

**Chapter 3**  
**Was There a Crisis of Opera?:**  
**The Kroll Opera's First Season, 1927-28**

Beethoven's "Fidelio" inaugurated the Kroll Opera's first season on November 19, 1927. This was an appropriate choice for an institution which claimed to represent a new version of German culture - the product of *Bildung* in a republican context. This chapter will discuss the reception of this production in the context of the 1927-28 season. While most accounts of the Kroll Opera point to outraged reactions to the production's unusual aesthetics, I will argue that the problems the opera faced during its first season had less to do with aesthetics than with repertory choice. In the case of "Fidelio" itself, other factors were responsible for the controversy over the production, which was a deliberately pessimistic reading of the opera. I will go on to discuss the notion of a "crisis of opera", a prominent issue in the musical press during the mid-1920s. The Kroll had been created in order to renew German opera, but was the state of opera unhealthy in the first place? I argue that the "crisis" discussion was more optimistic than it has generally been portrayed by scholars. The amount of attention generated by the Kroll is evidence that opera was flourishing in Weimar Germany, and indeed was a crucial ingredient of civic culture, highly important to the project of reviving the ideals of the *Bildungsbürgertum*.

### **"Fidelio" in the Context of Republican Culture**

Why was "Fidelio" a representative German opera, particularly for the republic? This work has not always been viewed as political in nature. In the nineteenth century it was seen as a purely private drama of a loyal wife, Leonore, who disguises herself as a man under the name of Fidelio. This was despite the fact that she does so in order to rescue her husband Florestan from his unjust incarceration in a state prison at the command of the tyrannical prison governor, Pizarro. She manages to find Florestan in an underground dungeon and threaten Pizarro, who intends to kill her husband, with a pistol. At exactly the right moment, a trumpet call sounds announcing the arrival of the royal minister Don Fernando, who liberates all the prisoners. The twentieth century has seen in it much broader connotations than the "merely" private ones. Modern productions have assumed that the opera contains a general political message about liberation, and have thus found it problematic to deal with the domestic subplot, centering around Rocco the jailer and his daughter Marzelline, who has fallen in love with the supposed Fidelio. Generally, a radical break between the first act, which deals with the domestic, and the rest of the opera, centering on political liberation, has been assumed. However, the type of liberation concerned has been a matter of dispute. Is it brought about through the ethical actions of an individual, or is it collective, representing a mass movement which will effect a total change in political structures? The most concrete "collective" interpretation has been that which associates "Fidelio" with the French Revolution. The best-known

explicit association of "Fidelio" with the Revolution comes from Paul Robinson, who argues that the opera's sense of historical time connects it to the Revolution and to a move "from an unreconstructed to a redeemed order."<sup>1</sup> The fact that Robinson mentions redemption rather than liberation makes his argument problematic from the start, and in fact he does not present a convincing case that the opera ought to be linked to the Revolution. I maintain, however, that "Fidelio" is political, because while it concerns ethical behavior that originates in private relationships, in this case marriage, this ethical imperative extends to the public sphere to become a universal message of liberation.

The Kroll's reading of "Fidelio", which was the first production put on there in its incarnation as the opera of the republic, was inevitably viewed in the context of an increasingly political reading of the opera. It was not well received by many Berlin critics, and was praised by others for reasons which had more to do with ideological debates than with what was happening onstage. I argue that reactions to the production were not merely based on its failure to conform to "older" standards of staging "Fidelio". These standards were not in fact very old, having established themselves only in the twentieth century. Nor did the production treat the opera as a text about revolution, contrary to the tendency to politicize it on the level of individual action. This interpretation was projected onto the production by those who conflated artistic experimentation with left-wing engagement. Attitudes towards the Kroll were determined by each commentator's view of the proper relationship between culture and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Robinson, "Fidelio' and the French Revolution" in *Cambridge Opera Handbook*. Cambridge 1996.

The objections of the extreme right were based on the claim that this "Fidelio", by failing to follow what were defined as the traditional rules, served as a critique of all previous productions. What most disturbed critics such as Paul Zschorlich was the spare, non-decorative aesthetic evident in the sets of stage designer Ewald Dülberg, a painter who had been designated by Klemperer as one of the major designers. The home of Rocco the jailer, for example, was devoid of historical or class markers: "Bare walls, a table with laundry on it as the only furniture, and a sort of potato crate. Poor Rocco seems to have pawned everything else... Then the prison courtyard: connected dice blocks with bare spaces which practically scream for advertisements..."<sup>2</sup> The behavior and appearance of the prisoners also displeased Zschorlich, who ironically remarks here that "the Prussian parade march was individual, arbitrary, it was the perfect example of personal improvisation compared to the movements of the inmates of this state prison into which Herr Klemperer has finally brought order."<sup>3</sup> This implies that while order in politics is a desired goal, to be preferred to the chaotic republic, order in art is unacceptable. Finally, one must not overlook the factor of anti-Semitism. While Zschorlich does not go as far as the Nazi *Völkischer Beobachter* in calling Klemperer a "head musical Jew" he leaves the unmistakable impression that the conductor's tyranny was worse than Prussian discipline because it was "cold", "over-intellectual" and "un-German". The right expected art to be a realm of escape and spectacle, rather than depressing as this production evidently was. "Fidelio" especially was on a higher plane, regarded as a holy work

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Zschorlich, "Fidelio" auf Eis", in *Deutsche Zeitung*, November 21, 1927. Reprinted in Curjel, p. 221-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

by the greatest genius of German music. Any attempt to transform its staging amounted, according to Zschorlich, to "German shame everywhere one looks." This review reveals that "Fidelio" had by 1927 already become a canonical work, representative of the best of German culture. However, not a single word of this review would indicate that "Fidelio" was not generally regarded as holy, or even shown much respect, until the twentieth century.

The opposition to Klemperer's and Dülberg's perceived intention, the demystification of "Fidelio", was not confined to reactionary critics such as Zschorlich, but was expressed by those who were much more sympathetically minded, showing that anti-Semitism was not the only factor. Adolf Weißmann, for example, revealed the expectation among many critics that the Kroll's first production would be the start of a new era: "Something unprecedented had to happen. The shadows which, according to the familiar saying forecast great events, were enormous on this occasion."<sup>4</sup> By these standards, it was almost bound to prove a disappointment. Weißmann called the production "a realization of dogmatism", thus taking a simple approach and blaming the "tyrannical personality" of Klemperer for over-intellectualizing the opera, with regrettable results: "The carrying through of the fixe idée which has been nourished by theater is astonishing in its consistency...its meaning is beaten into the opera to the greatest extent possible. The ensemble is wonderfully drilled. The singer becomes a puppet, infallible [in movement] but also gesturing convulsively."<sup>5</sup> This review reveals the

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<sup>4</sup> Adolf Weißmann, "Die neue Ära der Staatsoper", *B.Z. am Mittag*, November 21, 1927, in Curjel, p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

common assumption that the Kroll's productions aimed to bring opera into line with modern movements in theatrical production. Klemperer, Weißmann continues, is on a mission to "crystallize" Beethoven, to rob "Fidelio" of emotion, to make it "interesting" rather than moving. In the musical realm, he applauds this; the score emerged crisp, clear, and "purified". This approval does not, however, extend to the staging, or to Klemperer's "drilling" of the singers' voices, representing "the fully accomplished victory of the conductor and the director over Beethoven."<sup>6</sup>

The force of the argument which puts "pure" music, represented by Beethoven, on a pedestal cannot be overestimated. For reasons similar to Weißmann's, Max Marschalk in the *Vossische Zeitung* criticized the production, again emphasizing the pressures on Klemperer: "Otto Klemperer has earned more laurels of praise than any of his colleagues before him. We expect the unprecedented from him, the opera director, the opera conductor, and it will be difficult for him to fulfill these high expectations."<sup>7</sup> Dülberg's sets were blamed for distracting the audience from the music, and for being merely features of the contemporary artistic scene, rather than arising from the spirit of the work. That the grey, white and blue cubist blocks should be seen as distracting, rather than a glitzier and more ornamental design, shows the continuing power of resistance to experimentation in opera in the 1920s. Rather than being distracting or disturbing, the forms of the sets are actually too harmonious. There is not enough differentiation among the various locales involved in the opera. Rather than overshadowing performers and treating them as objects,

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Max Marschalk, "'Fidelio' unter Klemperer", in *Vossische Zeitung*, November 21, 1927, in Curjel, p. 223.

