
STORKS AND OSTRICHES: AN EARLY PARODY OF STRAUSS'S 'ARIADNE AUF NAXOS'

Chris Walton



Max Conrad in 1937

The name of the conductor Max Conrad is hardly one to conjure with. He admitted as much himself in the first paragraph of his memoirs, published in 1956:

To be sure, I was born in Berlin, as was [Bruno Walter]; he attended the Askanische High School in Berlin – as did I; he left it without finishing his school leaving certificate – as did I; he studied music with teachers from the Stern Conservatory – as did I; and he soon became famous – and I ... oh dear, now it becomes irregular, like a Greek verb ...¹

For more than 30 years, Conrad (1872–1963) played a major role in the operatic life of Zurich. In the greater scheme of things, this might perhaps be regarded as of little significance, for Zurich's was then but a theatre in the outer provinces of the German-speaking world. Nor did Conrad achieve recognition by conducting important premières there, as did other men (such as Robert F. Denzler, who conducted the world premières of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* and Berg's *Lulu* in the 1930s, or Hans Rosbaud, who conducted the staged première of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* in 1957). Conrad did train the flower maidens for the first (legal) performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* outside Bayreuth, given in Zurich in 1913 – but the première itself was conducted by the chief kapellmeister, Lothar Kempster. To be sure, Conrad did conduct the world première of the revised version of Othmar Schoeck's fine expressionist opera *Penthesilea* in 1928; but that is hardly enough to ensure anyone posthumous fame.

Conrad was, however, a keen observer of his times. Not only did most of the great names of the German dramatic and operatic stage grace the boards in Zurich during his long years of service, but the theatre in which he worked proved to be an early stopping-off point for a number of men who later acquired greatness. These all figure large in Conrad's lively memoirs. Among the latter group, there is Alfred Reucker, director of the Zurich City Theatre from 1901 to 1921, who subsequently left to head the Dresden State Theatre, and was there responsible for a host of important world premières in the ensuing years. Then there was Alfred Jerger, who conducted briefly in Zurich in 1913, but who was discovered by Reucker to possess both a remarkable voice and a commanding stage presence, and who went on to become one of the finest dramatic baritones of his era.² Wilhelm Furtwängler also began his operatic career in Zurich. He was Max Conrad's successor as *répétiteur* in 1906, when the latter moved one rung up in the theatre's musical hierarchy. Conrad remembered many years later how Furtwängler would practise by conducting at empty chairs arranged in orchestra fashion in the living room of his relatives

¹ Max Conrad: *Im Schatten der Primadonnen. Erinnerungen eines Theaterkapellmeisters* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1956), p. 5.

² See Conrad, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–7.

in Zurich. Conrad is also the only source for a story of how Furtwängler almost died when he fell through the ice while skating on the frozen Zurich Lake in the winter of 1906–7; this tale was transformed by the writer Friedrich Huch into the final scene of his novel *Enzio*, written three years afterwards.³



Max Conrad with the Flower Maidens for *Parsifal* in Zurich, 1913

Conrad was also a composer, and enjoyed a certain local success with his operettas, his incidental music for the theatre and with occasional works – such as a large-scale cantata in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Schiller's death, performed in Zurich in 1905.⁴ His works for the theatre include incidental music commissioned for a production of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Und Pippa tanzt* under the direction of the author himself⁵; and Conrad's incidental music for *As you like it* (as *Wie es euch gefällt*) was on at least one occasion even performed at the Schiller Theatre in Berlin.⁶ Conrad seems to have been a rare example of a man aware that his talents, both as composer and conductor, were modest, and so kept his ambitions on that same scale. He retired from the Zurich Theatre in 1937. In 1944, Conrad published and dedicated to his former place of employment an opera guide that reflects his intimate knowledge of the operatic repertoire, and which remains a useful reference book today.⁷ He died in Zurich in 1963.

