

## OPERA BETWEEN THE WARS

ERNST KRENEK

IN respect to size, opera during the last twenty years has shown two divergent tendencies, one toward the monumental, the other toward the miniature. In respect to content, there has been demonstrated an increasing interest in subject matter believed to be significant of the spiritual and political problems of the time. As to style, the period began by and large, with two antagonistic trends – continuation of, and reaction against, Wagnerian principles; later we find a tentative emergence of newer, independent ideas.

The basic fixture of Wagnerian opera is a powerful paradox: the absurdity of immersing dramatic action completely in the music lends that action a higher, stronger, magic-like reality, instead of destroying the last vestiges of reality, as common sense would seem to suggest. Transfiguring every detail of the action from beginning to end through a complex system of psychological symbols, music seals the drama into a sort of airtight chamber where it ceases to appear as a stage play with music and takes on a peculiar character of its own, like a chemical compound whose original ingredients are no longer discernible.

It frequently happens that in looking at past periods, we are at a loss to understand how contemporary observers could find essential differences between phenomena that seem to us now to have obvious common denominators. We are able today to see how much of what has been exploited against Wagner – such as Puccini's extrovert *verismo* or Debussy's atmospheric pointillism – really falls in line with Wagner's basic ideology. It is clear now that the contemporaries mistook difference of idioms for differences in frame of mind.

Glancing quickly at works by the older generation, we may discount Richard Strauss' late operas as essentially post-mortem contributions from the nineteenth century, and list as fairly imaginative products in the Wagnerian vein the operas by Franz Schreker which in the early twenties had an important influence on the German scene, and the more original works

of Leoš Janáček, rather fascinating offerings in the field which Moussorgsky's genius had made so fertile.

True reaction against Wagnerism in Germany began with Busoni (as I have pointed out at greater length in my article on that composer in the January 1942 issue of *MODERN MUSIC*) and Paul Bekker; in France with Cocteau and Stravinsky. Each of these artists and thinkers in his own way put new emphasis upon the artificiality of the operatic spectacle, upon those inherent contradictions which Wagner had wanted to submerge in his Dionysian melting pot. Nietzsche's diatribes against Wagner were quoted copiously, the *Spieloper* of the early nineteenth and eighteenth centuries (Auber, Donizetti, Grétry, Lully, Dittersdorf, Duni) was rediscovered with a vengeance, and a solid Handel renaissance, emanating from the University of Göttingen, evoked new interest in the baroque opera. The effect of all these movements upon opera writing was immediate, though at first rather confusing. It appeared easier to extricate oneself theoretically than practically from Wagnerian ideology. Incorporation of neither antique mannerisms nor timely antics broke the spell. Neither the laborious vocalises fashioned after the coloratura of Bach's cantatas in Hindemith's *Cardillac*, nor the ribaldry of the story of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*, nor the mechanical contrivances enlivening the plot of *Jonny spielt auf* made of these works singularly new additions to operatic literature. At their best they cast a slightly skeptical light upon the great magic, much as had Verdi's *Falstaff* long before. But they were still inside of the sealed chamber. More was done to pave the way out by Alban Berg, precisely through his special faithfulness to Wagner's legacy. I think that he never saw himself in any opposition to Wagner and therefore did not maneuver to throw the oppressive heirloom overboard and so escape the problems involved. In *Wozzeck*, by resolutely applying the new idiom of atonality (in itself the ultimate consequence of Wagner's purely musical innovations), he materially altered the technic of opera writing, if not its ideological background. I like to visualize my own *Orpheus und Eurydike* of those early twenties as a contribution along similar lines.

Arnold Schönberg's brief contributions to the musical theatre (three one-act plays) had no marked influence upon the further evolution of operatic style, since the wealth and pithiness of the music greatly overshadowed the esoteric, or tenuous, dramatic substance of the works.

