

ERNST KRENEK

ADOLPH WEISSMANN

IT has often been observed that the esthetic movements of the present era come swiftly to maturity. The critic today finds himself in an uncomfortable situation and may well doubt whether it is necessary to comprehend all the stages of the new development. Certainly there never has been more written about music, and consequently in no age has the word of the average critic been of less weight. Overvaluation of isolated esthetic experiences is a common occurrence.

The last decade has seen a number of artistic reputations established too soon that are now in danger of perishing with equal dispatch. When all esthetic matters were viewed from the standpoint of the revolutionary it was natural that the avowed musical radical should be esteemed beyond his worth. One knew that little further could be achieved with the technical and instrumental resources of the period just come to a close. But for the unprecedented no technique had yet been found; consequently the experimental and half-baked were more highly prized than ever before. If a man showed a trace or a suggestion of power one compromised with his immaturity; indeed it became the custom to consider these immaturities organic needs of his nature.

Nowhere, perhaps, has there been such chaos as in Germany which has an inherent love of the controversial and where dilettantism has played a dangerous if often fruitful role. Even Wagner takes his place as the end and fulfillment of the most extreme dilettantism. The new realization of how important it is to keep music free of non-musical elements is beginning to develop a sharper and more precise technical knowledge.

These paragraphs should explain the vicissitudes of the past decade that have affected the reputation of an unquestionably first-rate talent like Ernst Krenek's. A few years ago the choice

between Krenek and Hindemith would have been a difficult one. Born in Vienna in 1900, Krenek allied himself so openly with revolutionary principles and attracted so much attention by his earliest works that for Germany he became the truest expression of the spirit of our age. His case was remarkable enough. An Austrian, trained in the school of Franz Schreker, he tenaciously opposed everything which Austria is reputed to prize in music. His writing was emphatically linear; voice rudely opposed voice and sounds trod upon each other's toes. An output so untraditional would seem to be the product of long effort, but the speed with which one work followed another indicated that even then Krenek created with a certain spontaneity. The flair for the unusual evinced by this young man, barely in his twenties, linked itself with an explosive energy and the combination brought us distinctive works. Since youth is universally inflammable and unwilling to ponder its enthusiasms, it was not difficult for Krenek to establish himself as leader of the modern spirit in Germany. His music revealed a simple determination to *épater les bourgeois*.

Hindemith on the other hand appeared to be a musician opposed to everything speculative, deriving logically from Brahms. He also grew revolutionary wings but though he dallied with jazz and took unto himself Schönberg he avoided extremes.

For several recent years however the scales have inclined toward Hindemith. It is now evident that Krenek's startling debut, his unflinching linearity, were only symptoms of a flaw in the ground work. If he had been more of a musician he would undoubtedly have been less inflexible. Hindemith on the other hand expanded his musical method to embrace the purely linear, and finally, through the unusual experiment of *Cardillac*, he even enriched the opera—opera which so often effects its solutions through compromise. Though one may scarcely say that Hindemith has achieved an enduring influence upon opera by following this road, there is no doubt that his line of development has been consistent.

Krenek's path has been a tortuous one. Once the advocate of the most radical tendencies in music, at a sudden moment of creative activity he turned toward life and relinquished all that was uncompromising and systematic. There were good reasons

for this change. His first works were chamber music; they contained many interesting details but they were the expression of an asceticism based on a repressed experience. It is no exaggeration to say that these works, whose polyphony was so much admired, have lost their value today. They were designed only for premieres. Similarly the symphonies which ground so hard upon the ear of the average listener will scarcely find their way again to a place of vantage in the concert hall. They had a certain ephemeral existence in music festivals and on programs of modern works because the name Krenek assured a sensation. It was obvious also that Krenek paid homage to the spirit of the grotesque, which is generally but the veil of an individual's true spirit.

Up to this point there was every reason to believe him an artist whose will and intellect had so much the upper hand that something generous and free, something broadly human in feeling was not his to give. He needed the stage in order to emerge from behind his own mask, to make his genuine self known.

