

Chapter 5

Representing the Nation: The Visual Aspects of Kroll Productions

The last chapter discussed the successes and failures of contemporary opera at the Kroll. This chapter will consider another aspect of its innovative history, something that has few parallels on the opera scene of the time and is probably the most notorious aspect of the institution; production styles and set design. The profusion of styles visible in the Kroll's productions, especially after 1928, is a microcosm of what took place all over Germany; there was no one Kroll "look", but many under one roof, often involving renowned modern painters and directors who had not previously been known for their work in opera.¹

This has sometimes been interpreted as a stylistic mess, revealing that the Kroll Opera had few if any guiding concepts for its work. This was the view taken by Arthur Maria Rabenalt in his oft-cited text, "The Legend of the Kroll Opera."² Rabenalt charged that Hans Curjel, who was largely responsible for the hires, devoted little thought to the qualities that would illuminate specific works for the modern age. He simply hired artists he admired and threw them together without regard for compatibility. While this charge has some substance, I aim to show that it is exaggerated and that a number of convincing and artistically integrated productions did emerge at the Kroll. Walter Panofsky's rather superficial

¹ For purposes of comparison, it is instructive to examine the scene in Darmstadt; see Vibeke Peusch, *Opernregie/Regieoper*. (Frankfurt 1984).

² Printed as an appendix to Wilhelm Reinking, *Spiel und Form: Werkstattbericht eines Bühnenbildners zum Gestaltwandel der Szene in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren*. Hamburg 1979.

Protest in der Oper examines the new production styles which emerged in the 1920s, including those at the Kroll, and often assumes that they were intended to shock the audience.³ I can find very little support for this assumption, and particularly in the case of the Kroll, focus on some of its more outrageous offerings has occupied far too much scholarly attention in the past.

This is particularly important in view of the fact that Klemperer's favorite designer, Ewald Dülberg, the target of a disproportionate amount of right-wing ire, actually declined in influence after 1928. Dülberg, who had been responsible for the 1927 "Fidelio" (see Chapter 3) is often understood as the person who best embodied the Kroll style. This is inaccurate, but understandable in view of the fact that his designs for Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman" actually inspired a debate in the Prussian Landtag in 1929. The German National People's Party spoke for many traditional Wagnerians who were outraged at the lack of mystical symbolism in the production; the realistic costumes, which depicted sailors dressing the way they might have dressed in Wagner's day; and, not least, the appearance of the heroine Senta. Paul Zschorlich of the far right-wing *Deutsche Zeitung* condemned what he called "a Marxistically deformed Wagner...In the circles of the Volksbühne there also exists a longing for Wagner, but they are thankful for his Klemperization [*Verklemperung*] and for the musical nursery into which one is led. It is encouraging that the "people" can detect the "betrayal of the people in grand style" and that it is beginning to defend itself against a flattery of its

³ Walter Panofsky, *Protest in der Oper: das provokative Musiktheater der zwanziger Jahre*. Munich 1966.

falsely understood instincts and its underestimated taste."⁴ Zschorlich was referring to a protest against the production made by the Richard Wagner Society of German Women, which strongly objected to the Kroll's aesthetic approach.

This story is well known and has been the subject of several accounts.⁵ I will therefore not provide an exhaustive account of it, except to note its effects on Dülberg, who was becoming increasingly alienated from his colleagues at the Kroll. The artist claimed, for instance, that he had been designated to direct and design the "Neues vom Tage" premiere (see previous chapter) but the assignment ultimately went to Traugott Müller, who had worked with radical director Erwin Piscator. In the 1929-30 season no work had been assigned to Dülberg, whereupon he wrote to Legal that "...I have spoken no unfavorable word about Hindemith's new opera...Thus I viewed it as self-explanatory that *I* would direct the work..."⁶ Allegedly Curjel had assigned him to work on the Hindemith project, but at a time when he would not be in Berlin. By this time Dülberg, suffering from the tuberculosis that was to kill him four years later, was required to spend significant amounts of time in a warmer climate. Letters from his doctor attest to the poor state of his health as well as the stress caused by the "Holländer" scandal. Dülberg clearly felt that he was quietly being pushed aside and denied further work at the Kroll, though he did not blame Legal for this. Rather, he implied that the poisonous atmosphere created by Tietjen was responsible. The "Neues vom Tage" incident was only one in a series of incidents in which

⁴ *Deutsche Zeitung*, February 7, 1929.