Conrad's memoirs, published in 1956, are written in a lively, amusing prose. Given his obvious sense of humour and his fondness for writing for the stage, it should perhaps not surprise us that Conrad on at least two occasions indulged in writing an operatic parody. The first of these was a version of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, to a text by Emil Rameau (later one of the leading actors of the early German film) and performed at the 'Bei-Reucker Festspiele' (literally, the 'Chez [Alfred] Reucker Festival') at the Zurich City Theatre in 1905.⁸

³ See Huch: *Enzio* (Munich: Martin Mörike, 1910). Furtwängler and Huch became closely acquainted when both lived in Munich; the latter's sister also bore the former an illegitimate daughter. See the chapter 'Friedrich Huch. Othmar, Willi und der kleine Vogel', in the present writer's *Othmar Schoeck und seine Zeitgenossen* (Winterthur: Amadeus, 2002), in particular p. 38.

⁴ The score of this *Kantate zur Jahrhundertfeier von Schillers Todestag* is held in Conrad's archives in the Zentralbibliothek Zürich, shelfmark Mus NL 43: A 13.

⁵ Score and parts have survived in Conrad's archives: Mus NL 43: A 16.

⁶ Score and parts have survived in Conrad's archives: Mus NL 43: A 18.

⁷ Max Conrad: *Neuer Führer durch Oper und Operette* (Zurich: Scientia, 1944). A second, revised and expanded edition appeared in 1947.

⁸ Printed in Zurich by Meyer and Hensess in 1905. Rameau's subsequent career was many-faceted, ranging from work with the Max Reinhardt Ensemble and scriptwriting for the early silent German horror film to a late career in Hollywood, including a performance alongside Angela Lansbury in *Gaslight*. See the present writer's article 'Henpecked Heroes, Mummies and Gaslight: A forgotten Wagner parody by Emil Rameau', in: *Wagner* Vol. 24, No. 2, November 2003, pp. 73–99.

:: Künstlerfest 1913 ::

☞ **Einmaliges Gastspiel** ☜

des weltberühmten Theaterdirektors

Emanuel Striese

mit seiner Elite-Truppe

☞ Indem ich hoffen darf, ja der festen Ueberzeugung bin, durch die Aufführung des vorliegenden Sensationsdramas von dem berühmten Futuristen-Duo Hugo Hoffnungslos und Richard Storch, dem "geehrten Publikum von hier und den benachbarten Ortschaften einen höchst bedeutenden Genuss zu verschaffen, erlaube ich mir darauf hinzuweisen, dass ich weder Mühe noch Kosten geschenkt habe, für Ausstattung der Bühne, glänzende Kostüme, der damaligen historischen Zeit Rechnung tragend, durch Auftreten des gesamten Künstlerpersonals nebst Gästen und entsprechend pompöser Beleuchtung und Musik, zu dieser ausserordentlichen Darbietung alles aufgeboren zu haben.

Emanuel Striese.

Uraufführung

Zum allerersten Mal

Uraufführung

Nur einmaliges Gastspiel

Thaliadne auf Pleitos

oder: **Thespis im Dalles**

Von Hugo Hoffnungslos. — Musik von Richard Storch. — Zu spielen nach einem Vorspiel von Volière

Gesang!

Tanz!

Glänzende Ausstattung!

Personen des Schauspiels:

- Jardin
- Ein Hausknecht
- Ein Dienstmädchen

Personen der Oper:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------|
| Thaliadne | 2. Binninger | |
| Küchlinetta | 1.) | Waggis |
| Harlekino | 2.) | |
| Bacchus Löwenthal, Theateragent | 3.) | |
| 1. Binninger | Echo | |

☞ Victualien werden **heute** nicht in Zahlung genommen!

Hochachtungsvoll

Emanuel Striese, Direktor.

Inhaber hoher Auszeichnungen. Besitzer des Kunstscheins für ganz Europa.

Emil Birkhäuser, Basel.