To imply that those composers who attempted to deliver opera from the hothouse atmosphere of Wagner's sealed chamber by taking their cues

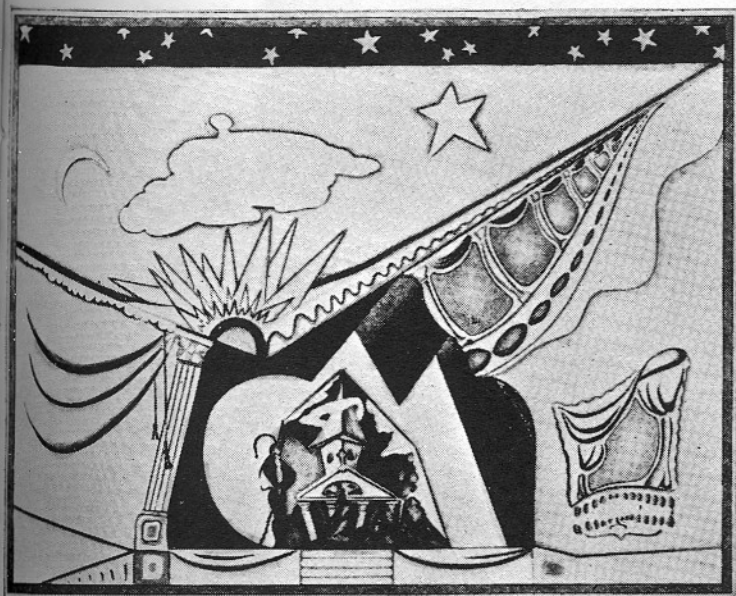
from earlier styles and by deliberately reverting to pre-Wagnerian musical idioms, were, if only unconsciously, evading a paramount issue, may seem a harsh judgment. Indeed it is to their endeavors that we owe such charming works as Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* and Henri Sauguet's Gounodized *Le plumet du colonel*. Some of Darius Milhaud's operatic output should also be listed here, notably his *opéras minutes* and the powerful tragedy, *Le pauvre matelot*. But the impish gleam, and the tongue in the cheek, so evident in many phases of such creations, became for a time the accepted pattern of behavior for modern composers who ironically played down the more profound significance of their art.

Somewhat earlier than the period considered here, a truly new direction for the musical stage made itself apparent in Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat*. This was not taken up by opera until later, because Stravinsky's playlet did not really belong to that genre properly speaking, being set for a miniature ensemble which during the 'twenties was of little practical interest, in view of the dazzling prosperity of German operatic enterprises. Composers of all countries could be reasonably sure of seeing their exercises in opera writing, no matter how extravagant, tested on the great Central European stages. The miniature genre was studied in earnest only later when the economic and political crisis put an end to the golden age of experiments on a grand scale.

### III

The real significance of *L'Histoire*, however, is not that it demands only a few executants, but that it destroys the fictitious integrity of the stage play by exposing it, as it develops, to the critical searchlight of comment, through the agency of a "reader" who mediates between the public and the spectacle. Bert Brecht, one of the most talented poets of Germany between the wars, was the first to realize the import of this idea upon opera writing. Since he loved to stylize himself as a Marxian theorist of the scientific brand, he linked his somewhat ponderous theory of the *Epic Theatre* with socio-economic doctrines that made it a little more befuddling than necessary. His essential points, however, were sound enough: opera should be a spectacle made up of clearly definable components, rather than an illusory image of a magic super-world, and that spectacle should convey an explicitly demonstrated meaning for those beholding it, instead of being merely expensive entertainment or glorified dope. Kurt Weill's *Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny* are the main tangible results of this approach.

