

THE GERMAN OPERA SEASON REVIEWED

MAHAGONNY AND OTHER NOVELTIES

THE numerous opera houses in Germany which continue to increase despite economic depression, need material for their repertoires. It becomes daily more apparent that a diet consisting only of the works of Wagner, Verdi and Puccini is insufficient. Hence not only on the large stages but everywhere new works are submitted for judgment. So far they have not won overwhelming success. No post-Strauss opera has found its place in the standard repertoire and only *Jonny*, the *Dreigroschenoper* and *Schwanda* have enjoyed popularity for any length of time. But this need not discourage us; progress depends on experiment.

The music season that has just closed in Germany saw the baptism of quite a number of new works. Most of these, unfortunately, were not produced in Berlin; notwithstanding its three opera houses the capital's share was limited to but one premiere, that of Milhaud's *Christophe Colomb*. Previously the most obvious success of the winter's novelties had been Krenek's *Leben des Orest*, staged in Berlin soon after its introduction in Leipzig; this won acclaim despite all the protests against its arbitrary musical scheme. On the other hand, Schönberg's *Von Heute auf Morgen*, intended as a gay one-acter, did not come out of Frankfurt and even there had only a few performances. This work is and will remain a piece to be studied by experts. The general public is at a loss before its complex score. The reactionaries of Munich also ventured into the field of "modern" opera with an opus by the Bavarian composer, Piechler, called *The White Peacock* which, however, will hardly be appreciated by any but Bavarians. *Transatlantic*, the eagerly awaited American work of

Antheil's, was to be given in May. Ernst Toch's *The Fan* is scheduled for the music festival in Königsberg, while Carol Rathaus' "emigrant opera," *Foreign Soil*, is postponed until next fall.

Unquestionably, the most significant event of the operatic season so far has been the recent work of Brecht and Weill: *The Rise and Decline of the City of Mahagonny*. The premiere in Leipzig ended in a disturbance such as I have never seen surpassed. Objections, which started in the first act, developed later into an open battle, with people roaring, whistling, swearing, clapping and shouting with joy; the evening just escaped closing with a fist fight.

How account for this scene? Was the music so wild as to provoke excitement? Obviously this could not be the case. The public, educated in the school of atonality, has learned no longer to look on dissonances as catastrophic, and, moreover, this new score, like all the scores of the more mature Weill, is positively tonal. Weill's style in his latest works is absolutely harmless compared, let us say, to the cacophony of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*. The music alone could not be the cause of this condemnation. What really aroused the public's anger was the fact that the authors of *Mahagonny* tried to create a new kind of music theatre for the first time and quite consistently. This opera in fact is no longer an opera. All operatic traditions based on "beauty," "illusion," "nobility," "pathos" and "idealism," are thrown overboard in this work. The spectators sensed the unfamiliar and nobody likes to be torn from his comfortable habits of thought.

It was the text, chiefly, which caused indignation, for it is materialistic, cynical and, beyond everything, profoundly pessimistic. Life appears not rose-colored as is usual to opera but naked and brutal. Brecht sets the plot of his libretto in America, most probably because of his preference for American names; in reality the events could take place anywhere.

The theme is the expansion and decline of an imaginary town. The city of Mahagonny, founded by three criminals, is a town of happiness, where everything is permitted. This is an old conception of Bert Brecht's. It is the land of unbounded enjoyment. "In

the first rank is the pleasure of eating, then comes love, thirdly boxing and fourth drinking to capacity. This is the place where 'everything goes.'" Brecht first exploited this nihilistic theme in ballads and later in a sort of dramatic poem, a *Songspiel* written in collaboration with Weill. The first version was devoted to the grotesque; the present three-act operatic form is supposed to revolve around a more profound and forceful idea. Notwithstanding the fact that the free city of Mahagonny is set outside the mores, the rules of society, it cannot escape the supreme law of the world: the law of money. Jim, the Alaskan hero, is sentenced to die in the electric chair because of failure to pay the expenses of his pleasures. He is punished for "lack of money, the greatest crime on earth." This is the social moral of the piece but it seems to me to have been an afterthought, its sincerity open to question. Still Brecht has depicted the life of the appetites in *Mahagonny* in a highly picturesque, sometimes impressively poignant way, with humor, melancholy and a resigned cynicism, and above all with his own individual poetry.

