

OPERA — A WAY OUT

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I believe that a healthy opera ballet movement would do a great deal of good to the future musical life of America. It would loosen things considerably and set a number of new developments in motion; if properly managed it should attract a larger and more generous audience than the symphonic public we have today. There is no doubt whatsoever that the American composer has neglected the serious music theatre. When asked why, he usually excuses himself on the ground of the difficulty of production; he can hear his symphonic work, he argues, but not his opera. Therefore he does not write his opera. But for that matter, he rarely hears his symphonic work. In fact the frequency with which he hears his symphony performed is usually so disproportionate to the number of times he ought to hear it, that he can hardly excuse himself by pleading he will not hear his opera at all. He will probably, at the very outside, listen to his symphony only three times, and that all in one season. Why quibble, when, practically speaking, the high and the low very nearly meet. We can write operas without feeling that we are much less impractical than the symphony composer.

The trouble lies, of course, in our national and instinctive feeling against opera. We are a musical nation reared upon the German symphony orchestra. Our esthetic is the esthetic of the abstract. When we go to the opera, we want to hear it in another language! We are apparently annoyed that we are not listening to a symphony and therefore try to hear the opera as an abstract work. Our young composers criticize opera with the measuring tape of symphonic music. They say it is not "tight" enough, not abstract enough, not "developed" enough (they mean in a symphonic sense), or not contrapuntal enough. They feel that musical purity is the thing . . . any foreign sub-

stance—words, action, scenery—is vulgar, profane. However, musical art has not grown from “pure” roots, but in literal praise of many gods, and in literal explanation of many dances. It grew up in the church, employed to literal ends. And some of the greatest music ever penned is in the *very operatic* and delightful operas of Mozart.

But our young composers have been fostered in the German symphonic tradition—the only tradition our country has known. Years ago our grandfathers went to hear Theodore Thomas and as a nation we grew to love the symphony orchestra, and today we have at least three of them which cannot be matched in the rest of the civilized world.

Now we have evidence that the symphonic tradition is breaking in the land of its origin, in Germany during the last seven or eight years. The contemporary scene in Germany is still too disturbed to be more than opaquely visible at the moment, but there are indication that she still continues along the lines laid out by her ten years ago. Though now definitely more conservative, the operatic renaissance goes on.

The tremendous music-theatre activity of Germany during 1926-1931 only duplicated and imitated the equally tremendous activity of Paris from 1911 to 1924, with its Ballet Russe, its Ballet Suédois, and its Stravinskys, Aurics and Milhauds, all of whom would be unthinkable without the serious musical theatre. Of course the young Germans of that day did their own operas in their own style, which at its best approaches Breughel, and is, in effect, either a lusty uproarious business or the inevitable phantasmagoria that sooner or later enmeshes the German imaginative and poetic mind. But it was successful . . . for them at least.

Even here in America there are a few signs of approaching change. Operas are actually being given in English. Composed upon interesting librettos (also for the first time in American musical history) they have awakened curiosity toward what is actually happening on the stage. People are beginning to want to know what the singers are saying and what it is all about. They never thought of that before. New operas are being staged at the Metropolitan with librettos that are full of perfectly good theatre. The lone Indian maiden has disappeared. Intelligent

opera-goers no longer want to hear a three-hour symphony performed with singers and a scenic background, but to indulge in a living, vital, understandable adventure of the theatre. The singers actually act their roles. The Metropolitan opens its season with an American opera. In other places in this country, native operas are being rehearsed this very moment.

Composers are beginning to realize that fugues and counterpoint sound out of place on the operatic boards. Inasmuch as these same boards have vibrated to the divine operas of Mozart, they seem no less divine when symphonic and abstract methods of measurement fail utterly and completely. America is beginning to crack; if we break the hypnotic spell of the Theodore Thomas period, we may well be on our way into another fascinating era in the serious musical theatre, glamorous as any other opera or ballet renaissance. And, during its progress, we may perhaps establish a national music and a national public. So was the music of Russia given its first real encouragement; the modern music of France and Germany are unthinkable without the assistance of the theatre. Can we in America hope to succeed with a purely symphonic music where others have failed?

Lack of suitable librettos may at first hinder composers. The technic of modern opera is much more intricate than that of symphonic writing. The elements of words with literal meaning, stage, drama, necessarily complicate matters to a degree unknown in purely symphonic composition. The voices must move in orchestral tunnels, the brasses are dangerous and occasionally bite the singers. There is a new technic of orchestration to be considered. Green librettists occasionally leave the whole chorus out on the stage to be witnesses of the most intimate and delicate love scenes. The moving of choral masses, the instinctive theatrical feeling for the right intimate moments, must be firmly and absolutely imbedded in the opera.