Conrad's music for this is no longer extant, though a printed copy of the libretto has survived in his archives, held today by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich. The second case was a parody of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, one of the earliest musical parodies of that composer.

The first performance of any opera by Richard Strauss in Zurich was of *Salome*, which took place on 26 April 1907, just one-and-a-half years after the work's world première. Reucker was keen to produce the composer's subsequent operas as soon as possible; *Der Rosenkavalier*, for example, was given in Zurich on 2 March 1911, just over a month after its world première in Dresden. Strauss's next work, *Ariadne auf Naxos* (coupled with the *Bürger als Edelmann*), was also given in Zurich within weeks of its world première in Stuttgart on 25 October 1912. At the first Zurich performance, Max Conrad was charged with playing the piano part in the *Bürger*.⁹ Conrad wrote his parody of *Ariadne* shortly afterwards, describing its genesis in just a few words in his memoirs: '... another time, we put on a parody of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which had just come out. On account of our chronic deficit, we called it *Thaliadne auf Pleitos*'¹⁰ – this being a play on the name of the Greek muse of the theatre, Thalia, and on the German word *pleite*, meaning 'skint'.

The text, according to reviews of the first performance, was written by a fellow member of the Theatre personnel, one Ludwig Kaase. The music has survived in Conrad's estate, as have two posters, one for a performance in Zurich, the other for one in Basle. Upon the reverse of the latter is printed a different version of the libretto from that in the manuscript score. Since neither poster bears a date or the name of a real-life venue, both were presumably printed for distribution on the evening of performance (in neither case was *Thaliadne* the only item on the programme). We know only the date of the Zurich première, which, according to a review in the *Zürcher Post* of 4 February 1913, took place at the Theatre Ball, held in the Hotel Baur au Lac on 1 February. (Reviews also exist in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and the *Tages-Anzeiger* of a performance at a ball the following Saturday, 8 February, during the weekend of the Zurich Carnival or 'Fasnacht' festivities). Both performances were accompanied by Conrad at the piano. The reviewers of the above-mentioned papers were unanimous in judging *Thaliadne* to be the highlight of the evening; the critic of the *Tages-Anzeiger* expressed the certain belief that, if played in the main city theatre at Carnival time, *Thaliadne* would undoubtedly bring in a full house.

The date of the Basle performance remains unknown. Carnival time would again have been the most likely, and since Basle celebrates its Carnival on the Monday to the Wednesday after Zurich's weekend celebrations, this is not impossible. *Thaliadne* would have been well-suited to performance there, for one of the event's principal traditions, still very much alive, is of poking fun at topical issues, the foibles of public figures and the like. During these three days, the pubs and restaurants of the city everywhere become impromptu venues for cabaret-like performances of satirical songs known as 'Schnitzelbäängg'. However, the main Basle papers do not mention any performance during that year's Carnival, so it might have been scheduled a few weeks later in order to follow the first performance there of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which took place on 24 February 1913.¹¹

⁹ Conrad: *Im Schatten der Primadonnen*, p. 136.

¹⁰ Conrad: *Im Schatten der Primadonnen*, pp. 170–1.

¹¹ See Fritz Weiss: *Das Basler Stadttheater 1834–1934. Gedenkschrift zum hundertjährigen Bestehen des Stadttheaters* (Basle: Benno Schwabe, 1934), p. 191.

The text was obviously adapted to suit the local audience. Whereas in the score, the secondary characters are named 'Zürcher' and 'Schlierseer' (citizens of Zurich and nearby Schliersee respectively), the Basle text has two 'Binninger' – citizens of Binningen, a suburb of Basle – and three 'Wäggis', stock characters from the Basle *Fasnacht*. The latter can still be seen by the dozen today, during the three days every year when Basle comes to a virtual standstill to celebrate its Carnival.

