

SUICIDE IN VIENNA

MARK BRUNSWICK

THE most characteristic feature of Viennese musical life today is the alarming rapidity with which it is being provincialized. The steady economic decline of Austria and Central Europe as a whole, while furnishing the foundation for the process, is far from being the complete explanation. In Vienna at least, there are so many elements which favor mediocrity and incompetence at the expense of talent and ability, that one must recognize a voluntary and conscious tendency toward what seems to be deliberate suicide, rather than any inevitable development of organic decay.

With the complete permeation of politics into all phases of Austrian cultural activity, there is no longer any opportunity for truly objective values to come into play and form even a long-run corrective. The definite establishment of this tendency and the turning point in Vienna's* musical life was undoubtedly the year following the destruction of Germany's highly developed musical civilization by the Nazis. Here was an opportunity unparalleled in the whole history of Austria. A large number of the best trained and talented musicians, many of them Austrian by birth and upbringing, and by no means all Jews, were suddenly available, and, because of the law of supply and demand, at terms well within the means of Austria's restricted financial resources.

The reaction to this situation was typical of the worst side of Austrian mentality. There was never any official or unofficial declaration of principle. At first there was hesitation. The entrenched interests—already made up, so far as they were musicians, of mediocrities or worse, and in their political, official or ministerial capacities incompetent, ignorant or timid—played for time. Their caution was well rewarded in February 1934 by

*(Or Austria's—the terms are for all intents and purposes interchangeable.)

the defeat of constitutional parliamentary government by force. With the suppression of the Socialist opposition, the last check was removed on those elements which, either through ill-will or ignorance or both, were unconcerned with the free development of musical culture in Austria. They could now pursue the personal, reactionary exploitation of all positions and functions they already had, and any others they could take possession of.



It is here that the practice of anti-Semitism, always popular and respectable in Austria, came into full play. But not, as in Germany, by the application of a rigid law or principle. Theirs was the much more subtle and, for Austria—which is so dependent on its tourist trade—more effective way of allowing several Jews, if they were not too able, to retain their positions, and of appointing one famous non-Aryan to a high-sounding but not too influential office. Meanwhile a ruthless purge was executed in the opera, the radio and the remaining institutions of all those musicians who had the misfortune to be both talented and Jewish.

But it should be emphasized that anti-Semitism is never altogether an end in itself in Austria. Many musicians are barred from taking any but the most perfunctory part in the musical life around them because they have the bad luck to be merely talented.

This attitude, which was always present in Austria in a more or less latent form, was crystallized in relation to the emigrants from Germany and has been consistently extended ever since 1934. The two principal pillars of musical activity, the State Opera and the government-owned Radio Corporation, have not only deviously or directly ignored many of the most talented performers, thereby forcing them to emigrate or fritter away their energy and ability in a state of inactivity. They have also brazenly neglected the creative output of both the Austrian and foreign contemporary composers who have any importance in the European and American musical world. The Opera has always been conservative. But even in the era of Franz Schalk, occasional new works of more than local interest were given, such as Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and Hindemith's *Cardillac*. Clemens

Krauss responded at least to a primitive sense of artistic duty and produced *Wozzeck*. In the last few years there has been staged no single new work of significance. Neither Hindemith's *Mathis der Mahler*, Shostakovitch's *Lady Macbeth*, Berg's *Wozzeck* or *Lulu*, nor any other opera enjoying a reputation in the rest of the civilized musical world.

Until 1934, the Radio Corporation, though always thoroughly opportunistic in its policy, gave a few grudging opportunities to anyone of real importance in Austria's musical life. But even then a composer with the world reputation of Alban Berg received the smallest possible encouragement, and his ablest colleagues still less. Performers who had exposed themselves through their particular musicality and talent were thrown the sop of an engagement at long enough intervals to keep them quiet between times, removing the most pressing cause for complaint, and giving them a glimmer of hope for the future.

