

---

# UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

MARK BERRY

---

As the *Capriccio* Prelude begins, we enter musically and historically into a mordent-ornamented and mordantly ironic conversation. It is both playful and with higher stakes than Strauss might previously have imagined; it seems to be a conversation that has been in progress for some time prior to our eavesdropping. What might we have heard, had we tuned in earlier? We both want and do not want to know, like the Countess Madeleine herself with her impossible choice between words and music; and the impossible choices Strauss, and we, must face.

*Capriccio*'s opening string sextet – the conceit being that it is itself a new work by the composer Flamand – had already been performed before the opera's 1942 premiere. The sextet's first performance was given at the villa of Baldur von Schirach, the Vienna *Gauleiter* who helped Strauss to secure his Belvedere home and who concluded an agreement that would have had Strauss play a role in furthering Viennese musical life in return for protection for his Jewish daughter-in-law Alice and his grandsons. (They would not have to wear the Star of David in public and the boys would enjoy the privilege of an 'Aryan' education.) Schirach had acted as patron to the 1941 Mozart Week of the German Reich, held in Vienna, during which Goebbels had given a speech at the State Opera declaring that Mozart's 'music rings out every evening over homeland and front. It is part of what our soldiers are defending against the wild assault of Eastern barbarism.' Schirach was one of the two defendants who spoke against Hitler at Nuremberg (the other being Albert Speer), and he would serve 20 years in Spandau Prison; he was released in 1966.

In negotiating with Schirach, Strauss was at one level simply – or not so simply – acting as he had long done with patrons, royal, noble, political, or otherwise. *Ariadne auf Naxos* had shown that, though the patron called the tune, the artist might still retain integrity. Whether that were the case in such a radically different situation from that of *Ariadne* is another matter; now the musical arch-manipulator – Strauss always knows how to elicit the right response, even, perhaps especially, when one knows that one is being used – was himself manipulated.

What should we make of an opera conceived and first performed in such circumstances? It is hardly a work of overt protest, though how could it be? In its 'aristocratic' refinement, both verbally and musically, it stands at one level about as distant from the catastrophe enveloping Europe in the 1930s and 40s as one could imagine. Yet when one considers it more deeply, all sorts of difficulties (intentional or otherwise) emerge, indeed defiantly present themselves. This might seem facile, but the very setting in France has resonances. Moreover, to have the Countess comparing the musical merits of Rameau *vis-à-vis* Couperin at this time in Nazi Germany is perhaps more telling than one might think. Brahms might have edited Couperin, but one will struggle to find Couperin's name or his music in Third Reich performances and musicology. Even leaving aside matters of

nationality, such composers were not part of the musical mainstream; indeed, many *composers* would not necessarily have been well acquainted with their music. Strauss certainly was, and showed this through his composition, sometimes through direct quotation – for instance the ‘Air italien’ from Rameau’s *Les Indes galantes*, when the composer is mentioned – and at other times through allusion. There seems, then, to be an assertion of humanist, perhaps aristocratic, values, lightly done, as needs must, yet which connects well with Strauss’s increasing re-immersion in the work of Goethe, with *Metamorphosen* as its ultimate fruit.

The apparently apolitical becomes highly political, whatever the straightforward ‘intention’. Arguably true, yet the Rococo – neo-Rococo? – setting cannot help but seem like a refuge, a retreat. We have, perhaps, returned to the *Rosenkavalier* problem, intensified, for retreating from harmonic experiment after *Elektra* was one thing, but withdrawing from a world of war and genocide quite another. Even in 18th-century terms, the aristocratic salon with exquisite manners and rarefied aesthetic debate contrasts sharply with what we know was to come after 1789. The alleged ‘truth’ of revolutionary art exemplified by the studio of Jacques-Louis David, let alone the Paris of the *sans-culottes*, seems distant indeed. Yet we can hardly avoid considering it. Perhaps surprisingly, this was just the sort of setting favoured by Nazi cultural policy. Goebbels wanted *Unterhaltung* (entertainment), not Wagnerian challenge. *Capriccio* is not unusual in offering an 18th-century setting. What is unusual, though not unique, is the combination of that setting with explicit and implicit reflections upon the nature of art and its relationship with its historical context. Masks and games both gratify and haunt: Straussian detachment and irony works its wonders through posing questions without evident responses (at least from the composer). In context, this was a reinstatement of the artistic criticism that so troubled Goebbels, who had requested that journals simply report upon the content of a piece rather than attempting assessment of its aesthetic quality.

