

## WANTED—OPERA BY AND FOR AMERICANS

GEORGE ANTHEIL

THE national school of Russia was given its chief impetus by the operas of Moussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov and Glinka. The new French school of Les Six devoted itself mostly to ballets for Diaghilev, Rolf de Mare and Ida Rubenstein; and the latest German school gives by far the largest share of its attention to modern opera. Each of these three important national groups has been nourished mainly in the atmosphere of the theatre.

The reason is obvious. The "modern music" of every epoch is more easily assimilated by the general public in theatrical garb wherein the eye may help the ear over the difficult places until every part of a new score has become part of the common popular musical language of all time, no matter how modern it may have seemed in the beginning.

In the development of modern music one thing must by now be obvious to all; its newest and strongest tendency is to educate rather than to flout the public. That composer whose scores cannot be abstract, reserved or cacophonous enough finds himself more and more limited to his special followers and his solitary conductor. Even these tightly enclosed little groups are beginning to break up as their futility becomes apparent. Modern music faces a new boundary and a new epoch. All former groups are taking part in the vast revolution and all far-flung dialects are gradually combining into a common language. This evolving of music today towards an inner norm is merely a preparation to speak the international tongue that it once commanded, to a large public.

Several practical steps have been taken in this direction by the young German school. One example is Kurt Weill's *Beggar's Opera* which was a sensational success throughout Germany and

is now being played everywhere in Europe, even in reactionary centers like Rome. The music of this work is, without question, extremely modern. Nevertheless all over the Continent one can hear almost every shop-girl singing its melodies. *Jonny Spielt Auf*, in spite of obvious limitations, was the first move in this direction, and a bold and daring move it was, to be applauded as such. It made a bad impression in America, because our critics failed to realize that it was not intended to represent American jazz but was a European burlesque of our atmosphere. With his new opera, *Leben des Orest*, Krenek has proved to be one of the most talented of all the young European operatic school.

A renaissance of opera is at hand. A few years ago the opera houses of Europe were dying in their own dust, maintaining, towards no end, huge and costly personnels. Today, in spite of recent theater-crises, nearly every one of them is a live and going institution with box-office receipts, a direction, and a soul. Brilliant young directors scarcely thirty years of age, and often in their twenties, are in charge of their destinies, and brilliant destinies they are. Musical Europe, stunned after the war, is awakening; and how! There are eighty-two intensely active opera houses in Germany alone. If America wishes to remain within the circle of foremost musical nations, it will have to do some quick thinking.

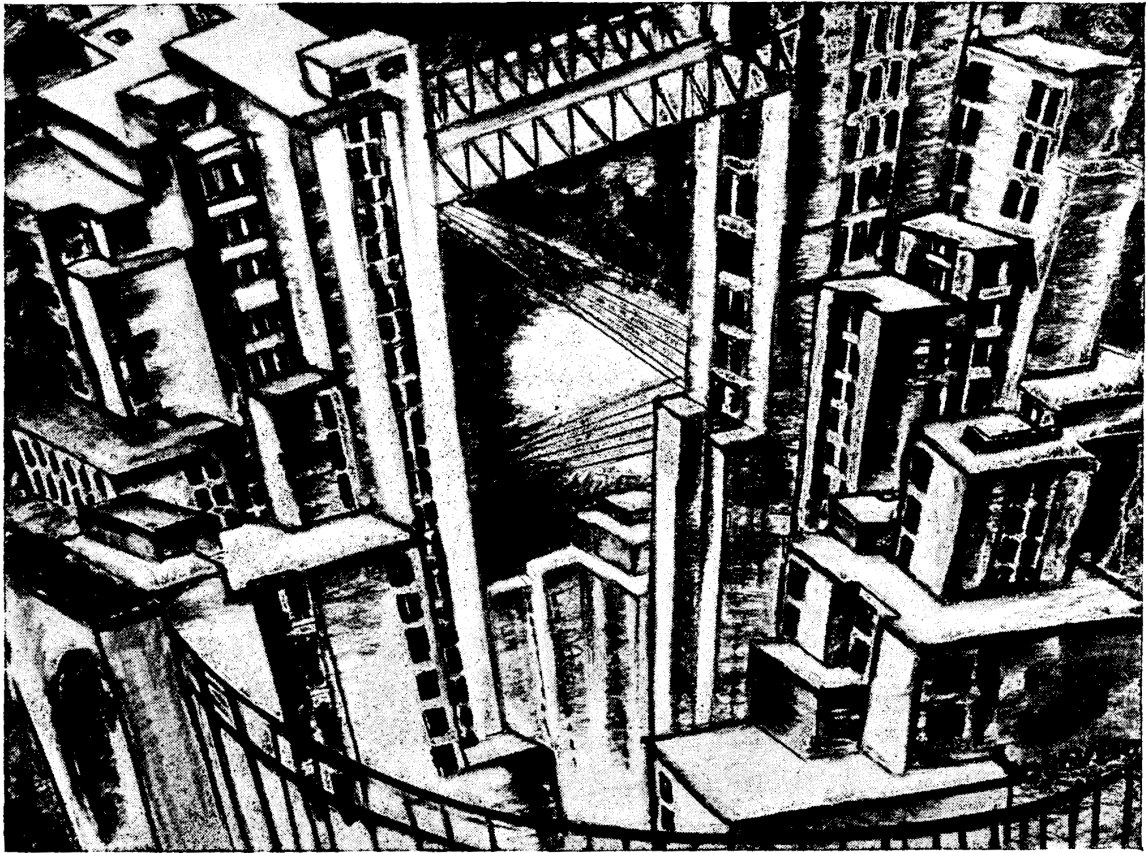
For "modern" music must continue to belong to the people, as it has in the great operatic periods of the past. A public of music lovers should come to the music-theatre from all walks of life in America. From this vast group, trained through the theatre to understand the essence and reason of modern music, a new symphonic public will gradually be formed, a public that is able to project itself completely into the abstraction of symphonic music. But to put the cart utterly before the horse means the complete suppression of the organic growth of an individual American school of music. In painting, as in all art, abstraction is impossible before the literal has been achieved.

