

## HELLENIC JAZZ

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KRENEK'S *Leben des Orest*, the latest work of the thirty-year-old Viennese, and the eighth he has written for the stage, is an attempt to achieve a synthesis of jazz and classicism. It is an experiment in style not very different from certain compositions of the sur-realist school, although it falls far below them in artistic effectiveness. From one point of view, however, it is important: for the first time in the history of the new music the fusion of disparate systems of ideas is consciously attempted, and, to a certain extent, successfully accomplished.

Nothing could be easier than to sniff contemptuously at this piece of Krenek's. Its faults, its esthetic and ideological weaknesses, are so perfectly obvious, that it hardly remains the function of the critic to dwell upon them. The critical importance of the work lies in this very will to synthesis, in the effort to achieve a comprehensive art form, an opera genuinely dramatic and genuinely significant, drawing its materials from all the wide realm of music. Such an objective is rare today in Germany stifled as it is by excessive specialization. When it does appear it should be saluted, however incomplete the results.

The action of this grand opera in five acts (eight scenes) weaves together the whole Orestes cycle, the Iphigenia motif, and something else contributed by Krenek, here once again his own librettist. The principal scene of action is the castle of the Nordic king Thoas, to which benevolent gods have carried Iphigenia thus saving her from the sacrificial death to which she had been condemned. Using this icy kingdom as a symbol, Krenek develops a half-theatrical, half symbolic contrast between South and North, a contrast which is powerful in conception and has dramatic possibilities. Unfortunately the Thoas scenes are musically and structurally the weakest, so that the

intended antithesis fails to materialize. The northern cloud-world remains a mere abstraction.

The action develops somewhat as follows: Orestes, a homeless adventurer, separated from Clytemnestra by the wrath of Agamemnon, wanders through strange lands. After protracted, aimless drifting, he reaches home again only to find his mother the mistress of Aegisthus. He slays them both. Remorse drives him, half-crazed, on far wanderings through the world. By chance he comes upon Thoas' dim kingdom; here he finds his sister, Iphigenia, and Thoas' daughter, Thamar, with whom he promptly falls passionately in love. It is agreed that they shall all return to Greece. In Greece once more, the matricide Orestes is dragged before the tribunal to be judged. A *deus ex machina* wins acquittal for Orestes. There is a typical, movie happy ending. The couples, Orestes and Thamar, Thoas and Iphigenia, live happily ever after. Apotheosis. Olympian light. C.-sharp.

It is easy enough to see that the *Leben des Orest* is no classical work and that this approach to the ancient world is radically different from Stravinsky's in *Oedipus Rex*. Krenek deliberately mixes elements of all styles, romantic and classic, modern, southern and northern, vulgar and serious. He has one end in view, and one only: the greatest possible theatrical effect. He unhesitatingly sacrifices all nuance, all artistic solicitude. He draws liberally upon all forms of music: anything which serves his immediate purpose is good. Krenek belongs to the fortunate but imperiled class of artists who compose with the greatest facility. Thus he stumbles into an obvious fault: he is uncritical of his own work, he trusts his native genius too much.

We have in this opera (to come at last to the music itself) things of the very first rank side by side with others almost painfully poor. The score, though of impressive length (the opera lasts more than four hours), is a mixture of inspiration and the dreariest sort of rubbish. There are passages of sterling worth, melodic patterns of great creative power; and with these, long stretches of the purest routine matter where a string tremolo or a chord in diminished sevenths takes the place of ingenuity.

The attempt to "sell" us a Hellas with jazz accompaniment is clearly abortive. Not because such a union is impossible

(Milhaud succeeds where Krenek fails), but because Krenek doesn't understand jazz. The foxtrots in the first act are just tiresome and miserably worked out into the bargain. But the anguish of Clytemnestra—this is magnificent, in sonority, in atmosphere, in total musical value (from measure 660 on): magnificent also is the gipsy circus in the second act and nothing since Meyerbeer has equalled the brutal power of the bloody close of the third act, whose effect is intensified by the preceding scene, the most inspired in the opera. Orestes wanders, weary and resigned, through twilight mountain regions. In his depression there is the murmur of a tranquil, natural music, like the chirping of crickets and the singing of birds in summer. A cantilena for flutes with banjo accompaniment gives us a melody clear and pure such as modern music has seldom produced.

In the last act conventional musical language is for the most part closely adhered to. Here the unctuous triads are often distressing; the arias and the ensembles are clichés from the old opera. Ultimately, of course, Krenek's native gift carries him over all the hazards. But it is a pity that such talent should have gone so hopelessly astray. One more work as trivial as this and Krenek is done for, forever.

For the opera has been wonderfully successful. And this, not only because it is so dulcet and tuneful, or has good choruses, or is really so effective theatrically, but because it is a symbol of the stylistic chaos of our times.

The Leipzig premiere, which was followed at the beginning of March by the Berlin performance under Klemperer, contributed greatly to this success. Gustav Brecher toiled over the stage problems of the opera. Walter Brugmann, the conductor failed in the most important part of his task, an effective indication of the symbolic opposition inherent in the opera. But the chorus, ballet and orchestra were beautifully handled.

There is no doubt that the success of Krenek's opera will be a lasting one. But let us hope, however, that he has not set himself for all time upon the easy highway of conventional and sure-fire things, that he does not really intend to pander to the tastes of a bourgeois musical public.