⁵ For example, David Levin, "Reading a Staging - Staging a Reading" in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, March 1997; pp. 47-71.

⁶ Akademie der Künste Berlin, Nachlaß Ernst Legal; Dülberg to Legal, April 5, 1929.

Dülberg sensed miscommunication with Legal. Due to his frequent absence from Berlin, he had missed the chance for an extended conversation and believed "that the practice which has been established in the meantime (the "Holländer") cannot completely replace this conversation."⁷ Dülberg suspected that both Curjel and Legal were passing him over for jobs, a matter possibly related to the "Holländer" controversy. His decline did not, however, mean a retreat on the modernist front.

I will thus not focus on this production, but will instead explore some lesser-known productions which inspired far less outrage. The "Flying Dutchman" scandal is often used as a way to explain that the Kroll was a "leftist" opera. Though certainly the focus of attacks from the right, it simply cannot be used to explain the political significance of the Kroll as an institution. Thus, this chapter will also explore the alleged equivalence of abstract art and the political left, which is usually left unexamined in Weimar culture. Does set design tell us anything about politics, and if so, how? The cliché of a leftist opera, although dismissed by chroniclers who point out, for instance that the Kroll had nothing to do with official Communist aesthetics, is probably hard to shake because the Kroll project was called into being by politicians who adapted a social-democratic notion of *Bildung* and because, after all, it was intended to serve the working class. The politicized image of the opera may also have been in Otto Klemperer's mind as he rejected the label of avant-garde. The nature of right-wing opposition will also be explored in this chapter. Were right-wing critics in particular inalterably opposed to what took place on the

⁷ *Ibid.*

Kroll stage? The chapter will examine the nature of this opposition and argue that it was much less virulent than is generally imagined. Curjel's *Experiment Krolloper* has played a major role in the misconception that opposition to the Kroll's aesthetics was the major ingredient in a right-wing plot to close the opera. His tendency to print negative reviews only when they are obviously politically inspired and lack serious consideration of the production in question tends to lead the casual reader to conclude that any opposition could only be political. This is not the case, as the variety of approaches pursued at the Kroll actually worked in its favor. Most groups could find something to their taste. A unified lobby in support of the Kroll project was slowly emerging, but was ultimately thwarted by economic and political developments which doomed the opera. Its collapse should not be viewed as inevitable or as the result of a right-wing plot. With this in mind, one must acknowledge that accusations of "cultural Bolshevism" did indeed affect the opera's reputation and it is important to examine this charge and what it actually meant in the context of Weimar culture.

This chapter will begin by discussing Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's designs for a production of "The Tales of Hoffmann" (1929) and will go on to discuss the Kroll's 1928 production of Bizet's "Carmen" and its 1931 production of Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" as examples of innovative productions which nevertheless had popular appeal. The changes in production policy after Klemperer stepped down as *Generalmusikdirektor* were largely the work of Hans Curjel and Ernst Legal, whose views on the condition of opera in the 1920s are worth examining.

The decision to produce "Carmen" was widely understood as a departure from the repertory policy pursued by Klemperer in 1927-28. More radical critics saw Legal's advocacy of this and other familiar operas as a simple act of capitulation to the Volksbühne. Heinrich Strobel, for instance, conceded that it was difficult for opera houses to survive without accommodating themselves to the (presumably unsophisticated) public taste. Hence Legal's "conventional and operatic" approach was more persuasive.⁸ Strobel was not alone in using the word "operatic" [*opernhaf*] as automatically pejorative. This speaks volumes about his attitude to cultural life. However, if one seriously considers the question of what makes works like "Carmen" appealing in the first place, one can refute Strobel's assumption that the opera was unsuited to the age of Neue Sachlichkeit. Indeed, his view reflects a sort of left-wing German nationalism. Just as Nietzsche praised Bizet's opera for offering a healthy alternative to Wagner, "Carmen" was threatening to advocates of modern German music because it was far more popular than the contemporary German avant-garde. Fundamentally, the two works I discuss in this chapter represent an escape from German-ness. The Weimar-era shift in public taste, away from Wagner and towards Puccini, Mozart and Verdi has been well documented.⁹ 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

⁸ *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, undated.

