

Postlude: The Demise of Operetta

In September 1932, Oscar Straus's *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will!* was the last new operetta produced in Berlin that went on to achieve international renown (its London version was *Mother of Pearl*). Straus left Berlin in spring the following year, at first moving to his villa in Bad Ischl in the Salzkammergut. German operetta began to fall into decline after its production was required, from 14 March 1933, to conform to the demands of the Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) headed by Joseph Goebbels. He had been appointed as Minister for Culture the day before, and he aimed to promote the enlightenment of the people by controlling all cultural activities in Germany and ensuring they were in accord with the objectives of National Socialism. In the autumn of 1933 the Reichskulturkammer (the Reich Culture Chamber) was established, of which the Reichstheaterkammer was a subdivision. Linked to antipathy for the numbers of Jews involved in operetta was a fear about decadence and, connected to that, anxiety about jazz rhythms.¹ Already, after April 1933, Jewish homes and business in Berlin were being daubed with the word 'Jude' (Jew) or the Star of David.² Adolf Hitler, who had become Chancellor in January 1933, turned into Germany's all-powerful Führer following President Hindenburg's death in August 1934.

In 1935, many Jews who self-identified as German found they were no longer classified as such under the Nuremberg Laws, which specified that all four grandparents must be Aryan and deprived Jews of the right to own wealth, to work in various professions, and to marry non-Jews. Operetta star Gitta Alpár had married a non-Jew in 1931, and given birth to a child, but her marriage was dissolved on grounds of illegality in 1935. Many

¹ See Kevin Clarke, 'Konkav und konvex: Bühnenoperetten und Operettenfilme als Spiegel der Zeitläufe 1933–1945', in Bettina Brandl-Risi, Clemens Risi, and Rainer Simon, eds., *Kunst der Oberfläche: Operette zwischen Bravour und Banalität* (Leipzig: Henschel Verlag, 2015), 184–96, at 187–88.

² Berta Geissmar, *The Baton and the Jackboot: Recollections of Musical Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1944), 72.

operettas were coming to be regarded as ‘verjudet’ (Judaized) and ‘entartet’ (degenerate).³ Senior government officer and dramaturg Rainer Schlösser sent a message to Joseph Goebbels in 1934 informing him that 80 per cent of the production of operetta, in both music and text, was of Jewish origin.⁴ Artistic directors, such as Heinz Hentschke at the Metropol-Theater (nationalized as the Staatliches Operettentheater), worked under the supervision of Goebbels.⁵ In 1940 the *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* was published, listing proscribed composers and performers.

Kálmán, Straus, Gilbert, and Abraham all left Germany to avoid Nazi persecution. This was not accomplished easily; the Hitler regime only allowed people out of the country whose passport carried a special exit permit, and touring musicians were not exempted.⁶ Straus was helped to escape by a Nazi officer who loved *Ein Walzertraum*. He managed to prevent customs officials checking Straus’s papers on a train journey the composer was making in order to join his wife in Zürich.⁷ Some Jews relocated, at first to Austria, although a Nazi regulation imposed in May 1933 required the payment of an economic sanctions tax of 1000 marks before anyone could travel to Austria. That was abolished in July 1936, but worse was to follow: the Austrian Anschluss was declared on 12 March 1938. The Czech Sudetenland was then annexed in October 1938, a month that also witnessed the pogrom against Jews known as Kristallnacht. Those seeking to emigrate in 1938 were looking to obtain permits for the UK, the USA, Australia, and China.

In the late 1930s, around 18,000 harassed and impoverished Austro-German Jewish refugees travelled to Shanghai, where they were accepted without visas. Shanghai had self-governing foreign Concessions that had developed around the city as part of its trade relations. There were many musicians among the newcomers, and they soon began organizing cultural

³ See Stefan Frey, ‘Unter Tränen lachen’: Emmerich Kálmán: Eine Operettenbibliographie (Berlin: Henschel, 2003), 245.

⁴ The complete message (in the Bundesarchiv, R 55/20169, 145–47) is reproduced in Wolfgang Schaller, ed., *Operette unterm Hakenkreuz: Zwischen hoffähiger Kunst und ‘Entartung’* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2007), 14–15. For more information on Schlösser, see Boris von Haken, *Der Reichsdramaturg: Rainer Schlösser und die Musiktheater-Politik in der NS-Zeit* (Hamburg: Bockel, 2007).

⁵ See Matthias Kauffman in Len Platt, Tobias Becker, and David Linton, eds., *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin, 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 258–73.

⁶ Geissmar, *The Baton and the Jackboot*, 74.