instruments of a "painterly" vision, the sets are ineffective precisely because of their regularity of form. They provide no means of distinguishing between the domestic spaces and the prisoners' courtyard, and thus no means of distinguishing the public and the private in "Fidelio". Marschalk and other reviewers disliked what they saw at the Kroll primarily because this was a work of Beethoven, and not just any work of art. It supposedly had a sacred quality which the production sought to deny: "Beethoven's immortal masterpiece must not become a pretext for fashionable experimentation..."<sup>8</sup> Here it is worth noting that Dülberg, although he believed that each generation must interpret older works in its own way, distanced himself from the idea of historical contingency in ways similar to Klemperer. Dülberg was also a painter, but he denied any connection with specific artistic schools or movements. His writings on opera production attack director-centered operas which are mere responses to "trends."<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Curjel, he contrasted "living theater" with theater that was "*zeitnah*", or explicitly linked to contemporary concerns, arguing that truly great art always goes against its time. This attitude, naturally, inspires Heyworth to portray Dülberg as a better alternative to Curjel in the matter of scenic design. After 1930, Dülberg ended his association with the opera, both because of illness (he died of tuberculosis in 1933) and because of disillusionment. This opened up the field for Curjel to appoint modernist painters, not all of whom had experience with theater, to design the Kroll's sets. Curjel emerges in Heyworth's account as a villain not because of his politics, but because of his explicit allegiance to the idea that opera is a product of historical

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See his essay "Musik und Szene" in Eigel Kruttge, ed., *Von neuer Musik*. Cologne 1925.

conditions. Curjel was "virtuous" but not in the sense of privileging music as a pure art. The review discussed above also praises musical innovations but rejects the sets. For Marschalk, renewal of opera did not include its visual aspects.

There were, however, positive reactions to this "Fidelio" which viewed the sets as the equivalent of what Klemperer was trying to do musically. Heinrich Strobel again uses the rhetoric of reform and purification, meaning the clearing away of the debris of prewar culture. Klemperer had thrown out everything traditional and cleansed "Fidelio" from the kitschy details that had accumulated in previous productions:

It [the production] cleared away the sloppiness and fixed routine that had grown over the work for decades. A "Fidelio" without theatrical pathos, without bombastic sobs, without middle-class banality, without naturalistic embarrassments. One thought one was hearing a new work. The stern monumentality is astonishing.<sup>10</sup>

The "clear lines" of the sets effectively carried the music. What Strobel suggests is that Klemperer and Dülberg provided a return to the spirit of the landmark production by Gustav Mahler and Alfred Roller at the Vienna State Opera in 1904. At the same time, the production was an intensification of what Mahler and Roller had tried to do. Their vision, according to Strobel, had to be updated for the 1920s because, while noble, it was no longer automatically valid.

The "tradition" which Klemperer had either defiled or purified, according to each critic's opinion, comes largely from this production, but also from later ones which attempted to follow Mahler but succumbed to the kind of "bourgeois sentimentality" so disliked by Strobel. Why was

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<sup>10</sup> Heinrich Strobel, in *Thüringer Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 25, 1927.

the 1904 production such a milestone? One reason was its use of modern technology, especially electric lighting, which made possible a literal portrayal of a "darkness-to-light" teleology which Mahler and Roller held to be the dominant feature of the opera. More importantly, however, Mahler was one of the first to politicize the opera through his resolution of the apparent tension between its first and second halves. He attempted to downplay the "purely" domestic aspects. Assuming a radical break between the domestic and the political is inherent in accounts of the 1904 production. Mahler and Roller believed that previous productions had marred the understanding of the opera's political core by using unnecessary frills, and by distorting the meaning by incompetent set design. Attempting to show the politics of the domestic was not Roller's goal. For him, the political was the public sphere. Thus, all distracting elements should be eliminated in order to focus the audience's attention on Beethoven's progression from darkness to light: "By dispensing with pompous decorative scenery and by strongly elaborating the above-named qualities [attention to the music in order to correctly picture scenes such as Florestan's dungeon] the best contrast to the final scene also results, and one can be true to the basic feeling of the whole work."<sup>11</sup>

Decoration was out; so was an exaggerated focus on the private sphere. The Mahler/Roller "Fidelio" was praised by critics for having brought set design up to the level of other elements of opera. Some of the necessary work of renewal had been carried out by Wagner, but the visual element had lagged behind. Hermann Bahr enthusiastically noted that this production had solved the problem of decoration:

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 308.

The feeling was already everywhere; decoration, instead of participating dramatically, is only a distraction...If one seeks a word [to describe the production] perhaps it is animation, giving a soul to decoration. A ship, a prison, completely real, admittedly of a reality completely cleansed of the arbitrary and reduced to what is necessary, one might say of a heroic reality in which only the spirit of the musical tones travels, until it becomes the expression of this spirit, just as when a storm enters a forest, there are no longer trees which bend but monstrous figures of the storm, of its rage and its greed. If one desires another word: decoration as expression.<sup>12</sup>

The "soul" of the production, according to this view, was the individual soul, capable of bringing about redemption and freedom. The collectivity could not do this; only Leonore, the representative of "heroic" reality, could: "...the atmosphere transformed itself entirely with the entry of the heroine, Leonore-Fidelio."<sup>13</sup> Yet her self-expression was also a political act which fused the private and the public, as seen in the triumph of light.

The music dictated this expression. Thus it is worth noting that Mahler, convinced that the quartet at the end of the first act constituted music on a higher plane, a moment of redemption before the literal redemption, staged it quite differently from the scenes which surrounded it: "...Mahler made the four players, who up to this moment had been in vigorous movement, suddenly form a tableau, and a ray of sunshine fell on the group through a window."<sup>14</sup> The characters formed a sort of "still life" transformed for a moment by the "ray of hope" represented by the sunlight.<sup>15</sup> While the quartet provides us with a glimpse into individual souls, it may show the potential for transformation already inherent in the

<sup>12</sup> Hermann Bahr, "Alfred Rollers Dekorationen" in *Ibid*, p. 305.

<sup>13</sup> de La Grange, p. 466.

<sup>14</sup> Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*. Edited by Donald Mitchell. London 1973. p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Louis de la Grange, *Gustav Mahler. Volume 2, Vienna: The Years of Challenge*. Oxford 1995. p.467.

characters and their world. The notion of transformation through the act of an individual (Leonore) may embody a hope that outsiders would become insiders, that private feelings would finally be in tune with the demands of the historical moment. In Mahler's own context, the "best" individuals, among whom he placed himself, were ignored, but their very isolation perhaps made them capable of transforming society: "Beyond time and space, there exists a select society of lonely people who, for that very reason, live together all the more intensely..."<sup>16</sup> The select society can be connected with the familiar paradigm of the "outsider" artist. This analysis, however, should not remain on a strictly personal level. If this "Fidelio" expressed a desire for individual redemption that did not involve the participation of the collectivity (the masses) this was characteristic of its historical moment. By the 1920s, however, the idea of cultural renewal looked very different. If the prewar, "late romantic" question about this opera was to ask, "Could man achieve his ends?"<sup>17</sup> by the Weimar period many saw hope *only* in the collectivity. Though the Kroll production, because it is dehistoricized and decontextualized, is an even more severe repression of the idea that the domestic could be political, it is not justified to assume, simply for this reason, that it portrays revolution.

Klemperer and Dülberg in fact confirmed some of Mahler's innovations while changing others. The most important change was the refusal of historical location, marked by the radically pared-down aesthetic which so infuriated many critics. The 1904 production had made

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<sup>16</sup>Letter to Alma Mahler, quoted in de la Grange, p. 707.

<sup>17</sup>Question from Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to His Music*. Cambridge 1980, p. 6. Cooke continues, "...new tyrannies and new wars have shaken Europe, and we find ourselves the uneasy heirs of the first romantics, still committed to their ideal of refashioning the world, though more soberly in view of bitter experience."

it quite clear, especially through costumes, that the political struggle was between the arbitrary authority of the seventeenth century (Pizarro) and the enlightenment of the eighteenth (Don Fernando).<sup>18</sup> If Mahler saw an opportunity for the actions of an individual, Klemperer was viewed as having denied this possibility, as having created an oppressive atmosphere in which individual heroism did not count. Alfred Einstein criticized the lack of spontaneity in the production: "...there is an exaggerated dependence on the conductor that borders on tyranny...In this opera about freedom there is no sense of freedom."<sup>19</sup> For anyone familiar with the Kroll's political association, this implies the creation of a socialist or even Bolshevik opera disloyal to the spirit of Beethoven. This interpretation remains, with the moral signs reversed. Was this "progressive" opera house promoting ideas of political revolution?