Weill's musical intentions are clear. He wanted to apply the popular style of the *Dreigroschenoper* to the larger form of an opera which has no prose dialogue. He was clever enough to realize that, in spite of its tremendous success, a dramatic scheme only occasionally interspersed with music, in the long run offers a poor field for the musician. Thus a circle in Weill's development was completed. As a pupil of the great reformer Busoni, Weill began with the usual labor of serious composers, the string quartet, etc. In his one-act operas, in the *Protagonist* and in the humorous *The Tsar Has His Photograph Taken*, we admired his craftsmanship and deplored the great lack of melodic substance. He freed himself from the danger of abstractions by the *Songs* of the *Dreigroschenoper*, in which the element of melody is dominant and which in fact revealed the gift for a very individual invention. Now in *Mahagonny* he has attempted to develop this new melodic line in the larger dimensions of an opera score. His success has been uneven. Even here the effect is strongest when songs are to the fore, as in the *Alabama Blues* and the *Song of Jenny*. Lyrical passages (the love duet) and dramatic scenes (Jim's death monologue) reveal a power of ex-

pression hitherto lacking in Weill's art. The rest of the work is less convincing. Some passages of the score, where the dialogue is constructed melodramatically, suffer from a rhythmic monotony. The chorus plays an important role. Often it is allotted a chorale and at other times a contrapuntal treatment. The orchestra is no longer merely a jazz band but has been strengthened in the strings and wind instruments, without however being deprived of the piano, saxophone and guitar.

The power of Weill's style has been greatly intensified in this newest work. One of its advantages is that, still retaining all its effectiveness, it can be used in every kind of music, although it seems least appropriate to the operatic genre. Yet, as I have already said, *Mahagonny* is really anything but an opera; it is rather the starting point for a new musical theatre.



Nothing else of the season can be compared in importance to this stirring work. Certainly not Braunfels' *Galathea*, a bucolic idyl in a Greek setting. Braunfels is the director of the Conservatory in Cologne and his work reflects his office. The score is not devoid of pretty ideas but it lacks personality. It abounds in flute playing and horn sounding, in coloratura passages and violin virtuosity. I can prophesy no long life for this little work.

The same fate will apply to *Achtung, Aufnahme!* a one-act trifle by the Viennese composer, Wilhelm Grosz, which belongs to a quite different type of production. It is a sort of revue, transposed to the operatic stage. (We had something similar in Hindemith's *Hin und Zurück* and in Weill's *Tsar*). A jealous student dashes into a film studio to kill the actress who has deserted him. His realistic agony and loaded gun so impress the director that he calls "Ready, camera!" obtains a brilliant movie reel and at once engages the desperate lover as a star. The whole thing is somewhat pretentiously labelled a *Tragicomedy*. Grosz, who is skillful at handling modern dance forms, to our advantage as well as his own here renounced any serious intention, the title of the work notwithstanding. The play is built on blues, shimmy and tango, dances which do not appear as separate numbers but form a continuous whole, furnishing the rhythmical skeleton of

the score. The result is a very amusing story of no great significance, to be best enjoyed as a sort of dessert.

It is characteristic of our experimental age that almost every new work presents us with a new style. We no longer have a uniform conception of opera such as prevailed, for example, in the time of Mozart, with recognized rules of dramaturgy and laws of composition. All that we can observe as a common tendency in present-day operatic effort is a negative one—the revolt against the music-drama. For the rest, we have no rule book of new opera; every work demands individual appraisal.

Sometimes an opera wins to success despite or perhaps because of being *vieux jeu*. *Schwanda, der Dudelsackpfeifer* is such a folk-opera, written by the Czech, Jaromir Weinberger, who has learned much from his great compatriot, Smetana. It is a fairy-tale of the familiar pattern, about the goodnatured Schwanda who must go through many adventures and even descend into hell before he can return to his young wife. Like Smetana, Weinberger borrowed excellent material from the marvelous Bohemian folk-music. But being a pupil of Reger he burdened it with so much counterpoint that the effect falls far short of the beauties of *The Bartered Bride*. The success of *Schwanda* means a victory for conventional opera, while that of *Mahagonny*, symbolizes a triumph over tradition.

Hans Gutman

CHRISTOPHE COLOMB

THE premiere of *Christophe Colomb* was the long awaited high spot of the year's opera season in Berlin. The impression it made emphasized its quite extraordinary position in the field of contemporary opera. Putting aside for the moment the purely external distinctions of novelty and strangeness inherent in the use of films for scenic décor, *Christophe Colomb* deserves to be ranked among the noteworthy contributions to present-day opera because of intrinsic merit. It takes a new step toward the solution of the opera problem, attempting in every possible way to escape the long current conceptions. Milhaud's work may thus be regarded as an important experiment, and, like all experiments, it has its faults as well as virtues.