# SCENES FROM CONTEMPORARY OPERAS



*Theatre Arts Print*

## L'HISTOIRE DU SOLDAT

By IGOR STRAVINSKY

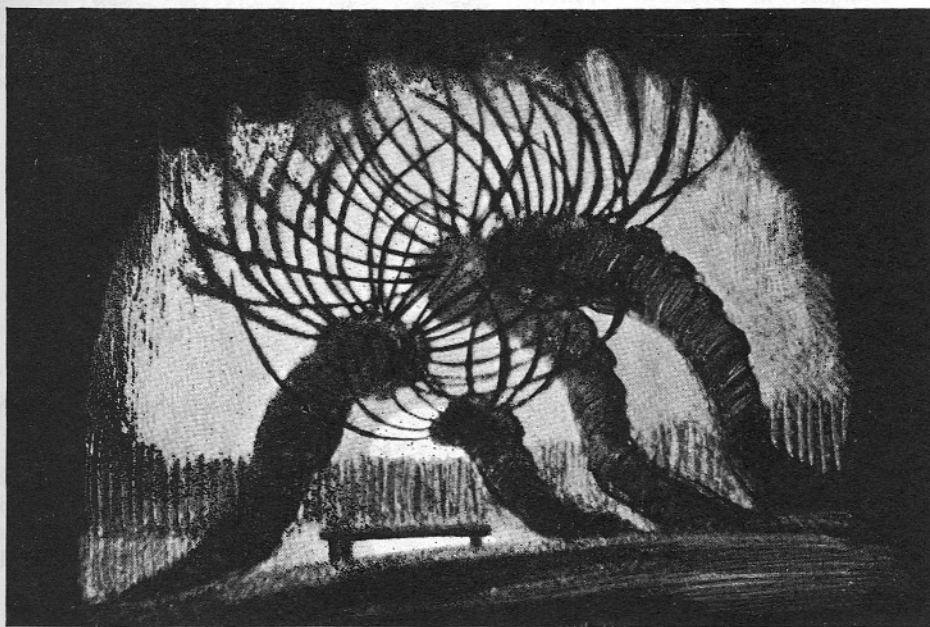
Libretto by C. F. Ramuz, décor by Donald Oenslager, produced by the League of Composers in New York, March 1928. (Premiere in Lausanne, 1918)

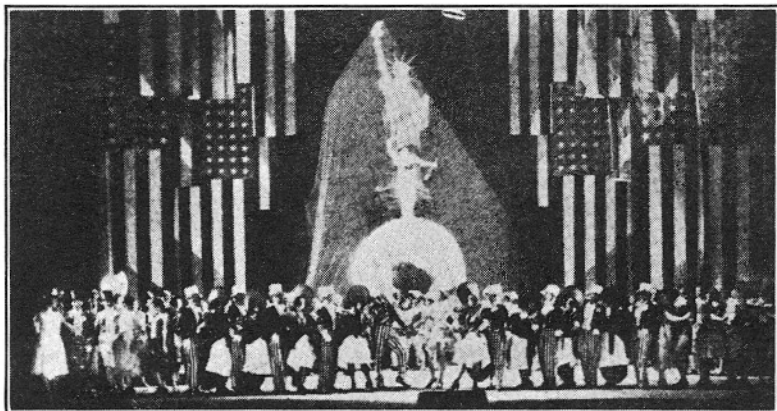
## WOZZECK

By ALBAN BERG

Drama by Georg Büchner, décor by Panos Aravantinos, produced in Berlin, December 1924.

(This work was introduced to America under Stokowski, in New York and Philadelphia, Fall, 1931)





*Courtesy of Musical America*

## JONNY SPIELT AUF

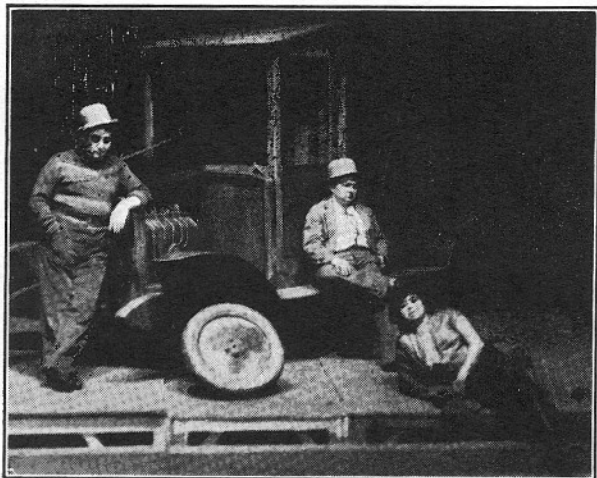
By ERNST KRENEK

Libretto by the composer, décor by Josef Urban, produced in New York, 1929. (Premiere in Leipzig, 1927)