The alleged drilling of the performers has recently been interpreted differently by Robinson, who remarks that:

...this supposedly left-wing version of the opera was curiously authoritarian. Not just the prisoners in the first act but the "liberated" populace of the finale were deployed in static blocks, their movements stiffly choreographed to suggest puppets. As the various sections of the chorus cried "Heil", their arms shot into the air, while Leonore, whose heroism had provided the opera's *raison d'être* in the nineteenth century, was swallowed up by the crowd. Klemperer's and Dülberg's modernist aesthetic led them to repress the opera's bourgeois sentimentality. But, ironically, their abstract monumentalism seemed to anticipate the totalizing inhumanity of the Nazis.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> de La Grange, p. 472. Needless to say, symbolic value is more important here than historical accuracy.

<sup>19</sup> *Berliner Tageblatt*, November 20, 1927.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, p. 156.

This claim that the production was fascist should not be taken seriously. Robinson merely relies on assumptions that the Kroll was a leftist opera, rather than subverting them as he may have intended. The confusion of politics and aesthetics, both on the level of the work and of the production, reveals that there are no grounds for his interpretation. A photograph of the final scene in fact shows that the chorus raised both arms in a gesture that in no way recalls a Nazi salute. Nor do they appear particularly static. In the Mahler/Roller production, the prisoners, during their chorus had also moved as a unified whole, and had also raised their arms toward the sky - as a symbol of liberty.<sup>21</sup> While Leonore does disappear into the crowd, one should also note the ominous presence of the soldiers at the back of the stage, who watch over the crowd's movements, making it doubtful that they will be victorious. There is no opportunity here for mass political action. Klemperer's only essay on the subject of "Fidelio" identifies the trumpet call which frees the prisoners at the end of the opera as "an appeal to humanity". However, he goes on to say that it is "a prayer for outward and inward peace".<sup>22</sup> These two things are not the same, as the opera's ending may indicate a forced peace, coming from above rather than below, that will repress individual heroic action. As Klemperer understands the phrase, however, it seems to represent reconciliation of private and public. "Fidelio" should be universalist not only in its message but also in its scenic design.

It is hard to see why a modernist or abstract aesthetic should be "inhuman", still less fascist. Robinson is in no doubt that this production privileged the collectivity, and that the Mahlerian interpretation (*not* that

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<sup>21</sup> de La Grange, French version, p. 468.

<sup>22</sup> Klemperer, "Fidelio" in *Minor Recollections*. London 1964. p. 101.

of the nineteenth century, as he states) is preferable. Yet if "Fidelio" really is an opera representing political revolution, would not a collective interpretation be necessary in order to portray Beethoven's intentions? There is no sound evidence that Klemperer and Dülberg actually intended a "left-wing version" of the opera, but what were they trying to do on an aesthetic level? Robinson's assumption that "modernist" equals "left-wing" means that he ends up with a distorted picture.

However, as shown by the reactions of contemporary critics, the connection between the aesthetic of the Kroll "Fidelio" and advocacy of some form of dictatorship was made at the time of the production. The dictator was evidently supposed to be Klemperer, a logical connection when one considers that the Kroll was usually regarded as "his" opera, rather than as another kind of opera with different goals than the two which already existed in Berlin. Klemperer himself contributed to this idea; in addition to his lack of commitment about the "avant-garde" nature of the Kroll, he never decided whether it was supposed to transcend all previous ways of performing opera or whether it was just another house with a different approach, which complemented the State Opera and the City Opera in Charlottenburg. His statements in 1931, shortly before the Kroll closed, suggest the first. "One may close our theater, " he proclaimed, "but one cannot kill the idea."<sup>23</sup> The phrase, taken up by Curjel in *Experiment Krolloper*, suggests cultural rebirth and contradicts Klemperer's more prosaic claim that he merely wanted to make good theater. This lofty idea of the Kroll's mission led to a mystification of Klemperer's own role, which had unfortunate results, as shown by the

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<sup>23</sup> Klemperer, *Über Musik und Theater*, p. 111.

rhetoric of some of his supporters. Klemperer did not effectively distance himself from this rhetoric, and thus never contradicted the myth surrounding his personality. Instead of the *Republikoper* being truly representative of the republic (which, given its aesthetic, was a difficult goal to achieve) it became the opera of Klemperer and those intellectuals who viewed him as a redeemer - who then went on to identify themselves with the republic. The consequence of this was that all notions of openness and democracy were lost. The Kroll did not begin as a *Volksoper*, or as a way to make opera more accessible to the masses, because the political and personal emotions which animate the opera were so muted. The Kroll is viewed today through the lenses of those "austere souls"<sup>24</sup> who wanted their own ascetic theater, but not through the eyes of the theater-goers' associations who sponsored it.

The music periodical *Melos*, for instance, did nothing to help the Kroll's historical reputation when it reviewed "Fidelio" favorably because of its discipline and subordination to Klemperer's authority. Without confirming that Klemperer intended this effect, the following passage nevertheless reveals something ominous about what some "progressive" intellectuals expected of him:

His "Fidelio" has a purifying effect, as the creative deed of a will which enforces itself with pitiless consistency, which is directed towards the clearest formulation of the drama, towards extreme concentration. Klemperer is obsessed by the work, he performs the music with forceful certainty. The unified plan of this modification can be felt everywhere: in the precisely watched dynamic of the gesture, in the repression of the *Singspiel*...in the direction of the dialogue, freed from obvious pathos, in Ewald Dülberg's scenery, released from decorative naturalism. All

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<sup>24</sup> Phrase in quotation marks from Blum, p. 142.

grows with inner necessity from the organism of the musical artwork. In the costumes the style of the Revolution is presented, the time in which the rescue opera is rooted. The necessary condition for the unity of such a rendering is the subordination of all participators to the strong-willed personality of a leader.<sup>25</sup>

I quote this review at such length because it provides an excellent example of both a leftist interpretation of "Fidelio" and an accompanying interpretation of Klemperer's role at the Kroll. The distaste for the decorative and domestic which had marked Mahler's production, and the reactions to it, is here even more extreme. The authors oppose what they consider bourgeois sentimentality, which works against a culture of virtue, that is to say clarity of form and an ascetic denial of individual emotion. They reject "pathos" without considering that individuals and their emotions might be political forces worthy of depiction. They do not argue against the heroic, masculine myth of Beethoven, but restate it in their own terms. They disallow the possibility that "Fidelio" be treated as a product of the nineteenth century, thus displacing it historically while insisting that the new staging grows from elements already present in the artwork. At the same time, however, they reinsert a historical element by associating the opera with the French Revolution.

Although the costumes are identified as being from the revolutionary era, this does not automatically justify a connection with revolutionary politics. Even the whole genre of the rescue opera, and "Fidelio"'s association with it, has been questioned, for example by David Charlton, who notes that the description is too undifferentiated. If anything, Bouilly's "Léonore", the stage work which provided the basis for "Fidelio", was notable for the greater scope it provided for individual

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<sup>25</sup> Hermann Springer, Heinrich Strobel and Werner Wolffheim, in *Melos*, January 1928.

action: "'Léonore" also developed another characteristic further than had been done in these operas: the portrayal of suffering. Whereas Type 1 ["tyrant" operas] did not much dwell on the human suffering of its victims, Type 2 ["exemplary action" operas] could use such suffering to increase the effect of the counterbalancing act of humanity."<sup>26</sup>

The sense of redemption, of a new beginning that would bring hope to humanity, was a feature of the Mahler production, as I have noted. However, the crucial point is that in the revolutionary interpretation, liberation is collective and not due to any individual act of heroism. The treatment of the quartet, for example, emerges as a moment which foreshadows collective action rather than one which explores individual emotions, whatever political weight those emotions might have.

An interpretation such as this one pushes the domestic completely offstage. Individuals cannot act to bring redemption. This sort of reading, I would argue, was appropriated by left-wing critics to discuss Klemperer's "Fidelio" and the significance of the Kroll for the Republic. What the left wanted Klemperer to be doing was revolutionary opera. Attempts to rejuvenate a form identified as "anachronistic" and in crisis were not enough unless they were explicitly political. As I have argued above, however, the fusion of abstract aesthetics with left-wing politics was an assumption on the part of critics and does not necessarily indicate the intentions of those responsible for the production. The entire question of aesthetics and production value was of far more importance to critics and those already familiar with traditional productions. The Volksbühne

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<sup>26</sup> David Charlton, "On Redefinitions of Rescue Opera" in Malcolm Boyd, ed., *Music and the French Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

focused on the works themselves and had little interest in comparing productions.

