

OPERA IN GERMANY TODAY

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IN the season of 1934-5 a round dozen new operas made their appearance in Germany. Evidently it was considered obligatory to animate the otherwise totally conventional repertoires by the introduction of contemporary works. A great effort was made to find in this new output the German folk-opera that would satisfy the demands of the present cultural policy. Since contradictory views of this policy issued from various quarters, the demands in question were not quite clear; but the confused voices did achieve unison on the most important watch-words—folk-kinship, timeliness, heroism. There was a work, as it happened, with a text combining these three qualifications into a whole of high artistic quality; but as the composer was Paul Hindemith, the opera was not produced. Only symphonic fragments from *Mathis der Maler* were made public.

It is not unimportant to note the practical successes of the new cultural policy. Out of about twelve new works, four aroused more than ordinary attention and seemed good prospects for the German opera repertoires. One of them, the new opera by Richard Strauss, met with objections of a purely political kind after its successful world-premiere in Dresden, so that those theatres which had already accepted it had to cancel their contracts. The second, Paul Graener's *Prinz von Homburg*, was heralded as a music-drama worthy to represent the Third Reich; but it had strikingly little success, and only a very few German theatres have accepted it. A positively sensational record, on the contrary, has been achieved by the two other works, *Der Günstling* of Rudolf Wagner-Regenyi and *Die Zaubergeige* of Werner Egk. Not only almost all the important theatres in Germany but even the smaller houses, usually reluctant to risk modern works, have scheduled them for this season. They are the biggest "best

sellers" that have appeared on the German opera market since Krenek's *Jonny Spielt Auf* and Weinberger's *Svanda Dudák*.

Thus the scales have tipped decidedly in favor of youth. Strauss is seventy-one years old, Graener sixty-three; Wagner-Regenyi and Egk are in the middle thirties. This is an encouraging symptom, especially as the two young composers belong in spirit to the realm of new music. The peculiar psychology of present German cultural policy makes it possible, in this case as in others, that though the leading representatives and acknowledged heads of a certain movement are suppressed (Hindemith, Stravinsky, etc), young talents working in the same direction are fostered, simply because they are not as yet well-known.

In his new opera Strauss has once more set himself a problem in style. He has chosen a figure from English Baroque comedy, Ben Jonson's Admiral Morosus, and Stefan Zweig has adapted this old tar who hates noise to operatic requirements. The story concerns a marriage-farce. Timida, the quiet, chaste girl whom the old eccentric has married develops into a shrill shrew after the wedding and drives him to despair. Then it all turns out to be a practical joke staged by a troupe of actors to which Henry, Morosus's nephew and heir, belongs. And Timida, of course, is Henry's wife. Morosus, only too happy to become a bachelor again so easily, forgives the young couple. "How wonderful is music," he sings at the close, "once it is over!"

There is a double problem here. First, the music must convey the atmosphere of the late English Baroque. This is accomplished externally by citations of old English piano music and entire arias of old Italian opera music (Monteverdi and Legrenzi), and creatively by a distinctly virtuoso treatment of the vocal parts. Secondly, noise must enter in a hundred different forms as the antithesis to music. Here Strauss is the unequalled master of descriptive instrumentation, not only delineating noise through musical sounds but also incorporating genuine noises into the body of his music—a belated and unconscious imitation of those Italian Futurists who proclaimed *bruitisme* as the "new" music.

Stylistically *Die Schweigsame Frau* is a continuation of that dialogue technic of which *Ariadne auf Naxos* furnished the

prototype and *Intermezzo* a somewhat more rounded development. The quick, pointed conversations are given a typically Straussian parlando, with a great deal of psychological interpretation of Zweig's words and whatever ideas lurk behind them. The break-up of the melodic atom which Strauss introduced into opera and developed into an artistic principle, attains a high degree of mastery in this work. Numbers of firm melodic construction appear like islands in a sea of quasi-recitative: a beautiful A-major ensemble and a gay stretta in the first act, an A-flat-major sextet in the second act, some canzones and two charming buffo overtures, the latter in the form of a fugue.

On the whole, however, the stream of Strauss's invention no longer flows as freely here as it did even in *Arabella*, not to mention the *Rosenkavalier*. Too frequently one becomes conscious of the craftsmanship (always admirable) and longs for more music. The first act makes a strong impression, the second is too long, and the last fails in the finale. The positive and new aspect of the work is the virtuoso treatment of the voices—which, to be sure, sets certain technical limits to its availability for performance.



Paul Graener, in his choice of text, is more accommodating to the new demands than Strauss. There are not many dramas in world literature that treat the problem of heroism with the depth of *Der Prinz von Homburg* by Heinrich von Kleist. This work of genius is superlatively effective material; but should it be set to music? The action illustrates the conflict between obedience and foresight, between a sense of duty and deeper perception. The prince proceeds against the king's orders in battle; and although he thereby turns defeat into victory, his disobedience as a soldier is punishable by death. Several generals intercede for him and just before the execution the king pardons him. A love story is interwoven with the plot.

Graener has made the most effective scenes of Kleist's drama into a skillful opera libretto. The music concentrates on two main themes, the martial and the romantic. The military note is extrinsically supplied by the thematic use of old Prussian military marches and soldier-songs. The army-camp scenes, too,

with their fanfares and march-rhythms, present a mere facade of heroism. Graener's nature is fundamentally soft, romantic, sentimental, and only by straining his forces excessively can he rise to heroic stature. What in Kleist is the natural expression of a Prussian and tragic mentality, in Graener becomes an artificial construction. The love scenes are more successful. The characterization of Princess Natalie has a number of fine touches, and in the big duet there is a breath of genuine feeling.