The action in a modern opera, I believe, should move and get somewhere. We have had too much that is static in the old opera. A little action would be refreshing. Opera cannot move quite as fast as a play; for that matter, it should not encroach on the play's territory. It loses when it is too breathless, too parlando. A good play does not necessarily make a good opera libretto . . .

but a good opera should make an excellent sketch and groundwork for a three-act play. It is a "cut-down" of the non-essentials, the talkiness and the get-nowhereness of many parts of many excellent plays. When you go to the opera you should see an excellent play made over into the poetry of music, but without loss of theatre tempo.

If, on the contrary, you see a three-act symphony in pageant, or a cantata with curtains and backdrop, you are being cheated, and everybody concerned is barking up the wrong tree. There is no excuse for the untheatrical in the theatre. Here, however, we come to dangerous ground. What is theatre? Though nobody can tell exactly, a few general principles may be ventured. For opera, one of the very first is, I think, to get down to business immediately, start to go somewhere from somewhere else, arriving in a reasonable time in an interesting fashion, if possible, in a very interesting fashion. Most of us are sick unto death of the French theatre which seems to find it important and significant to shoot a rifle into the ceiling of one part of the stage and have a bunch of dead fowl fall down on the opposite side. This kind of *surréalisme* approaches Broadwayism, but it is never as funny as Joe Cook and lasts much longer. When it is beautiful and esthetic, it is really theatre, as in the Ballet Russe. But their ballets are short and can carry this dead-weight. A long opera written in the same style is impossible. I do not believe that James Joyce can offer us a solution for opera but I also believe that a hack librettist can offer us only a hack libretto. We should approach our great dramatists, not the Broadway revue writers. Louis Gruenberg made an admirable choice of librettists in John Erskine and Eugene O'Neill. One is brilliant and witty in the right way for opera and the other is powerful. I would not be surprised if Hemingway or Faulkner could be interested in writing a libretto. Almost every modern writer I know has expressed an honest and kindly interest in the future American Opera Libretto. At the present time we have in America some of the greatest literary figures and one of the finest theatre movements in the world. If these men are not snobbish about furnishing us librettos, I do not see how we can be snobbish about opera.

In Yaddo, this last September, a number of outstanding young composers discussed the danger of not cultivating their public, the fact that foreign conductors do not play enough American music, and ways and means of remedying this appalling lack of audience and appreciation. Most were agreed that we should take part in some active educational movement, should develop some kind of association with an understanding of the public, or at least cultivate a public. But not once, during that long discussion, did a single composer mention opera or ballet, or, most important of all, school opera.

The explanation of such an omission is that our music has no roots in any popular movement such as produced the marvelous and thrilling ballets and operas of Russia, France and Germany in the last seventy-five years. The first great music that we heard in this country reached us through the geniality of the first great symphonic conductors who came here to play for our great-grandfathers. On the other hand, the advent of opera from Italy did not unduly thrill us — it never became part of us. We have been fortunate with symphony — unfortunate with opera. The music of Brahms and Beethoven, presented in the best way possible, spoke to us, but the great operas of Mozart, Bizet, Moussorgsky, never had even a fighting chance. As a young musician, I grew up to think that opera was dull, stupid, impossible. I did not understand the language in which it was sung, thought the scenery vulgar, and it was spinach anyway. The young American composer of today is still trained as a symphonist to the modern and tight symphonic music. He cannot project a large musical line. And yet the public does not really understand his tight and nervous music. It is often admirable but it is a blind alley.

It seems to me that the nervous trembling of the final scene in the *Sacre du Printemps* has ceased, that the musicians have packed their instruments and gone home, that it no longer hangs in the air. Today a larger and broader line, words, melodies, action, would be more revolutionary. Stravinsky, together with André Gide, is finishing an opera, they say, upon a Greek subject with plenty of action and "go."

Switching over to *Verklärte Nacht*, as so many young musi-

cians seem to be doing, is no solution. Schönberg's arrival here, together with the great success of *Wozzeck* two years ago, is naturally enough to unhinge the minds of a number of our younger composers, and to provide a very definite influence for some of our older men who were tired of neo-classicism. But as a matter of fact, I think it would do them more good to compose an opera, even if only one act, upon some text or other, not too mawkish or sentimental. For us, the Viennese atmosphere is too sentimental. Neither is France right for us nor Russia. Our music must be a spontaneous expression . . . a reaction of our own. I think we owe it to ourselves to give it a natural and free form, to feel that fresh air is blowing through it, that it is well-ventilated. Opera may be the solution or it may not; but apparently twenty-five young composers at Yaddo never even thought of it! Truly the German symphonic era has gripped us and gripped us tightly.