

NEWS FROM OVERSEAS

AUSTRIAN UNDERGROUND

Zürich,* April 1945

THE catastrophe of March 1938 did not merely banish Mahler and Schönberg from Austria. Everything that had given Austrian music its character was proscribed. Under the sign of the swastika Vienna was officially proclaimed a center of culture and music; fanfares announced the city had been entrusted with a special mission. Before the war broke out, two Reichs-Theater festival weeks were held, but soon there were much subtler attempts to exploit Austria's culture for propaganda. The actual living musical organism shrank fearfully out of sight.

What remained was a system lavishly financed by the state which rapidly improvised a deceptive imitation of native musical activity. But the imitation was a dismal failure, partly because the former leading figures were pushed into the background, dismissed or banished, chiefly because the Austrian conception of music and its practice could not be reconciled with the purposes of those now in power. As a result of cultural *Gleichschaltung*, the great music city of Vienna fell heir to emptiness and chaos.

The Vienna State Opera, which had been continuously on the verge of closing since March 1938, finally shut its doors six years later. This breakdown was an inevitable consequence of the Anschluss which deprived the most representative music institution in Austria of its conductor, director, manager and important singers. Gone were Bruno Walter, the spiritual leader, three directors, the manager Wallerstein, the ballet mistress, and Lotte Lehman, Elisabeth Schumann, Margit Bokor, Kolomon Pataky, to mention only a few. The much harassed administrative director, Erwin Kerber, who remained at his post, brought assistants to the conductor's stand and tried to handle the stage direction himself, his one concern being to make any kind of performance possible. In this lamentable condition the organization dragged out its

* This letter was sent to MODERN MUSIC by a well-known Viennese critic at present living in Zürich.

existence until 1940, when Heinrich Strohm, general director of the Hamburg State Opera, won the Vienna post. Only a few months after this event had been loudly and vulgarly acclaimed in the usual Third Reich fashion, Strohm suddenly suffered a nervous breakdown and was rushed to a sanatorium. The Viennese climate may have disagreed with him; perhaps too he recognized the evidence of resistance which underlay the ostensible submission.

At all events, by the beginning of 1941 Vienna's opposition to everything it was supposed to become in the way of culture and music began to be apparent. At the root of the resistance were those influential musical figures who remained in the city and, after their first terrified paralysis, initiated the opposition movement in the musical field. Sometimes their first small acts were passive, sometimes they were active and open. Thanks to the shortage of qualified people, these musicians could retain, even expand their positions, though many were enemies of the regime. Carefully and vigorously they took every opportunity to work out their own ideas. Isolated acts of politico-cultural sabotage, not important by themselves, added up to an impressive total. For instance, artists known to be anti-fascist, "pro-Austrian," even though their technical proficiency may have been open to question, were given, where possible, protection and preference in engagements and contract renewals. And when Nazi authorities protested, the engagements were justified as artistically indispensable. Naturally the best-known figures could not be so dangerously exposed. But a network of oppositional solidarity was spun.

Force and widespread activity are used against resistance movements only where there is open insurrection. In the early stages, however, the participants themselves are secure in their secret knowledge, and publicity, even in foreign countries, is discouraged. Any survey of Viennese musical activity since the beginning of the war, to be a true picture, must be supplemented by a second one, of the real Austrian spirit secretly at work.

Externally other Viennese institutions had careers like that of the State Opera. At the State Music Academy the organist, Franz Schütz, remained director until it closed. Piano classes were taught by second-raters like Walter Kerschbaumer and Friedrich Wührer. Josef Marx was pushed into the background (he had been an Austrian Staatsrat). His one-time pupil, Friedrich Bayer, acceptable because even before 1938 he had composed a symphony and variations on the *Horst Wessel Lied* and

had been critic for the *Völkische Beobachter*, conducted a class in composition.

The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, dictatorially ruled by its new Nazi director, Wilhelm Jerger, was in turn conducted by Furtwängler, Knappertsbusch, Böhm and Krauss. All semblance of life disappeared from its programs. The few standard works which would assure audience response were endlessly repeated, this monotony being broken only by the premiere of some meaningless student composition. The same policy applied to soloists and to chamber music concerts, which latter were dominated largely by the Schneiderhan Quartet.

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But alongside the wretched sterility of the "representative" work of national cultural propaganda, underground musical activity developed ever more vigorously. Young musicians, many of whom had never heard a concert performance of either Schönberg or Mahler, wanted to know about their music. Privately owned scores passed from hand to hand. A young Austrian composer, whose own works were still only in manuscript, even copied the whole score of Schönberg's *Kammersymphonie* for himself.

Anton Webern was known to be living in the immediate vicinity of Vienna, though he was seldom seen. His works could not be played openly and so private circles organized home concerts for carefully invited audiences. Here loving performance was given to much that was scorned "outside," the music of Schönberg, Webern, Berg, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, songs by Mahler, even choruses by Hanns Eisler. And Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* was studied by every young violinist though of course the music was nowhere for sale.

A secret performance of the *Dreigroschenoper* by Bert Brecht and Kurt Weill was prepared and successfully brought off, with a fairly well-known film star in the role of Polly, and a piano replacing the orchestra.

The notorious propaganda exhibit of "Entartete Kunst" also made a sensation. In the "decadent music" section one could hear, as horrible examples, pieces of contemporary music on records: *Mondfleck* from Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, or songs from the *Dreigroschenoper*. The results surprised the instigators. Only a few days after the opening, the phonograph department realized that the visiting crowds were having the records played not for shock but for the pleasure of enjoying something

otherwise banned and painfully missed.

A characteristic incident at the Vienna State Opera at this time can be explained as the outcome of this pervasive and deep-rooted opposition. After the director Strohmer became ill the Opera was without a head for many months. The staff seized this opportunity to stage a new opera, *Johanna Balk*, with text by Caspar Neher, scene designer and former close collaborator of Bert Brecht and Kurt Weill, and music by Rudolf Wagner-Regeny. Musically and scenically the style is closely related to that of *Dreigroschenoper*, "Entartete Kunst" in the strict Third Reich meaning of that term, a category pursued by the Nazis with fire and sword. Nevertheless the premiere did take place and it was followed by a series of repeat performances. Finally Berlin woke up and Goebbels himself issued a ban on performances of *Johanna Balk* for any German stage. The angry word "sabotage" was heard in official circles but as there was no desire to broadcast the scandal it was allowed to die down. Questions of directorship were thereafter handled more energetically and Karl Böhm was rushed from Dresden to the Vienna State Opera.

Whether open or underground such attempts to preserve the true cultural aspirations of the Austrians were, in effect, an expression of political resistance. Burning opposition to fascism manifests itself just as clearly in the copying of a Schönberg score as in the "direct action" of a purely political group. Surely the genius and energy of Austria, once again liberated, can be depended upon to give us a renewed musical activity in the line of its great tradition.

Sebastian

PARIS RESURGENT

Paris, April 1945

FROM the very beginning of the war many of our finest musicians were mobilized. With the signing of the armistice, we realized that some would not come back; we knew them well enough to appreciate our country's loss. But what of those who fell by their side: young students torn from their classes at the Conservatoire, forever unknown to the great public which they never had a chance to approach. We can only think bitterly of the precious things they might have accomplished.

The high hopes we had for Jehan Alain, Jean Vuillermoz and Maurice Jaubert, known for the film scores of *Carnet de Bal*, *Quai des*