

Salzburg Festival 2026

Manfred Honeck in conversation
on **Richard Strauss** and ***Ariadne auf Naxos*** and what
he passes on to young conductors.

(SF, 15 January 2026) From Richard Strauss to Manfred Honeck:

Ariadne auf Naxos was the first opera by Festival co-founder Richard Strauss to be performed at the Salzburg Festival – exactly 100 years ago. The composer also conducted the performance on 21 August 1926.

In 2026, Manfred Honeck will conduct the Vienna Philharmonic. Christina Nilsson will make her Salzburg debut. Ersan Mondtag makes his Salzburg directing debut.



Manfred Honeck conducts the 2026 new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* in Salzburg.
He thus follows Richard Strauss, who conducted a performance of his work exactly 100 years ago at the Festival.
Photo: Felix Broede

Manfred Honeck has been conducting at the Salzburg Festival since 2000. Since 2021, he has served as the jury chairman for the Herbert von Karajan Young Conductors Award. In 2026, Manfred Honeck will be prominently featured at the Salzburg Festival, filling three separate roles:

He will conduct the new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. He thus follows Richard Strauss, who conducted his work at the Festival exactly 100 years ago.

He appears with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the Großes Festspielhaus on 27 August – the native of Austria has served as the orchestra's music director since 2008. His work chairing the jury of the Young Conductors Award is also dear to his heart. On 17 August, the previous year's winner, Christian Blex, will conduct the ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra in the Prize Winner's Concert.

In conversation with the Salzburg Festival, Manfred Honeck offers insights into his perspective on the music of Festival co-founder Richard Strauss and the special challenges of *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

SF: If you were to describe Richard Strauss' music to someone who has never heard or come into contact with it, how would you try to convey the character of the music to such a person?

Manfred Honeck: Rich in colour, sumptuous and delicate. It pays attention to the various characters. I would recommend listening to the tone poems first and only then delve into the world of the operas. I think that is a good start for those who are not so familiar with Richard Strauss. His melodies and inventiveness are amazing.

SF: Let's talk about *Ariadne auf Naxos*: for the second version of the work, Molière's play *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* was replaced with a composed prelude. How would you characterize it?

Manfred Honeck: Basically, the prelude is one big recitative in which the individual characters – along with their petty jealousies, enmities and ambition – are very clearly portrayed by Richard Strauss in his music. We consciously tried to enable these little subtleties and nuances derived from the language to be optimally implemented. At the Haus für Mozart, that is an important consideration.

SF: The opera combines serene, comical elements with serious aspects. How do you view the role these contrasts play?

Manfred Honeck: I think these various attributes enrich the proceedings – you can't always be sad, and being cheerful all the time is also boring. I think this art of nuance and differentiation is very well executed in *Ariadne*. There are parts that are almost operetta-like, that you could sing along when you leave the opera. Then there are moments that delve deeply into Greek mythology, where you can feel that this is grand opera. The duality of *opera seria* and comedy is fundamentally inherent in *Ariadne* – let's not forget that in the story, the richest man in Vienna demands that comedy and *opera seria* take place simultaneously – a great challenge for the composer.

SF: Does that imply special challenges for you as a conductor, compared to other works?

Manfred Honeck: Indeed it does: we must not forget that Richard Strauss also composed *Salome*, *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*. Here, he reverts to a smaller orchestra: the strings are quite reduced. The winds – flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, two horns – are also somewhat reduced, but you find all of them in a classical orchestra setting. There's a bit of percussion, one trombone – it's more of a chamber orchestra, really. The surprising thing, however, is that this music sounds at times as if it were performed by a full orchestra, with an opulent sound. Why? Strauss had mastered the art of doubling certain melodies in certain instruments, creating the illusion of a large orchestra playing. I find it endlessly fascinating how Strauss produces such a rich palette of colours, even with a smaller orchestra. That is very typical for *Ariadne*.

SF: If you look at the opera's roles – two major soprano roles, each of them embodying a different concept of love and a different connection with it: would you say that these differences between Ariadne and Zerbinetta are also reflected in the music?

Manfred Honeck: This is something Strauss does very clearly. Zerbinetta is the one who loves freedom, who could love any man, and you can tell: this coquettish manner in which Strauss has composed it – those are difficult coloraturas he has devised, something Ariadne does not have in this form. Ariadne's lines are one of a piece, her melodies tend to be somewhat broader and courtlier. The contrast could not be clearer. Nor should one forget that Ariadne has been abandoned on this island in the midst of a profound depression and is close to death, and that Bacchus liberates her, so to speak. She cannot be like Zerbinetta. Zerbinetta does not have this past and this death-wish; she wants to live, and you can hear that incredibly clearly in her coloraturas.

SF: Do you have a special moment, a favourite spot in this opera?

