

Williams College Symphonic Winds

Wind Music from Germany and Austria, 1900-1950

In order to understand the cultural climate in Berlin in the 1920s, one must understand the general atmosphere in Germany. After suffering a humiliating defeat in World War I, the German government was ordered to pay war reparations. Knowing that these reparations would be hanging over their heads for years, perhaps decades, many Germans felt a sense of hopelessness, which was reinforced by an economy in ruins. In 1923, inflation wiped out the savings of most middle class Germans. These events led to the odd mixture of despair and manic festivity that would fuel Berlin's artistic, musical, and literary renaissance...Out of the ashes of World War I had come a cultural movement the effects of which would be felt for the rest of the century.

Kelly Wittmann

The changes in the "cultural climate" in post-World War I Germany and Austria forever revolutionized the role that the arts played in society. The decade after World War I was undoubtedly one of the most crucial in the history of twentieth-century art, producing architecture, painting, music, and theater, "dedicated to the total overthrow of the decaying Romanticism that, some held, had fostered that war." (William Bolcom) While many artists were interested in overtly commenting on society through their creations, others inadvertently helped to construct the schism that developed between artists and their audiences and become synonymous with "twentieth-century art". Led by artists such as Richter, Hausmann, and Grosz, the controversial movements of Expressionism and DaDaism flourished in Germany. At the same time that these artists were creating political art works, Erwin Piscator, a member of the growing Communist movement in Germany, founded the Das Proletarische Theater in the hope of "rous[ing] the working class from its slumber and prepar[ing] the masses for the coming socialist revolution." Writers such as Bertolt Brecht and Vladimir Nabokov also flocked to Berlin in this time of cultural experimentation. Erich Maria Remarque, a young veteran of the German Army in World War I, chronicled the horror of the war and the sense of utter defeat felt by many Germans in his "All Quiet on the Western Front," the most influential book in Germany in the 1920s and one of the most read novels of all time.

The music of this era also evolved dramatically, reflecting the reactions of various musicians to the ever-changing cultural landscape. While composers such as Carl Orff reacted against the avant garde trends of his day by intentionally utilizing a simplified rhythmic and harmonic language, others such as Arnold Schoenberg, and his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern, wrote music that reflected their chaotic time. Described as "Expressionists," they replaced conventionality, in the name of traditional harmony, with the then-radical compositional techniques of atonality and serialism. Although these three composers, known to posterity as the "Second Viennese School" (Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven being regarded as the "First"), are now regarded as among the most influential musicians of the twentieth century, their music was regarded by the vast majority of concert-goers as irrelevant and peripheral—most Germans went to hear music not at the orchestral concert hall, but at the cabaret. In addition to singers, a cabaret would have comedians and dancers, and the acts were considered extremely risqué for their time. As in America, jazz was all the rage in Berlin in the 1920s. As composers such as Kurt Weill (and non-Germans Darius Milhaud and Igor Stravinsky) were profoundly influenced by this

"new" form of music, the line between concert music and popular music becoming increasingly less defined. In fact, Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*) still defies categorization as either classical or popular music, opera or play.

In 1921, during this time of artistic accessibility experimentation, the first major avant garde music festival in Germany was held — the Donaueschingen Festival. Initially conceived as a forum for little-known composers to experiment with new forms of musical expression, the Donaueschingen Festival quickly evolved into a major international event, attracting the best musicians. Composers such as Bartok and Stravinsky were regular visitors while major works such as Schoenberg's *Serenade, Op. 24* (his first fully twelve-tone composition) received their premieres at Donaueschingen. When in 1923 Paul Hindemith joined the Festival's artistic committee (eventually becoming its artistic director), he helped shape the vision of contemporary music in Germany. His conviction that the ever-widening gap between composer and general public could be bridged if composers wrote with a particular purpose and according to prescribed premises, now had a platform on which to be displayed—Hindemith's anti-Expressionist concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* ("functional music" or "music for amateurs") took center stage.

During Hindemith's tenure as artistic director, the festival began incorporating theme-programs that highlighted certain genres and mediums, specifically those that he felt were under-represented in the world of serious art music. In 1926, the festival theme was music for mechanical instruments and music for wind band (specifically referred to as *Gebrauchsmusik* in the official program booklet); while the festival obviously anticipated future experiments with electronic music, the inclusion of music for military wind orchestras is more peculiar. As the standard repertoire of music for turn-of-the-century German military bands was little more marches and arrangements, the commissioning of prominent composers to write works for this medium was undoubtedly the first attempt to create a body of serious repertoire for the band. On July 24, 1926, a complete concert was devoted to the premiering of four works for wind band: Hindemith's *Konzertmusik*, op. 41, Krenek's *Drei Lustige Märsche*, op. 44, Pepping's *Serenade*, and Toch's *Spiel*, op. 39.