⁷ Bernard Grun, *Prince of Vienna: The Life, the Times and the Melodies of Oscar Straus* (London: W. H. Allen, 1955), 163–66.

activities, including the performance of operettas.⁸ Even though Hongkew, the area of Shanghai in which Jews lived, came under Japanese rule in December 1941, Adolf Breuer founded a permanent operetta company in 1943. Along with two operetta companies that had been put together on an *ad hoc* basis, this meant that performances of Kálmán, Lehár, and Straus took place regularly in Shanghai's Broadway Theatre.⁹ Even before this occurred, the film version of *The Merry Widow*, starring Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier, had been screened in Shanghai. This became the favourite film of the refugees.¹⁰

Sometimes those who managed to leave Germany found that the Nazis were relentlessly at their heels. Abraham, for instance, went first to Vienna, then to Budapest, Paris, Cuba, and New York. He died in 1960, but produced no post-war operettas; he had been diagnosed in 1946 as suffering from psychosis with syphilitic meningoencephalitis.¹¹ Ralph Benatzky and Robert Stolz, neither of whom were Jewish, decided they had no future in Germany or Austria.¹² Stolz was visited by Goebbels's envoy in Paris with a request that he return, but he refused on principle, declaring that it was impossible for him to live and work in an atmosphere where his friends and co-workers were harassed in the cruellest way because they did not meet the requirements of the Nuremberg Racial Equality Laws. If either Benatzky or Stolz nursed any doubts, these would have been intensified by the exhibition of *Entartete Musik* (degenerate music) in Düsseldorf in May 1938. The organizer was Hans Severus Ziegler, who later wrote an introduction to an operetta guide, in which he stressed ominously the importance of care and taste in its music and staging.¹³

⁸ See Renata Berg-Pan, 'Shanghai Chronicle: Nazi Refugees in China', in Jarrell Jackman and Carla Borden, eds., *The Muses Flee Hitler* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983), 283–89; Jeremy Leong, 'Musical Irony and Identity Politics: Austro-German Jewish Refugees in Republican China', in Katherine L. Turner, ed., *This Is the Sound of Irony: Music, Politics and Popular Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 59–72; and Yating Tang, 'Musical Life in the Jewish Refugee Community in Shanghai: Popular and Art Music', *Journal of Music in China*, 4 (2002), 167–86.

⁹ Several reviews of operetta productions can be found in the weekly German-language *Shanghai Jewish Chronicle*.

¹⁰ See Marcia Reynnders Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 126, 129.

¹¹ Klaus Waller, *Paul Abraham: Der tragische König der Operette* (Norderstedt: BoD, 2014), 166.

¹² 'es ist mir leider unmöglich, in einer Atmosphäre zu leben und zu arbeiten, in der meine beste Freunde und Mitarbeiter, nur weil sie den Anforderungen der Nürnberger Rassegesetze nicht entsprechen, auf das grausamste verfolgt und drangsaliert werden'. Stolz's words, quoted by Gustav Holm in *Im ¾ Takt durch die Welt: Ein Lebensbild des Komponisten Robert Stolz* (Vienna: Ibis-Verlag, 1948), 342.

¹³ *Operettenführer* (Reclam, 1939).

Others who faced no immediate threats were not unaffected by events: after the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, Künneke found that his wife was categorized as a 'Mischling' (a German-Jew hybrid in the Nazi pseudo-science of race). In January 1936, he was dismissed as conductor of his opera *Die große Sünderin* at the Berlin Staatsoper, because he clung to his marriage with a 'half-barbaric' wife.¹⁴ The most successful operetta of the Third Reich era was perhaps Fred Raymond's escapist *Maske in Blau* (1937). Raymond's *Saison in Salzburg* appeared in the year of the Anschluss, 1938, and was intended as a Nazi-approved substitute for *Im weißen Rössl* – banned because of its connection with the Jewish director Erik Charell, the Jewish lyricist Robert Gilbert (Jean Gilbert's son), and the decadent jazz rhythms of Ralph Benatzky. An operetta of this period, however, that can be seen to some extent as satirizing the Nazis, especially their recent focus on sporting prowess at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, was Abraham's *Roxy und ihr Wunderteam*, produced in Vienna in 1937.¹⁵

