

## THE RETURN TO THE STAGE

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THOSE outside of Europe may consider it strange that so many Continental composers now concern themselves with the writing of opera, an activity which the more eager and radical spirits, even a few years ago, would have regarded with some suspicion. Opera composers indeed! One thought of them with gentle contempt as people who continued to do what Wagner and Verdi had done before them and had done so much better. Why should the younger generation turn to an outlived form? And had not the devotees of "absolute music" been declaring for over three hundred years that the opera was without enduring vitality? Yet just those composers who are considered far from reactionary have regained interest in this form.

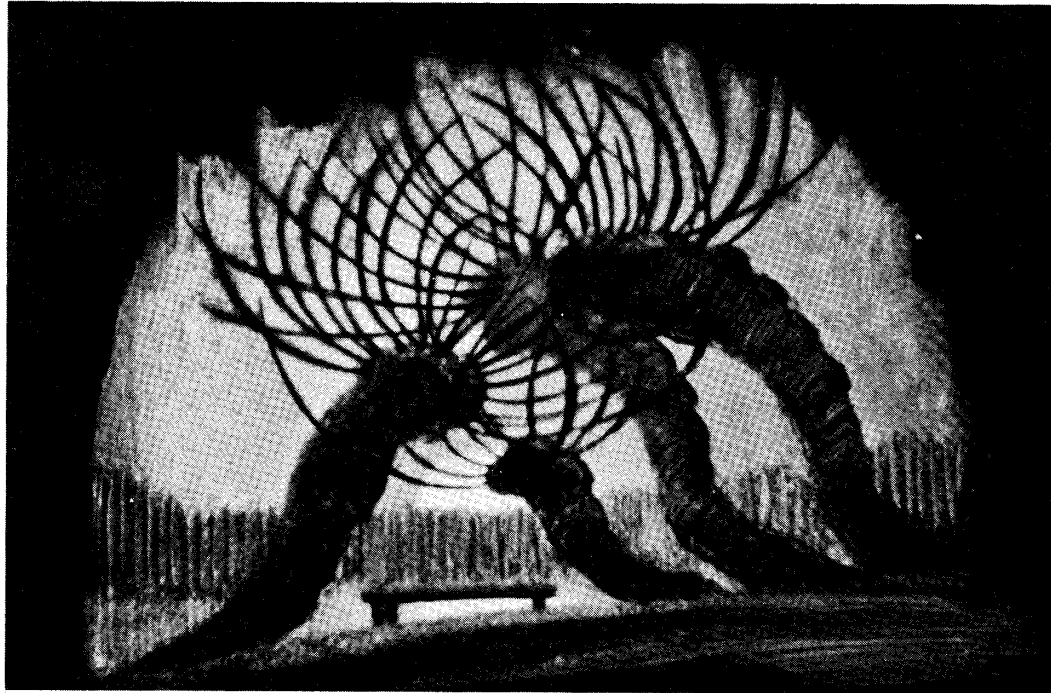
To me it seems that this development can be examined and understood rather from the social, the purely human view-point, than from the aesthetic. After the war, the theatre in Europe emerged as a much stronger cultural influence than before. In Germany the need for the theatre was felt in all social strata and it is significant that in precisely the most trying post-war period, that of financial inflation, interest in opera increased enormously. One should bear in mind that in Germany alone there are about twenty cities in which opera can be so performed that the composer's intentions will at least be made clear, and ten opera houses, at a conservative estimate, which give first-rate productions.

Furthermore there now exists a perfect net-work of active and vitally functioning organizations, staffed largely by young conductors, young stage-managers and young painters who have long been struggling with works not written in the contemporary spirit, trying to stage them in a way that would lend them some aspect of our era.

It is easy to understand why the present generation did not take up the opera earlier. For it has been only a few years since music succeeded in liberating itself from the bondage of the nineteenth century. There appeared during the transition a small number of important works; in general, however, this period of experiment was not favorable to the opera as a form. It was necessary to start with the smallest units and to create a new language. Only then was it possible to return to the opera as to a living experience. The conventions, the shackles of the past, had to be eliminated before opera could be approached with true inspiration as an ultimate goal for an idea and an ideal.

I must digress for a moment to utter what should be accepted as a platitude but unfortunately is not—nor does it apply only to the problem of a new technique. (In 1921 a composer said to me “Operas are not being written.” Today he would say “Operas are being written in the neo-classic style.”) For opera one must be something more than a musician; an instinct for the stage is essential. This instinct was repressed by something inherently wrong in the music during the period through which we have just passed. Present day music provides a wider scope for dramatic talents.

