

SCHÖNBERG'S OPERAS

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THERE were until recently only two stage works by Arnold Schönberg. In the last few months, however, a third has been added, an opera, whose production has been scheduled for December at the Frankfort Opera House, long famous for the courage with which it has introduced novelties. Between the appearance of the two earlier operas and the completion of this new one there is an interval of fifteen years, during which time Schönberg has moved along a road which it is not yet possible to map out very clearly. The two earlier works reveal a Schönberg vastly different from the master of these latter years.

Let us recall a few significant dates here. In 1924 his native city, Vienna, having long ignored him after greeting his first concert with jeers and laughter, at last feted her composer with exaggerated zeal. He was invited to the City Hall; the mayor warmly saluted him and in the presence of the assembled guests proclaimed him a leader of his generation. The chorus of the State Opera House then sang Schönberg's *Friede auf Erden*, a work up to then considered almost impossible to perform. This did not prevent Schönberg from leaving Vienna three years later (as he had left it so often before) to go to Berlin, for there only, and not at home, he found a suitable sphere and a sympathetic environment. The Prussian Ministry of Arts and Sciences had appointed him instructor in composition at the Berlin Academy of Arts. He was required to live in Berlin only six months of the year, and had ample leisure for creative work. Such a position and such a salary were not to be had in Vienna.

The celebration of Schönberg's fiftieth birthday coincided approximately with the end of a period of crisis in the composer's artistic development. During this time, as a result of theoretical investigation, he had arrived at the doctrine of his twelve-tone

system. With this as a basis he again turned to composition and completed, in quick succession, the series of works which begins with Opus 23 for piano. He still regards this theory as perfectly valid, and his own immediate pupils adhere to it. Such masterpieces as Schönberg's *Third Quartet*, Anton Berg's *Lyrical Suite*, and the *String Trio* of Anton von Webern were all composed in strict accordance with Schönberg's rules. Theory alone, however, is evidently insufficient, for works have already appeared which adhere scrupulously enough to the rules but do not reveal a genius such as that of the composers named above.

Schönberg needed new tools, new bearings, a new mold. He had written a wonderful treatise on harmony, one of the most brilliant books ever penned on music and on art in general, in which he treats the sacrosanct laws of the old school as nothing more than rules of thumb. These he examines and interprets for the reader, indicating their *raison d'être* as he goes. Only in the concluding chapter is one forewarned that new rules must come, that a new art has arisen. One of the first prophets of this new art and one of its mightiest personalities, has been Schönberg himself.

Schönberg was not and is not a professional revolutionary. In the oratorio, *Die Jakobsleiter*, an uncompleted work of his middle period, he reveals himself unmistakably a martyr of the new era, a man driven against his will to wrestle with the angels, to take upon himself the proclamation of the New. Had he chosen to remain upon the broad beaten highway, he would have found ease and have won early recognition. For after a difficult youth in Vienna and in Berlin, he experienced several triumphs, one even on the occasion of the first presentation of his great choral work, *Die Gurre-Lieder*, in Vienna in 1913. And *Pierrot Lunaire*, a work markedly different from *Die Gurre-Lieder*, received enthusiastic applause, despite sharp criticism.

It is only in the light of Schönberg's almost legendary martyr-life that we can understand how he could complete a work like *Die Gurre-Lieder* at a time when he was wrapped up in the *Pierrot*. For *Die Gurre-Lieder*, although they bring us wholly new spiritual values, although they further integrate Wagner's sonorities, nevertheless issue undeniably from the harmonic world

of *Tristan* while with *Pierrot* a state of harmony has been reached which we are accustomed to call atonality. But Schönberg denies the possibility of atonality. In effect he denies anarchy and insofar as his own compositions are concerned he is wholly right. The succession of his earlier works shows how smoothly and how logically the liberation from harmonies of the seventh and ninth had proceeded, how, further, the pyramiding of chords and the use of suspensions led to the development of harmonic fourths and progressions in fourths. The same powerful logic dominates his rejection of the large form, its dissolution into originally impressionistic tone-pictures, and the reintegration of all the expressive powers of his music in new molds.