If Klemperer envisioned a cultural institution that would embody the new values of the post-1918 situation, the major problem was a lack of consensus about what those values were. As old court institutions had become state institutions, and older conceptions of culture no longer seemed appropriate, many argued that new conceptions were needed. One possible approach was to write new operas which included an explicit political message, the best example being the various Brecht/Weill collaborations. The Kroll was more concerned with new interpretations of older works, which were read as political statements because of their aesthetic features. Klemperer's undefined relationship to the term "avant-garde" did not prevent at least one observer from comparing him to the well-known radical director Erwin Piscator.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this lies not only in mixed cultural signals, but also in a kind of wishful thinking which has not vanished from discourse about Weimar culture; that so-called avant-garde art is necessarily leftist art. The opposite comparison, to Nazi "monumentalism" becomes possible because it is the flip side of the original thesis that the Kroll was about political revolution. A specific content based on the privileging of the collectivity is still assumed.

## **The Aesthetic and Political Dimensions of the "Crisis of Opera" Debate**

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<sup>27</sup> The observer was Anatoly Lunacharsky, who "probably saw the Kroll "Fidelio" when he was in Berlin in late November 1927 and also attended a performance of Toller's controversial "Hoppla, wir leben" at the Junge Volksbühne, which may have led him to suppose there was a parallel between Piscator and Klemperer. There was none." Heyworth, *Life and Times* p. 258n.

The mixed reception of the Kroll's "Fidelio" and of its entire first season can be discussed within the general framework of a debate about the role of opera in German society. From around 1925 onwards, both the mainstream press and specialized music journals addressed the notion of a "crisis of opera." This issue is inescapable in the small body of literature dealing specifically with Weimar opera, but this scholarship has treated the opera-crisis discussion as more pessimistic than it actually was.<sup>28</sup> Contemporaries generally did not suggest that opera had no future; i.e., that it appeared to have reached an aesthetic impasse because it could say little to a modern industrialized world. The opera crisis debate was more concerned with practical problems. Hans Tessen's series of articles during 1930 explicitly addressed many of the obstacles opera faced. Although the art form was "certainly not the 'impossible' artwork it is often accused of being"<sup>29</sup> it suffered from the lack of an ensemble, too much reliance on international stars, poorly trained singers, and a limited repertory.<sup>30</sup> Precisely these concerns animated Kestenberg and Klemperer, the man he appointed to lead the Kroll and carry out his vision of opera reform. The Kroll idea was clearly a response to the alleged opera crisis. Not all contemporaries agreed, however, that a crisis even existed. Some were weary of the discussion and argued that opera's problems had been exaggerated. Paul Stefan wrote in 1930, "The complaints about the spiritual emptiness of this age, and the misery of its music, are moving to

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<sup>28</sup> The most thorough discussion of the opera crisis can be found in Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitoper of Krenek, Weill and Hindemith*. Ann Arbor 1988.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Tessen, "Zeitfragen des Operntheaters" II, in *Zeitschrift für Musik* 97/1, January 1930. The term "impossible artwork" refers to Oscar Bie's history of opera in which he famously described it as impossible due to its status as a synthesis of the arts. (Bie, *Die Oper*: Berlin 1913).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Similar views can be found in Willi Aron, "Opernkrise, Opernreform, Opernregie" in *Die Musik* 20/8, May 1928; Karl Schonwolf, "Operndämmerung" in same issue; Erik Reger, "Die Krise des Opern-Repertoires" in *Die Musik* 22/1, October 1929.

read. Unfortunately, none of this is true. Neither the new nor the older form of opera has failed. The public also has not failed, and even the theater directors can be accused of less than one would like, at least concerning opera.<sup>31</sup> The true issue concerned opera as a representative form. If there was a discernible crisis, it lay in the fact that there was no one representative style which could be considered the music of the age. Nor was opera any longer the property of a secure *Bürgertum*. That class was deeply insecure economically and psychologically, leaving open the question of whether the concept of *Bildung*, long considered its defining quality, could even survive. If so, it would have to be redefined and expanded socially.<sup>32</sup> This situation, however, was promising in an era when new social groups were eager to secure access to the opera house. A representative republican opera had to combine aesthetic and social change.

This chapter examines two aspects of opera and representation in Weimar culture - the type and content of operas performed, and the behavior of the public. I do not draw any final conclusions about what the republic could have achieved had it lasted longer. This is impossible to prove. I do suggest, however, that with respect to opera the formation of a new audience indeed took place, but was undermined by cultural discourses, inspired by both political and aesthetic factors, which considered opera the most reactionary of art forms. Because opera was more expensive and more socially exclusive than spoken theater or

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Stefan, "Die sogenannte Opernkrise" in *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 12/2, February 1930. For similar views, see Heinrich Wiegand, "Rede an den Opernfeind", *Die Musik* 24/5, February 1932.

<sup>32</sup> Many articles discuss this problem and its complication by the rise of radio and recordings. See, for example, Erwin Kroll, "Unterhaltungsmusik im Rundfunk - ein Erziehungsproblem", in *Die Musik* 22/9, June 1930; Adolf Weissmann, "Der Musikkritiker und die Gegenwart", *Die Musik* 18/8, May 1926; Eberhard Preußner, "Staat und Musik", *Die Musik* 19/4, January 1927; Karl Laux, "Zweckformen der heutigen Musik", *Zeitschrift für Musik* 96/9, September 1929.

concerts, both of which had earlier been available to lower-income people, it served in their minds as a symbol of social prestige. For this reason, it highlighted class differences and recalled the old order of the Kaiserreich. At the same time, however, due to the rise of radio and records, opera became increasingly available to the masses. This led, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, to a loss of cultural capital in which attachment to older forms of opera signaled a "petty-bourgeois" mentality.<sup>33</sup> The avant-garde had its own notions of how opera ought to change, which in practice conflicted with its democratization. The German Communist party (KPD) argued, on the other hand, that opera diverted resources from the working class and was an example of an art used by elites as a means of keeping less wealthy people in line.

This last cultural argument is, however, contradicted by many contemporary accounts suggesting that opera had broad popular appeal. Surveys of public opinion were very rare in this period. One of the few to exist appeared in the radio-oriented publication *Die Sendung* in summer 1930, as part of a project sponsored by Kestenberg. Kestenberg did not claim universal validity for his survey, since it was based on 329 answers from a randomly selected group of people in various professions in the Berlin area. Under the title "What does music mean to us, and what do we like to hear?"<sup>34</sup> The survey nevertheless went on to demonstrate some surprising results. When asked about their musical preferences, respondents consistently placed opera and concerts first.<sup>35</sup> Some indicated that they accepted radio and recordings as a second-best opportunity to

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<sup>33</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique social du jugement*. Paris 1979.

<sup>34</sup> *Die Sendung*;g 7/35, August 1930; the opinions of conductors and critics were solicited in numbers 34 and 36 of the journal.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.557.

hear music, but would prefer a public forum. Kestenberg's conclusion was, "It cannot consistently be the case that opera and concerts are in crisis because of the public; it is rather the case that purely economic factors limit visits to the opera or to concerts."<sup>36</sup> Finally, a comparison of different occupations showed that:

the worker hears music primarily through the radio and records. Concert attendance is reduced significantly and takes place only in the form of cafe music. On the other hand, opera attendance seems to be preferred to concert attendance. Civil servants and *Angestellten* [salaried employees] hear music primarily on the radio, and after that through concert and opera attendance. It can thus be clearly shown that the economically better-off classes have access to musical experiences in the opera and in concerts, whereas the less fortunate limit themselves to the radio and gramophone.<sup>37</sup>

The only irrefutable statement about opera made in debates about its place in a representative republican culture is thus that its high cost made it unavailable to many people. This had been the justification for the Kroll in the first place, since other institutions were out of reach for most workers and other lower-income people.<sup>38</sup>

The avant-garde's investment in the Kroll project involved primarily aesthetic transformation. As described above, the Kroll was part of a movement among directors, set designers and some conductors to re-emphasize the theatrical aspects of opera. This idea was partially inspired by Hans Gregor's prewar experiment at Berlin's Komische Oper (1905-

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Even with subsidies, ticket prices for most cultural institutions failed to reflect the change that had taken place in the public; see Curt Hagen and Robert Hernried, "Falsche Preispolitik an den subventionierten Theatern", in *Das Orchester* 7/12, June 1930. This article does not use class categories, but simply divides audience members into high-, middle and low-income. Unfortunately it also provides no account of where the authors obtained their statistics.

