

# Emotion and *Zeitoper* in the Weimar Era

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*This paper explores the genre of Zeitoper, prominent in Weimar Germany. Many scholars consider Zeitoper, a form of opera based on engagement with contemporary political and social issues, to be the archetypal operatic form of the era. Because the heyday of Zeitoper was short, and these operas did not find lasting popularity with the public, many accounts of Weimar culture claim that opera was no longer relevant to the concerns of the era. I take a new approach to the problem by suggesting that Zeitoper was really a new form of representative national opera. It was this concept, rather than opera in general, that was outdated in the 1920s. I focus here particularly on the example of Paul Hindemith's "Neues vom Tage" (1929) in order to demonstrate the limitations of Zeitoper. I conclude by stating that scholars should reassess their view of the place of opera in Weimar culture.*

Opera during the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democracy, had an ambiguous position and faced a crisis with regard to its representative role. Traditionally it had appealed to social groups who were increasingly under threat. The traditional operatic repertory was also in question. What could it say to a contemporary audience? The issue of music and emotion played a major role here, since attitudes to emotion were highly colored by Germany's defeat in the war and attitudes to the fallen regime of the Kaiserreich.

My larger project addresses the role of these issues in the works of Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek and Arnold Schönberg. (For reasons of space, in this article I will focus on Hindemith.) Each one of these composers was devoted to finding a new approach to opera in the 1920s, though they took very different paths. All were also involved in the debates about *Zeitoper*, sometimes regarded as the typical operatic form of the Weimar era. The issue of *Zeitoper* can help scholars understand how composers viewed the relationship between art and emotion in the midst of an uncommonly creative era. The paper will explore the representative nature of *Zeitoper* and what this reveals about the significance of opera for a democracy. It will also contrast the ways in which composers responded to the new political and cultural conditions, including a commitment by politicians

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to subsidize opera and make it accessible to greater numbers of people while also encouraging the production of new works. What emotional impact did composers hope to have on listeners, and how was this connected with the political content, if any, of the works in question? Finally, how did new musical and cultural influences, particularly from the United States, change the perception of opera's representative role?

First, however, it is necessary to define *Zeitoper* and to place it in the context of republican culture. Most importantly, it claimed to be a distinct and new form of opera, adapted to the cultural conditions of the 1920s. Can this claim be maintained? Was *Zeitoper* really so new and original?

Clearly, the Weimar era is the subject of so much emotional nostalgia primarily because of its openness to experimentation. This applied to opera as much as to other art forms. The number of opera premieres, not only in Berlin but also in provincial cities, was staggering by today's standards and allowed young composers and innovative musical ideas to gain a public forum. *Zeitoper* has generally been considered the archetype of Weimar opera. I will argue that it was one ingredient among many in the 1920s, and that its most important role was an attempted revival of the representative German national tradition. Most accounts of *Zeitoper* focus on formal and musical innovations. For example, these operas were set in the present; they focused on socio-political issues; and they were often, though not always, satirical (see Cook 1988, Amidon 2001). Musically, the *Zeitoper* form incorporated jazz and American popular music into the score. Ironically, however, one crucial fact about *Zeitoper* is usually underemphasized in historical accounts. All examples of the form were in German, and they were a conscious attempt to create a German form of opera distinct from previous traditions, especially the legacy of Wagner. It is this which makes *Zeitoper* as much a restorative project as a revolutionary one. However, I shall argue that the emotional poverty of these operas, their cynical and satirical nature, makes it impossible for them to achieve the restoration at which they aim. The working people who were the intended audience for these works responded strongly to operas from the classical repertory that depicted and aroused strong universal emotions – love, jealousy, grief – but they turned away from *Zeitoper*'s cynical elitism.

My focus is on the Kroll, an opera house established to package elite culture for working people as part of a project of constructing democratic culture. Most literature on the Kroll has correctly pointed out that it did not offer an unusual number of contemporary works and that the attention devoted to new opera was no greater than at most German opera houses of the period. Indeed, in Berlin itself the Kroll appeared almost conservative, given that it premiered only one new opera, Hindemith's "Neues vom Tage" in 1929. Contemporary opera occupied a small but important role in the Kroll repertory. My purpose here will be to argue

that the Hindemith work did not serve well the democratic project, which was, perhaps ironically, better served by the allegedly elitist operas of Verdi, Puccini, and Beethoven.

