SCHOENBERG'S OPERAS

BY PAUL STEFAN

AFTER a long period of anticipation, both stage works of Arnold Schoenberg have finally been presented within the last year. *Erwartung* was given by the Deutsches Landestheater of Prague under the direction of Alexander Zemlinsky and in connection with the orchestral performances of the International Society for New Music. The other, *Die Glueckliche Hand,* was staged in October by the Vienna Volksoper under Dr. Friedrich Stiedry, with the generous support of the city of Vienna during its music and theater festival.

That they were presented at all is noteworthy, since for so many years the production of either work was held to be impossible, a consideration which dissuaded even the largest opera organizations from the attempt. Now the entire feasibility of performance has been proved. It is true that many rehearsals were arranged, a practice no longer customary with our opera repertoire theaters; but after this preparation, as Dr. Stiedry has said, his ensemble plays *Die Glueckliche Hand* as easily as it plays Mozart.

Anyone even superficially familiar with the stagecraft of the last twenty years will recognize the almost unbelievable progress made during that period. Modern music is certainly not the last to benefit by this advance. In March 1925, when the Berlin Staatsoper produces Alban Berg's *Wozzek,* under Kleiber's direction,—a performance which has been definitely promised,—a still greater mastery of the technical field will be made. (Alban Berg is one of Schoenberg's oldest and most devoted disciples.)

Granting the difficulties of stage presentation in both these works, let us put them aside for the present. By far the greatest difficulty is for the performer to enter into the spirit, the nature of the music itself. Both pieces, Opus 17 and Opus 18, were

begun in 1909, a year significant for Schoenberg. *Erwartung* was finished the same year, but the work on *Die Glueckliche Hand* was interrupted and completed four years later. Nineteen-hundred and nine is the year in which Schoenberg definitely enters the realm of his new music. We know that his early output, illustrated by the *Gurrelieder* and the sextet for stringed instruments, *Verklaerte Nacht,* in the historical perspective of today assumes a close relation to Wagner's *Tristan* and to Brahms, or at least seems to develop from this point. In rapid succession after that he created transitional works such as the first *Quartet* (D-minor) and the *Chamber Symphony,* which even more clearly tend away from tonality. With the first three *Pieces for Piano,* Opus 11, and the five *Pieces for Orchestra,* Opus 16, all written in 1909, Schoenberg finally comes into his own, becomes the Schoenberg known today, condemned by some, revered by others, the master of a new form and a new content in music.

The new form represents a liberation from all bonds of the sonata form, obviously, of course, from all aria forms of opera, and also from all the leit-motif constructions of Wagner and his followers. The accusation that Schoenberg's form is sheer negation and anarchy has long since been abandoned. He tried at first to render his ideas with convincing simplicity and conciseness. What developed, however, as in the pieces for piano and orchestra, were not so much tone impressions as visions of tone such as had never been heard before. To translate into sound the unheard and unhearable is a desire dear to the heart of the romantic, especially the German; and Schoenberg is perhaps fundamentally romantic, unlike the younger generation as typified in German and Austrian music by Hindemith, Krenek or Wellesz,—a generation seeking above all a new ideal of form, and traveling toward a classical goal.

Schoenberg, of course, also seeks a definitely new form, but only in the works that follow the two operas. He already approaches it in *Pierrot Lunaire,* (1912), undertaking the most difficult contrapuntal exercises with masterly skill. He believes he has lately found it in propounding the theory of the twelve tones and the "fundamental form." According to this, all twelve tones of the

chromatic scale have the same rights, none possesses the function of the tonic:—the theory of atonal music. Out of some of these twelve tones a definite order is established, the fundamental form, which is treated like a theme or leit-motif. Other forms in the same piece must take a complementary relation to the fundamental form, thus introducing the remaining tones of the chromatic scale which are not present in the fundamental form. Where this theory of Schoenberg's will eventually lead us is as uncertain as the future of music in general.

As far as the "content" of his music is concerned, its outstanding characteristic is held to be that in its latest development it renounces the triad and the theory of altered chords, and rests, both horizontally and vertically, entirely on a formation of fourths. This, on the face of it, is correct. The essential point is, however, that this fact is nothing but the result of Schoenberg's independent voice-leading; that even the fourths can be traced back to an expansion of the eleventh and thirteenth chords; and that Schoenberg, a distinguished theorist as his splendid *Harmonielehre* has demonstrated, actually believes he can bring his atonality within tonal compass in some fashion which is not yet clear even to himself.

The orchestral fabric of both stage works is rich. The scores are for full orchestra with about four of each of the wood-wind sections. While in *Erwartung* he bases this great tonal structure purely on sound effects, in *Die Glueckliche Hand* he clearly indicates the way to a solistic treatment of each instrument, to a motivistic interpretation of each voice. The vocal parts are unusually trying, requiring the greatest histrionic ability as well. Especially is this true of *Erwartung,* the monodrama. The poem is by Marie Pappenheim. It is a scene drawn with most skillful brevity. A woman awaits her lover in the forest at night. Stumbling in the darkness over his dead body, she knows through a sudden revelation that he has been killed because of some other woman, and enkindles herself at the imperative call of a deathless love. This whole piece is written in four hundred and twenty-six measures and lasts about twenty-five minutes. It rushes over its audience with the force of a torrent, of a wild beast. It

is pure ecstasy, but as an ecstatic masterpiece it has such individuality and greatness as to compel belief.

The poem of *Die Glueckliche Hand* is Schoenberg's own. This is the tragedy of the husband. His wife, for whom he works and suffers, deceives him with the first man who happens to come along. She lures them both on, the husband and the lover, but is finally lost to her husband. All sorts of extraordinary devices contribute to the treatment; lighting effects—also a romantic development—are as important as the words and the music; a chorus speaks in the manner of the melodrama, its speech turning occasionally into singing and chanting; and all this is like some monstrous dream experience, taking place in less than a quarter of an hour. The score is written in two hundred and fifty-five measures.

Both works are of such a structure as to make repetition impossible even for their creator. Like all significant artistic achievements they have the quality of completeness and finality. Our age is rich enough in personalities who can travel other routes. These works of Schoenberg may be admired, may be mistrusted, but certainly not imitated.