Stefan Frey has made the astute observation that *Giuditta*, which ends with the most affecting of Lehár's several depictions of resignation, symbolizes the demise of operetta. Four days after a final performance at the Vienna State Opera on 7 March 1938, Nazi troops took over the city. Jarmila Novotna, who sang the title role (as she had done in the premiere of 1934) went to the USA and became a star at the Metropolitan Opera. Richard Tauber, who played the lead male role Octavio, made his way to the UK, as did one of the librettists, Paul Knepler. Tauber had married English actress Diana Napier in 1936, and she recollects that Hermann Göring, who was an admirer of Tauber's singing, came over to their table at a restaurant in Munich to warn him of the danger facing him in Germany.¹⁶ The lyricist, Fritz Löhner-Beda, had written satirical poems about Nazism, and was arrested the day after the Anschluss. On 1 April 1938, he was transported along with over 150 others regarded as key subversives (*Prominente*) to Dachau Concentration Camp.¹⁷ He was transferred to Auschwitz III in October 1942 and beaten to death there in

¹⁴ 'weil er an seiner Ehe mit einer "halb barbarischen" Frau festhielt'. Words attributed, without a precise source, to operetta composer Edmund Nick, in Schneiderei, *Eduard Künneke*, 181.

¹⁵ A view put forward by Clarke in 'Konkav und konvex', 192–93. The libretto of 1937, held in the Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library, states that the operetta is 'playing today in London, Budapest and Siofok [Lake Balaton, Hungary]', but I can find no record of a London performance.

¹⁶ Charles Castle, with Diana Napier Tauber, *This Was Richard Tauber* (London: W. H. Allen, 1971), 89.

¹⁷ Günther Schwarberg, *Dein ist mein ganzes Herz* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002), 82.

December.¹⁸ It is sometimes claimed that Lehár had made a personal plea to Hitler in a vain attempt to obtain Löhner-Beda's release, but, when asked after the war, he said he knew nothing of his colleague's arrest.¹⁹

Operetta continued to enjoy a measure of popularity during the Third Reich, but many operettas went unperformed. Syncopated rhythms ran into difficulties as the 1930s progressed because all jazz rhythms were to be avoided in Nazi-approved operetta.²⁰ Operetta production was no longer to be guided by the taste of the public but, rather, by the specifications of the Ministry. The Ministry, however, knew better than to try to use operetta as a means of indoctrination and was content for it to be escapist entertainment with the occasional gesture of conformity with the politics of *Nationalsozialismus*.

Operettas by Jewish composers were banned, including one of Hitler's and Himmler's favourites, *Schwarzwaldmädel*. Its composer Leon Jessel was eventually arrested by the Gestapo. He was admitted some time later to the Jewish Hospital in Berlin, wrapped in rags, bleeding from his mouth and nose, and reduced to a skeleton.²¹ Lehár may have seemed to be doing well – he and Künneke were made exceptions when the Reich Radio Chamber adopted a policy in early 1938 of not broadcasting music by composers who had Jewish wives²² – but Lehár's *Rastelbinder* was banned because of its Jewish leading character, and *Friederike* was banned because of Löhner-Beda's involvement in the libretto. In 1936, Leopold Jacobson's name was removed from the Berlin production of Künneke's *Lady Hamilton*,²³ and this well-established librettist, who had written the books for Straus's *Ein Walzertraum* and Gilbert's *Katja, die Tänzerin*, was later murdered in Theresienstadt. Other composers found difficulties

¹⁸ Raul Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1990), 994. Paul D. Seeley examines Lehár's life during the Nazi period, in 'Franz Lehár: Aspects of His Life with a Critical Survey of His Operettas and the Work of His Jewish Librettists', PhD diss. University of Liverpool, 2004, 88–143.

¹⁹ Gunther Schwarberg, *Dein ist mein ganzes Herz* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002), 12, 125, and 183.

²⁰ As early as 1933, Heinrich Streker reassures the musician in the piano score to his *Ännchen von Tharau*: 'Alles Jazzmäßige vermeiden' (everything jazz-like avoided). Quoted in Kevin Clarke, 'Konkav und konvex: Bühnenoperetten und Operettenfilme als Spiegel der Zeitläufe 1933–1945', in Brandl-Risi, Risi, and Simon, *Kunst der Oberfläche*, 184–96, at 187.

²¹ Günter Weisenborn, *Der lautlose Aufstand: Bericht über die Widerstandsbewegung des deutschen Volkes 1933–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Röderberg-Verlag, 4th edn 1974), 274; cited in Albrecht Dümmling, 'Wiederentdeckung NS-verfolgter Operettenkomponisten: Erfahrungen eines Musikwissenschaftlers', in Schaller, *Operette unterm Hakenkreuz*, 198–208, at 204.

²² Michael H. Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83.

²³ Kevin Clarke, 'Song of the Sea', booklet accompanying 2 CD box set of *Lady Hamilton*, cond. Franz Marzalek [1953], Gala GL 100.774 (2007), 7–12, at 12.

because they worked with Jewish librettists or Jewish directors. Benatzky was ‘accidentally’ included in a list of Jewish composers, perhaps because he had married singer Josma Selim, who was Jewish, and then, a year after her death in 1929, had married another Jewish artist, the dancer Mela Hoffmann. Goebbels certainly believed Benatzky was Jewish until he discovered otherwise in July 1938, when he ‘rehabilitated’ him.²⁴ Hence, his name does not appear on the proscribed list in the *Lexikon* of 1940.