## The Relationship of *Zeitoper* to the Democratization of Opera

First, however, some background about what *Zeitoper* was. The ideals of *Zeitoper* seem to be highly compatible with those of the Kroll. To make high art functional and relate it to contemporary concerns looks at first like a promising approach which would also justify the existence of institutions like the Kroll which presented opera not as a meaningless luxury but as living theater. Some of the limitations of *Zeitoper* are, however, also clear from the story of its reception at the Kroll. As I will show, the proponents of the form ultimately turned away from it and took their efforts in new directions. Because of 1933, these developments are unclear to us today. I will try to show what they were and why they failed.

The central examples of the form that are relevant to us are the works of Paul Hindemith and Ernst Krenek, examples of the *Zeitoper* form which ultimately reveal its limitations. Hindemith's "Cardillac" (1928) had been a nationwide success before it reached the Kroll after a rather lengthy tour through ten cities. "Neues vom Tage" was the only Kroll world premiere, appearing in the context of the Berlin Festival of 1929. Hindemith ultimately turned away from the *Zeitoper* project, but this 1929 work is a representative example of the form. While introducing new elements into opera, such as jazz and popular music, and helping to break down the Wagnerian mystique which had surrounded German opera, much of *Zeitoper* failed to develop into a new form which would combine attempts to make opera more accessible with attempts to deal with specifically modern issues and problems. Frequently it misses what makes opera appealing; passion, emotion and the ability to make audiences identify with the action. My discussion of "Neues vom Tage" will show why these shortcomings led to the decline of *Zeitoper* and, at the same time, why the culture of opera in the Weimar Republic did *not* in general decline.

### Pseudo-Populism in Hindemith's "Neues vom Tage"

The premiere of "Neues vom Tage" took place on June 8, 1929. It is one of Hindemith's least-studied works and is striking for the way it combines a complex score with a libretto by Marcellus Schiffer, better known for his work in the Berlin cabaret scene. The major contemporary issues addressed in the opera are two: the role of mass media in shaping the lives of individuals; and divorce, including its impact on women's sexual freedom. This first theme is more pertinent to a

discussion of the relationship between *Zeitoper* and the rest of Weimar culture; mass culture and the mass dissemination of music through the new technology of radio were viewed as inevitably undermining the significance of opera. This issue is more complicated than many accounts of Weimar culture would have it. “Neues vom Tage” shares the deep ambivalence about high culture and *Bildung* displayed by the *Zeitoper* form as a whole. This meant that the form could not serve as the basis for a transformation of opera, but became a phenomenon that merely cancelled itself out. *Zeitoper* proclaimed that the notions of *Bildung* characteristic of the prewar era were completely hollow and could only serve as objects of parody. This, however, was not obvious to the general public. Most examples of *Zeitoper*, however, did not suggest any future for high culture and thus failed to answer the question of what the future of opera might be.

The disparity between the music and the libretto of “Neues vom Tage” was noted by critics at the time and has continued to puzzle them ever since. As shown by Susan C. Cook’s discussion of the work, the mixture of genres evident in “Neues vom Tage” has even raised doubts about the seriousness of Hindemith’s intentions in setting Schiffer’s libretto (Cook 1988, 161). An examination of the relationship between music and text must also be related to Hindemith’s position in Weimar musical life in general (Mainka 1988). “Neues vom Tage” has never been discussed within the framework of Hindemith’s ideas about music and *Gemeinschaft*, nor have its possible connections to the Kroll idea been explored.

However, it is those aspects of the opera dealing with sexuality which caused a scandal at its premiere. Hindemith’s works, claims Michael Walter, were forbidden during the Third Reich primarily due to the fallout from “Neues vom Tage”; Hitler was personally enraged by the infamous scene in which the heroine Laura is depicted “naked” in the bathtub of the Hotel Savoy singing the praises of the Berlin utility companies which provide her with warm water. (In fact, soprano Grete Stückgold wore a flesh-colored body stocking.) (Walter 1995, 193). There is, however, no evidence that Hitler ever saw the production. Walter’s allegation that it is likely he did so because politically prominent people often attended the Kroll and “it would be improbable if Hitler did not also occasionally, or at least once, attend the Kroll Opera” is insupportable (*ibid.*, 193, footnote 81). The evidence is against his having visited an opera already notorious as a temple of “cultural Bolshevism.” The bathtub scene was widely reported in the press and knowledge of it did not require actual familiarity with the opera.

Laura ends up in the bathtub in the course of a series of attempts to “compromise” herself so that she and her husband Eduard can get divorced. This process is no simple matter, but requires considerable trickery and theatrics. Many of these are ingredients of traditional opera plots, but, as the critic of the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* pointed out, generally they are employed for the opposite purpose; to

bring two lovers together rather than to separate them (*Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, June 10, 1929). Many musical conventions of opera are used to make this effect clear; both dramatically and musically, “Neues vom Tage” intends to mock these conventions and thus expose them as hollow. The goal is to turn traditional opera on its head, and thus also the expectations of an audience used to treating opera as an accessory to its own embrace of social respectability and empty conventions.

