

FORECAST AND REVIEW

NEW VISIONS IN THE RUSSIAN THEATRE

RUSSIA'S methods of presenting opera and ballet today are manifestations of an intensive change which for some years has been transforming its whole theatre. The aim of Russia is, of course, to cut loose entirely from tradition, and nowhere in the world perhaps is there a more fertile field for experiment for no other nation has so consciously discarded the old canons. In the theatre this spirit has been expressed in an effort to achieve an entirely new *mise-en-scene*. However, despite a wide gesture toward independence, this art of the theatre has not yet leaped across any dividing chasms. Bizarre experiments have been the outcome of a steady development proceeding systematically step by step.

The actual innovations do not date back more than a decade, but the credit for the whole new movement may safely go further, to the Moscow Art Theatre. From its very inception it brought a new impulse not only to the other dramatic stages of Russia, but to the ballet, operetta and opera itself.

The definite beginning of musical-dramatic experiments is dated by the Free Theatre's season of 1912-1913, whose high water-mark was the production of the Schnitzler-Dohnanyi *Schleier der Pierette*. It was this performance which led to the formation of Alexander Tairov's famous Kamerny Theatre. At the same time the staging of Moussorgsky's unfinished opera *Foire de Sorotchinski* bore fruit in the organization of Serge Lapitsky's Petrograd Art Opera. Still another pioneer at this time was Konstantin Mardjannov, stage director of the Free Theatre, whose efforts were concentrated on pantomime and the establishment of a closer relation between the opera and the drama; freedom from the iron conventions of the past and a living response

to the present. His work was crowned with a two-fold result—it encouraged Tairov's attempt at the fantastic and Lapitsky's new drive for realism.

After the revolution only Tairov's Kamerny Theatre survived. Mardjannov had again come forward and, with a group of young novices, organized the Petrograd Opera Comique, endeavoring to carry out the earlier experimental work of the Free Theatre. But after a single season he failed. Lapitsky was similarly unsuccessful in his reorganization of the Art Opera.

For ten years the Kamerny Theatre has forged steadily ahead with the creation of a new theatrical technic. Tairov has perfected a peculiar synthesis of the theatre arts which is based on a principle of inner rhythm. It is the prevalence of rhythm over the other elements that lends all of his productions, even those of a purely dramatic nature, a definite musical quality. Moreover the actor's speech is modeled on the plan of a semi-recitative, and incidental music is always plentifully employed. In *Schleier der Pierette* and in Lecoq's operetta *Girofle-Girofla* we have the best examples of this scenic perfection and rhythm which have so widely influenced the dramatic art of Russia.

Building his scenes on a dynamic and expressionistic foundation he divests them entirely of primitive realism, and opens the door to the life of the imagination. It is in this sense that his theatre is fantastic, but it is not the fantasy of the romantic age, nor that of Leonardo da Vinci. This is not a world of legends, fairy tales or dreams. Out of realistic elements Tairov creates new and hitherto unimagined forms.



This power to create new visions in the theatre is the distinction of the contemporary Russian stage. Mardjannov in his Opera Comique tried to produce change by intensifying movement and action on the stage but failed to create a new effect. Lapitsky on the other hand attempted to adapt the realism of the Moscow Art Theatre to his Petrograd Opera productions but could not change

the character of Russian opera and at best only gave it a surface of new mannerisms.

From the Studio of Stanislavsky no new or startling achievements in musical-dramatic form are to be expected so long as he persists in using the works of old composers such as Tchaikowsky, or scores like the *Secret Wedding* of Tchimarowsky, put on by students and amateurs the world over. Much more promising is the Musical Art Studio under Nemirowitch-Dantchenko. The productions of *La Fille de Madame Angot* and *Perichole*, though not, to be sure, as new as *Girofle-Girofla*, nevertheless share their spirit of creative fantasy. The greatest novelty is of course the production of *Carmencita* which, though one may consider many of its details unsuccessful, is after all an innovation in the dynamic manner, and is the only work of this Studio which in its entirety ranks with the Tairov productions.

Several very telling portents of new developments have appeared in the recent production of experimental works. Two of these, while not definitely musical, are nevertheless allied with music, *Princess Turandot* by Gotzi, and *Bubus the Tutor* by Faiko. The first given by Vachtangov in the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, may be considered the dramatic complement to Strawinsky's *Pulcinella*, so similar are they in spirit. The establishment of a Russian Opera Ballet and Opera Vaudeville has been made possible as a result of this production, and the expectation of a Russian Opera Comique has once more been revived.

Bubus the Tutor is a comedy given with an accompaniment of Chopin and Liszt. The music, heard in the background throughout the entire performance, creates the rhythm for the dramatic action and accompanies its emotional climaxes, without being an organic part of the whole. While interesting, the experiment seemed to me to fail, because the music retards the action. An opera has an entirely different interior rhythm from that of any purely dramatic text.

Most striking and daring incident in a number of years was the production in Moscow last season of Serge Vasilenko's ballet, *Beautiful Joseph* at the Experimental Theatre. From a purely terpsichorean view it undoubtedly had many weaknesses, but as a *tour de force* in group staging it was overpowering, a spectacle

typical in its dynamic sweep of the vitality of the new theatre.

Side by side with the progressive stage we still find the Russian Grand Opera, whose origins are in the Russian Imperial Theatres, the Marrionowsky in Leningrad, the Grand Theatre in Moscow and the former Momtavsky and Winter Opera Houses. Even here attempts have been made to take new steps.

But after all is said, opera remains opera, the most conservative art and the least amenable to change. All the influences brought to bear by those modern theatre tendencies which are not purely operatic will make after all but a slight impression that affects the detail and not the essence.

Reform in opera can only occur through the writing of opera itself, and in Russia we have faced the need for change. The desire for a new form is felt by the public as well as by the artists. So far attempts at innovation may be divided into two kinds—first the reconstruction of old material into new and hardly recognizable work such as the re-written *Coq d'or* of Rimsky-Korsakov, second the alterations of the outer form with the retention of original inner content.

Neither of these it seems to me is conducive to operatic transformation. The change must come from the composer and not the producer. Not until some genius appears, to produce an entirely new work which will meet the modern psychological need, will Russia be able to satisfy its yearning for new opera.

By Victor Belaiev

FILM MUSIC

THE most interesting problem connected with the development of film music is the extent to which it has been affected by modern art tendencies in general. How little such music reflects the modern spirit either in the idiom employed, or structurally, in the matter of form is obvious when one compares the musical output for films with such a picture as *Dr. Caligari*. No score that has been written for the cinema has the distinction of this production in its truly contemporary feeling or unity of form. The best approach to a modern film score which has been heard here was written for *Beggar on Horseback*. It was a true jazz