

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

AS-7
The Staatsoper

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Vienna is a city which has played many roles in its long history, but in the development of music -- and particularly of opera -- it has occupied a special and enduring place. Although opera is by origin (and perhaps by nature) an Italian form, it was in the Hapsburg capital that the first great operas were created. There, between 1785 and 1790, Mozart and the librettist Lorenzo da Ponte composed Le Nozze di Figaro, a good part of Don Giovanni, and Così fan tutte. These were not "Viennese" or "Austrian," but European works. Mozart, as the itinerant prodigy of Salzburg, had known all the great capitals of Europe; da Ponte, a Venetian Jew and friend of the widely traveled Casanova, was later to become a London impressario and, still later, a professor at Columbia University. Their three operas, but particularly the first two, reflected even more cosmopolitan sources: Figaro, of course, was drawn from Beaumarchais, while the Don Juan story had already been worked by Tirso de Molina and Molière, among others. The blending of the worldly eighteenth-century rationalism represented by da Ponte and his sources with the nascent romanticism, sublime sensitivity and fecund talent of Mozart was unique in its cosmopolitan taste and unfailing modernity -- a standard by which all subsequent operas would have to be judged. The Mozart-da Ponte operas thus represent a summit of the all-European culture soon to be eroded by the rise of nationalism.

Nowadays pilgrims from all parts of the world stream unceasingly to Vienna, no longer as a capital of empire, but as a city preeminently of great music. There is some irony in the fact, for Vienna was and perhaps is (as A. J. P. Taylor remarks) "more congenial to Johann Strauss than to Mozart or Beethoven." Don Giovanni received its great triumph in Prague, and da Ponte records the comment of the Emperor Joseph II: "Divine... but such music is not meat for the teeth of my Viennese!" Although Vienna has endured nearly two centuries of disapprobation for having permitted Mozart to die a pauper, even today the house in which he died remains an untended slum, with a crated bust of the composer standing in the lobby awaiting disposal, apparently, for years. And the Vienna Staatsoper feels free to cancel (as it did New Year's week) a performance of Così fan tutte three days in advance because of a soprano's indisposition; I cannot conceive this happening in New York, and wonder if it would be the case in Vienna either if Die Fledermaus or The Gypsy Baron were involved.

The Staatsoper is the older and more celebrated of Vienna's two permanent opera companies and it is, as its name indicates, supported by the government of the Austrian Republic. The other company, the Volksoper, supported by the city of Vienna, resembles the Paris Opera Comique in that it has a lighter repertory and somewhat lower ticket scales. What with matinees, the city may have three or four operas a day; for, almost every week of its long season, the Staatsoper will give, in addition to the regular performances in its own house, at least one supplementary performance elsewhere. These may take place in the Redoutensaal, former site of court entertainments in the Hofburg palace, or in the charming Theater an der Wien, where Die Zauberflöte was first performed -- now, of course, completely modernized. (Vienna, it should be noted, has a population of less than two million, a fourth that of New York, which is currently planning to destroy both the Metropolitan and the City Center in the interest of Lincoln Center halls with fewer seats.)

The Staatsoper, both the house and the company, has a venerable tradition. The "new" house was built in 1869, and Kaiser Franz Josef's name is still engraved on its main tower. Partly destroyed in the last war, it was finally rebuilt in 1955 and has been filled to capacity (2,200) or near-capacity ever since. While the exterior is a ponderous nineteenth-century version of Franco-Italian Renaissance, the inside of the house is impressive indeed. Not, that is, the gilt and marble staircases and lounges, but the theater itself and especially the stage. There are very few seats with an obstructed or angled view; and although acoustically there appear to be a few "dead" spots for singers on stage, the enormous back-stage -- of great visual effectiveness in mass scenes -- does not seem in any way to hinder the acoustical deployment of choruses. (We saw this put to effective test in the Triumphant Scene of Aida; the management of the various choruses, as well the ensemble of soloists up front, was itself a triumph.)

