

## Richard Strauss' *Komponist*: the journey of a role, from soprano to mezzo

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the changes in casting of the role of *Komponist* in Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The aim of the article is to establish the timeline when this originally soprano role became a staple of the mezzo-soprano category. The research involves an examination of the historical archives of international opera houses such as the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Vienna State Opera, the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, and the Royal Opera House in London. The conclusion reveals that the shift in voice type took place gradually between the 1960s and 1970s. The conclusion also proposes that the reason for this change lies in the development of the mezzo-soprano's subcategories, which coincides with this period in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Key-words: *opera, soprano, mezzo-soprano, Fach, repertoire, Ariadne auf Naxos*

### 1. Introduction

Voice classification is ubiquitous to the operatic experience: singers train for years to perform the roles of a specific category, and connoisseur audiences are familiar with the voice-types of famous characters from the operatic canon (e.g. Carmen is a mezzo, Rigoletto is a baritone, etc.). Historically, some roles have maintained their category, while others fluctuated in their assignation quite significantly. This article is focusing on one of the many roles which changed classification throughout its performance history: Richard Strauss' *Komponist*, in *Ariadne auf Naxos*. In the initial performances of the (revised) opera's premiere in 1916, the role of the *Komponist* was performed by two legendary sopranos, on alternate nights: Lotte Lehmann and Marie Gutheil Schröder. Fast forward to the 21st century, this role is now exclusively performed by mezzo-sopranos such as Kate Lindsay and Sarah Connolly. But what prompted this drastic change in classification? Is there something in the vocal writing of the role which makes it accessible for both voice-types? Or was this change prompted by factors

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unconnected to the actual writing? This article's focus on voice classification stems from my long-lasting interest and research in this topic, which began in 2009 with my PhD dissertation, and follows on recent articles of John Kapusta and Isaiah Feken, that call for further research on voice classification.

## 2. Objectives

The aim of this article is to establish the timeline in which this role has shifted voice category from soprano to mezzo-soprano as well as suggesting a reason for this change. By using the *Komponist* as a case study, I am proposing this type of analysis as a starting point for an overhaul of the entire *Fach* system. The exploration of a role's performance history enables the formation of a critical body of information on the evolution of casting, thereby contextualising the *Fach* system from a practical perspective. I argue that it is important to establish the connection between actual casting and the theoretical process of assigning roles to categories, which currently (and historically) lacks transparency.

## 3. Materials and Method

The *Fach* system started forming at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Carl Maria von Weber sought to create a German opera company that would rival the pervasive Italian opera companies which were active in the German lands (Weber 1817). In doing so, he developed a system which permitted the performance of Italian, French and German opera, through ensuring a reliable supply of singers who would specialise in certain types of roles. Although this system developed organically during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had its share of criticism. In 1925 musicologist Martin Kunath published a damning assessment of the way in which roles were distributed to categories and argued that the criteria for classification was not clear (Kunath 1925, 409). A quarter of a century after Kunath's critique, in 1951, Rudolf Kloiber published the *Taschenbuch der Oper* – which became the leading industry-handbook on role classification (Kloiber, 1951). It has since been regularly updated and renamed *Der Handbuch der Oper* (Kloiber 2016). Kloiber divided roles in categories (Soprano, Mezzo-soprano, etc.) and subcategories (Coloratura, Lyric, Character, etc.) based on the tastes of the period in which it was published, and as a reflection of the casting practice in theatres at the time (Kloiber 1951, 695). However, the handbook fails to offer further clarification as to whose tastes are so relevant to classification, to overcome the need for any further justification of their criteria for distribution. Indeed, while Kloiber briefly discusses the qualities of each