In Conrad's parody, Thaliadne bemoans both empty houses and the lack of public monies for the opera. She is saved by 'Bacchus Löwenthal', who promises a new contract, and – to bring in the public – an operetta by Leo Fall and a production of *Parsifal* (of which the Zurich première was in fact to take place the following 13 April 1913). Thaliadne is ecstatic, and exits with Bacchus, whose designs on her – so we are assured by 'Harlekino' and 'Küchlinetta' – are more than operatic ('Thaliadne is caught. / He'll get her to do everything now / He is cunning and she is stupid!',¹² they sing). A loud kiss is heard offstage just before the curtain closes. The character of 'Harlekino' is presumably a reference to the latest rival to the opera in the public's affections, namely the cinema (in German: 'Kino'). According to the poster, the play is produced by the troupe of 'Emanuel Striese' – named after the unscrupulous director in the well-known comedy about a travelling theatre company, *Der Raub der Sabinerinnen* (*The Rape of the Sabine Women*), written in 1889 by Franz and Paul von Schönthan. The music of Conrad's parody (just eight pages long) is typical of the genre, beginning with a quotation from *Ariadne auf Naxos*, but thereafter running through a whole medley of quotations from other works, including Bizet's *Carmen*, Schubert's famous *Marche militaire* in D major, and popular Swiss tunes such as the 'Bernese March' still beloved by Swiss marching bands today (and, *nota bene*, a staple musical feature of the fife bands at the Basle Carnival).

The theatres of Zurich and Basle were both in a parlous financial state at this time. Zurich suffered from a constantly-growing deficit. Its employees were engaged for only nine months in the year and had no proper pension fund (the director Alfred Reucker had nevertheless, in the space of twelve years, succeeded in increasing gradually the number of months they were employed from seven and a half in 1900). Furthermore, the number of tickets sold had undergone a noticeable decrease since 1910¹³ (hence Thaliadne's cry: 'Terror has often seized me, / When I gazed down from the stage / And saw emptiness'¹⁴ – though the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* also saw in this a specific reference to the poor attendance of *Ariadne* just a few weeks earlier¹⁵). The fact that Zurich was planning a production of *Parsifal* naturally brought it much-needed local, national and even international publicity. That production was made possible by a donation of Fr. 31,000, and was followed shortly afterwards by numerous, further donations totalling Fr. 60,000 that helped to keep the theatre afloat.¹⁶ An application to the city for further funds was being planned when the First World War broke out just over a year later. Financial constraints meant that the theatre had to sack all its personnel and re-employ them on new contracts that were even less attractive than before.

¹² 'Thaliadne ist gefangen. / Er kriegt sie zu Allem 'rum, / Er ist schlau und sie ist dumm!'

¹³ See *Zürcher Stadttheater. Die ersten fünf und zwanzig Jahre im neuen Hause 1891–1916. Erinnerungsblätter*, ed. Theater-Aktiengesellschaft Zürich (Zurich: Fretz, 1916), p. 18.

¹⁴ 'Schauder hat mich oft erfasst, / Wenn ich von der Bühne stierte, / Und die Leere konstatierte.'

¹⁵ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* No. 42. Tuesday, 11 February 1913, second morning edition. Author anonymous.

¹⁶ See *Zürcher Stadttheater. Die ersten fünf und zwanzig Jahre* [etc.], p. 19.

The text of *Thaliadne* remains humorous today, as does its music – but there again, complaints about bad pay, empty houses, inadequate public funding and sexually predatory operatic agents have lost none of their topicality. The poet and composer of the work are given as 'Hugo Hoffnungslos' and 'Richard Storch' respectively – namely, 'Hugo Hopeless' and 'Richard Stork', a parodistic play on 'Hugo Hofmannsthal' and 'Richard Strauss': the real composer's last name being the German word for 'ostrich'.¹⁷