## LADY MACBETH OF MZENSK

By DMITRI SHOSTAKOVITCH

Libretto made by the composer from the novel of Nikolai Leskov, décor by Richardi Rychtarik, produced by the Cleveland Orchestra under the auspices of the League of Composers in Cleveland and New York, February 1935. (Premiere in Moscow, Spring, 1934)



*Courtesy of Musical America*

## MAHAGONNY

By KURT WEILL

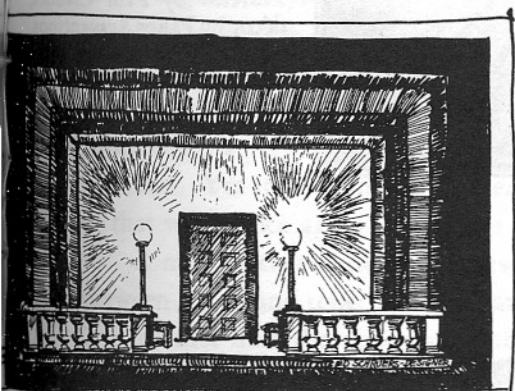
Libretto by Bert Brecht, décor by Ludwig Sievert, produced in Frankfort, 1930. (Premiere in Baden-Baden, 1927)



## FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS

By VIRGIL THOMSON

Text by Gertrude Stein,  
Decor by Florine Stettheim,  
Produced by The Friends  
and Enemies of Modern  
Music in Hartford, Febru-  
ary, 1934, later in New  
York.