American music to date has had a curious, quixotic development. There is a tremendous musicality here such as very few nations possess, yet its cultivation has been haphazard and we find ourselves today making excuses that we are still a young

nation musically, which is obviously hokum. Music in America has been going on a long time, and there is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that a large share of the dissipation of our energies is due to the rafts of ultra-conservative European musicians who have flocked to our shores in past decades, ensconced themselves in positions of power and trust, and betrayed a good deal of the musical future of America. In this they have been aided by the American musical critic. As a boy of sixteen I was so embittered by this situation that I swore never to write anything but the most revolutionary music possible—"revolution" being somewhat confused in my youthful mind with cacophony. In my late twenties, I see the error of these earlier ways, but I am convinced that there still are other musicians in America who feel as I once did, who are still going to an unnecessary extreme, often within the scope of an iconoclastic theory or an esthetic that long since has either been exploded or accepted. There is something depressing about this fine futility, this clashing of swords upon one's own armor, this shouting of battle-cries alone, when the battle has already been won and the armies have already gone home. Such self-delusion would be impossible in Europe.

Opera we must have, but I am not so fantastic as to suppose that we will *soon* have a music springing from the people and patronized by them, nor that state legislatures will immediately establish state operas everywhere. My suggestions are entirely practical. I know that all the musical schools in America are turning out really splendid operatic material. Only last December I heard a perfectly startling rendition of a Goossens and a Mozart opera by the pupils of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. The amount of talent revealed by these young people upon the stage and in the orchestra was extraordinary. I am sure that a dozen personnels could instantly be found in America for a dozen new opera houses. But—where do all these gifted young graduates go, year after year? Do they, these fine young talents, merely become teachers who teach other young people, who also in turn become teachers?

Short operas of one act, interesting as plays or as "talkies," with no heavy "literary merit," stripped of the false operatic poetry of a decade past, with no long philosophical speeches and



ANTHEIL'S OPERA, TRANSATLANTIC  
*Design by Ludwig Sievert*

Final scene of the American work given its  
premiere at Frankfurt-on-the-Main, May 25th



no slowly moving psychological drama devoid of action, and without tedious and impossible arias, should be given on Broadway and in the legitimate theatres. There is a sufficient dearth of stage material or novelty to assure a welcome to such experiments. But remember! The present day public, spoiled or educated, as you please, by the rapidity of the movie-screen and the real excellence of the contemporary legitimate theatre, will put up with no *démodé*, "artistic," operatic monkey-business. The composers will have to get to work without too much accessory baggage. In this way only, I am convinced, can we soon have a real American school of opera.

For the seemingly unattainable Elysia can be captured by American composers alone, it is with them exclusively that the hope of an American musical future rests. They should entrench themselves no longer behind some tightly encircled group to devote themselves solely to the production of one more or less short orchestral composition a year. Let them remember that the elderly "promising young composer" is a purely American phenomenon. Some day he wakes up definitely past the middle-age mark, scarcely further than his starting point, just one more of those innumerable, finicky, dry, cautious and fairly unimportant men with whose names our music lexicons and *Who's Who* are filled.

I suggest that we incorporate the daring and the friendly spirit of the Russian Five in our striving towards a national goal. Though living in Europe I feel myself as American as anyone who has never left its shores and that I am needed as each one of us should feel that he is needed. It is towards a national goal and competition with Europe that all of us should bend our thoughts. The new public will listen to something new. Living constantly in the movie-theatres, it is astonished at nothing in the way of dramas. It will listen to anything that seems to be going somewhere and has a head and a tail. A score can be amazingly modern and yet will be swallowed without question by the public when the action explains the music. Serious opera, written in excellent scenario, with rapid cinema technic or at least a new stage technic, with a good story, dramatically heightened by music, should be comprehended by everybody. I can readily un-

derstand that the usual business man is not interested in the usual wooden opera story in a foreign language about people and an epoch he cares little about. Why not an opera about this business man himself, his surroundings, New York, factories, the romance of the West, whatever is of absorbing interest in America? Or if one must write about antique Greece, why not write as though one were born on the same soil that produced Hollywood or Ernest Hemingway?

But if the new operatic movement is to get off only to a half-hearted start, it is better not to begin. For American critics in general are only too glad to knife any dangerous idea right off the bat when it is still weak and in its infancy, thus saving themselves any future trouble with a possibly irritating and new esthetic. The experiment if undertaken deserves a fair chance.

One thing is certain; the newly developing relation of modern music toward the public requires the breaking up of all narrowly enclosed musical circles and esthetics. America, just beginning to accept and understand modern music, has a difficult but unavoidable problem to solve. Nevertheless we should be completely optimistic.