During this period of transition, between 1910 and 1920, and soon after the piano pieces, the five orchestral pieces and *Pierrot*, there appeared the two dramatic works, *Erwartung* and *Die Glückliche Hand*. Both *Erwartung* and *Die Glückliche Hand* are to be ranked below the *Pierrot* from the point of view of achieved precision. It is not certain whether Schönberg at the time actually intended to bring them to the stage. He was living in an almost visionary state. These were the years when, stimulated by Oskar Kokoschka, he also began to paint. His pictures were marvels of logical consistency, powerful in expression and self-revealing; they gave concrete embodiment to certain moods and passages from the symphonies of Gustave Mahler. Everyone who came within range of the man felt his almost miraculous force. His penetration and sensitivity were too keen to be satisfied with the customary modes of expression in music and on the stage. It almost seemed as if Schönberg had his own premonition of the approaching world catastrophe, was already feeling it in every nerve. Some such prophetic admonition inspires the scenes which succeed one another in his music dramas, the tempo of whose development is as stormy as his own. Both last only a short fraction of an hour. If the short opera is the fashion today, it was Schönberg who originated it almost two decades ago. *Erwartung* brings a single person on the stage, a woman. In darkest night, in the forest, she comes to a rendezvous with her lover and suddenly she stumbles over his dead body. By intuition she understands that he has known another woman

who was the agent of his death. This is Schönberg's first opera, a "monodrama" set to a poem by Marie Pappenheim. The music is an ecstatic surge of fear and love; it has an eerie splendor.

Die Glückliche Hand is leagues beyond this first attempt. It was first presented by Zemlinsky at Prague in 1924, during a festival of The International Society for New Music. Several months later, at the suggestion of the city of Vienna, Dr. Stiedry produced it at the Vienna People's Theatre, where it was twice repeated. The performance proved very costly and the management of the theatre was bitterly criticised. But in 1928 the Opera House at Breslau presented *Die Glückliche Hand* with overwhelming success, without in the least compromising either its schedule or its budget; and again, in 1929, there was a brilliant performance at the Music Festival at Duisburg, where it won such extraordinary acclaim as to compel a repetition after two days.

In *Die Glückliche Hand* action is stripped of all realism; one moves in the sphere of poetry, of symbols, of visions. The scene reveals a Man, astride whose back sits a mythological Beast that will not release him. The chorus chants its sympathy for this victim, who longs for earthly happiness although heavenly joy is his destiny. (This chorus is partly a *Sprech-chor*, speaking in carefully indicated tones, a sort of "melodrama" form already introduced by Schönberg in the *Gurre-Lieder* and in *Pierrot Lunaire*). A Woman, who embodies earthly happiness, deserts the Man for a Stranger, who seems to represent the power of money, as the Man does the power of spirit. For the second time abandoned by the Woman, the Man rises to his full height, and knows, at last, that in controlling his own destiny he possesses the Woman—not in the body, but in the spirit, and so forever. There follows a great battle for golden treasure within a Cave. Once more the Man conquers; but because he dreams of pursuing a new vision of the Woman, he falls finally into the power of the Beast of the first scene. And the chorus mourns: "Must you suffer again what you have so often suffered? Can you make no sacrifice? Can you not be content?"

Through this music we perceive now the lines, now only the colors of a celestial voice. Chords pile upon each other

as the lines flow together, eleven and twelve parts simultaneously; the instruments, often in strange, bizarre combination take on an ever increasing role, an extraordinary power and significance. Schönberg the painter, rounds out the complicated score by exact specifications for unusually rapid shifts of light and colors of symbolic meaning, undoubtedly of the kind anticipated by the light-color music of Scriabin and others.

To comprehend the magnitude of this work it must be heard and seen. There is no doubt that *Die Glückliche Hand* is significant in Schönberg's development. It marked an inevitable goal, but a goal from which he was forced to depart with equal necessity.

There is another question which might be asked: Does *Die Glückliche Hand* really belong to the body of the new opera as we have seen it develop in the last two or three decades? This cannot be answered off hand. The first two of Schönberg's dramatic works were too long neglected, stood too long alone. Perhaps they still do. The opera has since traveled along many roads. Let us indicate some of the divergences: *Cardillac* of Hindemith with its action reduced to symbolism; *Oedipus Rex* of Stravinsky, which is so deliberately removed from all dramatic effect, that it even has recourse to a dead tongue; *Jürg Jenatch* of Kaminski, which interweaves song with spoken drama; those operas of Krenek (I do not here refer to the *Jonny*, the triumph of whose explicit text is attested by its great popular success) which rest upon poetico-symbolic texts; the revue, *Neues vom Tage* of Hindemith; the three-penny opera, *Schauspiel mit Songs*, of Kurt Weill—and other works which are to be produced during the current European season, as well as the short operas, which were introduced at Baden-Baden in 1928. I believe the composers of all these works have been acquainted with Arnold Schönberg's attempts for the operatic stage; and I also believe that the whole history of the opera since their appearance shows them to have been of the greatest importance and far-reaching effect.