This evening's performance reflects several of the musical trends that emerged after World War I in Germany and Austria. "The Wind Music of Germany and Austria, 1900-1950," is but a glimpse at the manner in which music embodied the marriage of anxiety and optimism prevalent in this tumultuous "cultural climate."

ABOUT THE WORKS:

Paul Hindemith: *Geschwindmarsch by Beethoven* (1946)

Undoubtedly one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century music, Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) was a composer, theorist, teacher, conductor, violist, and the author of *The Craft of Musical Composition* (1945). The foremost German composer of his generation and a figure central to both music composition and musical thought during the inter-war years, he immigrated to the United States in 1940 to avoid Nazi persecution and accepted a faculty position at Yale University. He composed sonatas for every string and wind instrument in the orchestra and his works have achieved a place as standard repertoire in every genre. Described conversely as

"modern" and "traditional," his position in the music world seems almost to capture the essence of the creative artist in 1920s Germany.

Hindemith's first experience with wind band music came when he was called up for military service at the end of 1917; when he joined his regiment in January 1918, he was assigned to the regimental band, in which he played the bass drum. In addition to the *Geschwindmarsch* and *Konzertmusik*, op. 41 both written for winds, he also wrote *Symphony in B-flat* in 1951 for the United States Army Band. *Geschwindmarsch* is actually the second movement of a little-known orchestral work entitled *Symphonia Serena*, composed at the end of 1946 and first performed in Dallas under Antal Dorati on February 1, 1947. The work is far from just a lively and happy piece (as might be deduced from the title, "Cheerful Symphony"). Even in this light-hearted work, Hindemith's craftsmanship and contrapuntal skill is demonstrated. More than a musical joke, *Geschwindmarsch* quotes a military march by Beethoven (*March in F, Wo.O. 18*). Hindemith separates the melodic phrases of the march, wittily continuing the process of motivic reduction which Beethoven himself applied in the apparently simple piece.

Ernst Toch: *Spiel für Blasorchester, Op. 39 (1926)*

Discouraged by his family from a life in music, Ernst Toch (1887-1964) began a career in medicine before devoting himself exclusively to music after receiving the Mozart Prize in 1909. Entirely self-taught as a composer, Toch took as earliest models the music of Mozart and J.S. Bach. After serving in the Austrian army during World War I, he returned to Mannheim where he taught for ten years. His experiences in the war left a mark on him, and his compositional style changed radically after the war. While his pre-war works betray the influence of Brahms, his post-war compositions instead demonstrate an extended tonality and an uncompromising emphasis on the linear dimension. Attempting to justify his single-minded focus on the melody, Toch wrote:

The truth is that the melodic impulse is primary, and always preponderates over the harmonic, that the linear, impulse is the force out of which germinates not only harmony, but also counterpoint and form. For the linear impulse is activated by motion, and motion means life, creation, propagation, and formation.

In fact, he held that the study of melody was so important, and so lacking in the German universities, that he wrote *Melodielehre*, his famous book on melody.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, purging all Jewish music, Toch was compelled to immigrate to the United States, teaching for many years at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Through his sixteen film scores, including *Ladies in Retirement* (1941) and *Address Unknown* (1944), he hoped to find a means to popularize avant garde music. Although he won a Grammy Award (1960) and garnered three Academy Award nominations, Toch's acknowledged that much of his music remained largely unknown, once commenting that "[he] was the most forgotten composer of the twentieth century."

The combination of his lifelong friendship with Hindemith and his prominent place in the musical avant garde led to his music being regularly heard at the Donaueschingen festivals. In 1926, two of his works were premiered: *Original Piece for Mechanical Piano* and *Spiel for Wind Orchestra*. Timothy Reynish offers the following about Ernst Toch's *Spiel*:

The miniature Overture is in three parts, an energetic section with simple mixed metres, a flowing trio set against semiquaver runs in wind, and a repeat of the first section. The "Idyll" is also in ternary form, with something of the bittersweet nostalgia of the decade. An extensive lyrical oboe melody is heard twice, embracing a brief but poignant Mahlerian episode. The "Buffo" finale is the most discursive movement; despite paying lip service to a rudimentary sonata form, it takes us into the realm of circus music, sheer high-spirited fun aimed at interesting those serious-minded German military bands of the twenties in contemporary music.