Manfred Honeck: I would say that my favourite spot is probably the end – where the whole thing is close to dissolution and goes from ruins to hope and a world of love and peace, where Bacchus and Ariadne form a unit. To me, that is a great moment and never fails to uplift me. Nor should one forget the first part, the prologue. The prelude is designed as a recitative, and the subject of that conversation is: what will this opera be like, will all this work out? Many spoken words – those too are great moments in which Strauss illustrates the fear of the artist, of the composer: how will I ever manage this? Perhaps there are also vanities, then again friendships – it's all very audible in the prelude. Those are also moments where I have to say: he could not have found a better solution than this.

I was fortunate to have played *Ariadne* very frequently, with different conductors and casts, at the Vienna State Opera when I was still a violist, and I grew enormously fond of it. This is chamber music of the highest calibre, and for each role, you need singers who are able to act with considerable virtuosity. I can remember Jessye Norman as Ariadne or Edita Gruberova as Zerbinetta. Our cast will be no less stellar. It's a fantastic cast.

To me, it's also a great event because *Ariadne* was the first opera by Richard Strauss to be performed at the Salzburg Festival. It wasn't *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Elektra* or *Die Frau ohne Schatten* – it was, indeed, *Ariadne*, and to me it's just a beautiful thing that the Vienna Philharmonic plays in Salzburg year after year. Another aspect making this special to me is that it's my brother's last year as concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic.

SF: In addition to *Ariadne*, you will also conduct a concert at the Festival.

Manfred Honeck: Yes, I will be on a grand European tour with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and of course the Salzburg Festival is a must. I am looking forward to Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, and the pianist Alexandre Kantorow will play the solo in Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*. It is a great joy for me to go on tour with this fantastic orchestra, and to perform in Salzburg at the Großes Festspielhaus on 27 August.



Manfred Honeck conducts the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the Großes Festspielhaus
Photo: SF/Marco Borrelli

SF: As an internationally renowned conductor, what does it mean to you to chair the jury of the Herbert von Karajan Young Conductors Award?

Manfred Honeck: It means a lot to me, because this work allows me to see what young conductors are up to, and what the future will bring. Of course it's important to me to see great talents supported. It was no different in my case. Furthermore, I find the cooperation within the jury very interesting in its richness of ideas.

SF: Which pointers would you have been grateful to have had at the beginning of your conducting career? Or, put differently: what advice would you give your younger self?

Manfred Honeck: I would counsel patience above all else. It's no use being a shooting star for a short while and then to fade away quickly. Of course, hopefully there will always be the Karajans, who are able to stand at the very top from a young age. I think young artists should allow themselves to take shape, to give themselves time to grow. For everyone with an exceptional talent, the decisive moment comes.



Manfred Honeck has chaired the jury of the Herbert von Karajan Young Conductors Award in Salzburg since 2021. Here he is depicted on the right with the 2025 winner, Christian Blex. Photo: SF/Marco Borrelli

The German conductor Christian Blex will lead the ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra at the Salzburg Festival in the YCA Prize Winner's Concert on 17 August 2026, featuring works by Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Richard Strauss and Piotr I. Tchaikovsky.

Links to further information:

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/p/ariadne-auf-naxos-2026>

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/p/yca-preistraegerkonzert-orf-radio-symphonieorchester-wien-blex-2026>

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/p/pittsburgh-symphony-orchestra-honeck-2026>

SALZBURG FESTIVAL 2026

ARIADNE AUF NAXOS

Opera in one act and a prelude, Op. 60

(written 1911-1912, world premiere of the second version in 1916)

Libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

New Production

Haus für Mozart

6 performances between

Sun, 2 August and Fri, 28 August

Manfred Honeck Conductor

Ersan Mondtag Director / Sets / Costumes

Franck Evin Lighting

Alexander Pannier Video

Till Briegleb Dramaturgy

Kate Lindsey The Composer

Christina Nilsson Primadonna / Ariadne

Eric Cutler The Tenor / Bacchus

Ziyi Dai Zerbinetta

Johannes Silberschneider The Major-Domo

Christoph Pohl A Music Teacher

Jonas Hacker The Dance Master

Leon Košavić Harlequin

Michael Porter Scaramuccio

Lukas Enoch Lemcke Truffaldin

Theodore Browne Brighella

Jasmin Delfs Nayad

Anja Mittermüller (YSP Participant) Dryad

Marlene Metzger Echo

Fabio Dorizzi An Officer

and others

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/>

Ticket Purchases

Deadline for orders: 20 January 2026, online via www.salzburgerfestspiele.at

Direct sales starting on 27 March 2026

The Ticket Office of the Salzburg Festival is located at

Wiener-Philharmoniker-Gasse 3

5020 Salzburg

Austria

Tel. +43 662 8045 500

info@salzburgfestival.at

Press Tickets

Please submit your inquiries by emailing presse.karten@salzburgfestival.at.

Salzburg Festival

Hofstallgasse 1

5020 Salzburg

Austria

www.salzburgerfestspiele.at