⁹ Michael Walter, *Hitler in der Oper: Deutsches Musikleben 1918-1945*. Stuttgart 1995. p.100.

Kroll and other German opera houses had to start with accessible works - but in this case what made the greatest difference was production values.

Ernst Legal's perspective on the notion of "popular opera" was clear 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. What is most intriguing in Legal's article is the contrast between his official rhetoric, which is fully compatible with the "Kroll idea" and his actual practice at the Kroll. Legal's explanation of the way opera could become a truly popular art is fully in a national-representative tradition.

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."¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ AdK Berlin, Nachlaß Ernst Legal, p.71.

Legal's long experience in the theater almost certainly led him to the conclusion that opera should finally become as "modern" as the other arts. It is, however, 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.¹¹

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 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.

What did this mean for repertory choices? I have described the way in which Klemperer rejected much of the standard operatic repertory due to his belief that it was not only unchallenging, but positively tainted. Legal, along with Curjel, concentrated more on a reinterpretation of

¹¹ *Ibid* , p.73.

traditional genres. Curjel, for instance, was prepared to revive and reassess romantic opera, albeit from the standpoint of contemporary aesthetics. After a glance at Curjel's theory of romantic opera, the reader might be forgiven for assuming that the dramaturge simply wanted to deromanticize it, to rob it of its content.

Romantic opera, he wrote, had a bad reputation "in the age of so-called sobriety" because its original message had been distorted. The proponents of *Neue Sachlichkeit* were allegedly wrong to reject romantic opera, because the genre represented the first instance of German culture's attempt to free itself from the dominance of Italian opera. It was therefore revolutionary.¹² Composers of the Romantic era, such as Weber, Marschner and finally Wagner "felt themselves to be innovators, who could not have been further from softness, the 'sweet' (in pink tones) and every lachrymose attachment to the past."¹³ Curjel wanted to prove not only that German romantic opera was a more masculine genre than had generally been believed; it was also crucial for him to portray it as a democratic art form. Particularly Weber's "*Freischütz*", for which Curjel wrote program notes in 1928, was "the opera of all classes."¹⁴

The question remains - why were the Kroll's greatest successes with non-German operas? The idealized *Volk* was apparently far less interested in German cultural nationalism than were the founders of the Kroll project. This reveals a fundamental problem with the Kroll idea. Curjel and Legal were both heavily invested in German nationalist ideals, even if these were understood in left-wing terms. They developed a vision of

¹² LAB, FRep. 129, Acc.245, Nr. 644.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

culture not dissimilar to that of the right. What functioned as decadent and feminine for Curjel was not only pre-1914 culture, but all appeals to pathos and emotion in operatic production. Legal, while he expressed the same views in public, was nevertheless experienced enough in the theater to know what would appeal to the Kroll's core audience. His decisions had a salutary effect on the Kroll's repertory.

The premiere of "Carmen", on October 30, 1928, made this clear. Bizet's opera, presented in a convincing modern production, was obligatory for a successful opera house. Even Strobel recognized this when he wrote that "The repertory policy of the Kroll Opera has become more planned under Legal's direction..."¹⁵ This provided a reason to hope for a "regeneration of opera theater."¹⁶ The production emphasized the dramatic aspects of the work - predictably enough, since vocal quality alone was not the Kroll's first priority. Critics never tired of pointing this out, but they seemed divided over the performance of Rose Pauly as Carmen. Pauly had triumphed the previous month in the title role of Richard Strauss's "Salome." Her dancing skills apparently did not match her musical or dramatic talent, which confirms Arthur Rabenalt's observation that the Kroll ensemble lacked the training necessary for incorporating dance and movement into modern musical theater.¹⁷ No critic, however, missed Pauly's dramatic intensity - or, for that matter, her erotic intensity. Her performance in the role of Carmen was somewhat less well received. Pauly apparently fulfilled the audiences' expectations

