

## GERMAN OPERA, PAST AND PRESENT

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GERMAN opera of today has been subject to the conditions of the "revolution" long enough for results to have come to a head, although, it is true, great artistic creations take longer to mature than a child in the womb. Duly recognized sucklings of the Third Reich there are in abundance, but as yet no authentic opera has appeared.

I have before me the schedule of the Berlin Staatsoper, December 10th to 18th, 1933. Included is a restaging of Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*; other works are the recently staged first parts of Wagner's *Ring*, *Rheingold* and *Walküre*, Richard Strauss' *Arabella*, Bizet's *Carmen*, and naturally works of Italy, a kindred spirit: *Rigoletto*, *Vespri Siciliani*, *Madama Butterfly*.

This opera program is typical. The works might just as well have been presented — and they were — in 1932, 1931, 1930 and 1918; only in those days there was no thought of accenting the German-Italian character of the program. The one new work announced, *Arabella*, was a German opera event of the last ten or eleven months. But even though the Dresden premiere of *Arabella* took place under the triumphant sign of the swastika, no one can claim it to be a product of the Third Reich. It is even less so than the *Rosenkavalier*. Of extreme bourgeois refinement, it is an opera de luxe, anything but heroic, nationalistic or revolutionary; the work of an old master whose craftsmanship reveals ever-increasing virtuosity. The future will set this composition not in the glorious music epoch of 1933-2033, but in the age of the Wagnerian epigones around 1883.

No work of the new Germany has yet been presented; probably has not yet even been conceived. In the meantime, the official policy is to banish the few opera novelties by German com-

posers — Austrians included, of course —, not even to accept them as temporary substitutes. For example, Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Kreidekreis*, which it is true was accepted by the Berlin Staatsoper, had its premiere in Zurich. A work with the real German stuff of *Michael Kohlhaas*, after Heinrich von Kleist's immortal story, should have had its premiere in Stuttgart or Dresden, but unfortunately the composer, Paul von Klenau, is a Dane and brother-in-law to the Jewish proprietor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. . . Nordic materials are cheerfully flirted with and the *Island Saga*, by the meagrely gifted Georg Vollerthun, was rescued from deserved oblivion. Without French impressionism, this opera would never have had musical form. The older operas of Max von Schilling, who died young, would have been enthusiastically revived but it was discovered that one of his grandmothers lacked complete racial purity. Therefore it is necessary to be restricted to Richard Strauss and Hans Pfitzner, whose operas will never have a wide public, only their own small community; or to a few minor opera composers like Paul Graener whose most "German" work is unfortunately based on a libretto by a Jew. The real German opera events of the future will take place outside of Germany. Hindemith, as an opera composer, is mute. In the meantime, prizes have been offered in Germany for folk operas, in disregard of the fact that similar competitions in the Second Reich drew blanks.



It would be unjust to say German opera production has proved barren only in 1933. That year merely deprived German opera, as it did German art, of the last administrative support, the last air of freedom. Without inner freedom, art cannot survive; opera especially cannot unfold lacking social background, without official generosity. For five years, German opera has been moving in an ever-narrowing circle. The Third Reich's oppression merely intensified the emergency measures imposed on opera two years ago by the Republic. Whenever the situation of German opera was appraised in the past years, ever-increasing hardships were noted. The climax of German opera activity coincided with the so called "Hochkonjunktur" of 1927 and 1928, which after a few years turned out to have been a false conjunc-

tion point, catastrophic. In the 1927-1928 season, there were no fewer than sixty opera premieres in Germany; the following season saw only forty-three; 1929-1930, thirty; 1930-1931, twenty-four. In the season of the past year there were about ten, and current offerings will amount to only four or five. Of course the number of premieres is chiefly an index to the audacity of the directors, to the desire of the composers to produce. But it is also a gauge of the vitality of the art of opera. Increasing administrative hardships have stifled the enterprise of the directors, and necessarily the composers' creative impulse. What musician will continue to write operas which, we may venture to say, have no prospect of performance. The result is that German opera production has increasingly smaller resources to draw on. Berlin is a living example — the Krolloper, opened in 1927 closed its doors in 1933. Political as well as administrative reasons were to blame. Only the largest opera houses have been able to maintain their artistic standards, not without concessions and difficulties. The Berlin, the Munich, the Dresden Staatsoper are still in the first rank, although in recent years, Dresden, under Fritz Busch, has not been able to conceal a slight deterioration. The Stadtoper in Berlin, in Bruno Walter's time (at least on the evenings when he himself conducted) was a formidable rival of the Staatsoper, and after a lapse of several years attained a new peak under the direction of Carl Ebert; but Ebert was one of the first sacrifices to the "national uprising." Today the city opera is a sad, provincial institution, more appropriate to Spandau than to Charlottenburg. Stuttgart and Karlsruhe, once high-ranking theatres, had already lost some of their splendor in the days of the Republic. Hamburg used to be the chief import center for modern Italian operas; Frankfurt and Leipzig for modern works of all kinds; everywhere, in some German city, in Aachen, or Duisberg, or Breslau, or Hanover, or Koburg, some director would occasionally venture a bold deed, which demonstrated the vitality of the German operatic stage.