Richard Strauss was no stranger to Zurich, having performed there since the late 1890s.¹⁸ However, Max Conrad seems not to have made his personal acquaintance until January 1917, when the composer came on a short tour to Switzerland with the troupe of the Mannheim Court Theatre. The work he conducted was the new, revised version of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which he had completed the previous year, and which had been first performed in Vienna on 4 October 1916. Strauss returned to Zurich in May 1917 to conduct *Elektra* and *Don Giovanni* with the Zurich theatre's own forces. We know that the two men met, because Conrad himself relates a conversation with Strauss about the specially-made piano upon which the latter played the recitatives in *Don Giovanni*. Strauss apparently also wrote in advance to Conrad to explain how to reduce the complement of wind instruments for *Elektra* (though that letter has not survived in Conrad's papers, it is mentioned in a book written by a personal acquaintance to whom Conrad had presumably shown the original).¹⁹ It was also during these visits that Strauss 'discovered' Alfred Jerger, whom he recommended to the Munich Opera, and whom he later chose to sing the first Mandyka in *Arabella*.

On Strauss's later visits to Zurich, Conrad served as a partner in the card game 'skat', about which Strauss was so passionate. (The last words Strauss ever said to him, when he visited the composer in the Verenhof Hotel in Baden after the Second World War, were 'Don't you know a third man who can join in a game of skat?').²⁰ The fact that two 'Zürcher' in *Thaliadne* leave the stage to go and play cards almost immediately after the opening of the parody might just even be a reference to Strauss's own passion for cards, which was presumably already common knowledge in the operatic community. Sadly, no letters of either man to the other have survived in their respective archives that could help to throw any light on their (admittedly tenuous) relationship.

In the summer of 1917, not long after his appearances in Zurich, Strauss wrote the libretto for his next opera, *Intermezzo*. As is well-known, this was based on an episode in Strauss's own life. A decade earlier, his wife Pauline had intercepted a note sent to her husband by a girl of whom she knew nothing, and which she now took as firm proof of marital infidelity. She had apparently already decided upon drastic action before the matter was explained as a case of mistaken identity, the note having been intended for another man. Strauss was determined to make this into an opera, though his librettist Hofmannsthal showed no interest in the topic. Strauss then attempted

¹⁷ Strictly speaking, the word for 'ostrich' is 'Strauß', though the 'ß' – originally the German Gothic script for 'sz' – is commonly written as 'ss'. This is also the distinguishing factor between the two composers whose surnames are, in English, always written in an identical manner: Richard Strauss, but Johann Strauß.

¹⁸ As an example: in January 1898, Strauss accompanied his wife in several of his songs, and – on the same programme – conducted the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra in *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

¹⁹ See Martin Hürlimann: *Vom Stadttheater zum Opernhaus. Zürcher Theatergeschichte* (Zurich & Stuttgart: Werner Claasen, 1980), p. 55.

²⁰ Conrad: *Im Schatten der Primadonnen*, p. 154.

to interest Hermann Bahr in writing a libretto. Bahr began work on it, and it was he who first suggested the name of 'Storch' for the main character, in a scenario that he sent to Strauss on 5 October 1916 – the original name was to have been 'Kranich' ('crane'; the character is, however, still an archaeology professor, not the kapellmeister that he later became). Differences (albeit amicable) between the two men about the work led to Bahr's suggestion that the composer should write his own text. This he then did, though the music was not finished until 1923, with the first performance taking place in Dresden in 1925. On that occasion, the singers wore masks to make them look like Strauss and his wife, while the sets were designed as a faithful copy of the inside of the Strauss villa in Garmisch.

It is an interesting matter of synchronicity that Strauss's *alter ego* in the opera bears the surname 'Storch', just as does the fictitious composer of *Thaliadne* (though in the latter, the real composer's first name was retained, while Strauss, understandably, gave a different first name to his character: 'Robert'). This could naturally be a matter of sheer coincidence. If Bahr, at Strauss's own prompting, wished to parody the composer himself, then to take another bird's name would be an obvious choice. (Although the word 'Strauss' has two further meanings besides 'ostrich' – namely, 'a bouquet of flowers' and 'struggle' or 'battle' – their parodistic possibilities are not obviously as rich, and it was as an ostrich that Strauss had already been portrayed in contemporary caricatures).