¹⁵ *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, November 1, 1928.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See reviews in *Vossische Zeitung*, September 7, 1928; *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, September 6, 1928; *Berliner Tageblatt*, September 6, 1928. For Rabenalt see his "Die Legende der Kroll-Oper" in Reinking, *Spiel und Form*.

in that she was the demonic Other embodying the threat of female sexuality. In general, however, this production aimed to break with traditional expectations of "Carmen." Legal, who directed, and Caspar Neher, the set designer, intended to decontextualize the opera, to make it less an expression of French frivolity and more an embodiment of real dramatic tension, something in the spirit of Nietzsche's "The Case of Wagner."¹⁸ Nietzsche had famously argued for "Carmen" as a healthy alternative to the cultural hegemony of Wagner. By focusing on the drama, Legal and Neher rejected superficial notions of "authenticity" and created a "Carmen" designed to appeal to the emotions of a modern-day audience.

Neher's sets, for example, did not recall kitschy clichés of romantic Spain. While not naturalistic, neither were they abstract. Described by Alfred Einstein of the *Berliner Tageblatt* as "simultaneously real and fantastic", the sets suggested a mountain view (unlikely for Seville) alive with color; "a feast for the eyes, the achievement of an artist."¹⁹

Neher is best known for his work with Brecht. Notably, he designed sets for the premieres of both the "kleine Mahagonny" in Baden-Baden and for the full-length opera "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" (Leipzig 1930).²⁰ Neher's work at the Kroll has been much less studied. John Willett comments that in this period "...the avantgarde concepts of Neher and (however uncongenial he might find opera) Brecht were starting to filter into opera production."²¹ This, however, highlights a

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*.

¹⁹ *Berliner Tageblatt*, November 1, 1928.

²⁰ John Willett, *Caspar Neher, Brecht's Designer*. New York 1986.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.20.

fundamental difference. Brecht was politically and aesthetically opposed to opera, as shown by his condemnation of "culinary opera." Neher did not share this attitude. His work with the Kroll shows his commitment to opera. If the "Carmen" production was avant-garde, it was avant-garde in a sense which outraged neither the general public nor conservative critics.

Such an approach to opera staging was one initiated by Legal, and benefited the Kroll during its remaining seasons. The theater-goers' organizations, always an important source of funds for the Kroll, retained their commitment to the opera. This support was crucial in view of the fact that the Kroll always found it difficult to attract a non-organized public. Klemperer's Landtag testimony makes this clear; the opera had hardly any evenings on which the majority of tickets were available to the general public.²² The support of the theater-goers' organizations, the backbone of the Kroll public, remained strong through the end of 1930 due to wise production policy.

Ernst Legal left the Kroll in 1930 to head the Staatliche Schauspiele, but the approach he pioneered continued. This becomes clear when one examines a later example of the rethinking of traditional opera; a 1931 production of Puccini's "Madama Butterfly."

The decision to produce this opera did not please hard-line avant-gardists, and later accounts such as Heyworth's Klemperer biography follow this tendency.²³ From the perspective of many champions of "new music", "Butterfly" was a concession to the bad taste of Volksbühne members. Alfred Einstein, however, assessed the Kroll's intention more realistically: "The opera on Platz der Republik is now restoring a few

²² GStaPK, Preußischer Landtag, meeting of ??

²³ Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*. Cambridge 1983. pp. 353-4.

works which should have been part of the repertory shortly after its opening three and a half years ago, had it [the opera] been more 'diplomatic' and less programmatic...Then perhaps things would be different, at least as concerns the relationship to the Volksbühne."²⁴

Einstein went on to speculate that if the Volksbühne members had initially encountered more familiar operas, they would have been more willing to accept contemporary works such as "Die glückliche Hand."²⁵

As explained in previous chapters, this study argues something similar. It is unfortunate that only in the Kroll's ill-fated last season did it begin to develop a sufficient level of "diplomacy" in its repertory policy. Yet it is noteworthy that Curjel's *Experiment Krolloper* makes extremely few references to the "Butterfly" production other than the reproduction of two reviews.²⁶