NIGHT COURT

## THE CRADLE WILL ROCK

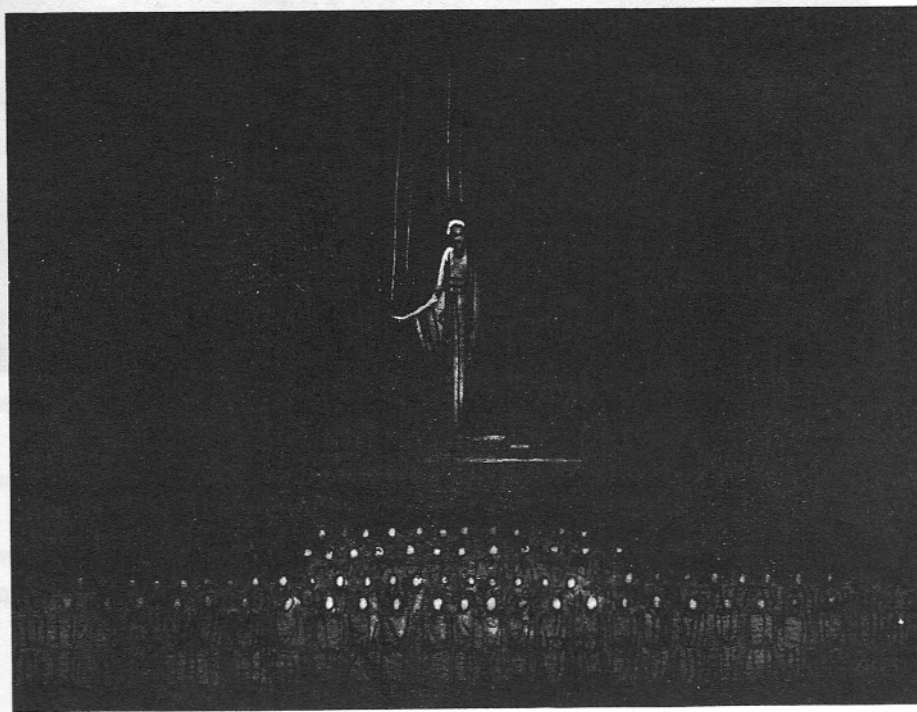
By MARC BLITZSTEIN

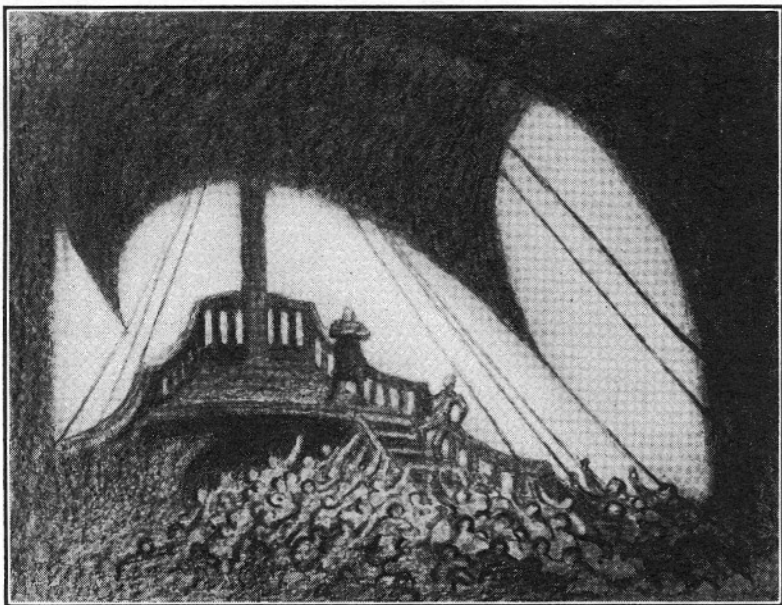
Libretto by the composer, design  
made under the direction of  
Orson Welles for the WPA pro-  
duction which was cancelled and  
then mounted without scenery by  
the Mercury Theatre, New York,  
January 1937.

## OEDIPUS REX

By IGOR STRAVINSKY

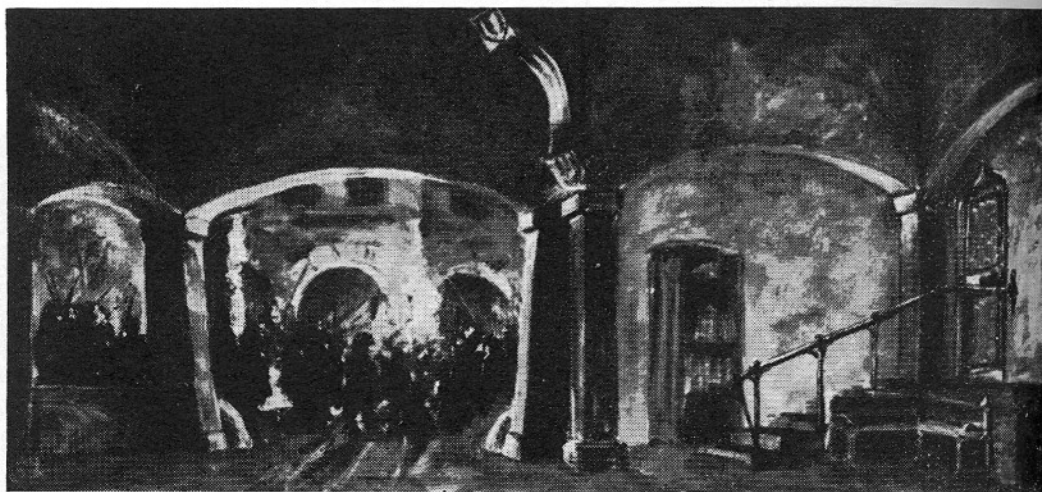
Libretto by Jean Cocteau,  
After Sophocles, décor by  
Robert Edmond Jones,  
Produced by the League  
of Composers in New  
York City, April 1931.  
(Premiere stage perfor-  
mance, Berlin, 1928)





# CHRISTOPHE COLOMB

By DARIUS MILHAUD  
 Libretto by Paul Claudel,  
 décor by Panos Aravantinos,  
 produced in Berlin, May  
 1935.



# MATHIS DER MALER

By PAUL HINDEMITH  
 Libretto by the composer, décor by Roman  
 Clemens. Produced in Zurich, May 1938.  
 Scene from the "Burning of the Books."

The former opened up a considerable line of musico-dramatic skits with social implications, to which genre particularly Marc Blitzstein has contributed in *The Cradle Will Rock* and *No for an Answer*. But if one identifies opera with a certain type of vocal style, most of these works hardly answer the definition, since the rendition of their vocal parts does not require, and usually does not even invite, the cooperation of trained singers.