The divorce requires the services of an “office for family affairs” represented by “the beautiful Herr Hermann” serenaded by his secretaries to the accompaniment of a chorus of typewriters. Hermann had previously been responsible for arranging the breakup of another couple, Herr and Frau M., but unfortunately forgot that he had only been “rented” for the job and fell in love with Frau M. The pattern seems to be repeating itself as Hermann meets with Laura in various public places, first in a museum, then in her hotel. Laura and Eduard’s divorce becomes a public scandal and an item in all the newspapers, but the couple finds they can get along better than they had believed; they decide to stay together. However, this is not acceptable, as a chorus explains at the end of the opera. Eduard and Laura are no longer real people, but media constructs. They may not decide on their own fate.

This potentially fascinating idea, familiar to us now from such phenomena as reality television, is undermined by the opera’s ambivalence about the bourgeois ideals it claims to reject. Is it simply a modern spin on themes which have always been used in opera? “Neues vom Tage” has been compared to Mozart’s “Marriage of Figaro”, but this is an inappropriate comparison as Hindemith’s work is a creation only of its time and place and only critiques traditional opera without transcending it. As a musical experiment, it aimed to mix jazz elements with much older forms. This is made clear by a revealing investigation into the origins of the Kroll production written by Lotte Eisner. Eisner attended a rehearsal and spoke to Hindemith about his musical goals. These included “getting away from operatic theatricality, naturally. The singers should simply sing as if they are in a concert.” (*Vossische Zeitung*, undated). Eisner interpreted this to mean a return to forms such as the fugue. In her words, “In the effort to go back to the original form of opera, a bridge is built from the news of the day to the old.” (*Ibid.*).

In fact, the opera does not work on this level because it relies so heavily on nineteenth-century models, if only as objects of mockery. The meeting between Herr Hermann and Laura in the museum, and their subsequent love duet, becomes too much for Eduard, who ends up hurling a statue of Venus at his “rival.” The point is that the stereotypical emotions presented in this scene are just as false in context of an opera in which the characters actually intend passion and jealousy as they are here, in which the context is merely a set-up. The choice of a museum as the location for a rendezvous is significant; this is a temple of culture which is clearly not taken seriously by anyone who visits it. As Laura arrives and reflects

on her prospective meeting with Herr Hermann, the façade of love is accompanied by the façade of culture; a bored tour guide appears with a group of people and introduces a statue of “the famous Venus” - “really classic, three stars in Baedeker.” The crowd responds with predictable staged rapture; “How classic! How famous!” Laura is thus inspired to compare her own situation to that of the ancient Greek gods. She is a character in her own personal drama, which is only reinforced by the appearance of Herr Hermann. Their love duet, full of “Tristan” quotations, is interrupted several times by Hermann remarking that all of his overblown rhetoric about love is “included in the price”. Eduard’s subsequent destruction of the Venus statue is thus meaningless since the statue is irrelevant except as an object of commodification.

The listener might well ask what the point of the parody is intended to be. The liner notes for a 1991 recording of “Neues vom Tage” praise the work for its freshness and irreverence, as shown by scenes such as the one described above. The author’s generalizations about the Weimar opera audience fit rather uncomfortably with his account of the work’s reception: “People could no longer tolerate the pathos so beloved in Kaiser Wilhelm’s days and were tired of the babble about German culture, since what that had led to was evident around them every day.” (Feuchter 1991). The popular idea that the First World War discredited “German culture” per se is cancelled out by the admission that “Neues vom Tage” was intended to provoke its audience.

This reaction does not, however, make “Neues vom Tage” into a daring or provocative work. Its treatment of operatic traditions allegedly appalled “the humorless militarists in the audience”, yet it is doubtful that very many humorless militarists attended the premiere. The critique of high culture in this opera in fact seems rather tired and adolescent, especially by the standards of 1929. Contrary to the idea that only the horrors of the war revealed the artificiality of Wilhelmine concepts of culture and *Bildung*, in fact these had long been recognized, not least by the Nietzschean critique of the *Bildungsphilister* (Nietzsche 1983, 9–10). The notion that high culture had become a commodity was far from fresh and subversive by this time; the infamous bathtub scene represents simply another attempt to shock the sensibilities of contemporaries.