Was the arrival of Puccini at the Kroll an embarrassing lapse in taste? Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who designed the sets, provided a fresh perspective on the opera. Moholy-Nagy had also been responsible for one of the Kroll's most controversial productions, second only to the 1929 "Flying Dutchman." His designs for Offenbach's "The Tales of Hoffmann" (1929) became notorious. The production included film clips, a moving stage and "the first pieces of steel furniture on the opera stage."²⁷ "Butterfly" incorporated the moving stage and principles of constructivist design, but was not nearly as radical or provocative. Its

²⁴ *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 24, 1931.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Hans Curjel, *Experiment Krolloper*. Munich 1971. Puccini in general seems to have been an embarrassment for Curjel. The Kroll's 1928 production of "Il trittico" fares even worse. Not a single review is included.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.50.

reception illustrates my argument throughout this study - that opera can be successfully modernized in terms of production values if the modernization is in harmony with the work in question.

The "Hoffmann" production was supposed to illustrate what Hans Curjel regarded as a new form of romanticism compatible with the twentieth century. In a 1929 article in the *Blätter der Staatsoper*, Curjel employed the term "the cleaned-up romantic opera" to describe his ideal - a work cleansed from such excesses as "...softness, sweetness (in pink) and...weepy nostalgia."²⁸ Modern productions of nineteenth-century opera, according to Curjel, ought to emphasize its revolutionary character, its democratic nature and its lack of sentimentality, and thereby make clear the relationship of romantic opera to such modern ideas as surrealism and psychoanalysis.²⁹

This is a fascinating program, but the question remains: was the Kroll's "Tales of Hoffmann" a convincing take on Offenbach? Most critics thought it was not, and it is difficult to argue that they were wrong. Franz Köppen argued that the works of Offenbach were rooted in a specific historical context, and thus, unlike the works of Wagner, could not be unproblematically transported into "our modern age."³⁰ Moholy-Nagy had explicitly connected his designs to the concept of a "theater of totality" which would integrate modern art and life.³¹ This was an idea he had explored as early as 1924 when he outlined his theory of what such a

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 348-49.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, February 13, 1929.

³¹ Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Circus, Variety" in Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer and Farkas Molnar, *The Theater of the Bauhaus*. Translated by Arthur Wensinger. Middletown, Connecticut 1961.

theater would look like. It was directly inspired by Wagner's concept of the total work of art, but pushed the boundaries of theater much further to incorporate multiple media and modern technology. Moholy-Nagy held that the problem with approaches to theater in his time was that everyone concerned viewed theater as an essentially intellectual enterprise. This was true even of some avant-garde attempts to break new ground, such as Dadaism. Because "The historical theater was essentially a disseminator of information or propaganda", theater was still burdened by what Moholy-Nagy referred to as "literary encumbrance."³² This is defined as "the unjustifiable transfer of intellectual material from the proper realm of literary effectiveness (novel, short story, etc.) to the stage, where it incorrectly remains a dramatic end in itself."³³ The result was that "Even in recent times we have been deluded about the true value of creative stagecraft when revolutionary, social, ethical or similar problems were unrolled with a great display of literary pomp and paraphernalia."³⁴ Although Dadaists and Futurists had moved away from this to some extent, their stage experiments still focused too much on the individual.

The solution was to view the individual as merely a part of a mechanized whole: "Man, who no longer should be permitted to represent himself as a phenomenon of spirit and mind through his intellectual and spiritual capacities, no longer has any place in this concentration of action. For, no matter how cultured he may be, his organism permits him at best only a certain range of action, dependent entirely on his natural body

³²*Ibid*, p. 45.

³³ *Ibid*, p.46.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

mechanism."³⁵ The individual on the stage, in order for theater to be fully effective, had to be supplemented by "a synthesis of dynamically contrasting phenomena (space, form, motion, sound and light)."³⁶ The fact that different art forms were increasingly blending and converging in the 1920s made the theater of totality promising: "...today, when music has been broadened to admit sounds of all kinds, the sensory-mechanistic effect of sound interrelationships is no longer a monopoly of poetry. It belongs, as much as do harmonies, to the realm of music, much in the same way that the task of painting, seen as color creation, is to organize clearly primary (apperceptive) color effect."³⁷ The task of the actor in this situation was not to interpret a literary type, but "to discover and activate that which is COMMON to all men."³⁸ Actors in the theater of totality should see themselves as part of an organism, but this did not mean that they could make no creative contributions: "...the REPETITION of a thought by many actors, with identical words and with identical or varying intonation and cadence, could be employed as a means of creating synthetic (i.e. unifying) creative theater. (This would be the CHORUS - but not the attendant and passive chorus of antiquity!)"³⁹ This participation by actors was not, however, conceived in an openly political sense: "And even if the conflicts arising from today's complicated social patterns, from the world-wide organization of technology, from pacifist-utopian and other kinds of revolutionary movements, can have a place in the art of the stage, they will be significant only in a transitional period,