*Fach* at the end of his volume, there is no discussion on the reasons for the allocation of roles into categories. The subsequent editions did not address this issue either, even though some roles changed categories. In Kloiber's first edition of *Der Taschenbuch der Oper*, the role of Komponist was listed as a Character Soprano or Youthful Dramatic Soprano and it stayed as such throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Kloiber 1951, 398). This is in line with Strauss' own preference for a soprano in this role. In the handbook's 13<sup>th</sup> edition, from 2011, the Komponist appears as Dramatic Mezzo-soprano or Youthful Dramatic Soprano (Kloiber 2011, 702). Indeed, the category of Character Soprano disappears entirely from the latest, 2016 edition of the handbook (Kloiber 2016, 716). Given the unique position of Kloiber's handbook within the German-speaking operatic community, these changes are significant. The various editors of the handbook have explained the inclusion of new repertoire within every update of the handbook but provided no justification for the change in category of some roles that remained in the repertoire of opera houses since the handbook's first edition.

Baritone, voice teacher and musicologist Dr. Peter Anton Ling concludes that Kloiber's subcategorisations are based on tradition, given the lack of a solid theoretical reasoning for their allocation (Ling 2008, 255-256). In a similar vein, mezzo-soprano and voice teacher Dr. Sandra Cotton argues that the system "is in flux, bending to shifting socio-cultural tastes and expectations" (Cotton 2007, 81). Baritone and teaching associate Dr. Isaiah Feken also recognises the *Handbuch's* flaws and suggests the need for the development of studies on specific *Fächer*, which would take in consideration factors such as *tessitura*, range, and orchestration (Feken 2023, 293-312). Dr. John Kapusta argues that the discourse on voice classification is also superficially discussed in musicology and argues for the study of what he terms 'ideologies of voice-type' – the complex process of understanding voice-types and their relevance to the operatic experience (Kapusta, 2022, 211). I share the view that such studies constitute a much-needed fact-based resource, which has the potential to develop into its own branch of voice studies. The following sections attempts a necessary brief version of such an analysis, with the addition of other elements that this author finds relevant.

### 3.1. Brief role analysis

This section discusses the Komponist's vocal writing, taking into consideration elements of vocal range, *tessitura*, orchestration, as well as any specific technical requirements. The aim of this section is to establish the reason why the role of the Komponist lends itself to such flexibility in its casting, and whether this has anything to do with the way in which the role is written.

The range of the Komponist encompasses B $\flat$ 3 to B $\flat$ 5, and its tessitura lies between D5-F5 it requires good dynamic control in this part of the voice as well as octave leaps during densely orchestrated passages.<sup>2</sup> The writing of the role varies – it starts with speech-like passages, where the lively rhythmical element is used as a means of expressing the Komponist’s energetic and anxious wait for his opera’s performance. This type of vocal writing requires quite a flexible voice, as there are numerous leaps. The articulation of the text on the fast-paced semiquaver rhythms demands a crisp diction in the middle and upper middle register of the voice, sometimes even on the *secondo passaggio*<sup>3</sup>. Later, there is a cantabile arioso, full of long, lyrical lines which stretch to A5, and this type of writing develops further in the duet between Zerbinetta and the Komponist, as well as his aria, where these climactic long phrases stretch to B $\flat$ 5. The orchestra is of classical size, yet it is loud – the role requires a performer whose voice can easily project in all its registers. Overall, the role’s *tessitura* is quite high, which helps from a projection point of view. However, there are dramatically important sections, when the vocal line drops to the lower octave and the orchestral texture thickens with the addition of movement in the bassoons, horns, cellos and double basses.

Despite these technical challenges, there are a few reasons why this role is also accessible to mezzo-sopranos; in comparison to the other main roles of the opera, the Komponist is quite short in length – in Kloiber’s handbook it is described as a ‘middle sized’ role (Kloiber 1952, 493). This automatically impacts performability – as any well-trained voice can cope with some challenging moments in a role, provided that these are isolated. As for the role’s tessitura, even though this lies around the area of the *secondo passaggio* – which is characteristic of soprano roles – there are numerous roles in the mezzo-soprano repertoire which sit similarly high, even if they are stylistically different from the Komponist – such as Jane Seymour in Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena*, Adalgisa in Bellini’s *Norma*, Eboli in Verdi’s *Don Carlos*. The performance practice of these roles is similar to that of the Komponist – in that the first two were written for sopranos and have since transitioned to being part of mezzo-soprano’s repertoire. Clearly, when it comes to repertoire, there is power in precedence. This is perhaps also illustrated in a different way: through the character aspect of the role. As a trouser role, the Komponist fits the historical narrative of a lower female voice as the most suitable to portray this type of character – this follows on from the tradition of the numerous en travesti roles of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti (André 2006, 103).