1911), but only became widespread in the Republic.<sup>39</sup> For this reason, the term "musical theater" arose to describe what most avant-gardists viewed as their ideal; the national theater with music. At first sight, this looks merely like a replay of Wagner's "music drama" and, indeed, many of its guiding principles are similar. Opera had to be reconstructed to serve as the basis of a new culture which would be fused with a new political order. Insisting on the term "musical theater" rather than opera had aesthetic and ideological implications, more so than in the present day, when it is most often used as a general term covering opera, operetta and musicals. Director Arthur Rabenalt explained it as follows: "We wanted to...clear up and dust off the old opera in order to make it free for new thoughts and conceptions."<sup>40</sup> However, it can also mean that the theatrical aspect ought to significantly outweigh the musical aspect. This conception of opera gives it short shrift. It is significant that many enthusiastic devotees of the Kroll Opera's project held the view that opera had to be "cleaned up" as though it were an impure and tainted art. One example is the critic Heinrich Strobel, editor of the influential music journal *Melos* and active in its reconstitution after 1945 before ending up at Südwestfunk in Baden-Baden. Strobel was one of those invited to present his views on the Kroll phenomenon in one of several radio programs put together by former dramaturge Hans Curjel. This particular one, "Conversations about the Kroll Opera" was broadcast in 1962 on Westdeutscher Rundfunk. Strobel recalled "our old Melos days, when we were all convinced that the

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<sup>39</sup> For Gregor, see Fritz Jacobsohn, *Hans Gregors Komische Oper*. Berlin 1911.

<sup>40</sup> Interview in Vibeke Peusch, *Opernregie/Regieoper: Avantgardistisches Musiktheater in der Weimarer Republik*. Frankfurt 1984. p.227.

next generation would never again enter an opera house."<sup>41</sup> Eventually, Strobel continued, he came to the conclusion:

that opera is old hat [*ein alter Käse*] and it will be dragged out again and again, decade after decade...with few exceptions, the old-hat opera is exactly the same way it was thirty or even sixty years ago. That there was once a Kroll Opera which at least tried to clean up this junk, that is a historical achievement. There's no doubt about that. But whether it really made sense...well, I'm skeptical.<sup>42</sup>

Strobel's absurd contention that German opera had not changed at all since the turn of the century is symptomatic of a whole set of attitudes which have distorted our picture of Weimar musical life. Today we take it for granted that singers ought to have at least some acting ability and that productions should tell us something about the inner core of a work. These were legitimate principles of musical theater which have had lasting results. The best aspects of the Kroll idea are still valid. Many others were born of an extreme overreaction to the cultural bombast characteristic of the Kaiserreich. This overreaction would have moderated in time had it not been for the National Socialist persecution of modern art. The impact of the *Entartete Musik* exhibition and similar defamations of the avant-garde of the Weimar era has resulted in the canonization of avant-garde artists as political martyrs. Critics such as Strobel felt no need to change their views, but these nostalgic views should not lead us to conclude that opera was moribund in the Weimar era.

The question of opera's representative status, as I have demonstrated, faced a number of challenges. Musicologist Michael Walter

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<sup>41</sup> Manuscript, "Gespräche über die Kroll-Oper" in Nachlaß Hans Curjel, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

states in *Hitler in der Oper* that representative republican opera was a hopeless project from the beginning. "In the republic, a modernization of the repertory indeed took place, but this did not mean that "republic-typical" works now dominated the repertory."<sup>43</sup> What works are typical of the republic? Such a conclusion contains the unspoken assumption that such works must be both contemporary (i.e. works which had their premiere after 1918) and explicitly political. Indeed, Walter goes on to describe a "left-wing" dilemma concerning opera:

One can explain this by reference to the split between practical politics and conceptual understanding of art, which dominated the considerations of many leftists immediately after the revolution and arose from the unsolved question of whether to secure access to bourgeois culture, or to eliminate it altogether. The demand for a representative function for opera in the republic (as it had previously existed in the monarchy) implied not only an alteration of the repertory, but also its politicization. However, that contradicted the lofty principle that art first and foremost represented nothing other than itself.<sup>44</sup>

An explicit politicization of opera's content was, however, not what aesthetic reformers demanded. There was no contradiction between the desire to create a representative republican opera and the desire to focus on aesthetic reform. Nor is aesthetic reform of opera inherently a leftist idea, although some of those who espoused it were in fact engaged on the left. Contrary to what this argument implies, I suggest that opera's validity as an institution of republican culture depended far more on its reception than on the specific works performed. Further, I contend that the notion of representative republican opera had a great deal in common with the

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<sup>43</sup> Walter, *Hitler in der Oper*. p.105.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Volksbühne's notions of democratizing art. The relationship of the Volksbühne to the opera thus provides a way of examining the idea of artistic community and of the continuation of an idea of *Bildung* within German society. Rather than examining only individual works which might be representative of Weimar opera, as I go on to do in Chapter 4, one should also consider the issue of republican opera from the standpoint of its reception. It is thus necessary to gain as full a picture as possible of the public for opera, and specifically for the Kroll opera.

Hans Curjel, the opera's former dramaturge, set up a series of radio programs in the 1960s in which he and his interviewees were anxious to give the impression that the Kroll audiences were largely populated by Berlin's cultural and literary elite. Philosopher Ernst Bloch stated, for example, that "one met people of the most varied beliefs at those premieres." ranging from Bertolt Brecht to Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII.<sup>45</sup> The Kroll undoubtedly appealed to those who were highly musically educated and had much experience with opera. What has received far less attention is the huge impact of theater-goers' organizations, primarily that of the Volksbühne public itself. On "Volksbühne evenings" between 1200 and 1400 of the 2200 seats were occupied by Volksbühne members, who operated according to a lottery principle. While all members paid the same price for their tickets, seat assignments were random once they arrived at the theater. This had been a principle of the organization since its founding and was intended to assure a democratic seat assignment not based on class. Without the Volksbühne

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<sup>45</sup> Manuscript, "Die Berliner Krolloper: Versuch einer Theaterreform", Westdeutscher Rundfunk, November 24 and December 1, 1962. Quoted in Hans Curjel, *Experiment Krolloper*. Munich 1974., p.73. This is the actual broadcast version of the original manuscript, which was edited with Curjel summarizing many of the points made by his interviewees.

members, the Kroll would never have come into existence. They were the ones who embodied its promise as an opera for the people. The Volksbühne public has, however, fared quite poorly at the hands of Kroll partisans. For Franz Beidler, Kestenberg's assistant in the Ministry of Culture, it "completely failed" because it exemplified the "petty-bourgeois" taste of the Social Democrats.<sup>46</sup> Others echoed this view. Klemperer expressed it quite forcefully during the 1931 hearings in the Prussian Landtag which resulted in the closing of the Kroll. At the time of his arrival in Berlin he was unaware that the Volksbühne was an inappropriate audience for the sort of reform he intended. The organization wanted simply "good middle-class fare." [*gute Mittelstandsküche* ]<sup>47</sup> Secondary accounts of the rise and fall of the Kroll have followed these assumptions. Klemperer's biographer speaks of the organization's "humdrum cultural tastes" which could not accept the genius of the conductor's ideas.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, previous literature on the Kroll has concluded that the Volksbühne members were shocked by the radical anti-naturalism of some of the opera's productions, a claim for which there exists little or no concrete evidence.

Such stereotypes have been far too powerful in previous assessments of the Kroll and its history. There is little doubt that there was significant tension between the Volksbühne leadership and the Kroll, and that many members were dissatisfied with the opera's record. There is,

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Beidler's automatic association of the Volksbühne with the SPD holds true in the case of its leadership, as Nestriepke and most others on the Volksbühne board were party members. In the case of individual members, one can draw no definite conclusions based on the lack of statistics. The organization tended to downplay its connection to the SPD in order to deflect attacks by its competitor, the "Christian-German" Bühnenvolksbund, which continually claimed that the Volksbühne's stated position of political neutrality was spurious and that its repertory was highly politicized. Even in the realm of spoken theater, it was not.

<sup>47</sup> Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Preußischer Landtag, April 21, 1931.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times.*, Vol.1, Cambridge 1983. p.239.

however, no reason for the condescending attitude frequently displayed by partisans of the Kroll, at the time and since, toward a group of people who were genuinely enthusiastic about opera and needed an affordable opportunity to see it. Rather than the Volksbühne "failing" the Kroll, in many important ways the Kroll failed its core audience. Klemperer launched his project in 1927 and 1928 with works which were certainly artistically valuable, but were of doubtful interest to an audience which was not highly musically educated. The Kroll production of Verdi's "Luisa Miller" was generally well received, but the work was totally unfamiliar, as it had never before been performed in Germany. Smetana's "The Kiss" had been selected by Alexander von Zemlinsky, Klemperer's fellow conductor who had previously been active in Prague. The work, whose plot revolves around whether or not a young man will succeed in getting a kiss from his fiancée, received devastating reviews. Whatever the opera's value for Czech audiences, its lack of resonance in the Berlin of 1927 was not surprising, since it had already failed in 1902 at the Theater des Westens.<sup>49</sup> Auber's "Le domino noir" was compared to "a dusty, faded garment, not spared by mothholes."<sup>50</sup>

Overall, the Volksbühne actually concurred with the judgment of the critics. Its attitude to art may be judged "petty-bourgeois" only in light of the avant-garde's vision of what constituted cultural capital. As opera became accessible to greater numbers of people through radio, records and the activities of theater-goers' organizations, it lost value - at least, in

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<sup>49</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*, November 28, 1927; this review calls the opera boring because "It has no plot, it is not even a dramatized anecdote, and it completely disregards theater." Another account stated that the libretto is "certainly one of the most unskilled in all of opera literature, a model of how one should not be constructed...One cannot understand why Alexander von Zemlinsky imported this work from his previous site of operation to Berlin." (*Berliner Tageblatt*, November 28, 1927.)

