alda Noni has a grand time throughout, making Zerbinetta's extended coloratura showpiece "Großmächtige Prinzessen" the breathtaking episode Strauss intended. And the dovetailing of phrasing by Noni and Böhm/Vienna Phil in the aria's final measures is absolutely delicious. Erich Kunz offers a lovely account of Harlequin's aria, and both the Commedia dell'Arte players and Ariadne's Naiad, Dryad, and Echo are excellent in their roles. No matter how fine a performance of *Ariadne* may be up to the entrance of Bacchus, it then has the potential to fall flat as a pancake. Bacchus is not a long role, but it is a fiercely demanding one, requiring extended passages of stentorian vocalizing above the staff. In the wrong hands (throats), Bacchus can prove quite the trial, both for the tenor, and his audience. Max Lorenz was an intense and committed performer, capable of riveting interpretations, heroically sung. But on occasion, Lorenz's intensity could get the better of his comportment and technique. That is, I am happy to say, not the case in this *Ariadne*. Lorenz is in prime form and on his best behavior, creating a portrait of Bacchus convincing as both a god and tender lover. If Lorenz doesn't quite equal the combination of vocal splendor and poetry that Helge Roswaenge achieves in the 1935 Berlin broadcast, that's only because the Danish tenor's performance remains the model by which all others are judged. Lorenz and Reining are glorious in their duet, as the Opera proceeds to its heavenly close, greeting by extended applause and cheers from the Vienna State Opera audience. The 1944 Vienna *Ariadne* occupies two discs. Excerpts from a gorgeous 1959 Edinburgh Festival recital by Seefried and pianist Erik Werba fill out disc two. Seefried sings songs by Haydn (in English), Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Strauss. Seefried was a masterful lieder singer, one who brought the same humanity to this repertoire as to her operatic interpretations. The inclusion of some of the radio announcer's commentary adds to the sense of occasion. My personal preference would have been to offer a bit less of this recital, so that Zerbinetta's aria in the *Ariadne* opera portion could be presented in its entirety at the start of disc two. Instead it begins at the end of disc one, and continues onto the next. But I very much understand and appreciate IP's desire to present its listeners with as much top-rate music as CD technology will comprise.

The 1935 Berlin broadcast (again, on Strauss's birthday of June 11), of the Opera portion only, is led by Clemens Krauss, the librettist and world premiere conductor of *Capriccio*. Krauss also led the first performances of Strauss's *Friedenstag* and *Die Liebe der Danae*, and is universally acclaimed as one of the composer's finest interpreters. Krauss paces the music beautifully, and draws warm and incisive playing from the Großes Orchester des Reichsenders, Berlin. Perhaps the vocalism in this performance is not

quite on the level of the 1944 Vienna production, at least from the female leads. Viorica Ursuleac, a noted Strauss interpreter, sings well, with style, involvement, and a rich vocal quality. But her voice doesn't quite have the youthful glow that Reining brings to the Vienna performance. Erna Berger, a wonderful coloratura soprano, most certainly has the technique and charm for Zerbinetta's great aria. But the voice lacks Noni's weight and presence. Zerbinetta is a woman of the theater and the world, and Berger's assumption is perhaps just a bit too much on the girlish side. Berger also tires just a bit toward the close of her aria. I don't want to give the impression that Berger's performance is in any way subpar. But I do think it is Noni's that approaches the ideal. Helge Roswaenge's Bacchus, however, is ideal on just about every level. Not only does Roswaenge sing Bacchus's punishing music with breathtaking technical ease, and full-throated and full-hearted commitment, there is a great deal of poetry, and even hushed singing, in the Danish tenor's interpretation. The 1935 broadcast is a must for Roswaenge's contribution alone. But of course as I have suggested, there is much more to enjoy, including the contributions of the supporting cast (Milizia Korjus is Naiad).

