

# MODERN MUSIC

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MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

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## THE FUTURE OF OPERA IN AMERICA

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THE development of opera in Europe, which had a sudden upsurge after the war, has been stagnant for many years. I was therefore greatly interested in discovering the state of the theatre when I came to America about twenty months ago.

What we have known for years in Europe is even more applicable here. The concept of opera cannot be interpreted in the narrow sense that was prevalent in the nineteenth century. If we substitute the term "music theatre," the possibilities for development here, in a country not burdened with an opera tradition, become much clearer. We can see a field for the building of a new (or the rebuilding of a classical) form.

The music theatre is as old as the theatre itself. Those cultures from which our theatre has descended (the Greek theatre, the Japanese theatre, the medieval mysteries) attempted and accomplished, each in its own way, the union of word, tone and movement from which sprang the later opera form. Since the theatre was originally a folk-art, it needed music, always the most natural, most "popular" form of artistic expression. Opera arose in the sixteenth century with the attempt to revive the ancient theatre, and the first operas were "musical theatre" in the best sense, achieving a logical union of music and drama, and bringing the drama into complete balance with the musical form.

Thereafter, opera pursued its own road. It became an independent art-form, going further and further away from the theatre, because the music subordinated the drama. A typical

European phenomenon, it developed in correspondence with social necessities in Europe. For a long time it was produced for private enjoyment at the courts of princes and aristocratic patrons and so was a typically subsidized art. Not having to fight for its life, it grew spoiled, over-refined, exigent, following whims and disregarding general laws. The great operatic masterpieces—*Don Juan, Figaro, Fidelio*—were the results of successful battles against this danger of isolation by composers striving toward a universally applicable form against the intentions of their patrons.

So-called artistic freedom is something special. The creative artist seeks independence, he wants to conceive his work freely, unaffected by outer compulsion. On the other hand, he needs some restraining influence to prevent his wandering in abstract spheres. He must know for whom he is creating. Only by considering his objective will he find the necessary spiritual background that prohibits an empty play with forms. Most great works of art were produced as commissions, for a definite purpose and audience, that is, between the millstones of outer compulsion and inner freedom, between "must" and "will."

The existence of opera was endangered because it was too well safeguarded, because it was intended for a too narrowly prescribed public. Its production demanded great subsidies which in the course of time had a detrimental effect on inner structure. The contents of the librettos drew farther away from the realities of life, from the simple natural relations between people, and lost themselves in artificial, false emotions, in a meaningless world of kings, knights and princesses, or in pure symbolism. Coincidentally, the means of musical expression became increasingly complicated. Melody, always the most expressive element of the music theatre, was threatened by over-emphasis on harmony and by orchestral effects. In an almost diseased passion for musical originality, the central problem of the music theatre—to bring words and tones together in equilibrium—was lost to sight. In the process of extending its musical structure, making it more fine-spun, opera presentation was so neglected as to become almost ridiculous. The stiff, unnatural movements of singers, the old-fashioned scenery, the meaningless interruptions by

ballets, these are the tragic signs of an age in which opera lost contact with the theatre and led the existence of a museum piece, toilsomely preserved by its devotees.

Paralleling the subsidized product was a different kind of opera, reared on a far healthier basis as part of the amusement business by entrepreneurs who recognized and tried to satisfy the need of the masses for a music theatre. The artistic value of such operatic works is often underestimated, because they are popular, completely comprehensible, and have a direct effect on the public. Mozart's *Zauberflöte* was written on commission and in collaboration with a commercial theatre impresario; it is an ideal example of the union of popular music and the highest degree of artistic power. The flowering of Italian opera in the nineteenth century brought forth in Verdi a new peak of popular opera. The melodic invention of its music and the technical mastery of the means of expression rank it with the great masterpieces. At the same time its public reception was such that it could stand on its own feet. The circumstances under which Verdi wrote his operas provided the healthiest condition of the theatre. There was a group of impresarios who were commissioning operas. Each had several prominent singers under contract, and from Verdi's letters to his librettists we know that with each work there was a consultation about which singers had to be provided with roles. A direct motive for the creation of opera existed, and each one was awaited by an enthusiastic public.

