

MUSICAL THEATRE

by DAVID DREW

OPERA is an expensive entertainment. Dr Johnson's famous pronouncement on the form is merely a gloss on that hard fact. Opera becomes foolish and irrational only when those who want it aren't able to pay for it, and those who pay for it don't really want it. Being an expensive entertainment, it was at its height an aristocratic one, and in that alone lay its social function. Later, when the State took over the responsibilities of the aristocracy, acknowledging that the preservation of opera is a public duty like the preservation of ancient monuments, something of the form's social dynamism was lost. Not only that; for duty and love are poor bedfellows.

Significantly enough, the first signs of a new form of musical theatre became apparent during the Diaghilev era, that last great flowering of private patronage. In 1914, Diaghilev was persuaded by Benois to produce Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Le Coq d'Or* as a ballet, with the singers dressed in anonymous clothes and stationed motionless on either side of the stage, while the action was left to the dancers. If nothing else, this was a tacit admission that opera singers were inadequate to the demands of sophisticated theatre.

The developments in drama from the time of Ibsen onward exposed more than ever the purely dramatic lameness of opera, which had failed to develop vigorously in the one dimension which should distinguish it from Oratorio. One corrective for this condition was the evolution (by Stravinsky in *Oedipus Rex* and Weill in *Die Bürgschaft*) of a kind of opera-oratorio after the Handelian model. By dispensing with the traditional 'conflict of character' and designing the dramatic structure in static blocks or 'pictures', the untruths of *verismo* were avoided.

Handel was not the only way out. Both Stravinsky and Weill evolved alternative and quite unclassical procedures. Diaghilev's experiment with *Le Coq d'Or* bore fruit in Stravinsky's *Renard* of 1919. In *Renard* the singers remain stationary, and the 'actors' are silent. But the dramatic connection between them is loosened. Although there are four singers and four actors, the singers

do not 'represent' the stage roles. Sometimes they function as commenting chorus, sometimes more than one singer 'speaks' for a single character.

The action of *Renard* is as simple as an Aesop fable. The 'characters' are animals, but their significance is human and their behaviour, though most impassioned, is subject to rigid formal control, as if in a ritual. The division of the work into two parts, the second of which reverses the fortunes of the first, is part of the ritual process. So is the formal repetition of the opening march at the close of the work. Time moves in a circle. The work ends where it begins, and might be repeated *ad infinitum*, as the Crucifixion itself is lived again in every Communion service.

The separation of singing and acting was further exploited by Stravinsky in *Les Noces* and *Pulcinella*. In *Pulcinella*, Stravinsky turned to a highly stylised traditional form, the theatre of the *Commedia dell'arte*. This gesture of internationalism proved very influential, especially in France. Milhaud's *Salade* (1924) reproduces it precisely. *Pulcinella* (Polichinelle) is again the protagonist, and the singers in the pit again watch over the intrigues on the stage. The music adheres to traditional popular dance forms apart from a single borrowing (a tango) from contemporary dance music.

Allusions to the popular music of the New World were characteristic of the modern musical theatre from its very earliest stages (see Debussy's *La Boîte à Joujoux* of 1913 and Satie's *Parade* of 1917). In Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* they were an essential part of the work, establishing a tension between the plebeian and the aristocratic, the profane and the sacred. Chorale and Ragtime stand face to face, alert in their hostility. *The Soldier's Tale*, with its bare resources, its proletarian milieu, and its total rejection of the 'theatre of illusion', is without question the most influential of Stravinsky's early stage works. It won the admiration of Busoni, another great pioneer of the musical theatre, and was decisive in suggesting new paths for Busoni's pupil Kurt Weill and for Weill's collaborator Bertolt Brecht.

In all his pre-Brechtian works for the theatre, Weill experimented with new forms. His first mature opera (*The Protagonist*, of 1924) included elaborate silent pantomimes. His ballet-opera *Royal Palace* (1926), on a text by Ivan Goll, attempted to fuse two traditional forms, and add a

new one in the shape of a filmed episode with instrumental accompaniment. Apart from this film episode, *Royal Palace* is the obvious precursor of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, the only dance work written by Weill and Brecht (and, incidentally, their last collaboration).

Brecht is now established as the major poet-playright of our time, and Weill's extended association with him and his ideas between the years 1927 and 1933 resulted in an achievement second only to Stravinsky's in its importance to the development of the musical theatre between the wars. Unlike Stravinsky, Weill and Brecht broke completely with the aristocratic theatre tradition, and with the idea of Art as a more or less esoteric expression of more or less esoteric truths. Brecht found in colloquial speech a means of purging the German language of the waste elements it had acquired in the period of its literary decadence. Weill found a precise musical analogy for Brecht's innovations.

Yet however popular the forms may have seemed, they were rooted in the best classical traditions and they were capable of considerable complexity. In the famous *Threepenny Opera*, Weill approaches the cabaret song and the operetta with the quizzical eye of one whose musical personality had been formed in very different schools. When Paul Burkhard, an experienced and successful composer of operetta, comes to compose music for Dürrenmatt's *Frank V* (which is consciously modelled on *The Threepenny Opera*) he listens to Weill, and his attitude is not at all quizzical. *Frank V* pays homage to a form of musical theatre in which the drama reminds the audience of what they are—people who live in society and must pay for it, as surely as they must pay for their theatre seats—instead of making them forget what they are not—heroes, magicians, or the playthings of uncontrollable destiny.

In formulating a style which (like Stravinsky's, in *The Soldier's Tale*) says No to illusion and three times No to the dreamers of cut-price dreams, Brecht and Weill were not, as is sometimes suggested, giving way to disillusion. Their work is passionately moralistic, and more purely humane and humanitarian than any of Stravinsky's stage-works previous to *The Rake's Progress*. *The Seven Deadly Sins*, their last collaboration, is indeed a kind of Progress in the Hogarthian sense. The Sins

it depicts are the traditional ones, re-interpreted as a caricature of bourgeois morality. Thus, 'Sloth' is to be slothful in making money, 'Anger' is to be angry about the injustices of society. As always with Brecht and Weill, the interplay of music, words and action is strictly contrapuntal (this is their great achievement). In order to say that the real sin is to avoid those attitudes of mind which are sinful in bourgeois eyes, everything is given a double meaning. The music does not express the text: it contradicts it. For instance, when the tenor in 'Covetousness' advises that one must hide one's avarice, the music is in the form of a most expressive and dignified aria. It is right to be moved by the music, wrong to think that it confers approval of an undignified philosophy. On the contrary, through the tension of opposites it shows that philosophy for what it is. The musical theatre has discovered the principle of dialectic.

The Seven Deadly Sins, like *Renard*, involves singing roles which are both in and beyond the action. It disdains all illusion of realism, and in place of the conflict of character is put the conflict of ideas. It uses American place names as *Renard* uses the farmyard—as a backcloth against which to set in relief something much larger, something without time or locality. When the opening music returns again at the close, a ritual drama has once more turned full circle. Throughout, the Family—an almost motionless male quartet—are the ambiguous High Priests. Their satanic daughter sings seven litanies of Expediency to her sister Anna, who dances but does not utter, as if she were only a child; seven times her natural human instincts are overcome, and each stage brings the two sisters nearer the altar of worldly success, where the Family sit, waiting. There is no bloodshed in this gentle murder of a free spirit, and certainly no conventional tragedy. It is the music which first asks us to pity, and the combination of the spoken and the unspoken, the music and the dance-mime, which seeks to explain our pity. Different theatrical forms are brought together in order that they may seem to question each other. Without some such tension, any form of musical theatre, new or old, is valueless.