

THE NEW MUSIC AND TODAY'S THEATRE

ERNST KRENEK

IF opera is to follow a new path, if it is to continue along the new direction developed in the last twenty years, it must take its bearings from the new, the really new music; that is to say, opera can find a really new path of its own by taking this new music for a guide.

The new music has attained a superlative degree of sincerity and truth, by climactic power of expression, boldness and logical consistency of structure. At the same time it has been remarkably spiritualized by these characteristics and therefore stands directly opposed to the currents of the external world. In brief, it is the "atonal" music that Schönberg, his school, and a few other musicians practice and continue to develop in the face of outside opposition.

The twelve-tone technic is, as we know, a remarkably individual and ingenious artistic resource which this music has perfected. It has directed the creation of music into new channels and given it a new content. However, its meaning cannot be grasped if it is regarded only as an external procedure of craftsmanship which may be used with a whole series of other working methods in the same sense and to attain traditional ends.

Only a composer who makes the effort to build adequate creative designs, ideas and form conceptions, out of the special characteristics of the twelve-tone technic or, to put it better, out of the great reservoir of ideas behind it, who willingly acknowledges the legitimacy of this technic, and makes the most strenuous intellectual attempt to discover its innermost meaning, can hope, through its application, to find the way to new and individual forms.

This is not the place to develop a theory of the new music. I can only point to a certain peculiarity of form intrinsic in the

essence of this music, and most significant in its application to dramatic ends. By their very nature the principles of the new music lead away from the closed form, and realize instead the idea of "fragments." This does not imply the production of artificial, incomplete structures. But those forms of the new music which are most complete in artistic development are "fragmentary," not only in size, but in structure. Their abruptness, lightness, transparency are reflected in the sonority, in the instrumentation with its simple superposing of tonal strata, with its pronounced accentuation of single colors and its lack of connective material and "filler."

Though abrupt and compressed into small areas over a few points, these forms have an abundant musical vitality; just as the fragment of an ancient statue often reveals the intense and secret life which might emanate from the work were it seen whole. If at times hearing such music leaves us unsatisfied and troubled, it is perhaps because we cannot entirely grasp it, perhaps because some inner instinct finds its unusual mixture of intensity and melancholy particularly appropriate.

Applied to drama, this music does not develop closed forms in the old sense, either. Intermittently it may be interrupted by the spoken word; it reappears, almost as if by chance; it dies away with no real ending. Illustrations of these principles appear in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, and, more distinctly in his *Lulu*. I have applied them in my opera, *Karl V*, where I have attempted to give the procedure an especially dramatic sense.

It is my belief that all artistic methods should be inherent in the thing itself, not attached as externals. In the old opera, interrupting the music by the spoken word served to emphasize the outline of the closed form. These interruptions in the new opera have a quite different function; they are *real* interruptions, preventing the development of the closed form. What is the vocal instance most clearly exercising such functions? It is the reflective question, and as a matter of fact, in *Karl V*, the meaning of the drama depends on the occasional interruption of the historical accomplishments of the emperor which serve to justify him, by questions of persons who analyze these deeds, who probe their political and religious implications. In this way, I have tried to

continue along the road pointed out by Paul Claudel in his magnificent *Colomb*.

I believe that it is not by chance that my composition, which carries still further the idea of interrupting form by reflection, has a fundamental Catholic idea. The spiritual gains of the new music inspire a closer relationship with religious motives, quite apart from the fact that the latter provide especially strong inducements to dialectic and reflection.

A second formal characteristic arising from this ideology of the music-drama, is the tendency to divide the dramatic action between diverse simultaneous scenes and the device of an all-enclosing treatment. Reflection, an absolute anti-realistic force, always penetrates from an outer to an inner circle, which explains the practice of placing the circles within each other spiralwise and finally reducing them to a point quantitatively small, but of the greatest spiritual concentration. In *Cristophe Colomb*, this reflection proceeds from a chorus representing posterity, the other world; while next to the stage where the earlier life of the hero has been played, there is a film which introduces still another, a third level. In *Karl V*, it is the people in attendance at the hero's deathbed who put the question and start the action on a second plane. The simultaneous scenes, as well as the idea of an enclosing frame recall Calderon's dramatic technic and the old mystery plays. The urge for reflection, analysis and commentary represents intellectual speculation just as much as it does the age-old, naive hunger of man for truth. And since the new music presents the result of a ruthless critical appraisal of tradition, it is most apt and most powerful when applied to theatrical material which also represents the force of criticism.

It is therefore easy to understand why the new opera has frequently made use of historical subjects and will continue to do so. Shunning the old illusionistic conceptions of history, it searches out the true political significance of events, and develops the conflicts that are essential to dramatic construction.

Obviously the dramaturgic technic of such works has been influenced by the films. The straight use of motion pictures, as in *Colomb*, is not essential, may be perhaps even not desirable, since films and realistic dramatic action do not blend easily. But the

quick change of locale, the compression of dialog into a few decisive phrases, the epic course of the scenes, are all devices closely related to film technic.

It is no wonder that such an art should encounter special external difficulties. To the technical problems of the new music itself must be added the spiritual hazards met by every kind of truth. The new idea first of all meets the preconception that opera should be dedicated to non-serious subjects presented in agreeable form, that it is merely an arrangement of play, song and dance which aims to please. Whereas the new method would link opera with important ideas, transforming empty trifling to real achievement, with results commensurate with the heavy labor and expenses of preparation. For quite a long time to come, it will be the fate of many genuinely new operas to go unperformed. The most numerous and best prepared opera houses—the German—bar the development of this kind of work; the theatres of the rest of the world are neither technically nor spiritually equipped to solve such hazardous problems. Indeed the most important operas of our day lie in the drawers of their writers and publishers, to the loss of the whole art of the drama. We can only hope that composers, by some miracle, will summon enough resistance to continue this now hopeless industry. At least a later age, surely deeming itself better than the present one, will be grateful to them.