³⁵ *Ibid* , p. 52.

³⁶ *Ibid* , p. 54.

³⁷ *Ibid* , p. 57.

³⁸ *Ibid* , p. 58. Capitals in the original.

³⁹ *Ibid* , p. 62.

since their treatment belongs properly to the realms of literature, politics and philosophy."⁴⁰

Interestingly, the move away from subjectivity Moholy-Nagy desired was, he claimed, more advanced in mass culture such as vaudeville and the circus. Such forms should not be dismissed as kitsch because "It is high time to state once and for all that the much disdained masses, despite their 'academic backwardness', often exhibit the soundest instincts and preferences."⁴¹ Yet, as his own work on opera design shows, there was no reason that the theater of totality could not embrace traditional theater and opera. Moholy-Nagy proclaimed that "It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them take hold and participate - actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy."⁴²

Moholy-Nagy's vision has clear connections with the Kroll idea. It might be seen as the visualization of the ideal of the national theater. In representing that which was common to all, rather than what appealed to a particular social group, the theater of totality could theoretically unite an audience and appeal to the ideals they held in common. It is, however, important to realize that the theory could not always be practically applied. A visual version of the ideals of the national theater was still too unclear and incompletely formulated. This is clear from the reviews received by the 1929 "Hoffmann" production. Nora Pisling-Boas wrote in the *8-Uhr Abendblatt* that the mechanical approach was quite appropriate

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid* , p. 64.

⁴² *Ibid* , pp. 67-68.

for the first act of the opera, involving the mechanical doll Olympia, since after all the plot revolves around machines.⁴³ However, if a theater of totality meant "a synthesis of music, acting, movement and objectivity", this production did not provide it, for the familiar reason that the singers were not sufficiently trained.⁴⁴

Oscar Bie posed the most compelling question regarding the "Tales of Hoffmann" production. In principle, wrote the critic, he was not opposed to the idea that every era interprets theatrical works afresh. Exaggerated respect for the composer's intentions should not prevent new interpretations. "But. First of all, is this constructivist style really the absolute expression of our era?...It involves a lot of abstraction to bring human beings who are acting on the stage in harmony with a system of so much technical absolutism. And there is even more barbarism involved in binding older works, which are conceived realistically in their construction and effort, in these restraints."⁴⁵

Bie continued his review by stating that even if one recognizes the constructivist style as the most aesthetically appropriate for the republic, it still presented problems for this particular production. Moholy-Nagy had not created "a unified structural world" to match each of the three acts.⁴⁶ Further, "Individual ideas at the height of modern technical imagination do not come together to create an organism representing translation into this style...Unfavorable for the effects of the music, which will always remain the most important thing for us. If one celebrates the

⁴³ *8-Uhr Abendblatt*, February 13, 1929.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, February 13, 1929.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

unconventional, the nonoperatic, one celebrates a moral, not an artistic virtue."⁴⁷

This review addresses a key weakness in the Kroll idea. The reform of opera, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, was a moral project as well as an artistic one. Many Kroll productions, in their zeal for the "non-operatic" ran the risk of alienating opera's core audiences who continued to value artistic unity and the appeal to the emotions. The next section will discuss the ways in which "Madama Butterfly" avoided the problems described above.

Many critics, notably Joseph Kerman, view the operas of Puccini as automatically reactionary.⁴⁸ Their immense popularity is usually ascribed to excessive sentimentality and a retrograde treatment of women, among other things. I propose, however, that this condescending view is not only elitist but is rooted in modernist assumptions which are themselves heavily gendered. At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed to Ernst Legal's view that conventional opera productions were decadent and feminine. Such objections amount to a rejection of the whole category of the "operatic."