While conceding that, to a degree, operetta remained popular under the Third Reich, its glory days had passed with the lack of productions of Fall, Straus, Gilbert, Kálmán, Berté, Jessel, Abraham, Benatzky, and Stolz – and, making things worse, was the disappearance of some of the great operetta stars, such as Fritzi Massary, Oskar Dénes, Rosy Barsony, Gitta Alpár, Richard Tauber, and Marta Eggerth. Louis Treumann, Vienna’s first Danilo, was deported to Theresienstadt on 28 July 1942, where he died ‘of exhaustion’ the next year.²⁵ The German state wrenched control of operetta from private and commercial hands, but there was concern at its lack of grandeur. A desire to elevate its standing is evident in the production of Künneke’s *Die große Sünderin* at the Berlin State Opera in 1935. The leading roles were given to ‘serious’ opera singers Tiana Lemnitz and tenor Helge Roswaenge, and the music was played by a high-status orchestra. Sometimes, remarkable ironies surround operetta during the Third Reich. In his Leningrad Symphony (1940), Shostakovich constructs a relentless march out of a tune related to Danilo’s ‘Da geh’ ich ins Maxim’, from Hitler’s favourite operetta *Die lustige Witwe*. Shostakovich undoubtedly intended it to represent frenzied German aggression, and yet, at the end of the refrain of the original song, Danilo explains scornfully that he goes to Maxim’s because ‘dann kann ich leicht vergessen mein teures Vaterland’ (‘I can then easily forget my dear fatherland’).

Operettas of the Third Reich era did not travel to Britain and America the way they had done in the past. Kálmán’s *Maritza* (*Gräfin Mariza*) was the last operetta from the German stage to have a West End premiere before the outbreak of the Second World War. In the previous decade, this work had been a great success at both the Theater an der Wien and the Shubert Theatre, New York (as *Countess Maritza*, with comic scenes and a subplot added by Harry B. Smith). The London production of *Maritza* in

²⁴ Diary entry, 12 Jul. 1938, in Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente*, vol. 3 (Munich: Saur, 1987), 478, cited in Stefan Frey, ‘Was sagt ihr zu diesem Erfolg’: Franz Lehár und die Unterhaltungsmusik des 20. Jahrhunderts (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1999), 305.

²⁵ See Stefan Frey, ‘Was sagt ihr zu diesem Erfolg’, 322.

July 1938 gave Kálmán an excuse to leave Vienna. The Anschluss had been in March that year, and the imposition of the Nuremberg Laws in Austria had been in May. Described by Stefan Frey as the swansong for Hungarian-Austrian operetta, it was ironically appropriate that *Maritza* was also the swansong for silver-age operetta in the West End.²⁶ It ran for just 68 performances. Kálmán emigrated to the USA, but found his bank accounts frozen in December 1941, when Germany declared war on the US and he became regarded as an enemy alien.²⁷ Worse was in store for his two youngest sisters, Ilona and Milike, who both died during an enforced march of Jewish slave labourers from a Budapest brickyard in November 1944.²⁸

The last 'Viennese' operetta in London before the Second World War was Ivor Novello's *The Dancing Years*. Len Platt cites a letter in the Lord Chamberlain's Plays collection in the British Library, which complains about the anti-Nazi scene (scene 6): 'It undoubtedly pleased a certain section of the audience and was wildly applauded, but it jarred others and some of the people booed.'²⁹ Novello had shown that he was not averse to drawing comparisons between the stage and real life, and, indeed, George Edwardes appears briefly as a character in this operetta. However, Edwardes's most famous theatres, Daly's and the Gaiety, had both closed their doors by the time of this production, the former in 1937, the latter in 1938. It was another sign of the end of an era.

'Schön war das Märchen, nun ist es zu Ende'.³⁰

²⁶ 'Unter Tränen lachen', 166. ²⁷ 'Unter Tränen lachen', 264.

²⁸ 'Unter Tränen lachen', 282.

²⁹ Len Platt, 'West End Musical Theatre and the Representation of Germany', in Platt, Becker, and Linton, *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin*, 224–41, at 238.

³⁰ The fairytale was beautiful, but now it has ended. 'Good Night' (English waltz), *Viktoria und ihr Husar* (lyrics by Fritz Löhner-Beda, music by Paul Abraham, 1930).