



Ancient Abysses, New World Order

Press Text on the New Production *Ariadne auf Naxos*



Christina Nilsson (The Prima Donna / Ariadne), Ersan Mondtag (director / stage sets / costumes), Till Briegleb (dramaturgy) and Manfred Honeck (conductor) © SF/Andreas Kolarik

(SF, 17 July 2026) "Something is out of joint; the world order has shifted completely:" thus, director Ersan Mondtag defines the point of departure of his new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which he presented in a joint conversation with dramaturge Till Briegleb, conductor Manfred Honeck and soprano Christina Nilsson. The opera by Richard Strauss and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal was created during World War I, holding up a mirror to the upper class that had managed to avoid the war, insulated from the painful reality of most people. Mondtag and Briegleb have taken this concept of a closed society further, staging it as a time capsule on Mars.

An Aesthetic of Threat on Mars

"We used the urge of the superrich to build themselves a state within the state as a matrix," says Till Briegleb, naming Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, but also Peter Thiel's special development zone Próspera on the Honduran island of Roatán as real-life examples. The dramaturge, journalist and critic has been working with Ersan Mondtag since 2018, explaining their joint interdisciplinary work: "We always try to reinterpret opera stories with a certain political dimension." In *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Mondtag and Briegleb explore the consequences of turbocapitalism and astro-fantasies, moving the opera to a new location: the "desert island" of Naxos becomes the desert planet of Mars. The characters are part of a closed society, having left Earth behind and built a new order for itself. Security forces and guards protect this space: "We are creating a kind of aesthetic of threat. There are uniforms, all coded down to the last detail – all the way to the dressing gowns of the performers. There are plenty of entrances and exits in this architecture, but above all else stands the state, which controls everything," Ersan Mondtag explains.

Various forms of isolated time capsules had an atmospheric influence on the production and its set design: air-raid shelters during wars, sacred buildings of all religions, but also fictitious examples, such the one in Emir Kusturica's film *Underground* or Dracula's castle. Ersan Mondtag compares the stage sets to a kind of sacred building, adding: "We used Salzburg's architecture and arches as orientation, and the colours of the Haus für Mozart. This integrates the stage with the auditorium." After the prologue, there will be a break for resetting the stage: "The architecture in the second part stays the same as in the first, but there will be stage sets inserted into the interior, for the opera within the opera, for the performance within the performance." The production transforms „the desert into a snowy landscape“, with a freezing Ariadne and the cadavers of starved animals (an elephant, a lion and a monkey). This image "points to the present time, of course, and the potential destruction of nature". The director is keen to emphasize the seriousness: "You can read the original as an ironic take on opera. The second part of the opera opens an intriguing friction: is this irony or not? We intentionally leave that open. But we are not working with irony. Our setup on Mars is not ironic. We have built complex Mars landscapes: in the background, you see metal titans 100 metres high, robbing Mars of its resources; there is a journey through the universe; a kind of Hermes figure arrives by spaceship – this world is one we built, and we refer to the very serious aspect of Strauss' music." For their dream of a new society, people destroy Earth, says Till Briegleb. However, the result is the "rapid establishment of a social system that reproduces all the levels of eroticism, of love, enmity, envy, egoism, all the things we know from our society, in this time capsule as well. Thus, we really tried to extend this concept of the time capsule right into the architecture."



Christina Nilsson, Ersan Mondtag and Till Briegleb © SF/Andreas Kolarik

“Clichéd roles exist to be destroyed”

In the midst of this time capsule on Mars, we find Ariadne. The title role is sung by the Swedish soprano Christina Nilsson, making her Salzburg Festival debut in the double role of The Prima Donna / Ariadne. “Strauss brings out the beauty of the voice and allows us to use its full spectrum. He offers us all the sonic colours imaginable,” Nilsson enthuses, when asked to characterize Strauss’ music. While she describes The Prima Donna as “not the nicest person”, she also underlines the many facets of Ariadne’s character: “She may be the woman who was abandoned, but she is not depressed. It begins so quietly and beautifully, with a memory. I see so much force, strength and determination in her. She is a woman reawakening to life. That’s something one can bring out wonderfully in the music.” Till Briegleb emphasizes: “She is often reduced to her death wish. I think that’s totally wrong. When you truly read Hofmannsthal’s libretto with regard to Ariadne, you discover different facets. Her childhood memories, her purity, her lightness. And the death she imagines is really a transition to a different world, a transition she considers a mystery. It is a continuous exploration of the question how we can deal with death.” Ersan Mondtag makes Ariadne’s different facets visible by using dancers who express the emotions on the one hand, but also interact with the character on the other. “It’s like an organism,” Christina Nilsson says. “When I sing, the dancers take over and amplify the expression.”