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<sup>2</sup> The role’s *tessitura* was analysed as part of the author’s PhD dissertation; any further studies on *Fach* would benefit from the use of software such as a MATLAB program, for scientifically precise data (Apfelbach 2022, 599-607).

<sup>3</sup> *Secondo passaggio* (Italian) – area of passage or transition to the upper voice; it usually requires singers to perform some kind of technical adjustment such as vowel modification (Bozeman 2017, 9)

Therefore, the historic precedent of mezzo-sopranos portraying trouser roles gave potential legitimacy to any trouser role to be assigned to the mezzo-soprano category, regardless of vocal aspects which might conflict with this categorisation. To conclude this section, I suggest that the reasons above might have been some of the motivating factors for this role's change in voice type. The following section explores the performance practice of this role.

### 3.2. Casting practice analysis

This section analyses the archives of leading international opera houses: the Vienna State Opera, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Teatro alla Scala in Milan and the Royal Opera House in London. The analysis of the opera archives is looking to track the historic casting of the Komponist in these houses, in search for a timeline which might reveal the period when the role's casting changed from soprano to mezzo-soprano. The data is presented in a raw, table form, intentionally; the visual aspect offers a more tangible illustration of the issue under investigation. Table 1 below illustrates the casting of the role of Komponist in Vienna's State Opera since the opera's 1916 premiere to today. The gradual way in which this role shifted classification is immediately apparent. Up until the 1950s it was performed almost exclusively by sopranos – the only exception being four performances with mezzo-soprano Eva Hadrabova in 1933.

Season/Year	Number of performances	Soprano	Mezzo-soprano
1916-1921	35	Lotte Lehmann	
1916-1917	4	Marie Gutheil-Schoder	
1920	1	Elisabeth Schumann	
1921-1926	19	Marie Rajdl	
1924	1	Gertrud Geyersbach	
1924-1932	18	Wanda Achsel-Clemens	
1927-1934	15	Margit Schenker -Angerer	
1933-1935	4		Eva Hadrabova
1935-1937	5	Margit Bokor	
1938-1943	28	Else Schultz	
1941	1	Käthe Russart	
1943	1	Nona Jungwirth	
1943-1969	37	Irmgard Seefried	
1943-1969	1	Ljuba Welitsch	
1947-1980	58	Sena Jurinac	
1952	1	Annelies Kupper	
1956-1969	26		Christa Ludwig
1958-1959	2	Arlene Slater-Stone	
1959	1	Lore Wissmann	

Season/Year	Number of performances	Soprano	Mezzo-soprano
1960	3		Margareta Sjöstedt
1962-1971	3	Evelyn Lear	
1962	1		Hanna Ludwig
1963	1		Mildred Miller
1965	3		Louise Pearl
1966	1	Anny Schlemm	
1967	1		Barbara Scherler
1967-1971	5		Tatjana Troyanos
1969	2	Anneliese Rothenberger	
1969-1970	3	Marilyn Zschau	
1970	1		Regine Fonseca
1970	1	Irmgard Stadler	
1971-1991	25		Gertrude Jahn
1972-1985	30		Agnes Baltsa
1976-1991	30		Trudeliene Schmidt
1980-1987	8		Rohangiz Yachmi
1984-1984	2		Delores Ziegler
1985	1		Gabriele Schnaut
1985-1986	3		Ute Walther
1986 -1993	8		Jeanne Piland
1992	2		Marilyn Schmiege
1992-1997	10		Margareta Hintermeier
1994	1		Susan Quittmeyer
1996-1999	3		Ildiko Komlosi
1997	3	Nancy Gustafson	
1997	4		Susan Graham
1999-2000	4		Waltraud Meier
1999	2		Anne Sofie von Otter
2001	2		Angelica Kirschlager
2001-2018	23		Sophie Koch
2005	3		Cornelia Salje
2007-2009	6		Michelle Breedt
2008	6		Michaela Selinger
2011	9		Stephanie Houtzeel
2012	4	Christine Schäfer	
2014-2022	9		Kate Lindsey
2017	3		Rachel Frenkel