Many of these failings can be attributed to the libretto, which did not find favor among most contemporary critics. Yet it is backed up by Hindemith’s music, as explained above. Any appreciation of the opera’s significance required a familiarity with the operatic canon, making “Neues vom Tage” elite culture for those who rejected the notion of a cultural elite. *Zeitoper* distanced itself from previous models, but also failed to contribute anything new; it thus cannot be seen as part of the pedagogical tradition of *Gebrauchsmusik* in which Hindemith played so important a role. The form was indeed in decline from 1929 onwards and was not really a



victim of Nazi cultural policy. For this reason, its political significance as archetypal Weimar opera is extremely questionable. Though this opera was the target of right-wing attacks, this alone does not make it a “progressive” or left-wing work. In the case of the Schönberg school, recent scholarship has emphasized this point, which may equally well be applied to other sectors of the avant-garde.

“Neues vom Tage” is a typical *Zeitoper* because it is just that - topicality for topicality’s sake. The opera embodies pure cynicism without anything constructive to take its place. Its media critique in particular reveals just how indebted the opera remains to the notions of high art and *Bildung* it ostensibly attacks. The gap between score and libretto is not as great as some critics have alleged. The Schiffer libretto at first seems to resemble that composed by Arnold Schönberg’s wife Gertrud, using the pseudonym of Max Blonda, for 1930’s “Von heute auf morgen.” (Nussbaum 1997). This latter work, while in some sense a *Zeitoper*, is also an explicit critique of the form. “Modernity”, as exemplified by mass culture and licentious sexual behavior, is only a superficial distraction from the enduring artistic values Schönberg believed were present in his own music. This pseudo-modernity, represented by *Zeitoper*, would not survive because it rested solely on the fleeting enthusiasm of a public who might just as well be attending films or sporting events. According to Schönberg, it was not an answer to the complex situation faced by Weimar opera.

Schiffer’s libretto, by contrast, contains what looks like a trenchant critique of modern media culture. Eduard and Laura, deprived of any choice in their own fate, are archetypal creatures of the media, people who have lost their individuality. However, if the notion of the bourgeois individual were truly as compromised as the opera implies, loss of individuality would be no tragedy. This point is underscored by the music; if the pathos of nineteenth-century opera had completely lost its relevance in Weimar culture, it could not be worth attacking. A true *Gebrauchsmusik*, while intended to be a music suited to the conditions of modern life, cannot entirely reject pathos because the point of it is to bridge the gap between elite and popular culture. Indeed, the category, as demonstrated by Stephen Hinton, has deep philosophical roots; its use in the 1920s can thus be viewed as an attempt to fit the moral and ethical standards of a contemporary public (Hinton 1989).

Contrary to some received scholarly views, most members of the Weimar-era public did not believe that German culture was bankrupt or forever discredited by militarism. Rather, the experience of military defeat had shown the necessity of creating a different, more democratic and more accessible cultural life. The outcry generated by “Neues vom Tage” does not demonstrate the cultural philistinism of the public. The opera faced opposition because it is cynical and ultimately degenerates into snobbery. It does not explore human emotions in depth, and it does not engage the emotions of the audience. While depicting loss of individual subjectivity

as inevitable in the modern world, composer and librettist imply that the “normal” bourgeois people they depict never had a real subjectivity in the first place. While the opera satirizes the commodification of high culture, it never proposes an alternative. This ambivalence about high culture is characteristic of *Zeitoper*, and explains why the phenomenon was so short-lived. The strongest justification for creating a new *type* of opera was to engage opera in a project of cultural renewal which would lead to a new *Gemeinschaft*. Just as opera had served as the center of community in past centuries, it could now be reinvented to serve the needs of a vastly changed public and forge this new and amorphous audience into a new community.

Many writers about Weimar culture have alleged that opera failed in Weimar because the public was unable to appreciate it. *Zeitoper* tried to bridge the gap between elites and masses, but ultimately failed. My larger study argues, by contrast, that *Zeitoper* failed because it lacked the emotions that have given opera its appeal in many times and places. Works such as the operas of Verdi and Puccini, Bizet’s “Carmen” and Beethoven’s “Fidelio” were all highly popular – because they had an emotional substance that *Zeitoper* lacked. Just as Nietzsche praised Bizet’s opera for offering a healthy alternative to Wagner, “Carmen” and similar works were threatening to advocates of modern German music because it was far more popular than the contemporary German avant-garde.. The Weimar-era shift in public taste, away from Wagner and towards Puccini, Mozart and Verdi has been well documented (Walter 1995, 100). Indeed, this trend continued into the Third Reich despite the Nazi regime’s adulation of Wagner. What this suggests is that the “national” approach to opera was outdated. The *Zeitoper*, a modern attempt to create a representative German form of art, failed to attract a significant public. In order to win a new audience for opera, the Kroll and other German opera houses had to start with accessible works – accessible in large part because of their emotions.