The characters in *Ariadne auf Naxos* are plagued by clichés which Ersan Mondtag and Till Briegleb are intent to eliminate: “Such clichéd roles exist to be destroyed,” the director states. “In our production, the women are all very strong. It’s a relic of the time to portray female characters as weak. There are simple tricks to reinterpret that, and we have done so throughout the piece.” Furthermore, Mondtag points to the love story between the characters of Zerbinetta and the composer, which is in essence a love story between two women. The composer is a female role, sung here by Kate Lindsey. “Since we deconstruct the matrix of the figure, Kate becomes visible as Kate,” and the production recounts this

love story as it is already found “on the meta-level of the composition”. Till Briegleb adds that the point was not only to reinterpret the roles, but also to exaggerate them in order to expose “the structures this *opera buffa* is about”.

An “enormous palette of colours”: Richard Strauss’ tonal idiom

The conductor Manfred Honeck, a renowned Richard Strauss expert, confirms that the strong female characters are “very clearly recognizable” in the music. He explains that in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* – one of Strauss’ models for *Ariadne* – “Cherubino is not a man either. It’s fascinating how Strauss copied this idea and designed the Composer as a woman.” Zerbinetta expresses her seductive powers through coloratura, making her touching, tender moments surprising. “It’s incredible how Strauss translates this lively woman into music,” Honeck says, remembering Edita Gruberová as Zerbinetta in a Viennese production of *Ariadne* in the 1970s which he was involved in as a player in the Vienna Philharmonic. “This challenge involves an enormous palette of colours: drama, coloratura, passion, earnestness and voice-leading that might be Mozart’s – it’s all there. It’s the same with the Composer.” Asked about the Salzburg production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, he says: “It’s not a copy of the world premiere, but it’s set here in Salzburg in 2026. It’s nice that we go with the time, inviting other influences.” For him, this literal reaching for the stars and the setting on Mars brought the fascinating question of how to merge the director’s concept with the music. “Ersan was very open to ideas of how to stage these ideas musically.” A quintet in the style of the band Kraftwerk is part of the production. Furthermore, “we built a resounding body on stage. The stage sets work as an amplifier for the music,” Ersan Mondtag adds. Manfred Honeck began searching for suitable singers two years ago. “Everyone is incredibly motivated and well-matched,” the conductor concludes with satisfaction.



Manfred Honeck brought a second violin part from the archive of the Vienna State Opera to the event.
Right: Christina Nilsson © SF/Andreas Kolarik

Manfred Honeck has been associated with the Salzburg Festival for “a quarter of a century”, as the interim Artistic Director Karin Bergmann emphasized in her welcoming remarks. Almost for the same length of time, since 2008, Honeck has been chief conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which he leads in a concert at the Großes Festspielhaus on 27 August. Asked what fascinates him about Strauss’ music, he mentions the “transparency” which Strauss borrowed from Mozart to fashion this orchestration. At the same time, he is taken with the chamber music quality that Strauss manages to combine with “opulent, orchestral gestures”. “I love this language, this profundity. His tone poems are all operas without voices.” Honeck brought a second violin part from the archive of the Vienna State Opera to the press event. He points out how the musicians made their marks on the part, amounting to almost a chronicle of the times, for example: “Nowak, 1947. It says: ‘Peace.’ And then: ‘1954, still no treaty. 1955: finally, the treaty.’ That is so authentic.” *Ariadne auf Naxos* was the first opera by the Festival’s co-founder Richard Strauss which was performed at the Festival, exactly one hundred years ago. On 21 August 1926, the composer himself conducted a performance. In 2026, the premiere of *Ariadne auf Naxos* takes place at the Haus für Mozart on 2 August.

Photos of the press event can be found here:

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/photos/tt-ariadne-auf-naxos-2026>

Richard Strauss (1864–1949)

Ariadne auf Naxos

Opera in one act with a prologue Op. 60

(composed 1911–1912, second version premiered in 1916)

Libretto by **Hugo von Hofmannsthal**

New Production

CREATIVE TEAM

Manfred Honeck Conductor

Ersan Mondtag Director / Sets / Costumes

Franck Evin Lighting

Alexander Pannier Video

Ashley Alexandra Wright Choreography

Till Briegleb Dramaturgy

CAST

Kate Lindsey The Composer

Christina Nilsson The Prima Donna / Ariadne

Eric Cutler The Tenor / Bacchus

Ziyi Dai Zerbinetta

Johannes Silberschneider The Major-Domo

Christoph Pohl A Music-Master

Jonas Hacker A Dancing-Master

Blaž Stajniko* A Wigmaker

Fabian-Jakob Balkhausen A Footman

Leon Košavić Harlequin

Michael Porter Scaramuccio

Lukas Enoch Lemcke Truffaldino

Theodore Browne Brighella

Jasmin Delfs Naiad

Anja Mittermüller* Dryad

Marlene Metzger Echo

Fabio Dorizzi An Officer

Vienna Philharmonic

* YSP participants

Premiere: 2 August, with five further performances through **28 August**
Haus für Mozart

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