The increasing popularity of Puccini's works in Weimar Germany only served to make the composer more suspect in the eyes of the avant-garde.⁴⁹ However, the Kroll production showed that it was possible to produce "Butterfly" in a style that was "nothing less than revolutionary" and to keep the opera anchored within its cultural context.⁵⁰ Moholy-Nagy

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*. Berkeley, California 1988.

⁴⁹ See Michael Walter, *Hitler in der Oper*, for production statistics.

⁵⁰ *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 24, 1931.

depicted Nagasaki from a bird's eye perspective.⁵¹ Butterfly's house, not so much constructed as suggested by geometrical forms, was surrounded by bamboo trees. Alfred Einstein commented that "the coexistence of naturalism and constructivism is almost uncanny [*gespenstisch*]."⁵² Oscar Bie stated that the production had contributed greatly to the appreciation of Puccini as a serious composer: "So much freshness and new life was in it, that we ask ourselves how it was possible to have earlier viewed Puccini's music with certain doubts. Today it interests me from the first to the last note."⁵³ Zemlinsky's conducting conveyed both the beauty and the originality of the music.

The production also addressed the political complications of the opera. Butterfly's costume in the second act was Americanized, in order to suggest the effects of colonialism. Jarmila Novotna portrayed Butterfly as "like the content of the opera itself, the mirror of an exotic culture that has been eaten away by America or Europe."⁵⁴

As another critic noted, it is not clear how well this idea suits the "erotic-romantic mood" of Puccini's music, but it is certainly a valid interpretation of ideas found in the libretto.⁵⁵ Arthur Groos, among others, has pointed to the critical elements in the original depiction of Pinkerton.⁵⁶ Librettist Luigi Illica originally conceived of the opera as "a tragedy of East-West relations, in which the principal characters are agents of impersonal cultural forces that determine their actions as well as

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Berliner Börsen-Courier* , February 24, 1931.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* , February 24, 1931.

⁵⁶ William Weaver and Simonetta Puccini, eds., *The Puccini Companion*. New York 1994. p. 185.

those of others."⁵⁷ This portrayal was changed in subsequent drafts of the libretto. In the case of Pinkerton, "The political chauvinist [became] a male chauvinist."⁵⁸ However, the Kroll production suggested that the opera's radical potential could still affect audiences.

The 1931 "Butterfly" was well received even by right-wing critics, such as those at the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Fritz Stege observed cynically that the champions of the Kroll project had previously praised the opera for its radicalism, but in 1931 were more likely to focus on more mainstream productions in a bid to win support for the opera: "One should not be surprised that those newspapers which praised the progressive spirit of the Kroll Opera regard the "tame" productions of 'Figaro', 'Louise', 'Butterfly', etc. as proof that the 'disgrace in the woods' [*Schmiere vom Walde*] must continue to exist."⁵⁹ This cynicism was, however, unjustified, since the 1930-31 season represented a genuine attempt by the Kroll to fulfill its original mission. Stege predicted that the Kroll would soon close its doors, and that Klemperer and his associates were desperately trying to prevent such an outcome:

Even the grim Bauhaus associate from Dessau, Herr Moholy-Nagy, the apostle of Bolshevism, is trying to make amends to the Kroll public after the shameful production of the "Tales of Hoffmann", and is producing an essentially satisfactory "Butterfly." Granted, the perspectives are a failure, but the production is nevertheless tasteful and, with the large kitsch panorama of Nagasaki in the background, almost petty-bourgeois. But the regret comes too late, and today the Kroll Opera can no longer be rescued...⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.188.

⁵⁹ *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Heft 4, April 1931. The "*Schmiere vom Walde*" was a popular and obviously pejorative nickname for the Kroll.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Even such grudging praise is remarkable, considering that the journal was dealing with an artist it considered a "cultural Bolshevist." Along with other balanced and occasionally quite positive reviews in the right-wing music press, this shows that the Kroll stood a chance of winning over even its worst enemies. The circumstances of its closing were, however, determined by quite different factors, which I will discuss in the next chapter.