Graener once wrote a very poor opera—*Friedemann Bach*—and it brought him his big success. In the *Prinz von Homburg* he seems deliberately to have set himself a larger and more rigorous task, but without proving equal to it. His musical and operatic talent is rooted in late Impressionism; and ever since he has been trying to throw off Debussy's influence and to pursue a German folk-note his creative power has grown weaker. His harmony, it is true, even now retains the blurred contours of Impressionistic sound. Tonal modulation is almost entirely missing; nevertheless the play of chords keeps returning to the tonal confines drawn by tradition and reason. Reger's influence is evident here, although what would be a futile attempt at Reger's contrapuntal art is not even made. The voices are treated effectively, in an almost Italian manner, with broad emotional cantilenas.

The problem of heroic opera has not been solved by Graener. Can it be solved at all? Beethoven's *Fidelio* remains an inspired attempt, really outside the field of opera. Verdi's *Aida* is a special case, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* an experiment. Aside from Wagner's works, Germany has only one genuine heroic opera—Hans Pfitzner's *Der arme Heinrich*. And that is hardly ever performed.



Rudolf Wagner-Regenyi was born in Transylvania (then Hungary), but has lived in Germany for many years. He first attracted particular attention in 1930, when his four one-act pieces, *Esau und Jakob*, *Sganarelle*, *Der Nackte König* and *La Sainte Courtisane*, were produced with great success in Dessau.

His new opera, *Der Günstling*, proves his talent for the theatre to be an extraordinary one. The tremendous success of the work

however, is largely due to the libretto by Caspar Neher. Although it is psychologically inadequate and fails to give even the main characters dramatic development, it creates a tension and volcanic atmosphere that are irresistible. Neher treats a legendary theme with a historical background; he draws on Georg Büchner and Victor Hugo, both of whom dramatised this curious love story. Mary Tudor, so the fable has it, gives the Italian adventurer Fabiani full power. The people hate him because he oppresses and exploits them. One night a minister of state surprises the favorite visiting his mistress. Jealousy makes her fiancé lend himself to the queen's revenge. The queen pretends that he tried to assassinate her; he is arrested, declares that he is in Fabiani's pay, and shows the favorite's purse and dagger as proof. Both men are sentenced to death, but only Fabiani is executed.

The effectiveness of the text lies in the tension that exists between a dissatisfied people and a system of unscrupulous dictatorship, and secondly in the psychological conflict of the amorous queen. Choruses are used with great dramaturgic skill to express the mood of the people and thus take an explanatory part in the action.

To this libretto Wagner-Regenyi has written a consistent "opera of set numbers," with choruses, recitatives, arias, duets and spoken scenes. Just as in an Italian vocal opera, the baritone and soprano come up front after the dénouement and, brightly spotlighted, sing their duet of love and farewell. But although Verdi is followed in this respect, the whole style of the music is modeled on Handel. The choruses are Handelian, the vocal contours are Baroque in character, and the polyphonic foundation, the simple means of which Wagner-Regenyi puts to effective use, also derives from German pre-classicism.

The sung scenes have a gratifying clarity of line. Wagner-Regenyi is not a born vocal composer, but he knows how to handle voices for the stage and he is wise enough to put no strain on them. In addition, he has excellent taste and a strong sense of formal design. One is attracted to this composer by his precise knowledge of his own limitations. The secret of his success is to be found in the charm of a score that has form, taste, and a normal, never remotely fanatical intensity of feeling.

However, when the German press speaks of a "rebirth of opera seria," it commits an injustice. The *Günstling* does not strike out into new paths; it follows the road taken as early as 1931 by Kurt Weill's *Die Bürgschaft*.



Egk's *Zaubergeige* is a far more original work. Egk is a Munich composer, self-taught, an ardent modernist and nonetheless he is recognized by present-day Germany. A theme adapted from the Bavarian Count Pocci by Dr. Ludwig Andersen-Strecker furnishes the story of the *Zaubergeige*. It vividly recalls Ramuz's *Histoire du Soldat* but adds a great deal of grotesque Bavarian local color. A poor farmhand is given a miraculous violin, which makes him into a magician. At the height of his glory he breaks the vow on which the violin's powers depend: he falls in love. And so he returns to poverty and contentment and sings the praises of the simple life.

The music follows the folk-lore character of the book. The score is threaded by Bavarian dances, slow waltzes, gay folk-songs and peasant melodies. But the extremely modern technic, full of Stravinskyian rhythms and Milhaudian polytonalities, that is peculiar to Egk, lends a surrealist charm, as it were, to this "folk-kinship." The colorful quick changes of forms and characters are brimful of imagination, health and unabashed joy in grotesque fantasy. The score is by no means a masterpiece; in many respects it shows the inexperience of a first stage-work. Its talent and potency, however, place it far above the average run of what is being written in Germany today. The *Zaubergeige* is the first opera in a long time that owes its success not to a few happy numbers and climaxes but to a coherent, individual and highly modern style. It is neither heroic nor timely, to be sure, but on the other hand it expresses "folk-kinship" in a revolutionary way, as do the best works of Bartók, Janacek and Stravinsky.