<sup>50</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*, April 28, 1928.

its traditional form. The Volksbühne's perception of opera attendance as prestigious focused on those works which, in the Wilhelmine era, had been considered central to German culture, notably Beethoven and Wagner. Allegiance to the traditional canon and to the values of *Bildung* has traditionally been viewed as a sign of false consciousness among lower-income people. Siegfried Kracauer analyzed their culture, specifically that of the *Angestellten*, as inauthentic and unrepresentative of their economic situation. They were attached to "approved 'cultural goods' which one doesn't question because there is apparently nothing more in them to question, or waste products of bourgeois culture which now land at a lower level with their price reduced."<sup>51</sup> It is not at all obvious, however, why cultural preferences ought to directly reflect one's economic situation. Kracauer's further claim that his subjects sought out "glitter" in order to distract them from their everyday lives is also questionable with regard to the Volksbühne public. The Kroll's consciously anti-glitter stance was not the problem. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that the Volksbühne considered many of the Kroll's offerings unsatisfying not because they were forbiddingly modern, but because they were often superficial. The view that art is a deadly serious matter and must be approached with reverence indeed recalls another account of petty-bourgeois taste, that of Bourdieu. This attitude emerges among a group which is anxious to gain access to established cultural products because of its own insecurity and anxiety.<sup>52</sup> In the absence of an account of authentic proletarian culture, however, this

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<sup>51</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten: aus dem neuesten Deutschland*. Frankfurt 1930. p.143.

<sup>52</sup> "The petty bourgeoisie does not know how to play the game of culture like a game: it takes culture much too seriously to permit...the distance and disinvolvement which give evidence of real familiarity..." (Bourdieu, p.381).

conclusion ceases to be useful. In addition, the accusation that the new opera public was attracted to this art form merely because of its cultural capital<sup>53</sup> collapses when one recalls that opera always has been a social institution. Its social importance cannot be so easily disentangled from its aesthetic importance. The Volksbühne's problems with the Kroll arose because of the tension between its own idea of taste and that of the avant-garde, which had changed the rules regarding what constituted cultural capital. The concept of *Volksbildung*, based on the transmission of established culture, was supposedly the task of the Kroll. However, the opera could not simultaneously be a site of avant-garde culture and satisfy its core audience, as shown by that audience's dissatisfaction.

In 1928, for example, Volksbühne director Siegfried Nestriepke issued a memorandum to the Ministry of Culture requesting changes. The organization was concerned:

that the Volksbühne performances in the Oper am Platz der Republik should be made more attractive. The board of the Volksbühne is of course aware that not only large-scale operas [*grosse Opern*] can be produced. But when only extremely light and played-out operas or one-act evenings are offered, that is an impossible situation for the Volksbühne. The members reject this kind of opera and, despite their formal obligations, do not attend the performances. It can be statistically demonstrated at any time that in the last few weeks between 26% and 30% of the scheduled audience stayed away from the performances; in the case of theater performances in the same period it was only 15% to 22%. Numerous letters to the management of the Volksbühne show that the poor attendance at the opera performances is due to the program.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> For the allegation that the new public demanded access to opera "only" for social reasons, see Walter.

<sup>54</sup> Nestriepke to Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Volksbildung, May 8, 1928; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, BPH Rep. 119 (neu), Generalintendanz der Staatstheater, Nr. 747, Bl. 167. "Played-out" (abgespielt), a favorite phrase of Nestriepke's, apparently meant that the operas had been performed for so long that they had lost whatever interest they might originally have had.

Particularly the Smetana work and Gounod's "Médecin malgré lui", based on the Moliere play of the same name, proved unacceptable. Alfred Einstein of the *Berliner Tageblatt* predicted that the Gounod would be "charming and pleasant fare for the unspoiled stomachs of the Volksbühne members"<sup>55</sup> but this proved untrue, as Nestriepke reported that most disliked it. "We do not deny the artistic value of this opera. We also do not criticize the style of the production. Unfortunately, it is the case that large numbers of Volksbühne members have no understanding for this work. They do not consider the opera "fully serious" und heavily criticize its production for the Volksbühne."<sup>56</sup> In repeated complaints of this nature, Nestriepke expressed the view that the "played-out small operas" aroused in Volksbühne members "the impression...that the Volksbühne is not taken seriously by the administration of state theaters and is put deliberately at a disadvantage."<sup>57</sup> In other words, the distance between the Volksbühne and established culture was all too clear to its members.

Unfortunately for the Kroll's future as an institution of *Volksebildung*, its first season did not demonstrate the principle on which it had been founded. The 1927-28 repertory, due to Klemperer's personal preferences, was indeed largely made up of either lighter works or "rediscoveries." The rescheduling and frequent program changes which came about as a result of the Kroll idea also meant that individual members often ended up seeing the same work twice, or had an unbalanced access to the opera's offerings. For example, the highly

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<sup>55</sup> Even though he clearly considered it artistically at a low level; he refers to the 1857 work as a "waste product of 'Faust'". *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 6, 1928.

<sup>56</sup> GSStAPK, BPH Rep. 119 (neu), Nr. 747, Bl.166-67.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, Bl. 169.

controversial "Fidelio" production, despite its aesthetics, was actually in demand. "Fidelio" was only offered once for Volksbühne members between April 2 and May 14, 1928.<sup>58</sup> It was the only opera during this period which was relatively well attended. On other evenings, between 24% and 28% of members failed to appear.<sup>59</sup> The works offered on these occasions clearly did not fulfill the Volksbühne's expectations of opera.

Klemperer and his defenders held the position that a demand for "great art" was often a demand for spectacle. This is the basis of the claim that the average member of the Volksbühne was not aesthetically up to date, and is echoed in an oft-cited remark by the critic Adolf Weissmann. Rather than being natural consumers of modern art, wrote Weissmann, lower-income people had what he regarded as old-fashioned artistic preferences: "They long for "Carmen" and "Aida" like everyone else."<sup>60</sup> Weissmann apparently intended this to refer to both the traditional working class and to the *Angestellten*. The available evidence indicates that these two groups were more or less equally represented among Volksbühne members in Berlin.<sup>61</sup> Based on Nestriepke's statements, this assessment of the Volksbühne stance is valid.

The question is, why should a love for "Carmen" and "Aida" be regarded as a problem or as the sign of an insecure class status? A description of specifically working-class preferences in opera came from

<sup>58</sup> GStaPK, BPH Rep. 119 (neu), Nr. 747, Bl. 167.

<sup>59</sup> These being Puccini's "Trittico", "Luisa Miller", Gounod and Smetana. *Ibid.*, Bl. 170.

<sup>60</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*, September 1, 1928.

<sup>61</sup> *Blätter der Volksbühne*, Heft 3, 1930/31; January/February 1931. Unfortunately this survey was done quite late when the organization was already losing members, but it still shows that it was mostly proletarian in an economic sense. The Volksbühne's own percentages were compiled considering only the male membership; figures are 41.2% workers, 42.3% employees, 5.5% civil servants, 11% self-employed. Peter Lilje proposes figures of 31% workers and 31% employees for the whole Berlin chapter. See Peter Lilje, "Der Verband der Deutschen Volksbühnenvereine" in Dietmar Klenke, Peter Lilje and Franz Walter, eds., *Arbeitersänger und Volksbühnen in der Weimarer Republik*. Bonn 1992. p.306.

Paul Pisk in 1927: " For the rich, whether old or new, theater is sensation, satisfaction of the desire for luxury, relaxation and entertainment.

