

GERMANY'S LATEST MUSIC DRAMAS

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PROBABLY no other country in Europe has so much fertile operatic experiment as Germany today. Although we may complain that all modern versions of opera are merely reproductions of old works revamped by a new art of stage direction, it is true that in Germany, as nowhere else, an attempt is being made to revivify the opera by new methods. Here there is none of that resignation which seems elsewhere to have taken hold of the world of operatic creation. For so far as the public is concerned, it apparently likes nothing better than unthinkingly to surrender its spirit to Puccini and to sip his all too pleasing melodies with delight.

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* has made a breach in the old operatic style. It is interesting to note that Berlin, a city preferring as a rule not to be the dog on which new works are tried, for the first time in a long while presented an interesting premiere. The *Wozzeck* enthusiasm had hardly passed when it was revived by Ernst Krenek who appeared with two operas, one serious, one gay. He had frequently discussed the opera but too theoretically. Theories, especially about opera, exist only to be overthrown; Krenek himself, when assistant to Director Paul Bekker in Cassel, had once observed that practise is apt to differ from theory, and he acted accordingly.

While his *Orpheus and Eurydice* was written several years ago, there is no doubt that, with some improvements perhaps, it is still the expression of his attitude today. The libretto was taken from the text of the painter and author, Oscar Kokoschka. The words are shrieked out as if in a fit. Evidently the poet, metamorphosed from a painter whose creations had always been provocative, even agitating, was afraid to say anything clearly. At first reading the text is almost unintelligible despite the com-



JAZZO

An expression in bronze
of the jazz spirit by
ANNETTE ROSENSHINE

poser's recasting. But the semi-obscurity itself seems to have been Krenek's inspiration. Orpheus and Eurydice are breathed upon with a Strindbergian force that is both hate and love. Eurydice is a modern woman who chafes under masculine domination and finally takes her revenge. This action runs its swift course in a series of sharply defined pictures set in bold relief. The painter Schoenke and Director Bekker have done their utmost to bring out clearly the author's vague intentions.

The manner in which Krenek has set the libretto to music is most compelling. He disdains the use of any modern shibboleths—linearity, atonality, etc.—and his protest is not without relevance because heretofore there has been evident in his work a rigid adherence to principle which has created occasional deformities. The style of this opera is more pliable, more flowing. The composer seems to have but recently experienced a phase of romanticism, which is expressed in a novel manner. In fact, I do not know where else in the literature of opera the path to a new lyric form has been more happily opened up. Here Krenek has abandoned the worn-out patterns of the old music-drama. It is true that he has severe disparagers among the followers of traditional opera, who include many of the critics, but positive approval by the moderns has triumphed and brought his work to the threshold of success. It is soon to be performed in Berlin.



Krenek's gay opera, *Johnny Strikes Up the Band*, had its first performance a short time ago under the direction of Gustav Brecher in Leipzig. Johnny, who, of course, is a negro, plays the principal role in this work, the first German opera to employ jazz. Krenek did not go to Paris for nothing. One feels here that he has written almost from a directly personal inspiration. The story concerns a composer who has an agreeable and a disagreeable experience with his beloved, an opera singer, which serve as excellent occasions for romantic treatment. But in the background there is always jazz. We hear it first in a Paris hotel

where the singer is stopping, and almost at once are at its mercy in the drumbeats of Johnny and the playing of Daniello, the violin virtuoso. The libretto, by the composer himself, is very deftly written. The scenes shift from an Alpine glacier to a railroad station from which the Amsterdam express is about to leave. Naturally the radio, the auto and the loud-speaker also play their part. Realism is freely mingled with fantasy, the intriguing combination exploited to keep the audience in suspense.

But Krenek cleverly refrains from offending the ears of his opera public. He gives us romanticism of the old style, which has been interpreted by some of his most faithful followers as parody but which he, however, means literally. The dramatic action, modeled after revue and operetta, is more fleet-footed than the music, which runs a little behind. Though the work is not a masterpiece it is quite evidently an adroit experiment in jazz form by a musician who understands his time.



The contagion of jazz and topical subjects is so great that the Berlin Opera, under the direction of Erich Kleiber and Franz Hoerth, was recently induced to present a novelty which bore all the superficial earmarks of a success but, because of inherent weakness, achieved it only partially. Kurt Weill's opera, *Royal Palace*, to which I refer, is based on the libretto by Ivan Goll, a poet living in Paris. It deals with the deep wisdom of a misunderstood woman (she is more of a riddle to the author than to the rest of the world) who finds no happiness with her husband, with her lover of yesterday or with her lover of tomorrow. In desperation she throws herself into the lake, which by a happy accident is set in Italy and so supplies the audience with a beautiful landscape. But that is not enough—the Royal Palace Hotel serves you with a whole ballet of waiters and bell-hops and when the action lags, a film is used to project the chaos of a metropolis, the divertissements created by the appearance of autos and airplanes having been previously exhausted. The impression made

by this libretto is of a comic melancholy which borders on the ludicrous.

Nothing especially interesting has been contributed by the composer. His use of jazz is competent but he also attempts to be lyrical in the spirit of today and it is these lyrical moments that are the dullest. So much is presented to the eye that the spectator can hardly attend to the music which is almost relegated to the role of accompaniment for a movie. Weill is most successful with the ballet and pantomime as he was in an earlier opera, *The Protagonist*. He is not to be classed with Krenek in any respect. The orgies of this opera are merely circus appeals to bring in the public.



As it is not necessary to be chronological here, I am placing Paul Hindemith's *Cardillac* last, although it marked the beginning of the new experiment in opera. It represents the most strongly defined antithesis to everything traditional. The libretto by Ferdinand Lion is one of the most dramatic of the new operas and Hindemith has displayed great restraint in foregoing the usual theatrical effects to remain true to his principles.

This is the first time that the Bach school, the school of pure music, is expressed through the medium of opera. Though Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* exploits severity of form it retains, nevertheless, a great mixture of naturalism, impressionism and the *Tristan* spirit. This is not true of Hindemith. In his conviction that the score of an opera should not differ fundamentally from the score of any other composition, he has literally retraced his steps to the forms of Bach. *Cardillac* is a jeweler who loves his treasures so much that he murders their purchasers in order to regain them. The last purchaser is his own daughter's lover and thus the jeweler is unmasked. But murder and love, which have heretofore played such a great part in opera, have not tempted Hindemith. At the moment of murder there is silence and in the love scenes the music is, like Bach's, without sensuality, even where coloratura singing begins. The style is that which we associate with

the chamber orchestra; it is contrapuntal and linear and therefore as remote as possible from the operatic convention.

However it is easy to understand why the work so greatly disappointed the public. Accepted at many of the large German theatres because of Hindemith's popularity, it proved a great success only at the Wiesbaden Opera House. Despite its purity of style and the absence of aesthetic compromise in the music it is not a decisive gesture. *Cardillac* has something gray about it. Undoubtedly Hindemith's standards are higher than those of the other German composers discussed here, but his uncompromising attitude itself retards his success with opera.

To sum up, in Germany today there is a great, far-flung and varied experiment in the operatic field which is the result of stimulus from an active, operatic stage-management. It is, moreover, a definite reflection of the *Zeitgeist*, and for that reason of the greatest musical significance.