We can appreciate the problem of Kroll opera more fully by examining the writings of actor and director Ernst Legal, one of the main architects of the Kroll, whose views about cultural renewal are highly complex. Legal develops his perspective on the notion of “popular opera” in an article he wrote for the publication *Die Scene* in 1930. In an issue entirely devoted to opera, Legal explained that opera could become *volkstümlich* (popular) in a genuine sense if it abandoned the glitter and false sentimentality of the Wilhelmine era. Logically, this dictates a focus on works appealing to basic and universal human emotions, rather than works of merely historical interest. Opera in the Wilhelmine era, he claimed, had become degenerate and kitschy, definitely not in a position to appeal to those outside the social elite. The Weimar era enabled a necessary reform of opera, particularly in terms of its decor: “Our eye, trained through modern painting and architecture, can no longer comprehend that trees, reconstructed leaf by leaf out of linen, stood on the stage [in the era of naturalism]...Entire villages, cities and mountain ranges turned up with dreadfully false perspectives, whose ridiculous nature became



evident when a living person approached them.” (AdK Berlin, Nachlaß Ernst Legal). Exaggerated naturalism in design thus had nothing to do with nature. Reform of the visual aspects of opera demanded a focus on the “soul” of a forest, a village, or whatever else required representation on the stage. Similarly, operatic emotions should be focused on the soul, in ways that engage any person who worries about love, loss, or jealousy. So far, then, Legal seems to be justifying an operatic policy that turns to works that exemplify deep and universal emotions.

Legal also believed, however, that opera should finally become as “modern” as the other arts. At this point, his sympathy veered away from the timeless emotions in opera toward the sort of didacticism exemplified by *zeitoper*. It is extremely doubtful that he spoke for a broad theater public when he wrote lines such as the following, directed against the Wilhelmine version of opera culture:

Under certain conditions, false operatic art can work as a creeping poison, that in its false pathos, pompous excitement and melting sentimentality acts to slowly sap energy, makes people passive instead of inspiring them, and ultimately ought to be exterminated for the sake of the state. However, if it is placed in the service of the educational policy of the nation...opera will win back many lost sympathies and contribute to detaching the person of today from his earthly fatigue and helping him find the way to a higher reality. (AdK Berlin, Nachlaß Ernst Legal).

What exactly does this overblown and sexualized imagery have to do with opera reform? It shows how intimately the Kroll idea was bound up with German cultural nationalism, even if the actual political effects of Legal’s views were nil. An important part of the avant-garde project as far as opera was concerned was to condemn all trends before 1918 as sentimental and based on false emotion, therefore decadent and feminine. This meant that everyone associated with Wilhelmine cultural life, the audience as well as the musicians, stage directors and performers, had to be portrayed as infected. Cultural life could only be rejuvenated through a revolutionary break with everything that had come before. This was both impractical and overly dismissive of traditional opera. Legal’s adherence to modernist ideas here led him astray from his basic commitment to the values embodied in traditional opera.

In this paper I have argued that the essentially transitory and experimental nature of *Zeitoper* did not mean a crisis for the form as a whole. Opera culture did not fail to attract a mass audience, as the success of many Italian operas, of “Fidelio” and of “Carmen” shows. It was ultimately *Zeitoper*, that emotionally starved and cynical form, that failed to attract an audience. The question is: what next? What happened to the experimental impulses of composers in the following years, and how are they connected with the new function of music in an age skeptical of bourgeois subjectivity? Many potential developments in opera simply cannot be traced because of 1933. Contrary to much recent scholarship which aims to show the continuity of Weimar and Nazi culture, I believe that there was a profoundly

disruptive break, above all in the realm of cultural policy. So it is difficult to draw conclusions about the future of opera in an era of mass culture.

What we can say, however, is that the contemporary survival of opera, and its ability to offer cultural renewal – whether in Germany or in Finland or in the United States – rests on its ongoing commitment to values that have always been key in opera's popularity: its ability to probe the depths of love and jealousy, its compelling explorations of the tragic and comic fates of men and women. Cynical and self-conscious opera will not hold a mass audience. But the fate of cynical opera in an era of mass culture does not show that all opera must fail. If there is to be democratic cultural renewal from opera, it must come from the heart.

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