Typically this social class prefers operetta and revues, which are gaining more ground every day."<sup>62</sup> The attitude of workers was generally quite different:

The attitude of the worker to opera is a very different one from that of the *Bürger*. A rising mass, not yet imbued with its own cultural capabilities, seeks initially not to mark out its own culture, but to take over the cultural achievements which are already present. This takes place fairly uncritically. The worker demands the old classic or romantic, the bourgeois or even aristocratic-monarchical opera. The music, hand in hand with the stage action, affects him so strongly, his emotional life is so stirred up by the melodies, that he undertakes no control over extramusical elements; initially he is not even aware that the text of these old operas, with few exceptions, has nothing to do with the world view of the proletariat.<sup>63</sup>

The majority of operas beloved by workers indeed failed to reflect contemporary class conflict. Why should they? It is naive to assume that audiences ought to respond only to art works which relate directly to their own lives. Indeed, why ought they to judge a work such as "Fidelio" solely from the standpoint of its perceived politics, given that interpretations of the opera have changed so much since Beethoven's time? The view that audiences are engaging in "escapism" if they prefer works which appear too sentimental or full of pathos (to a middle-class critic!!) is based on an unarticulated vision of proletarian culture as simply the articulation of the elements of everyday life.<sup>64</sup> It is significant that the Pisk article concludes

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<sup>62</sup> Paul Pisk, "Das neue Publikum" in *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 8/1-2, January/February 1927.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> See Bourdieu, interview with the nurse Elisabeth S.: "...theater is something which ought to inspire people, which allows both the performers and the spectators to participate..." (p.412) She goes on to remark that theater which presents merely the ingredients of people's everyday lives is invalid; this statement, among others, is supposed to indicate her petty-bourgeois attitude.

with the hope that once workers are more musically educated, they will be able to appreciate a variety of operas. While this was important for the future of opera, musical education had to start somewhere, and it had to start with familiar works. A series of articles by Hans Tessmer, while noting that opera had lost some of its traditional public, viewed the theater-goers' organizations as a hopeful sign. Unfortunately, in all too many cases they were shortchanged; "It is fairly senseless to assume that one can educate these circles to become a real opera public through bad routine productions and interesting novelties of the most recent creation."<sup>65</sup>

This article condemns opera houses which operated on the basis of the narrow preferences of a few people. Among these Otto Klemperer must be counted. No one would question the seriousness of his artistic intentions, but in the setting of the Kroll they had little chance of success. What Klemperer viewed as an ascetic, downscaled version of opera, Volksbühne members saw as a sign that they were not regarded as a worthy operatic audience. A better strategy would have been for the Kroll to start with more appealing works from the standard repertory and only after that to branch out into experimental territory. This was the strategy adopted by Ernst Legal, formerly at the state theater in Kassel, after he was appointed *Intendant* (administrative director) in 1928, and it bore fruit only during the Kroll's last season. By then, however, it was too late for the opera to reinvent itself.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Hans Tessmer, "Zeitfragen des Operntheaters", III, in *Zeitschrift für Musik* 94/2, February 1930. Other defenses of the organized public are Robert Hernried, "Die Berliner Opernkrise", *Das Orchester* 7/22, November 1930, and Gustav Cords, "Brennende Fragen", *Das Orchester* 7/24, December 1930.

<sup>66</sup> For the success of the Kroll under Legal, see "Klemperers Demission als Operndirektor", *Das Orchester* 5/14, July 1928; *Das Orchester* 8/5, March 1931; Robert Oboussier, *Berliner Musikchronik* (Zürich 1969)

This particular segment of the public was not primarily attracted to operetta or to lighter entertainment. Was the Volksbühne old-fashioned in its preferences? Only by the standards of the polarized cultural discourse of the Weimar era. The musical avant-garde demanded a radical break with previous German artistic traditions. This was not in line with the preferences of many people who were otherwise prepared, within the limits of their budget, to support a healthy cultural life in Berlin. The opera public, as Friedrich Herzfeld argued in *Die Musik*, was not unified. Its most faithful audience preferred those works which, a generation or two ago, had been considered modern.<sup>67</sup> This audience was not particularly open to contemporary or to unfamiliar works. However, many members of the avant-garde were deeply suspicious of opera as an art form which, over the course of the nineteenth century, had served primarily as affirmative culture for the rich. The idea that theater had a considerable potential to educate and prepare the ground for political change enjoyed a revival in the Weimar era, but few people theorized about how specifically opera might do so. The avant-garde's distrust of opera was based on the idea that in its traditional form it was antagonistic to the type of communal culture they favored, which bore some similarity to the principles laid out by Kestenberg, but in practice clashed with the preferences of Volksbühne members.

The ideas of the avant-garde did not necessarily dictate a focus on contemporary works, which were more prominent in the repertory of the two other Berlin operas than they were at the Kroll. They are reflected more in other aspects of the Kroll idea; moving away from a focus on star

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<sup>67</sup> Friedrich Herzfeld, "Das Opernpublikum unserer Zeit" in *Die Musik* 23/12, September 1931.

singers and favoring small-scale operas over the better-known "great works" which still attracted the public despite the allegation that they were obsolete. When H.H. Stuckenschmidt, one of the most eminent postwar music critics, recalled, "This theater was in some magical way more than a temple of art...One believed modern social ideas to be in the air, but also a kind of modern religiosity, an aura of cult and belief, which seemed to stream out from the very person of Klemperer..."<sup>68</sup> his imagery is puzzling. Stuckenschmidt suggested an artistic community with vague socialist implications which were never spelled out or defined, but which had little to do with the actual preferences of the masses. The Volksbühne's proclamation of community was still rooted in the nineteenth-century ideal of interiority and the interaction of the individual with art. Although the avant-garde had declared individualism old-fashioned, the democratization of art desired by Weimar cultural politicians could not take place without building on established ideas of *Bildung*. A *Volksoper* could not operate on the basis of avant-garde taste, which did not take a broad public into account. This caused tension between those members of the audience who hailed the Kroll as a welcome reform and Volksbühne members who felt they were being cheated of an aesthetic experience more to their liking.

This tension was not only aesthetic in nature, as indicated by Beidler's remark about the petty-bourgeois tastes of the SPD. Occasionally class snobbery could be displayed in a more blatant form. The social changes which took place in the opera house during Weimar met with resistance due to the perception that the masses had no place

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted in John Sargent Rockwell, *The Prussian Ministry of Culture and the Berlin State Opera, 1918-1931*. Unpublished dissertation. Berkeley (California), 1971. p. 219.

there. Throughout the 1920s the Volksbühne journal instructed its members on proper behavior in the theater. Although the organization had existed since 1890, it experienced a significant growth in membership after 1918. These new members presumably were inexperienced theater- and opera-goers, or they would not have needed the advice dispensed to them, albeit in humorous form, by the journal. Members should avoid eating in the theater; they should not talk during the performance; and, above all, they should avoid coming in late.<sup>69</sup> Volksbühne members also stood out from the rest of the public, however, due to the fact that they could afford less. One of the few letters of complaint cited specifically by Nestriepke came from anonymous members who alleged that they were treated as an inferior audience. This member was refused a program by the responsible doorman because he or she had not provided a tip.<sup>70</sup>

Another letter is quoted directly:

For a long time I have been of the opinion that Volksbühne members in the Opera on Platz der Republik are regarded as a second-class audience. It appears as if all employees from top to bottom are determined to spoil visits to the opera by Volksbühne members. What accommodation, how many humble attitudes [*krumme Buckel*] one observes on the days when a wealthier public attends the opera.<sup>71</sup>

This may be an isolated complaint by a disgruntled individual, but the evidence indicates otherwise. In many other cities and towns, the local theater made some accommodation for members of theater-goers' organizations, though in no case was their role so great as was the

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<sup>69</sup> See *Blätter der Volksbühne*, issues of April/May 1925 and May/June 1925.

<sup>70</sup> GStaPK, BPH Rep. 119 (neu) Nr. 734, Bl.238-39.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

Volksbühne's at the Kroll. Allegations of poor treatment turn up in several other cities. Volksbühne members in Cologne also complained that their inability to tip caused discrimination against them.<sup>72</sup> The paying public in Hanover disliked attending performances with the Volksbühne, viewed as representative of the unwashed masses. Its members were repeatedly accused of displacing the old subscribers who were able to pay full price for their tickets.<sup>73</sup> There was a clear class division in the opera audience of which all were aware. While the Volksbühne did not institute an income cap on potential members, its policy of one ticket price for all meant that it was unattractive for those members of the public who took it for granted that higher income guaranteed a better seat.<sup>74</sup>

Poor organization contributed to the Volksbühne's dissatisfaction with the Kroll. Cancellations and program changes abounded, especially in cases where a planned premiere had to be delayed. The most serious blow to the Volksbühne's relationship with the Kroll was, however, the depression, the effects of which will be described in Chapter 6. It is time to reassess the role of the Volksbühne at the Kroll Opera. Its attempt to provide an opera for its members represented a serious attempt to democratize *Bildung* and make the concept of a civic culture meaningful. This had always been the organization's aim. Rather than operating with a notion of specifically working-class culture, since the 1890s its founders had defended a notion of culture for all, which would only be valid if the

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<sup>72</sup> Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln, Best. 46/16/2.