The chronology might tempt one to conclude that Conrad's parody in some wise influenced *Intermezzo*, though there is (sadly) not a whit of proof. To be sure, Conrad wrote his parody of *Ariadne auf Naxos* for performance in 1913, while Bahr and Strauss only decided upon the

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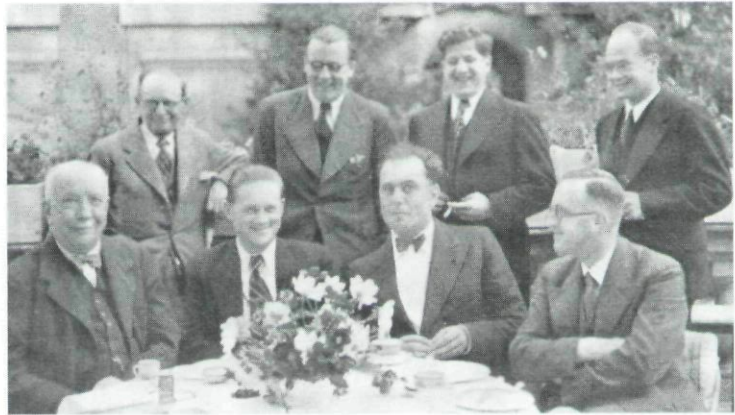
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name for their character over three years later. And it is not wholly impossible that the musical community of Zurich or Basle might have spread the news of Conrad's amusing Strauss parody beyond the borders of Switzerland, and that either Strauss or Bahr's wife, the leading dramatic soprano Anna Bahr-Mildenburg, might just have heard of it through the musicians' grapevine; and since Bahr's own plays were performed regularly in Zurich from the 1907/8 season onwards, we have a further possible point of contact. But we can be confident that Strauss did not become personally acquainted with Conrad until he conducted in Zurich in early 1917 (as it happens, it was Anna Bahr-Mildenburg who sang Klytemnästra in *Elektra* in Zurich in May of that year). Given Strauss's known sense of humour and the element of parody already present in his own music (one thinks, for example, of the waltzes in *Rosenkavalier*), it is quite possible that someone will have mentioned to him the existence of *Thaliadne* during his visit (or perhaps it was even Conrad who did so).



Zurich, circa 1946 (?): Max Conrad (above left), with (seated, left to right) Richard Strauss, Robert F. Denzler, Hans Swarowsky, Willi Schuh

There is one last coincidence that might, or might not, be significant. Bahr was due to give a lecture tour in Switzerland in late September and early October 1916, though it was cancelled at short notice.²¹ As mentioned above, it was on 5 October 1916 that he sent Strauss the scenario in which the hero's name is changed to 'Storch'. Did Bahr, while in contact with his Swiss colleagues in preparation for his lecture tour, learn of the existence of Conrad's parody? Did the impending première of the new version of *Ariadne* (given in Vienna on 4 October 1916) prompt one of his Swiss acquaintances to mention Conrad's parody of 1913? If so, was it perhaps Conrad's parody after all that brought about the transformation of Bahr's archaeology professor 'Albert Kranich' into Strauss's composer 'Robert Storch'? We shall probably never know, and must ascribe the matter to sheer synchronicity: a trivial, if not unintriguing, footnote to musical history. But Strauss and Bahr were no doubt aware that the best way to outdo an existing parody is to parody it oneself. If this is what they indeed did, then the last laugh was certainly with the ostrich.

Editorial note: the originals of the photographs used to illustrate this article are not available and they have therefore been reproduced from a published source, with some inevitable loss of quality.

²¹ See Joseph Gregor: *Meister und Meisterbriefe um Hermann Bahr* (Vienna: Bauer, 1947), p. 95.

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