I have previously heard the 1944 *Ariadne* via CD releases on the Preiser and Koch International labels. Likewise, there is an earlier Preiser issue of the 1935 Berlin broadcast. The Immortal Performances restorations are a significant improvement over all these prior versions. The Preiser and Koch International issues of the 1944 *Ariadne* had an admirably wide dynamic range, but also a considerable amount of resonance that results in a loss of definition and instrumental/vocal colors. This, by the way, is an effect that may be found in several Vienna and Berlin in-concert recordings from the period. Richard Caniell and Immortal Performances have restored this treasured performance with sound that removes the artificial ambience, and allows the voices and orchestra to be heard in a much more natural, pleasing, and musical way. Likewise, the IP remastering of the 1935 Berlin broadcast is far better than the Preiser, although that was more than acceptable in its own right. In the IP, the voices and orchestra emerge with greater warmth and definition. Even if you own the prior releases of these incomparable performances, you owe it to yourself to acquire the new IP set. And of course, you will get the Seefried Edinburgh recital in the bargain. Extensive and informative liner notes by Dewey Faulkner, a plot synopsis, and Richard Caniell's Recording Notes round out this sterling release. If you love Strauss and his glorious *Ariadne*, do not hesitate. Highest recommendation.

5 Stars-Superb restorations of two incomparable performances of Strauss's *Ariadne*, and a Seefried recital

---

Review by Henry Fogel  
March/April 2020 Fanfare Magazine

The centerpiece of this set is the famed 80th birthday celebration performance for Richard Strauss of his *Ariadne auf Naxos*. This rendering has been issued before, most notably on Preiser (reviewed in *Fanfare* 18:3 by James Miller). A direct A-B comparison of Immortal Performances's release with the Preiser was fascinating. When one compares the orchestral Prelude of both, one's first reaction is to prefer what appears to be the warmth and richness of sound of the Preiser. But once the singers appear, it

becomes apparent that Preiser achieved that warmth by adding a significant amount of reverberation. Very soon, one begins to prefer the clarity and crispness of the Immortal Performances version. Comparison with the constricted and congested Myto release shows an even greater superiority for Immortal Performances. I never heard the DG set, but Miller equates it with the Preiser. This set also includes the 1935 broadcast from the Berlin Radio of the opera portion of *Ariadne* without its Prologue. Here, Immortal Performances has achieved miraculous results. The only prior issue of which I am aware was a set of LPs on the BASF and Acanta labels, reviewed in *Fanfare* 8:2 by James Miller. The sound of those was close to unlistenable congested and distorted, but it has been cleaned up significantly here. The other bonus, in the best sonics of all, is a set of excerpts from a recital that Irmgard Seefried gave at the 1959 Edinburgh Festival. Richard Caniell, the producer of these transfers, discusses his work in some illuminating recording notes.

The 1944 *Ariadne* has long been admired perhaps more than it has been loved, but the improvement in sonics (including correct pitching throughout) reveals with more clarity than ever the wonders of the performance. A successful rendering of the title role is crucial in any performance of this opera, and Maria Reining certainly is triumphant here. Some have criticized a tendency on her part to scoop into notes, but I don't find it present to an objectional degree. Her voice is creamy, her identification with the music and with the composer's style is total, and her interactions with the composer and other characters in the Prologue are completely natural and persuasive. As the composer, Irmgard Seefried is equally impressive. This is early in Seefried's career, and her voice is pure and gleaming. She too seems inspired in her interactions with the music-master, the tenor, and the soprano (who are all putting different kinds of pressure on her to enhance their own interests in the opera to come). Because this is not only a live staged performance, but one given specifically for the 80th birthday of its composer who was present for the occasion, one senses that every one of the performers was "on."