The Staatsoper company, which numbers Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss among its former directors, is intimately linked with the Vienna Philharmonic and has had an influence far beyond Austria. For, with the Nazi Anschluss, a group of brilliant Viennese musicians went abroad. One of them, Fritz Busch, was responsible not only for the peerless Glyndebourne Festival recordings of the Mozart operas in England, but also for the revival of these operas in the United States after a period of unbelievable neglect. (He founded the New Opera Company in New York in competition with the Met, which had not performed Figaro between 1918 and 1938, Don Giovanni between 1908 and 1928, or Così Fan Tutte between 1927 and 1951; and Die Zauberflöte only once between 1917 and 1941.)

In recent years, the Staatsoper has been under the firm hand of Dr. Herbert von Karajan, whose frequent controversies with the Austrian Government over resources and contract terms have been watched covetously by other opera boards around the world. The Staatsoper apparently cannot compete with La Scala or the

Met for the great itinerant vocalists of the day, such as Franco Corelli or Joan Sutherland; nor does it include on its permanent roster a dramatic artist of the stature of Tito Gobbi or Giulietta Simionato. What the Staatsoper does have, first and foremost, is a disciplined veteran orchestra which neither outraces nor unduly overrides the singers. There is also a first-rank group of practiced singers to whom the house has been home, two or three times a week, for a dozen or more years (Irmgard Seefried, Hilde Gueden and Erich Kunz are among the best known). A steady eye is kept on Italy to grab spare talent whenever available, and young singers are welcomed from all over the world, including the United States and the Soviet Union.



'FLEDERMAUS' ACT TWO

One is liable, thus, in a week of opera-going to see Erich Kunz present a Papageno (in Die Zauberflöte) which is by now classical in its economy and intimate knowledge not only of the opera but of the audience. One may expect "unexpectedly" stirring performances from relative unknowns in supporting roles, such as Kostas Paskalis' Marcello (in La Bohème) or, better still, Louis Quilico's Amonasro (in Aida). And one may join in bringing down the house for a commanding display of the trans-Alpine genius, such as Ettore Bastianini's Renato in Ballo in Maschera.

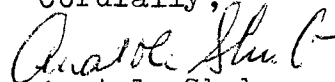
A serious standard of musicianship is maintained throughout, so that even routine performances are more than thoroughly competent, revealing the opera in its own terms without vocal excesses or orchestral tempo-tricks. (This is the Germanic heritage.) Stage direction is by and large conservative: There is no great attempt to prevent arias from being sung directly to the audience, rather than to the person to whom they are ostensibly addressed; on the other hand, there is none of that strained "popularization" which has been so common in recent New York productions. Costuming is fine, the sets are often magnificent (although they do not draw applause).

The Staatsoper repertory is not overly daring, but it does seem rather more varied than the Met's. Thus, in a given month one may see -- in addition to the operas already mentioned and such other standards as Traviata, Butterfly, Tosca and "Cav-Pag" all four Mozart classics, three operas by Wagner, two by Richard Strauss, Verdi's Don Carlos, Donizetti's Don Pasquale, Giordano's André Chenier and Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream. About the only displeasing element in our week at the Staatsoper was the ballet, which was incongruously fey.

Austria these days is often considered, and sometimes considers itself, a second Switzerland. Its politics of permanent two-party coalition and diplomatic neutrality arouse little excitement. Its intellectual life, by most accounts, has never quite recovered from the effects of the Anschluss. (The University of Vienna, we were told, still teaches pre-Freudian psychology.) Austrians seeking a serious newspaper take the Neue Zurcher Zeitung. Year by year, too, the tourist trade has loomed ever larger in the Austrian economy.

At the Staatsoper, too, one must confess that the audience, downstairs and up, was liberally sprinkled with tourists. Yet the survival and prosperity of this great opera house testify to the broader role -- the civilizing mission, if you will -- which Vienna has played in Central Europe and may perhaps, if its inhabitants so desire, play again.

Cordially,


Anatole Shub