It was some time before Krenek learned to know the stage. For this, contact with life as well as the theatre was necessary. He had composed thirteen works all of which seemed both to bow to tradition and at the same time to express something new. From childhood he had written polyphonically, and thus attained a certain routine. This first period reveals him occupied with the entire province of chamber music. By his own admission this field was not destined to nurture his individual style. He wavered between banality and novelty, and bewildered his hearers only through the dogged persistence with which he juxtaposed the disparate elements of his music. When, for instance, in his opus 13, a *Toccata and Chaconne* on an original chorale, he juggled the sacred and blasphemous, many trusting souls among the reactionaries were deeply wounded. But when he ended his *Second Symphony* with ear-piercing dissonances which oppressed the senses like terrific hammer-strokes, a general suspicion arose that here was one bent only upon conquest in the world of music.

The next period of Krenek's activity is notable chiefly in that both stage and concert works were produced. The young composer had aroused such unprecedented discussion that his music was virtually snatched from under his nose and given perform-

ance regardless of his own preference. But meantime Krenek had married the daughter of Gustav Mahler and had come to know life on more intimate terms. The former stern leader of the anti-romantics became a bit more romantic. He completed Schubert's unfinished *Piano Sonata in C major*, in this way perhaps encouraging the American committee which later offered a prize for a conclusion to the *Unfinished Symphony*. He also brought into suitable condition for performance the so-called *Tenth Symphony* of Mahler.

The young artist whose obstinate adherence to his principles was thus far evident only in concert works was now ready to transfer his uncompromising procedures to the domain of opera. He confessed not only to the view held by many that between music and action no inner connection is essential, but he even went so far as to set these elements purposely apart, contrary to the usual tendency of the past to establish an ideal co-ordination between them. As always he endeavored to follow set principles. But the stage itself was to teach him new things. While *Zwingburg*, a scenic cantata, opus 14, written in 1922 and performed in Berlin in 1925, simulated a revolutionary atmosphere by depicting suffering multitudes in revolt against a tyrant, it attempted to enlist not only Stravinsky and Schönberg under the same banner, but likewise to go back to established traditions, even the Wagnerian. It was not a very personal spirit that had fashioned the choruses sung by the unruly mobs in this work; the deep impression it made was due to its appearing at a time when communistic ideas still awakened sympathetic echoes in many hearts.

Music for concert programs continued to find its way into the catalog of Krenek's works. We find him writing songs and choruses a cappella. He is observed at Donaueschingen in the company of Hindemith. A *Piano Concerto* and a *Violin Concerto* are the composer's last significant contributions to the literature of the concert hall, and show that the obdurate Krenek had become a little more conciliatory. Meantime his patron, Paul Bekker, was appointed director of the Royal Theatre at Cassel, and engaged Krenek to work there as chorus master. In this way the young composer grew familiar with the theatre, which he had

known only at a distance. His three-act comic opera, *Der Sprung über den Schatten*, was produced at the Frankfurt Opera in 1924, and this work revealed the essential Krenek, his fundamental lack of sympathy with the carnival aspect of life which had exerted so great a charm in restless post-war days. For the first time Krenek supplied his own text. The poetic and musical conceptions were none too harmonious, but had certain elements in common. Even if parts of the score were inferior, the spirit of the grotesque in music, so pronounced in the contemporary foxtrot, found an impressive and moving expression here.

Krenek's romantic leanings have already been mentioned. The opera *Orpheus und Eurydike*, written in 1923 and produced in 1926 at the Cassel Opera shows him striving toward a new lyricism. Here for the first time he not only consciously transcended the principle of linearity, but espoused the principle of freedom in the choice of material. And Krenek, formerly champion of a music absolutely uncompromised by subject matter and literary considerations, invested his score with his own fate. He set himself against Busoni's principle that the erotic has no place in art, particularly in the music of the theatre, and followed the lead of his librettist, Oskar Kokoschka, in making Orpheus and Eurydice a modern wedded pair who reveal a Strindbergian love which is at the same time hate. He might easily have taken the music-drama, especially that of Richard Strauss, for his model but he avoided this course. Instead he gave each scene its individual aspect by exploiting the various resources of the newer music, not pursuing simply one isolated principle.