That is all done with. New opera houses are built only for politico-cultural reasons, really entirely political, as recently in Flensburg, on the Danish frontier. They open with a festival performance of Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmerman* and continue

with Léhar's *Zarewitsch*. For the rest, with inadequate resources, everywhere Wagner, Wagner and once again Wagner is given. If Wagner should be unfortunate enough to return to earth, he would not be happy at all about this "nationalizing" and "popularizing" of his work.

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To the ever-increasing economic pressure are added the limitations on opera schedules because of politics. The "nationalization" of German opera does not mean merely the exclusion of all foreign operas with the exception of the Italian and a few indispensable French works like *Carmen*. It does not mean only the banning of all Jewish opera composers like Schönberg or Kurt Weill or Korngold or Walter Braunfels, who is really one of the most German composers (though careless in selecting a grandfather). It also means the outlawing of all unquestionably "pure-blooded" musicians who will not compose in a "national" sense. For their mode of composition and the direction of their spirit, the expression "Cultural-Bolshevism" has been coined. And so it is that the new Germany has renounced *Boris Godunoff* (but by no means Tschaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique*), Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*; the opera attempts of the "diabolical" Stravinsky; Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*; Hindemith's *Cardillac*; all past and future operas of Ernst Krenek — although Krenek is the really great genius of German opera composition.

German opera now denies itself all audacity, every experiment (whether fruitful or barren), every development forecasting the future. It is forgotten that *Tristan* would once have been called "culturally-bolshevistic" if there had been such a word at the time. Grave error has been read into the meaning of *Volks-tümlich*. That which flatters a nationalistic spirit is not racial. A work is racial if in the course of the years it comes to epitomize the racial spirit of a decade. The *Zauberflöte* was racial, although Mozart secretly wrote for "every kind of ear." (Only not for asses' ears.) *Der Freischütz* was racial, but more through its subject than its music. The *Meistersinger* became racial. But beside *Der Freischütz* stands *Euryanthe*, which Weber himself preferred a hundredfold; beside the *Meistersinger* stands *Tristan*, which never was racial nor ever can become so, least of all

in the Third Reich, for it is not at all "race-rooted" or "race-united" (these are the new expressions). The stature, the value of a work of art is entirely apart from this conception of race roots. Not all art, opera included, is for everybody.

These politico-cultural hardships double the damage suffered by German opera under the economic duress of recent years. And opera is certainly not constituted to suffer heroic sacrifices. Opera is founded on luxury; or at least on plenty, festivity, richness. In contrast today an attitude of heroic modesty in poverty has evolved which at heart belies modesty. Far worse than the effects of the economic crises, are the results of the new spirit of self-denial and intolerance. It condemns German opera to a place in a museum; a museum in which a few magnificent show-pieces are displayed: Mozart's operas, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Weber's *Freischütz*, and everything by Wagner; a little Strauss completes the series. Occasionally the *Barbier von Bagdad*, von Goetz's *Taming of the Shrew*, Hugo Wolf's *Corregidor*, some opera or other by Pfitzner, are hauled out of the storerooms or closets, only to be soon sent back. In this museum there will be no more new creations on view.

It is evident that the external aspect of German opera is difficult. But the internal is no less so. As a matter of fact, it has always been a problem. We can say, there is an Italian opera; an Italian opera unity, which spiritually or culturally has lasted three hundred years, and whose vital force has survived a hundred and fifty years. In Italy, while Monteverdi's *Orfeo* can no longer be performed on the opera stage, certainly Paisiello's *Nina Pazza* can be, or any forgotten work by Galuppi or Cimarosa. The audience will find it a little old-fashioned but certainly will fully understand it. The spirit of the music, the preponderance of song, of the masculine voice, are identical here and in the most modern Italian opera. Every year a few dozen more operas are presented in Italy, and if they prove fiascos, it is not a disaster, as in Germany.