<sup>73</sup> See Dörte Schmidt and Brigitta Weber, *Keine Experimentierkunst? Musikleben am Städtischen Theatern in der Weimarer Republik*. Stuttgart 1995, p. 29: "Many critics [of the significant role of the Volksbühne] pointed to social distance, to the fact that 'many of those who pay full price are unwilling to sit with the members of the Freie Volksbühne, who pay a much smaller price.'"

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* Most theater directors argued convincingly that the attendance of the Volksbühne was economically more advantageous because a significant number of seats were automatically filled, thus justifying lower prices and making possible a theater of high artistic quality. A regular subscribing public entailed a higher risk.

fruits of *Bildung* were also available to the working class. Class conflict was thus the impetus for the founding of the Volksbühne, but it was never its guiding principle. Right-wing parties continued to view the organization as a means of party-political agitation. At the same time, the Volksbühne's ideas were anathema to those segments of the working class which held that the role of art was to promote revolution and the goals of a future society along socialist lines. The German Communist party (KPD) continually attacked the Volksbühne as "petty-bourgeois" and as the refuge of well-fed SPD "bosses." It is true that the Volksbühne's principles, from the moment of its founding, had been challenged by a significant faction within its own ranks which saw the organization as the cultural arm of Social Democracy and thus as a primarily political force.<sup>75</sup> In the Weimar era, however, due to the expansion of the organization and to changes within Social Democracy itself, those who put politics first were in a minority position. Even those who disagreed with the "Jena program" which stressed the role of art itself in changing society<sup>76</sup> were generally not adherents of the Communist view of the Volksbühne's role. The conflicts surrounding radical director Erwin Piscator, who failed to win over the Volksbühne leadership to his idea of political theater, are well documented and dominate the literature on the Berlin Volksbühne. The work of Heinrich Braulich, for example, despite the author's dogmatic reproduction of the Communist party line on Weimar cultural politics, is

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<sup>75</sup> Best described by Heinz Selo, *Die Volksbühne in Berlin*. (Berlin 1930. )This account concerns the early years of the Volksbühne movement (1890-1896).

<sup>76</sup> The program was based on ideas proposed by Julius Bab at the 1924 Volksbühnentag in Hildesheim and debated the following year in Jena. Bab's program was accepted over others which argued that radical changes in society had to precede artistic change. Bab stated that artistic experience itself could create the community, an idea strongly similar to the Kroll idea. See 5. Volksbühnentag, Hildesheim 1924 (published Berlin 1925).

still often cited as a standard work.<sup>77</sup> Braulich glorified the Volksbühne's Communist opposition, which supposedly wanted to return to the "original" political goals of the organization. Braulich's work has been succeeded by several more nuanced accounts.<sup>78</sup> However, literature on the Volksbühne generally includes little or no discussion of the Kroll, so that the historical picture remains distorted.

The idea that the Volksbühne "failed" as an opera audience is due to several factors. One is the determination of Curjel, himself a committed socialist, to ignore the fact that his conception of the connection between modern art and politics did not work in practice. The avant-garde's vision of communal culture did not line up with the Volksbühne's ideas, although the two sides agreed on the need for cultural transformation. However, in Curjel's eyes, the public he worked with, since it did not respond as expected, was simply not the "right" public. Further, the Volksbühne has been subject to a politically inspired bias against it as an organization which continually proclaimed that it was not interested in specifically proletarian art and which resisted Communist attempts to hijack its leadership. However, the Volksbühne did not propose a notion of culture which ignored class differences altogether. Its concept of civic culture was indeed based on the independence of art from political concerns, but also involved the alliance of socialists and democratic moderates against political pressure from both the right and the left.<sup>79</sup>

A final reason concerns the understanding of *Bildung* and civic culture in the Weimar years. Two very different conceptions were at work

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<sup>77</sup> Heinrich Braulich, *Die Volksbühne*. Berlin (East) 1976.

<sup>78</sup> For example, Freydank, "Zwischen den Fronten" in Pforte, op. cit; and Lilje, op. cit.

<sup>79</sup> See Lilje, p.258; also Schmidt/Weber, p.26.

here. The obligation of the state to subsidize art, written into the Weimar constitution, was subject to a number of different interpretations. It could represent a populist demand for giving the masses what they wanted, or it could entail an obligation to educate them. The Volksbühne never denied that education was important. A representative from Stuttgart at its 1927 annual meeting defined its goal as "the removal of the class character of culture."<sup>80</sup> The fact that new masses were seeking out theater, he claimed, must mean that they want to be edified, since inferior forms of entertainment were much easier to come by. This expansion of *Bildung* unfortunately came at a time when many traditional representatives of the *Bildungsbürgertum* had been wiped out by economic catastrophe. Others had already rejected the concept as bankrupt, and as having no other content other than a class-based one. Those who were not prepared to embrace either proletarian culture or aesthetic modernism were in a difficult position. The Volksbühne members' attitude to art is not old-fashioned or petty-bourgeois, but simply relies on the standards of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. When members of the organized working class adopted the idea of *Bildung* beginning in the 1890s, they did so uncritically. It may be true that initially there was a significant gap between workers' everyday lives and the ideals promoted by *Bildung*, but this does not mean that the ideals themselves were not applicable. The cultural polarization that arose as a result of a class-based society made it difficult for new social classes to take part in culture.

The question is whether conditions during the Weimar era changed this constellation and affected the notion of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. My

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<sup>80</sup> 7. Volksbühnentag, Hamburg 1926 (Berlin: Volksbühnen-Verlag, 1927) p.146.

contention is that a cultural conception of the *Bildungsbürgertum* continued to exist, though it was scorned or ignored by much of the avant-garde. The Volksbühne is an example of an organization which continually defended the notion of a civic culture; that is, a culture for all, open to all members of society. Further, theater was at the heart of this conception. As the organization expanded after 1918, it necessarily branched out and offered access to a variety of artistic forms, of which opera was the most popular and the most frequently demanded by members.<sup>81</sup>

Critics charged that the Volksbühne had betrayed its original mission; the organization had "sold out" and ceased to be revolutionary.<sup>82</sup> This is false. The Volksbühne's mission was never to explicitly promote revolution, but to expose workers to culture they could not otherwise afford. Although the organization initially promoted a specific type of theater, naturalist drama, which was banned from the official stages of the Kaiserreich, the connection between naturalism and the Volksbühne movement was itself short-lived. The organization concentrated on transmitting the more traditional canon of *Bildung* to its members. In this case, however, a workers' organization filled a cultural gap which might not otherwise have been filled.<sup>83</sup>

The position of opera was different. Opera for a working-class public was always based solely on the expansion of the idea of *Bildung*, and thus had to rely on bourgeois conceptions of culture. If proletarian

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<sup>81</sup> See Nestriepke, *Wachsen und Wirken der deutschen Volksbühnenbewegung 1927-1928*, Berlin 1928: "Musical works may also be presented by a Volksbühne to its members. The opinion of the members will be very much in favor of opera..."

<sup>82</sup> This view was most prominently expressed by Herbert Ihering in his "Der Volksbühnenverrat" (1929).

<sup>83</sup> See Selo, *Die Volksbühne in Berlin*.

plays appealed to a limited audience, a proletarian opera, since it was such an ill-defined entity, had even less claim to a representative role. It is understandable that German opera was associated with the rise of the *Bürgertum*; thus many people claimed that its apparent decline during Weimar made its "typical" representative form obsolete. Could there be an explicitly proletarian opera? This question was actually addressed by the critic Alexander Landau in 1926. Wagner's "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg", Landau argued, was the representative work of a triumphant bourgeoisie, and, as such, could not be duplicated in the 1920s. The opera had been written in an age when the nobility was no longer a threat. However, he continued, "Today we have no such optimistic perspective. Bourgeois culture has long reached its turning point, and an artist who juxtaposed the *Bürger* and the proletariat as Wagner did with Stolzing, could hardly expect applause for his sociological prescience."<sup>84</sup> Alban Berg's "Wozzeck", which Landau (very problematically) identified as the only proletarian opera to have emerged thus far, had been met with extreme hostility. There were two options left for opera if it wanted to survive in the modern world: today: "deeply romantic turning away from the world" or "social contact". How this social contact was to be accomplished is not explained in the article, but it points to two tasks for Weimar opera: aesthetic change and reform of the structure of the public. These two were not, however, interdependent. The hopes of people such as Kestenberg, that the two might be fused, were ultimately too idealistic. The limitations of *Zeitoper*, the form most closely associated with the Weimar era, will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>84</sup> Alexander Landau, "Meistersinger von Heute: ein Beitrag zum Problem der Oper." *Die Musik* 19/2, November 1926.