Although this work made itself felt in the contemporary scene, its career was cut short by a performance in Leipzig of *Jonny Spielt Auf*. The stir caused by this opera-revue was so great that it loomed as the rallying point for the younger generation. Hindemith's *Cardillac*, which had been adopted by many German theatres, was forced to give way before the contagious vogue of *Jonny*.

I dubbed this work an opera-revue. In point of fact it is a first attempt to blend all the diverse species of theatrical art, and that, surely, is in the spirit of the times. The opera is animated by the noise of life itself. Stravinsky had paved the way for this; his jazz

style was the first which music of any pretensions could utilize and *L'Histoire du Soldat* opened up a path which many others followed. In France, where life and art are more closely intermingled than in Germany, jazz has enjoyed a real vogue as an artistic medium.

Jazz still has its place today, but its significance as an artistic vehicle is no longer overestimated. Krenek used it as the chief conductor of his intentions in the theatre. Exploiting hotel, railroad, automobile, cinema, and radio on the stage he was only following the trend of the times, but in so maneuvering the love-interest that a negro was the focus of attention, he gave jazz a scope for wider boundaries. He had not, however, fully forsworn romantic conceptions. *Jonny* contains a chorus scene with a glacier as setting in which are to be heard palpable reminiscences of a sort of high class Puccini. It was almost as though Krenek wanted to remind himself of unromantic reality by the violence with which he handled romantic love.

Jonny missed scarcely a single provincial stage, and the more far-reaching its reputation the more begrudging of praise were its contemporaries. A sharp division ensued between the followers of Hindemith and Krenek, who are, after all, the two typical representatives of the younger generation in Germany. (Kurt Weill manages to remain on good terms with both sides.) Krenek has been called a deserter. With its use of questionable media, *Jonny* is felt to be a concession to the mob. No one could maintain that it is a true art-work in style or spirit; it sacrifices more to the idols of the time than a great artist can justify, nor does the manner in which diverse new and old musical elements are mingled speak highly for Krenek's mastery. The individual parts of the work are rather crudely put together. One feels some surprise that a composer whose polyphonic technique has been so highly valued should be so amateurish. It is also astonishing that Krenek, previously displaying a thorough sense of acoustic values, should in this respect leave so much to be desired.

But if Krenek did not hit upon the right style for his opera-revue he at least has combined attractive elements of music in a way which pleases the public. There are many bare spots and inadequacies in the score; the carelessness with which the voice

parts are handled is but a single instance. Yet one is forced to admire the cleverness, the sense of the theatre with which the opera is put together. In the final analysis *Jonny* is of course up-to-date, and no more than up-to-date; its persuasiveness has already diminished. At the same time we must remember that since *Rosenkavalier* no opera in the newer manner has had so widespread a success.

As for Krenek himself, he is immersed in the theatre. When Paul Bekker changed his directorship at Cassel for that of Wiesbaden, Krenek followed him to the latter city, but not for long, because he wished to keep his environment as free as possible for creative activity. Early during his stay at Wiesbaden three one-act operas were performed. These works, written shortly after *Jonny*, reveal their kinship with it, for the composer here again speaks in the cadence of our time, and the music is a portrait of its tendencies. The first of this trilogy, *Der Diktator*, has interesting details but its handling of dialog is unconvincing. The third, *Der Meisterboxer*, displays Krenek's unusual gift for the grotesque, and is almost an operetta in style. The middle one, *Das Geheime Königreich*, is again a return to romanticism; not a worn-out, faded romanticism propped up by sentimentality, but a new kind of romanticism, more concentrated and convincing.

A survey of Krenek's general development shows that the man whose radicalism seemed the support and strength of the modern trend in Germany is now openly seeking attention through entirely opposite means. While Hindemith has won the confidence of musicians through extraordinary consistency, Krenek has become a composer for the multitude, which has taken him for its very own. Any unprejudiced judgment must concede that his sense of the theatre is extraordinary; one of its manifestations is the skill with which he composes his own librettos, as do all the younger men except Kurt Weill. But the essential musical principle within Krenek, once so promising, is receding ever further into the background. The scenically effective has become his chief preoccupation; his music is too second-hand, too derived to be suggestive of further development for art. Such at least is the case today. Only the future will show whether Krenek will be an influence on the music of our time.



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