The crucial event in the regeneration of opera, in my opinion, was the appearance of the Russian ballet in the principal cities of Europe. For the first time in over a hundred years, dramatic action on the operatic stage was accompanied by simply designed, unpsychological music; music whose essence was immediately translated into gesture and action. This directness, this liberation of the orchestra from the old psychology and the psychological interpretation of the events on the stage, was the decisive, the liberating factor. In contrast to the hyper-individualistic treatment of details, such as we knew in *Salome* and *Electra*, it signified the recognition of an objective attitude towards the thing as a whole. The fairy operas of Rimsky-Korsakow, *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Richard Strauss, *Arlecchino*, *Turandot* and *Doctor Faust* by Ferruccio Busoni, and *Rossignol* by Strawinsky were the first works to reflect this new attitude toward the problem. If these belong to a type, the “opera comica-seria,” to use the old expression, they have nevertheless shown the way



WOZZECK, ACT II, SCENE 2.

FOREST PATH BY THE POOL.

Here Aravantinos has embodied, in definite forms, a sense of preparation for murder in the moonlight, which is the subject played out in this scene, and for the suicide which occurs at the same spot later. It is at this point that the crisis of Berg's opera occurs.

to the "drama per musica," the opera proper. Naturally the comic or tragi-comic opera took form most easily and independently. It had no immediate predecessors and was able to start where the masters of the eighteenth century had left off. In Hindemith's *Nusch-Nuschi*, in Krenek's *Sprung ueber den Schatten*, in Milhaud's *Malheurs d'Orphée*, in Prokofieff's *Love of the Three Oranges* and in other productions like them, the music reflects the plastic presentation, gesture and motion. These works are simultaneous attempts to revive the old *commedia dell'arte*.

The problem of the "opera seria" was more difficult. In this field the powerful Wagnerian influence had dwarfed the growth of every new blossom for several decades. It is customary to blame Wagner because his followers produced nothing of importance, just as in the epoch following Michelangelo it was felt that the sculptor had been "too great". Only after a certain space of time had separated these creators from their successors, after their effect had slightly worn off, could even sporadic developments come to maturity.

Since we are discussing a problem in whose solution I am especially interested, I hope to be forgiven if I refer to my own work, as it is, after all, only my own attitude which I am able to present. I think I have found a medium which completely reflects my idea of a new art-form—a combination of solo-songs, choruses, pantomimes, and dances, such as existed even in Gluck's day. This form (in which I have employed antique subjects and texts) has somewhat stimulated new efforts on the stage, for it demands of singers and chorus a new kind of performance. As I have said, there are at most of the opera houses young conductors, stage managers and painters, possessed of an understanding of and feeling for the contemporary movement. Among the singers and chorus, however, this feeling must be awakened and then cultivated through most intense rehearsing. Since opera-houses often possess only a limited corps-de-ballet, it has occasionally been necessary to enlist the services of young people from the academies and girls from the dancing schools. They must be thoroughly drilled, of course, before going on the stage but the enthusiasm of their youth eventually communicates itself

to the chorus and the soloists. It is not at all unusual to see the ballet and supernumeraries vitalize an entire performance, so that the stage, the singers, the chorus, the dancers and the rest again rightfully assume the center of interest, while the orchestra and conductor resume the role of accompanist.

In post-Wagnerian opera it has been the orchestra and singers who have had the greatest difficulties to conquer. Of every opera it has been said that it presented technical difficulties which were almost insurmountable, that it was well-nigh impossible to teach the singers their parts. I do not believe that this is a desirable condition; frequently the discussion of such difficulties is merely a pose of virtuosos of the baton to magnify their own importance. I believe that the opera of the immediate future will concern itself more with the creation of beautiful melodic line than with the imposition upon the singers of new and thankless technical burdens.

In this new opera, each scene, both in spoken drama or in ballet, must be merely the outward expression of an inner life. The difference between the epic and the novel on the one hand, and drama on the other, is essentially that the former are concerned with the past and the future, while the latter moves in the present. In opera, therefore, everything should be so immediately, so directly represented that, were the text omitted as in pantomimic forms, the whole work would nevertheless be completely understood. The words should not function as an aid to psychological coherence in the plot, but should rather express feeling. Only in this way will opera emerge as a form having more than a purely academic interest, surmounting trivial sentiment—a direct expression of emotion and drama through the medium of music.