

## FILM OPERA—SCREEN VS. STAGE

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THE time is 1928, the place the Opera House, in Vienna; or Unter den Linden, Berlin; or Narodni Trida, Prague; or Piazza alla Scala, Milan; or the Avenue de l' Opéra, Paris. We hear cries of terror, shouts for help, there is a panic.

From the screen Tita Ruffo, hemmed in between camera and microphone, blinking and sweating in the Kleig lights, with gleaming palate and a monstrously swollen tongue is bellowing, croaking, babbling, braying the *Barber* aria. Above the shrieks of dismay rising from the opera houses we hear the warning: "The celluloid sound-strips are going to catch the singer." When everyone can hear Gigli, no one will want to hear the domestic tenor, Heiser. When money from all the movie fans in the world is piling up palaces, orchestras and super-stars, no one will want to hear or see the wretched sham splendor of the domestic opera theatres. The opera, already in a critical condition musically, sociologically, and intellectually, is being devoured, and, all but dead, stirs sadly in the maw of the leviathan.



It is now 1929: in Germany, in Austria, the classic lands of the opera drama, the leading men are "in conference" planning how best to make the opera theatre of service to the sound-film so that Moloch, thus appeased, will spare the poor little lamb. The little lamb is to give the wolf a cap of its own wool.

The idea is as follows: the great opera theatres in Vienna and Berlin, proud possessors of brilliant orchestras, distinguished conductors, a splendidly schooled chorus, quantities of dancers, apparatus and men, would like to make sound-film operas with their own equipment! For who could do it better than the man who has all this opera apparatus at his disposal and who has a thorough knowledge of opera literature and the presentation of

opera drama, who, besides, has the cultural confidence and the financial support of the state—who is one hundred per cent superior to the shirt-sleeved, sound-film directors, the big entrepreneurs and the little technicians? The simple and logical answer is: found a corporation. For executive committee take the general managers of the state theatres. The resulting films will run in the German provinces thus decreasing the deficit at the same time; Jeritza in the smallest huts! The state will dispense perfect art and in return shovel gold into its treasury.

General Manager Tietjen gives out sensational interviews, Schneiderhan (Vienna) is willing to be in on it, and Max Reinhardt, a name mentioned with awe, joins the new official producers. The great undertaking is announced with tam-tams, millions roll before the gaze of the stunned reader. The *Pariser Leben* of Offenbach is the first thing to be filmed; it will be followed by the entire opera literature.

But nothing happens. Max Reinhardt's company dies before it is born, for lack of funds. And in Berlin, in Vienna nothing more is heard. A few stars are kicked out of the Berlin theatre because they have gone over to the sound-film (by way of the operetta) on their own. Meanwhile we have embarked with full sails on the lovely ruffled sea of international sound-films. The rubbish of a continent is imported, and if we are at first enraged by the rosy horrors and glycerine be-teared ukelele songs brought to us from America we soon outdo them with our own Heidelberg and Rhine magic. There is no more talk of opera films.



Something is wrong and finally it is all too painfully clear. When the opera experts went over to the film it became apparent that the *material* of opera consists of footlights and wings, orchestra and voice, that it takes shape only through improvisation; the chance of an evening gives it color and the excitement of the creative process gives it breath. The material of the film, however, is fixed *celluloid*. Stiffened picture and petrified music whirr by, always the same and always unmoved. Nothing can happen, no trill can go wrong. No one can stumble, no one comes in too late. The exciting part of opera drama is exactly the safe

circumnavigation of all these cliffs. The high C which does not miscarry is what we applaud.

The material of Mozart, Rossini, Wagner, Stravinsky is *the stage*. The material of Eisenstein, King Vidor, Stroheim, Lubitsch is *celluloid*. The "justification of the material," the inspiration originating in the material is a fundamental law of creation. What can have a glorious manifestation in one medium—in marble, oil, tone, the lyric, the stage—in another is stiff and cold.

The material of the sound-film in Germany has now been taken in hand experimentally by a young group, the advance guard in the film world, with Walter Rutmann at the head. A few of these first trials were seen at the last music festival in Baden Baden but there was little to pass judgment on. An obvious and very instructive example of the way the imagination is obliged to work out new and adequate forms from new material was presented recently in Vienna in the production of two sound-film reviews. The first, (one of those disillusioning color film productions) was a chamber review in which singers, dancers and small chorus were set before you. Nothing was presented that cannot be seen in any provincial review theatre, and the only inflection characteristic of the film (not in the least of the sound-film) on this banal occasion consisted in the odious alternation of the close-up with the shot from the distance which the spectator normally accepts in the theatre. The music (song and accompaniment) ran along irrelevantly. The effect of this piece was wholly negative.

