

GERMAN MUSIC ON THE BREADLINE

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UNTIL recently Germany was a country where the most extravagant requirements of the theatre were met from public funds. As is well known, after the war the patronage of the Kaiser, the reigning princes and the clergy had been supplanted by that of the new democracy. This support laid the foundation of a cultural efflorescence whose most marked manifestation was in our theatres. The practice of generous public subsidy had important and widesweeping influences on the whole life of the stage in Germany. Municipal and state theatres were not expected to make a profit. It was not their aim to show a balance at the end of the year, to operate on a successful commercial basis. They were completely subsidized activities, like museums, hospitals or other public enterprises, and this situation determined the character of their artistic efforts. It is obvious that this fine freedom and independence should be beneficial to opera in particular, because with its expensive trappings it is especially hazardous to balances. The opera houses—and two years ago Germany had more than two hundred with permanent staffs—were not dependent on the drawing powers of surefire hits or of their stars; the generosity of the cities and states permitted them to experiment not only with new works but with new methods of production.

Naturally such conditions had their effect on composition, for it was fairly easy to get a hearing; theatre directors were ambitious to snatch up new works as fast as they were written. In 1928 there were no fewer than sixty opera premieres and the municipal and state executives were ready to grant any request of an ambitious director. The theatre had become a symbol of the wealth and power of the state and it would have been thought mean and niggardly to economize on this cultural

activity. Subsidies from public funds reached a total of fifteen million dollars in 1928.

But a year ago we were already seeing the rising clouds of economic distress. And what has taken place since then (and I believe we are only at the beginning) is perhaps more consequential and noteworthy than the period of growth to which I have referred. Today we experience the alteration in the economic situation and in close relationship thereto a profound transformation in the arts. A model example for a Marxian text.

What is happening? The subsidies for the theatres were curtailed, slowly in the beginning, then more and more rapidly with the new economic policies that the German governments and cities were forced to adopt about 1929 when the industrial crisis began. The first emergency decree came in December 1930; for the first time the current payrolls were affected by law, salaries of all employes of the public theatres being reduced six percent. But by the summer of 1931 this slight cut had been far outdistanced and subsidies were mercilessly restricted. Generally speaking they allowed half the salaries that had been paid two years before. Here it is important to point out that in the majority of the theatres the orchestra and most of the employes are officials of the municipal governments, who cannot be discharged and whose salaries are based on their civil positions. It was therefore almost impossible to manage with the shrunken budgets. A new emergency decree came to the rescue. Now, the theatres are allowed by law to set aside the present contracts, to dismiss insubordinate members, to cut expenses and reduce the working periods. These reductions affect all salaries up to two hundred marks a month. The higher brackets have been reduced forty percent and in some cases as much as sixty percent. The largest salary an opera singer may be given, according to strict agreement of the associated theatre directors, is \$9,000 a year. Guest artists, who only appear intermittently and have no contract with any theatre, are limited to \$150 for an evening performance. Under no circumstances may more be paid, and one person may not receive it more than six times in a month. Consequently many theatres have already been closed. Prussia has been particularly severe; two years ago there were seven theatres,

at the end of this season there will be only two. Other measures prescribe mergers of neighboring enterprises, so that one city has an operatic theatre, another a dramatic, and a third is devoted to the operetta. By an interchange of productions, every audience sees all three kinds of performances.



Thus a complete change, even a reversal of the situation of a year ago, has taken place. The shocking privations of the time, intruding political events, the discounting of spiritual and cultural values which affect us are gradually altering the very nature of the art production to which we had become accustomed in Germany. It is obvious that there is less and less place under these circumstances for a free and unrestrained creation that is preoccupied with un-material considerations. A German theatrical director, the head of a large and important opera theatre recently wrote me:

"Only a year ago I would have been delighted to put on the premiere of this interesting opera whose artistic significance is so great. The composer deserves every consideration and his work must make a place for him, perhaps permanent, in the sphere of contemporary production. But how can I risk the time and expense for rehearsals, when superior officials are forever pushing the balance sheet under my nose? Today we have only one slogan: 'Retrench, retrench in everything.'"

This letter presents an accurate and illuminating picture of the new materialism that is infecting our theatres. I will give another example. Formerly, an occasional operetta was smuggled into the programs of the subsidized theatres but not without the shame-faced feeling that accompanies an unworthy action. Now, after the short lapse of two years, the most important theatres of the Reich, like those in Leipzig, Köln and Frankfurt, have plunged into the field of modern operetta. These stages are gradually yielding to the performance of modern revues. Anything to attract the public. A revue like the farce *Im Weissen Rössl* is the hit of the winter. *Im Weissen Rössl* appears four and five times a week in repertory at the most important theatres which two years ago would scornfully have

laughed down the suggestion that such a work enter their precincts so rich in the tradition of art. An increase in the production of operettas in the German theatres of more than four hundred percent over the preceding year, is the most striking development in 1931! That is in complete contrast to all the activities of the free art stage which we used to consider the function of all these institutions. It means the crass triumph of commercial principles in our theatres and is a fundamental change of the greatest significance.