**Table 1.** *The role of Komponist at the Vienna State Opera*

Thereafter followed a period during which the Komponist was performed both by mezzo-sopranos and sopranos until the 1970s. From then onwards the role started

being performed almost exclusively with mezzo-sopranos. The only exceptions being soprano Nancy Gustafson, who performed it three times in 1997, and Christine Schäfer in 2012. It is worth noting that Schäfer performed the coloratura soprano role of Zerbinetta in 1996, therefore her decision to perform the Komponist might have been dramatically motivated. The most relevant period to discuss is specifically between 1943-1969, when sopranos Irmgard Seefried and Sena Jurinc performed the role in turns alongside mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig. The German soprano Irmgard Seefried built an international career performing a variety of roles, from Mozart's Susanna (*Le Nozze di Figaro*), Pamina (*Zauberflöte*) and Fiordiligi (*Così fan tutte*), to Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* and Alban Berg's Marie (*Wozzeck*). She also performed the role of Marzelline in Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Her calling card however were her Mozart and Richard Strauss roles, which she performed to great international acclaim (Rasponi 1984, 489). Bosnian-Austrian soprano Sena Jurinac shared some of Seefried's roles – Pamina, Marzelline and Marie, but in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, she was performing the Countess and in *Fidelio* she also performed the title role (Rasponi 1984, 493). All this illustrates the difference in 'heft' between these two sopranos. To add Christa Ludwig to this mix brings a further degree of separation, as her Mozart roles were Cherubino and Dorabella. And while she did sing Leonore in *Fidelio* as well as the title role in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Ludwig herself admits in her famously candid autobiography, that these soprano roles stretched her vocal skills beyond her comfort zone, bringing her quite close to endangering her voice (Ludwig 1999, 193-194). The obvious timbral differences of these three singers can still be heard on their recordings; and while recordings are no substitute to live performance, their existence, alongside this (necessary) brief discussion of their repertoire is enough to illustrate the timbral journey that the role of the Komponist undertook, before becoming established as a mezzo-soprano role.

At the Metropolitan Opera in New York, *Ariadne auf Naxos* premiered at the in 1962, therefore its performance history is significantly shorter. The first performer of the Komponist was Swedish mezzo-soprano Kerstin Meyer, whose roles included Verdi's Eboli (*Don Carlos*) and Amneris (*Aïda*) as well as Wagner's Fricka, Erda and Waltraute (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) and Brangäne (*Tristan und Isolde*) at Bayreuth.

Here too, the practice of casting the role almost exclusively with mezzo-sopranos became established in the 1970s, with Tatyana Troyanos as a leading figure. Of the ninety-six performances at the Metropolitan Opera, the Komponist was performed by sopranos only sixteen times.

Season/Year	Number of performances	Soprano	Mezzo-soprano
1962 – 1963	6		Kerstin Meyer
1963 – 1964	5		Mildred Miller
1963 – 1994	8	Teresa Stratas	
1964	2	Elisabeth Söderström	
1970	4	Evelyn Lear	
1976 – 1988	14		Tatyana Troyanos
1976	2	Marcia Baldwin	
1985	1		Brenda Boozer
1987	1		Gail Gilmore
1996 – 2003	26		Susanne Mentzer
2005	5		Susan Graham
2010	5		Sarah Connolly
2011	3		Joyce DiDonato
2022			Isabel Leonard
2022			Olivia Vote