Of the pieces performed on the wind band concert during the 1926 Donaueschingen Festival, Toch's *Spiel (Game)* seems to have received the most immediate critical acclaim, described by reviewers as "playful and subtle" and as "a charming, inventive and richly contrasting piece of entertainment music." The work is dedicated to the conductor of the premiere performance, Hermann Scherchen, who was regarded as one of the foremost conductors of "modern music."

Carl Orff (arr. Friedrich K. Wanek): *Carmina Burana*

Although he lived an active life of almost ninety years, the German composer and music educator Carl Orff (1895-1982) is known primarily for only two works: the cantata *Carmina Burana* (perhaps the most successful piece of twentieth-century classical music) and the music pedagogy *Orff-Schulwerk*. Born into a family of music lovers and army officers, Orff began studying at the age of five, learning the piano, organ, and cello.. In 1917, in the midst of his studies, he was drafted into the army. Shortly after his return from the War, he founded, with Dorothee Günther, the Güntherschule in Munich, an educational center for gymnastics, rhythmic movement, music and dance. It was within these surroundings that he developed his concept of *elementare Musik*, a synthesis of gesture, poetic language and music that was later to fertilize his personal musical style and from which his *Schulwerk* would eventually evolve. The first edition of *Orff-Schulwerk: elementare Musikübung* appeared in 1932.

His first, and perhaps only lasting, success as a composer came with the premiere of *Carmina Burana* in Frankfurt on June 8, 1937. Reacting against the increasingly complex sonorities of Strauss, Schoenberg and others, Orff deliberately composed with reduced musical resources. As Thomas Kahlcke writes:

Orff staked everything on the appeal and expressive power of music at its most elemental. His aim in *Carmina Burana* was not to create a modernist masterpiece, nor even to conjure up the world of the Middle Ages. Rather, he used medieval poems and a magical musical language to appeal to an aspect of human existence which, independent of the age in which we live, is fundamental to our character: here is a world of elemental feelings, a world of tender desires and outbursts of passion, a world of love, longing and suffering. The phrase that comes to mind here is "sophisticated simplicity," a cliché, certainly, but one uniquely applicable to Orff's work, for it is this that constitutes its tremendous impact.

Subtitled a "scenic cantata" (for soloists and chorus, accompanied by instruments and supplemented by scenery), *Carmina Burana* is a setting of twenty-five poems and student songs in medieval Latin and Low German from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Though the work is seldom staged anymore, initial performances varied widely with location and producer: in Vienna as an epic of the world theatre, in Darmstadt as a peasant play, in Berlin as an allegorical medieval mystery play, etc. Divided into an introduction and three large sections dealing with nature, the tavern, and love, *Carmina Burana* has for years been regarded as highly suggestive in content. As the late conductor Robert Shaw noted, though, " what is written between the lines is more the imagination of the reader or listener than that actually contained in the poetry."

This arrangement by Friedrich Wanek for double woodwind quintet is of five of the most famous movements from the cantata (excluding, of course, the *O Fortuna* chorus which serves as a framing device for the cantata). In the instrumental dance and four songs he selected, Wanek has covered the expressive spectrum of the original, the texts ranging from a lover's plea to a bawdy tavern scene.

Ernst Krenek: *Drei Lustige Märsche, Op. 44 (1926)*

One of the most prolific composers of the twentieth century, Austrian composer Ernst Krenek wrote in a wide variety of idioms. Described as "stylistically unstable," Krenek experimented throughout his career with many different manners of writing, from neo-classical and neo-romantic to atonal and serial. Although he held Hindemith in high esteem in the early 1920s, he eventually came to reject, under the influence of music theorist and philosopher Theodor Adorno, Hindemith's notion of *Gebrauchsmusik*, writing that "the making of music should be left to the highly trained, while children and amateurs should be schooled to appreciate it." He instead defended "the freedom of each individual artist to establish their own personal standards of excellence," independent of the "events of the moment." After the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938, Krenek, labeled a *Kulturbolschwist* (a cultural nihilist) immigrated to the United States where he would become an influential author and teacher. Krenek won many awards and honors, including the Gold Medal of Vienna, and memberships in the Berlin Academy of Arts and the Austrian State Academy of Music.