In Germany we have no opera; only, strictly speaking, a series of operas. We have already enumerated them fairly completely. They begin with Mozart's *Entführung* and end with Strauss'



*Rosenkavalier*. German opera has been fortunate in having its foundation always enriched by some worthwhile piece. From this viewpoint Wagner's significance becomes something prodigious, regardless of whether he deserves the reverence that he enjoys today. But by itself, German opera could not survive like the Italian opera. It needs an international supplement. And — it has no national style. If Wagner's music dramas alone represent the national style, then the *Zauberflöte*, a "magic song play" (which at all events Mozart's music had made into a lovely festival piece), or *Fidelio*, which is an opéra comique in German, are no German operas. The German operatic theatre must change its style every day, too. Quite apart from the fact that it follows an international opera policy, and thus presents Italian, French, and Russian works; today it houses a modest song play, tomorrow a "dedicatory festival piece." And the new German opera has intensified this lack of national style. But this very lack was also proof of the vitality of the German opera before 1933, of its desire to find a new path, a new goal. . . .



Modern German opera ranges from the monocentric work to mass opera, to the very annihilation of the conception of opera. On the one hand stands Schönberg. He always objectifies the subjective, the personal, the psychographic: in the pantomime, *Die Glückliche Hand*, a Freudian wish-fulfillment dream; in *Erwartung*, a hysterical feminine experience; and he contradicts himself sharply by basing an abstract, construed music on a trivial libretto, as in *Von Heute auf Morgen*. His junior, Alban Berg, writes esoteric music on a great, realistic, folk poem, Büchner's *Wozzeck*. Really esoteric music? We do not know yet. We do not know whether in fifty years *Wozzeck* will be one of those works which, like *Corregidor* today, will have won at least a part of the public. Franz Schreker's *Schmied von Gent*, presented about a year ago, is a real national folk and fairy-tale opera, for which he proved unable to write the necessary naive and cheerful and meaningful music. Richard Strauss is piling up "festival operas" (*Frau ohne Schatten* or *Die Ägyptische Helena*) and a bourgeois duplicate of *Rosenkavalier*, *Arabella*.

Pfitzner writes a romantic redemption opera, *Das Herz*, on a libretto of little value, operatic in the cheapest sense.

All these works are different enough from each other, textually as well as musically. There is a decided difference between writing real librettos, as Strauss does (who also wrote *Salome* and *Elektra*, to be sure), and taking a finished literary product as Alban Berg did in *Wozzeck*. Another composer, Manfred Gurlitt, followed him with *Der Soldat*. A portion of all this music rests on the foundation of tradition, another part on the so-called "new music." But they are all alike in reckoning with the traditional requirements of the German opera stage; with the space, with the large orchestra, with a lasting effect, wherever possible with the "eternal" effect.

A section of the young German composers has no preoccupation with "eternity." Krenek began with *Jonny*, which ruled the German stage for two years, despite the reproaches and opposition of the so-called preservers of culture. Then it disappeared for ever. Hindemith began (apart from smaller attempts) in really operatic fashion with *Cardillac*, which brought the orchestra and song into a new relationship, dissolving the opera again into symphonically conceived units, into bare "forms." Then he had a cabaret opera, *Neues vom Tage*, written for him by a cabaret poet, in which he made the mistake of not injecting enough of fancy, of working too hard and too solidly.

The opera then made an appeal to a wider public. The material sank to their level, utilized the musical inclinations of the masses. Brecht's and Weill's *Drei-Groschen-Oper* was the first attempt; the vaudeville *Mahagonny* followed. And finally came *Die Bürgschaft*, whose text is no longer Brecht's but Caspar Neher's. *Die Bürgschaft* is a development of the remarkable German miniature or mass-opera, to which its creators, Hindemith and Weill, have given the name, *Lehrstück*. The idea is through the medium of the stage, by means of poetry, drama, music, to again *teach* something, as in the medieval morality plays. In this case, the curse of wealth, the curse of power — exactly as in Wagner's *Ring der Nibelungen*, but with somewhat different materials. The only error of this folk and masses opera

was that the music did not hold up its end, that the poetry and the drama usually were more impressive than the creation of the composer. *Die Bürgschaft* is, or rather was, more important than the other forward-looking opera of young Germany, Ernst Krenek's *Leben des Orest*. This too was an opera of the day, in the guise of an ancient drama. It revealed the chaos of the present, the desire to return home, for expiation, for exaltation. The classical symbolism was unfortunately too foreign to us and Krenek's music was not always striking enough to make this work the opera of our day.

It is on these paths that we must seek the future of German opera. For the present, it is believed that salvation is to be found in the subject matter. But it is immaterial whether twenty "Konjunkturkomponisten," such as Paul Graener, compose the *Prinz von Homburg*, with or without military marches, or whether the Edda or Grimm's fairy tales are again used as sources for operatic material. If German opera is to have a future, this future will not be formed according to the edicts of the Ministry for Propaganda but rather in defiance of them.