Clemens Krauss, a skilled careerist, conducted the 1942 Munich premiere (with his wife Viorica Ursuleac singing the role of the Countess). He secured the premiere by persuading Goebbels, with whom Strauss had once again fallen out of favour, to assume patronage as part of a Strauss festival mounted in the honoured *Hauptstadt der Bewegung*. (The ‘Capital of the Movement’: Munich was always more palatable, more ‘home’ to the Nazis than ‘red Berlin’.) The director Rudolf Hartmann was present at the premiere, and recalled it thus (arguably with a dose of sugary romanticism that tells its own story):

Who among the younger generation can really imagine a great city like Munich in total darkness, or theatre goers picking their way through the blacked-out street with the aid of small torches giving off a dim blue light through a narrow slit? All this for the experience of the *Capriccio* premiere. They risked being caught in a heavy air raid, yet their yearning to hear Strauss’s music, their desire to be part of a festive occasion and to experience a world of beauty beyond the dangers of war led them to overcome all these material problems... Afterwards it was difficult to relinquish the liberating and uniting atmosphere created by the artistic quality of the new work. But outside the blackened city waited, and one’s way homewards was fraught with potential danger.

Strauss's aestheticism almost seemed confirmed in such an experience. What might once have seemed anti-political now offered an alternative or complementary community to that of the 'real' world.

Aerial bombing would very soon incinerate the Munich Nationaltheater. Wartime performances would nevertheless be heard subsequently in Darmstadt, in Dresden (whose destruction lay close) and, almost inevitably given Schirach's patronage and predilections, in Vienna. Since so much of the drama concerns itself with artistic patronage, we almost seem invited by the material, even despite the composer, to consider the patronage of Schirach and Goebbels. How do we read in context a work in which it is the patroness, the Countess, who insofar as anyone can, resolves or, perhaps better, suspends dramatic conflicts?

La Roche, moreover, takes an affectionate cue from the Jewish impresario Max Reinhardt, an old and valued collaborator of Strauss from the premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier*, even before the two men played their part in the foundation of the Salzburg Festival. In this context, it becomes crucially important, even a case of dissent, that La Roche/Reinhardt, riled by the impudence of the callow poet and composer, has his say, above all in his dignified panegyric to the theatre. His monologue is boastful. Yet what La Roche says of himself – 'Without my kind, where would the theatre be? – applies to art more generally. Art chips away at the political present's would-be totalitarianism. What might in *Ariadne* – dedicated to Reinhardt, its first director – have concerned itself more exclusively with the business of putting together and putting on an opera, takes on a different light in different times.

There may also be an echo of Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, itself a defence of aristocratic culture, albeit composed during World War I rather than World War II, the first performance taking place in Munich in 1917. In a stroke of irony (perhaps someone should write an opera about this!) Pfitzner would be interned opposite Strauss's Garmisch villa in 1945. A presentiment closer to home might be the attack in Strauss's second opera, *Feuersnot* (1901) by Kunrad upon the *Wagnerphilister* of Munich. If only, then, Strauss had not joined the party he had once excoriated by signing, alongside Pfitzner, Hans Knappertsbusch, and several others, the 1933 protest by the 'Richard Wagner City of Munich' against 'Mr Thomas Mann', the 'national restoration of Germany... [having] taken on definite form'. There was nothing necessarily 'National Socialist' about the protest; indeed, it had more in common with a far more conservative form of nationalism. Its defensive, philistine attitude towards Mann's brilliant, provocative portrayal of Wagner as a 'cultural Bolshevik', and its acknowledgement of Hitler's movement as a national saviour nevertheless did none of the signatories any credit.

The outside world will not cease intruding. Schirach was not the most favoured of the Nazi establishment by 1942, his criticism of conditions attending deportation of the Jews having annoyed the high command. Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler would in turn find occasion, even at this point when they might have had more pressing concerns, to visit petty humiliations upon Strauss, ensuring that he receive no public honour. Strauss's conduct was not that of a moral beacon; still less so was Schirach's. Yet that does not equate them with Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler. Strauss's accommodationism, 'real' yet not without limits,

was owed partly to his need to safeguard his grandsons Richard and Christian from the danger they faced. Somehow it all sounds very much more 'real' when one names them. *Wort oder Ton* – 'words or music?' – is far from the only question *Capriccio* asks us.

Mark Berry is Lecturer in Music at Royal Holloway College, University of London. His publications include *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's Ring* (Ashgate, 2006) and articles on *Parsifal*, *Moses und Aron*, Theodor Adorno and Mozart operas. His book *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from 'Parsifal' to Nono* will be published in 2014 by Boydell and Brewer; it contains a chapter on Strauss and *Capriccio*