John Carmichael, has written the following about Krenek's *Three Merry Marches*:

Drei Lustige Märsche is a collection of march parodies. As his response to Hindemith's commission, Krenek submitted this composition which pokes fun at the typical military music of the day. From the stilted percussion introductions to the disguised quotes of well-known tunes, like "Mexican Hat Dance," and "Can-Can," Krenek teases the present and the past, while pointing a finger to the possibilities of the future.

Satirical and at times downright grotesque, these marches demonstrate Krenek's life-long dislike of the military. Although traditional march rhythms and forms are employed, Krenek seems interested in mocking the repertoire of the military bands by incorporating "non-military" sounds such as jazz-like elements.

Kurt Weill: *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik (1929)*

One of the outstanding composers in the generation that came to maturity after World War I, Kurt Weill (1900-1950) was a key figure in the development of modern forms of musical theater. A student of Humperdinck and Busoni, Weill initially showed no inclination toward writing for the theater; his early works, notably the *Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments* and *Symphony No. 1*, are "serious" and display the influence of Alban Berg, Igor Stravinsky, and Paul Hindemith on the young composer. Perhaps the greatest influence on Weill was not a composer, but a playwright: Bertolt Brecht. Brecht was singularly concerned with writing pieces of scathing, often satirical, social criticism. In Weill, he found the perfect collaborator.

First performed on August 31, 1928, *Die Dreigroschenoper (The Threepenny Opera)* was a "play with music" adapted by Brecht from John Gay's eighteenth-century *The Beggar's Opera*. Eventually banned by the Nazi government, *The Threepenny Opera* paints a not-too-flattering

portrait of 1920s German society, Brecht revealing the dregs of humanity (and casting a very wide net in the process) through an inspired political satire. Although the work was not expected to succeed, it proved to be the biggest theatrical success of the Weimar Republic, running for more than 350 performances over the next two years. In fact the *Dreigroschen* fever which gripped Germany from 1928 to 1930 soon spread to other countries, including the United States where, in the mid-1950s, 2611 consecutive performances were given in New York, making *The Threepenny Opera* the longest-running musical show at the time.

While Brecht was commenting on society, Weill was commenting on and attempting to reform opera. As he remarked at the time, "It presented us with the opportunity to make 'opera' the subject matter for an evening in the theater." With musical sounds borrowed from the *Überbrettel* (Berlin's low-life cabarets) and performed by the jazz studio orchestra Lewis Ruth Band, Weill created a score that came to represent the decadence of the time. *Die Dreigroschenoper* has been described as "the weightiest possible lowbrow opera for highbrows and the most full-blooded highbrow musical for lowbrows." As Weill-scholar Stephen Hinton notes:

By explicitly and implicitly shunning the more earnest traditions of the opera house, Weill created a mixed form which incorporated spoken theatre and popular musical idioms. Parody of operatic convention – of Romantic lyricism and happy endings – constitutes a central device...Rather than carry the drama forward, the music stops the action in its tracks in a way comparable to *opera seria*. Nor does it contribute to dramatic characterization in any general or substantial way...The music even undermines the sense of the words. Writing to his publisher about the 'Tango-Ballad', for instance, Weill observed: "The charm of the piece rests precisely in the fact that a rather risqué text is set to music in a gentle, pleasant way." The pervading tone is thoroughly ironic, a deliberately unsettling mixture of sentimentality and caustic social criticism...Amounting to a high-low stylistic mix drawing on baroque counterpoint, traditional and popular song, opera and operetta, even Lutheran chorale, and colored throughout by the sonorities and idioms of the modern dance band, the music contributed as much as the text to the work's multilayered ambiguity.

Commissioned by the famous German conductor Otto Klemperer, the suite *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* (*Little Threepenny Music*) was first performed four months after the opera's premiere at the Berlin Opera Ball. The convention of basing serenade-like suites for wind orchestra on the scores of successful operas and singspiels was common in Mozart's day; in fact, the "popular music" in the courts during the Classical period tended to be wind octet versions of operas. As the original cast of this "play with music" consisted principally of actors, not trained singers, it would seem likely that Weill adapted the music into this Suite for musical, not commercial, reasons —the art of his music could now be heard under conditions not possible in the theater.

Of special interest, the world famous "Moritat of Mack the Knife" was not the most popular tune in the Suite; it hardly attracted attention initially. Instead the sensual "Tango-Ballad" and the dark fox trot "Cannon Song" were the hits of the day. The utterly ironic Moritat was actually added to the show only days before the opening, created simply to satisfy the vanity of one of the actors.