Therefore the announcement of another review, the great *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* was received with even more scepticism. This film, which attracted remarkably little attention, suddenly revealed new possibilities—concealed though they were by clap-trap. Here we saw in an unforced, naive, almost artistic way, what was indicated in the abstract movies at Baden Baden where attempts were theoretically developed but carried through quite ineffectively. The development of a hit with a 16-bar refrain was presented here entirely by means of sound-film illusions with the formal connections actually experienced and carried out. The piece is divided into exact parts in the manipulation of sound and in the picture. For example, for



four bars we see only the stamping legs of beautiful dancers. The next four bars (imbedded in the film without any delaying transition and synchronized to the last fraction of a second with the change of beat in the music) showed mouths deliberately blurred by superimposed printing; the next four bars (with just as sudden a change) the trick photograph of a dancer taken at a great distance and reproduced many times. Then suddenly from trick illusions you are plunged into real, practical photography: two bars in which the melody is silent, only the percussion is heard—a close-up of the percussion man at his instruments. All this, which is set forth with the utmost rhythmic precision, is drawn entirely from the material of the film, and moreover is not presented as a variegated pot-pourri; the attempt is made to balance the whole with contrasts and to give it a formal unity. Everything moves in a firm rhythm, the lighting, the perspective, the shifting of moods and the course of the action are planned.

What was brought about could only be achieved through the medium of the sound-film and with no other material. That is the decisive point. When we approach more serious fields we are faced not with the problem of *opera film* but with the problem of *film opera*. Works of art which are drawn from the material of the opera—from a material which in all its principles (even in the rigidity of the stage and the seating arrangement of the spectators) is absolutely opposed to the film, cannot be “filmed” successfully. The material is too rich or too poor, too complex or too simple; it cannot be adapted without distortion. The proportion, which is the final secret of every work of art, is destroyed, and the work annihilated. We assume, however, that a generation will study the technical problems of the sound-film as the sculptor studies granite, the painter color and canvas, the film director the laws of the silent film, the musician harmony and counterpoint. This generation will familiarize itself with the peculiarities of the new material, the sounding roll of film—and will perceive whether opera—music drama, that is—can be utilized for this medium. It will be just as false, just as futile, to adapt the sound-film opera to the stage, as it is to make sound-films out of stage opera.

In Germany a decision has just been made in a lawsuit in



which, for the first time, two creative artists have unequivocally taken a stand against the film industry. They have protested against a false representation of their work. Kurt Weill and Bert Brecht, who had a sensational success in Europe last year with their new version of the *Beggars' Opera*, have proceeded against the company which had taken over this piece for a sound-film production, on the grounds that in the proposed version it would not be possible to carry out their artistic purposes, and they have, at least in part, won their case; Kurt Weill was the victor at any rate. Any misrepresentation or revision of his music by the professional sound-film adapter was prohibited; if the film company does not comply with this ruling and present the music as he wishes, with the principles which he himself worked out and adapted to the demands of the sound-film (and not at all of the stage), they may not produce the work. He has taken the standpoint that the sound-film has its own artistic principle of form which is not to be interpreted by engineers or theatre conductors, that the laws of the sound-film are not subordinate to the film director, but that here there is a new realm for the creative musician, to which he alone possesses the key. Trespassing is to be punished. There has been up till now scarcely a single instance of a musical film constructed according to the fundamental principles of a new form. On this account Kurt Weill's lawsuit will have an historical significance.

In Central Europe (I do not presume to pass judgment on other countries with which I am not familiar) the sound-film does *not* offer actual competition with the musical theatre. On the contrary through the sound-films the public is becoming more critical; failures are piling up (which never occurred in the era of the silent film.) Sound-film productions are being selected at the start; few are successful, and from the mediocre and bad ones, which are still in the majority, people turn back to the living theatre with a renewed interest in music and the stage. The sound-film competes as little with the musical theatre as the silent film competed with the stage. After the first sensation the sound-film will be obliged to show how its own material may be put to creative uses. If artists can be found who will give life to this material, then film operas, film revues, film operettas will spring up which will be greeted with joy.