Since 1934 even this minimum of decency and fairness has disappeared. A kind of boycott, again be it emphasized never openly proclaimed and only to be discerned by virtue of its complete effectiveness, was put into operation against most of those composers and performers who had risen above the level of distinction common to an average Alpine village, which is apparently the ideal of those now in control of Vienna's musical destiny.

The writer is not under the delusion that in the rest of the world, even in comparatively prosperous and energetic America, genius and ability are always encouraged, and mediocrity appropriately neglected. But Austrian musical life differs from that of certain other countries in the drastic nature of the triumph of mediocrity and spiritual corruption over their opposites. The economic decline has reduced private initiative to a minimum; there is hardly a single practical impulse in the musical life that is not directly or indirectly related to the state; and inasmuch as this state is a dictatorship, there is little chance for the natural correctives (at best none too reliable) of popularity, artistic or financial success, etc., to assert themselves. With the falling-away of one center of activity after another, the radio has become in Austria perhaps even more than elsewhere the single source of income for all those connected with serious music either as

executants or composers. This fact must be borne in mind when estimating the deadly effect of the Radio Corporation's present policy.

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It should be recorded, however, that in spite of these extremely unfavorable conditions, a small and ever-dwindling group tenaciously promotes the cause of modern music. The Verein für Neue Musik, the Austrian section of the International Society for Contemporary Music, has this year given worthy first performances of Schönberg's *Suite for String Orchestra* (Klemperer conducting), Stravinsky's *Concerto for Two Pianos*, Schnabel's *String Trio*, Jokl's *Violin Sonata*, Hindemith's new *First Piano Sonata*, and Frank Martin's *String-Trio*, besides reviving Anton Webern's *Symphony*, heard only once before in Vienna. There are several other concerts planned for this season, including performances of Schönberg's new quartet and Roger Sessions' piano sonata. Besides the Verein für Neue Musik, another energetic organization, Konzerte der Gegenwart has given several interesting, if somewhat uncritical programs of contemporary music.

The only important performance of a new work* this year to be given by one of the larger organizations, was Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher*, with the composer as soloist. This took place in a series of concerts given by the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, in collaboration with the Radio Corporation. This, as an apparent exception to the general rule, bring us to a final attempt to discern any elements of directing policy in the tangled mass of merely predatory instincts that inspire the present picture of the state of music in Austria.

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So far as the higher responsible officials concern themselves at all with the actual course of musical life, the objective side of the question is apparently not given a moment's consideration.

*The performance in October of Berg's posthumous *Violin Concerto* by the Philharmonic under Klemperer, Louis Krasner playing the solo part, can hardly be even touched on here. To do so would necessitate a discussion of the famous autonomy of the Philharmonic Orchestra and other anomalies so involved as to be completely unintelligible to anyone who has not lived in intimate contact with them for years. Suffice it to say that the Philharmonic ever since its inception, and never more so than at the present day, has been reactionary and materialistic to a fantastic degree. Only those very much on the inside know what enormous difficulties had to be overcome before Berg's last work could be played in the city of his birth.

Whether a work or a performer is good, even in the perhaps not very expert judgment of the minister concerned, is almost irrelevant. It is only important that there should be at least one Italian conductor acceptable to the regime of his own country, as many Germans as possible, all good Aryans themselves, of course, but not necessarily in too-perfect harmony with the present German government.

This is exactly the nuance the Austrian authorities are looking for today in the very tortuous and sometimes astute game they are playing. If we add to this, as a façade for the more liberal western nations, whose tourists contribute so much to the Austrian economy, a prominent Jewish conductor not excessively intransigent in matters either political or artistic, we have a fairly complete synthesis of Austrian musical policy. Since the only other effective force that can operate under this policy is the simplest and most powerful human instinct of the "haves" to keep the "have-nots" from any share in the material and functional spoils, we can easily see that there is nothing left over for the practice of music as a free art, an art that can be loved and developed for its intrinsic sake alone.