Stravinsky himself again took up the idea of action broken by comment, on a large scale, in *Oedipus Rex*. But he found himself driven to such a degree of stylization that this work, instead of opening a new avenue, remained a unique experiment. What at first seems the apex of affectation, namely the device of having the drama acted in Latin, is the most logical aspect of the experiment: a dramatic action, commented upon as it proceeds, is presented in a medium different from that used by the commentator. Yet it is the music of *Oedipus Rex* that lessens the significance of that work since again it indulges in regression to dated styles.

A more decisive attempt to base a new operatic style on the division between action and reflection was made by Milhaud in *Christophe Colomb*. For the first time the appearance of a critic who accompanies the drama with his remarks – in this particular case a chorus representing posterity – is more than a stylistic device aimed at shattering the illusory integrity of the stage play. It is an intrinsic part of the drama itself. The real drama is the discussion carried on about what is shown in the play. The play is the re-enactment of events past, deliberately staged so that they may be discussed. Paul Claudel, who is responsible for this ingenious conception, seems to have received some inspiration from the ancient Japanese theatre. In his play, *La femme et son ombre*, written for an actual production in Tokio and obviously stylized in relation to the Japanese scene, a paper screen was used as a prop to symbolize the boundary between the natural and the supernatural world. The screen as magic utensil is utilized again in *Christophe Colomb*, though for the more modern purpose of throwing moving pictures on it. The pictures illustrate the issue at stake on still a third level; a stand-in acts for the hero on the second stage, while his original ego watches these goings-on from the first stage where he has joined the commenting chorus. (The witnesses of the performance seem to have been slightly obfuscated by this additional complication.)

In my own *Karl V*, I also emphasized the forensic quality of the new operatic form. The real drama is the discussion between the hero and



his interlocutor, its object is the justification of the hero's deeds before the tribunal of the Lord, and what traditionally would have been the stage play, namely the events in the past life of the principal character, becomes staged action, consciously prepared to supply the discussion with material. The business of music is now to underline the un-reality of the action and strengthen its articulation, instead of magically transfiguring it. Therefore music stops at times and gives way to the spoken word, emphasizing the gap between the two media of expression rather than concealing it, though in a less naive manner than that of the old *opéra comique*. In what particular respect I might have failed in this experiment, I do not know, as I was unable to see the only performance of the opera at Prague, shortly before this last Central European house ceased to be available for progressive attempts.

Another work demanding full regalia is Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*. Had it come in time this opera probably could have been more readily absorbed by the existing production apparatus, since it is more conformist than the plays discussed above, which, in order to take root, needed the great testing ground of the Central European theatre of the 'twenties.

### III

The hope that by reducing its machinery, present-day efforts to adjust opera to the conditions of penury will succeed, seems thus far no less an illusion than that which prompted Stravinsky to write *L'Histoire du soldat* as an emergency venture during World War I. That work did not come into its own before the emergency to which it owed its existence had been ended. So too we will probably not know the real value of more recent experiments in the small genre until the present calamity will have ceased to exist. Many of these little operas are obviously too little to make any point at all. Nobody will be swept off his feet by exertions that seem to consist mainly of apologies for their having been made. A new artistic movement can hardly arise out of pastiches the main virtue of which is that they demand "only" three singers, take "only" twenty minutes, aim "only" at providing fun. Whenever such experiments begin to reach even a little farther, they prove too exacting for the present level of production facilities. The true nature of an emergency which induces such efforts is that it cannot be coped with, or else it would not be one.

Professional observers today usually agree that nothing of truly permanent value has been produced in the operatic field during the last

twenty years. The criteria by which the durability of artistic values can be tested being, as they are, of extreme vagueness and relativity, we may just as hopefully believe that future observers will find at last that some of the most important steps in the evolution of opera since Wagner, have been made between the two great wars. This fact may be obscured now because none of the composers who contributed to that evolution was so exclusively interested in opera that he could have become as ruthless and untiring a promoter of a new style as was Wagner for his ideas. Too many energies are being absorbed by the theoretical and experimental penetration of the mutations of the musical idiom brought on by our century. Posterity will measure the achievements of present-day composers by the magnitude and variety of the tasks which they had to face, rather than by the tangible success which they obtained in singularly adverse circumstances.