In addition to Reining and Seefried, one must single out for praise Alda Noni, Strauss' own choice for the fiendish role of Zerbinetta and Paul Schöffler's Music Master. The former is vocally brilliant and very witty and the latter conveys the patience and frustration of the administrator who has to try to calm everyone down. Famed Heldentenor Max Lorenz is terrific as the tenor in the Prologue trying to prevent his music from being cut by the Composer. In the Opera portion, though, Strauss wrote a viciously difficult, high-lying part and Lorenz does sound strained by it. Karl Böhm's conducting here is freer and more expressive even than on his 1969 DG recording, reviewed perceptively by Huntly Dent on its Eloquence re-issue in *Fanfare* 39:1. Dent rightly points out that this was one of Böhm's favorite Strauss operas and demonstrates how it tells in the elegance and sensitivity of his conducting. I find even more of those qualities in this 1944 performance. The Prologue can easily turn into slapstick, or can just as easily be the boring stuff we have to sit through until we get to the Opera. In this performance it is fully engrossing, with Strauss' depiction of the plight of the composer (as seen through the eyes, admittedly, of a hardly unbiased composer himself) coming alive with wit and sensitivity.

The 1935 *Ariadne* benefits even more than the 1944 performance from Caniell's wizardry. Viorica Ursuleac has often been criticized for a slight edge in her voice, with many observing that much of her career was due to the fact that she was married to conductor Clemens Krauss. As heard in this transfer, however, she sounds very good. The voice is less creamy than Reining's, more focused, but it shines with a glow and

never becomes harsh. Ursuleac's range of vocal colors is narrower than that of Reining (or, for that matter, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Leonie Rysanek, and Jessye Norman, to name three great Ariadnes), but hers is overall an enjoyable and satisfying performance, if falling short of greatness. Erna Berger's Zerbinetta is positively brilliant, sweeter toned than Noni's. Helge Rosvaenge's Bacchus may be the finest on discs. He sails through Strauss' writing in the final duet as if it weren't difficult, although we know from virtually all other performances we've heard that it is. James Miller stated "if I had to name one recording that shows him off to best advantage this would be it."

The other unique asset of this performance is Clemens Krauss. As much as I enjoyed Böhm's conducting, I find a similar energy and wit combined with a slightly higher degree of warmth and flexibility in this performance. Those qualities have not been evident in prior transfers.

The bonus set of excerpts from a vocal recital by Irmgard Seefried, with the sensitive pianism of Erik Werba, just adds one more lovely extra to this fine three-disc set. One of the twentieth century's finest critics of singing, John Steane, says the following about her in *The Grand Tradition*: "What matters is that in her we have an artist of outstanding imaginative strength, and with that rare quality, presence; no body but Schwarzkopf (with Schumann and Lehmann in the preceding generation) can match her vividness in a comparable repertoire, and at her best she has an exhilaration and intensity all her own." He goes on to praise her as the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, as I have above, and the addition of her mastery of the songs of Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Strauss is a treasurable extra for these two *Ariadne* performances. In this recital we hear a singer who clearly cares about words as much as notes, and who never appears to be focusing solely on vocal production or sound. In three of Schumann's "Mary Stuart Songs," Seefried achingly portrays the tragic contents of the poems by Mary, Queen of Scots, and also in the music of what were to be Schumann's final songs. The piano part is also crucial, often carrying the most important material, and Werba rises to the occasion. Caniell has reproduced well the qualities of an excellent BBC broadcast.

As is usual with this label, the booklet is yet another treasure. No company reissuing important historic recordings adds as much value with the kind of supplementary material that is the norm for Immortal Performances. Dewey Faulkner's notes are insightful about the performances, and about the historical context of Austria and Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. Caniell's Recording Notes are also always enlightening. It is also worth pointing out the generosity of the discs. It would have been perfectly acceptable to fill three discs with the two *Ariadne* performances. The addition of the Seefried recital is just the kind of extra bonus we are getting used to from this source.

Most collectors will want at least one modern recording of Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*. I think there are a number of very fine ones, including Rysanek/Leinsdorf (RCA), Schwarzkopf/Karajan (EMI) and a wonderful Metropolitan Opera video (Norman/Levine/DG). But these two historic performances, particularly the famous 1944 one, belong in any serious opera collection as well, and they have never been presented as well as they are here.

Five stars: Excellent remastering of two historic *Ariadne auf Naxos* performances