In addition to this commercialization there is an increased tension in the political situation. An alarming development is the growing fear inspired by the political parties on whom the theatres depend for the means of their existence. Outstanding is the terror spread by the Hitlerites, which has already penetrated deep into the theatre. Recently one of our most prominent theatre directors was forced out of his position because he did not follow the popular spirit strongly enough to suit the National Socialist minister who ruled in Braunschweig. The grotesque threat of the Hitlerites to every modern theatre art and every modern production can be deduced from these first definite occurrences in Braunschweig and also in Weimar. In the writings and newspaper articles they reveal a program that far outstrips present evils. We can hope that these insane demands and ideas will remain mere theories. Now, in the first months of 1932, they have become the center of discussion and have forced us to consider the proclamations of the "Third Reich" as they affect art and art-politics. "Back to the Middle Ages" is the only way of summing up these demands. They are of the greatest significance to all who are concerned about the fate of modern music.



Retrenchment, purely commercial management, political influence, these paint the picture of the German theatre in the spring of 1932. What are the consequences of such a transformation to modern opera, to contemporary production? Their

immediate effect is nothing less than disastrous. The difficulties involved in putting on a new work grow greater every week. No one dares to take a chance or to experiment with a new composer. Pfitzner's opera, *Das Herz*, was a complete failure at the Berlin and Munich premieres. But practically every German theatre is putting on this work. Why? It has been no more successful anywhere else; but Pfitzner is *the* German Nationalist composer, he moves in the circles of Hitler and Hugenberg—and the performance of his opera was a sacrifice offered with clenched teeth by the theatrical directors to those circles. So this Nationalist work has elbowed its way in among the daily revues and operettas and months pass before there are time and means for a modern novelty. From a total of sixty premieres in 1928, the figure shrank to twenty-eight last year. The whole attitude towards new music has changed. The former effort to educate the public led to new works in the repertory; pieces were kept in the program even when some performance did not sell very well. Now, however, the most severe commercial viewpoint is uppermost and a work is ruthlessly cast aside if it once fails to have the necessary draw. With the upheaval in the type of performance there has been a consequent transformation of the conditions surrounding creative work.



The various remarkable and potent effects of all these changes are now beginning to be clear. Life goes on, art goes on. The passing of judgment on opera production of the old type—which must ultimately result from this whole development—can act as a permanent check only to the creation of new operas, but not to new music or new musical works for the stage. The re-orientation of opera must activate a change in creation. The great rich repertoires of the bourgeoisie, of the feudal opera theatre, have suddenly become open to question. They are dwindling away because they can no longer be economically presented and because they lack sufficient public and sociologic appeal to withstand the economic process of curtailment. New forms are already being created, whose individual impulse arises out of poverty, out of the very primitivism which is demanded of these

works and out of the social upheaval which is principally responsible for the ruin of the feudal opera. There is a whole series of collective theatres in Berlin and other localities, associations of producers with a definite purpose, who take their style from the problems of the day and use the simplest means. We already have—something entirely new and amazing in Germany—a touring German opera stock company. Under the direction of first class artists this traveling opera troupe will visit all the German cities which can no longer support a theatre of their own.

All this demonstrates the new, simple, impoverished, disturbed conditions of the present period of political transition. Already it has had an effect on the creative artists. Composers and writers are adapting themselves to this new theatre. There is an entire series of new, serious productions which require a simple staging, singers who work with the simplest means and have a close kinship to actors and dancers, a small orchestra, and no chorus or a limited one. But in the texts, in the goal of the ideas, a link to the present is sought and often found. So far these are all attempts. They arise—as with Bert Brecht and his circle—from the political idea of the class struggle and its dialectic presentation. They lead others—like Ernst Krenek, in his new work—to use this new primitive theatre to present the application of historical lessons to the present and the future. The great impetus that opera received in the last fifteen years has been checked. Slowly the political and social facts of the present are beginning effectively to penetrate not only the content of the new musical theatre but the formal structure. The language of the new audience, the re-organization of the musical world by radio, the upheaval of the classes are the determining factors. In the powerful revolution which we are experiencing the metamorphosis of the German theatre is pregnant with significance for the future.