**Table 2.** *The role of Komponist at the Metropolitan Opera in New York*

At Milan's Teatro alla Scala, the role was first performed in 1963, in an Italian version, with soprano Giuliana Tivolaccini, whose other roles include Micaela in *Carmen*, Mimi in *La Bohème* and Oscar in *Ballo in Maschera*. Subsequent performances of *Ariadne auf Naxos* were cast with mezzo-sopranos in the role of the Komponist. For the following performances this role was always cast with mezzo-sopranos, as follows: Trudelise Schmidt (1984), Iris Vermillion (2000), Ildiko Komlosi (2006), Daniela Sindram (2019) and Rachel Frenken (2022).

At the Royal Opera House in London, *Ariadne auf Naxos* was performed from the 1976 onwards, and the Komponist was performed exclusively by mezzo-sopranos, as follows: Yvonne Minton (1976 and 1978), Ann Murray (1985 and 1987), Sophie Koch (2002), Susan Graham (2004), Christine Jepson (2008) and Ruxandra Donose (2014 and 2015).

It is perhaps not surprising that at Teatro alla Scala and the Royal Opera House the role was cast with mezzo-sopranos, given that *Ariadne auf Naxos* only started being performed regularly in the 1960s and respectively the 1970s. As the archives of the Vienna State Opera and the Metropolitan Opera illustrate, the change in voice-type was occurring during those years, therefore it makes sense that international opera houses hired the same singers (or the same type of singers) to perform this role.



#### 4. Results, discussion and conclusion

The juxtaposition of the various narratives above lead to a complex but realistic picture of the way in which classification works in theory and in practice. From a purely vocal point of view, I argue that the most suitable voice to portray the *Komponist* is a dramatic soprano – this voice would find the *tessitura* comfortable and it would easily soar above the heavier orchestral textures in the climactic points of the story – such as the duet with Zerbinetta and the *Komponist*'s final scene which includes “*Sein wir wieder gut*”. The fact that it is now exclusively performed by mezzo-sopranos has more to do with elements of an evolving tradition (a sense of generalisation that mezzo-sopranos should portray trouser roles) intersecting with the desire of certain performers (singers and conductors) to explore other tonal colours or push boundaries as legendary mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig discusses in her autobiography. When a mezzo-soprano performs the *Komponist* the aspects of vocal ‘comfort’ and ‘ease’ change - because it sits just above the comfortable *tessitura* for this voice type. There is an element of vocal athleticism about a lower voice type approaching the climactic high notes that are usually associated with the soprano; these high notes sound more extreme coming from a mezzo-soprano, which in turn impacts the way in which the character is perceived by the audience. While this vocal aesthetic will not satisfy everyone’s aural preferences, it has clearly prevailed on an international level. The performance history of the *Komponist* aptly illustrates the development of the mezzo-soprano category, which, up until the 1950s was performing mainly supporting, comprimario roles, with the occasional spotlight when performing the title role in *Carmen* or Amneris in *Aida*. Once the operatic repertoire began what Cormac Newark terms the “backward expansion” – the performance (and canonisation) of forgotten repertoire of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the mezzo-soprano gained new subcategories (Newark and Webber 2020, 14). One such subcategory is formed of roles that used to be performed by sopranos, but whose characteristics make them accessible to certain mezzo-sopranos as well. These originally soprano roles (which includes the *Komponist*) also served to propel the mezzo-soprano to a similar status to that of the soprano prima-donna due to the element of vocal athleticism discussed above.

The sedimentation of the *Komponist* as a mezzo-soprano role coincides with the “backward expansion” of operatic repertoire during the 1960s and 1970s. I argue that this period itself established a tradition of performance which continues to today without any challenge. The reason why it should be challenged is because classification has a direct impact on performers’ lives – on their long-term vocal health as well as their vocal identity, which is partly made up of the repertoire they perform. The amalgamation of certain soprano roles in the mezzo-soprano category needs to be acknowledged as such – so that performers make informed choices when it comes to their repertoire.

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