It is noteworthy that the resurgence of a new opera culture in Europe after the war went hand in hand with a great Verdi renaissance, long proclaimed by Busoni. This reached its climax in the *Masked Ball* presentation of the Berlin Municipal Theatre (staged by Carl Ebert with scenes by Caspar Neher). Musicians, critics and the public suddenly discovered the treasures hidden in this music, its original solution of the problem of opera form. The influence of the Verdi revival on post-war composers was accompanied by a realization that opera must again find a union with the theatre, and return to a simplified, clear and direct musical language. Already, during the war, Busoni had written an opera (*Arlecchino*) which used an actress in the principal

role. In Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat* a speaker carried the action; the *Dreigroschenoper* was written for an actress who could sing.

The great dramatists of the day began to interest themselves in opera. Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Paul Claudel, Georg Kaiser, Bert Brecht wrote librettos. Modern ideas of stage craft found their way into the music theatre, the singers received dramatic training and discovered a simple, human manner of presentation that threw a new light on classical opera. The composers of this period found their strongest form of expression in the theatre.

In the selection of themes we attempted to employ current ideas and events of the day in an operatic form—though this did not prove a permanent direction. The effort to use great, timeless materials in relation to great contemporary ideas, developed a series of important choral operas. Attempts were also made to penetrate into the most diverse fields and groups of audiences—outside the traditional opera theatre. We recognized that just in those circles where music was really needed, where music had a “market value,” second-rate matter was used almost exclusively. Thus we tried to break into the entertainment industry (musical comedy, night club, popular song.) The *Stück mit Musik* proved one of the most successful theatre forms of the day. Composers also wrote works for radio, operas for schools, scenic choral pieces for mass meetings, and began to tackle the problem of musical films.



Suddenly this whole development was interrupted by political events in Central Europe. And under the existing situation in the Old World, there is scant hope that it will be resumed in a reasonable time. I do not believe that America can simply take up this music theatre development right where Europe left off. The prerequisites for artistic construction here are quite different. But I do believe that a movement has already begun which runs parallel to the European and which will come closer to the goal we set in Europe, even though—or because—it develops on a new plane fixed by conditions in this country.

America stands near Russia, it is the only country in which the

theatre forms an active, vital part of cultural life. There is a genuine interest in the theatre not only in New York but in other cities. Every season sees a number of outstanding successes, of widely discussed theatre evenings. American dramatists today hold first place for ability and ideas, and the plentiful "second-growth" of young writers is also a favorable sign. Everywhere we find a tendency to break away from the realistic scene of the last decade, to find an elevated, poetic level of theatre, which can survive alongside the movies.

This tendency is especially important because the poetic is very close to the music theatre. At the same time there is an unusually strong interest on the part of the American public in every form of music. From my own experience I can testify that I have seldom found so large, so direct a reaction to music in the theatre as in New York. The musical taste of the general public is better here than in many other countries.

All these signs indicate that the soil is favorable for development. What will grow on it is hard to say, for there is no sort of tradition. The general public, outside of the large cities knows little or nothing about opera, but they tell me that traveling troupes giving Verdi performances have had great success, and I am convinced that the radio, which is an important influence in this country, will do profitable preparatory work. Whether the growth will be opera in the European sense or music theatre in a broader sense, a new amalgam of word and tone bearing a new idea, it is certain that it will be an active, vital part of the modern theatre, that dramatists and composers will cooperate in its creation, that from the plentiful supply of young singers a generation of singer-performers will emerge.

It may be that a music theatre will rise out of Broadway. There are already many starting points for a new kind of musical comedy here, and Gilbert and Sullivan in England, Offenbach in Paris, and Johann Strauss in Vienna have proved that a musical theatre culture of high merit can arise from the field of light music. It is also possible that the few existing operatic institutions will take the lead and start a development similar to that of the German opera theatres in the post-war period. Perhaps the resurgence that the Metropolitan has experienced in recent

years is the first indication that American composers will be able to create operas in the spirit of our own time for the great group of singers in that institution.

The best possibility for the birth of a new form of music drama, it seems to me, lies in the Federal theatre. This young organization, which in a short time has become one of the most important and most promising factors in the theatre and the music of the country, possesses not only the outer essentials but the inner compulsion to undertake the solution of this problem. A generously supported undertaking, which arose out of necessity, it rests in the hands of youth, and has a progressive spirit such as distinguishes few theatre enterprises in the world. Spreading all over the country, it has the practical means to bring dramatists, composers, actors, singers, chorus and orchestra together for one great, unified work of art.

And perhaps even all these ideas are still too steeped in tradition. In America the new musical art work may after all develop from the medium of the movies. For nowhere else has the film attained that technical perfection and popularity which can smooth the way for a new art form.