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GEORG KREISLER – THE PESSIMISTIC OPTIMIST

Georg Kreisler fled Vienna to avoid anti-Semitic persecution in 1938. Since his return from the US to Europe in 1955 he has achieved recognition in the world of German cabaret, but because he has consistently maintained a radically critical view of capitalist society and its interpretation of democracy, the status that his artistic achievements warrant has eluded him. His plays and novels are generally less well-known than the extraordinary range of songs he has written for the cabaret, where his remarkable musical and verbal dexterity as composer, poet, pianist, and performer has produced work of enduring quality and appeal.

Introduction

Georg Kreisler, who was born in Vienna in 1922, has written cabaret songs for half a century. The songs have certainly brought him a mixture of fame and notoriety in the German-speaking world, but it is nonetheless hard to resist the conclusion that his achievements still remain undervalued. It is not as if there is no market in German cultural circles for work which harnesses musicianship, textual dexterity, showmanship, wit, and political acuity in such strikingly original ways that the resultant sum seems greater than the parts. Songs by Brecht, Weill, Tucholsky, Eisler, and Biermann have set precedents as artefacts that are actually admired and granted recognition, as *enfants terribles* that can be tolerated in polite literary society, and figures whom Kreisler cites as some of his influences are established men of letters: Nestroy, Morgenstern, and Kästner.¹ Kreisler's prodigious output of remarkable songs for the cabaret (approximately a thousand in number),² have yet to elevate him to an appropriate place in the German cultural firmament.

A tribute to his songs automatically compounds the issue by diverting attention from his output in other spheres: novels, stories, poetry, plays, musicals, and latterly an opera entitled *Der Aufstand der Schmetterlinge*, premiered in Vienna in November 2000. And while all warrant analysis, Kreisler's extraordinary life story as a Jewish refugee from Austria who retains his American citizenship, but has worked in the German-speaking world since 1955, itself attracts interest. Kreisler has now abandoned the memoirs that were originally intended for publication in 2000; in a recent collection of prose and verse texts, he recounts how they led him to discover that he 'musste fürchten, mich falsch einzuschätzen... Ich war kein Thema für mich.'³ Despite this fractured *autobiography*, enough is known of his life to designate it a fractured biography of particular resonance, one that is, moreover, eloquently expressed and communicated in his art. When asked his profession for the sake of hotel registration forms Kreisler uses the term

‘Fremder’;⁴ the practice deftly encapsulates a number of interlinked themes: the personal Odyssey of a refugee from totalitarian oppression who is caught up in the criss-cross fortunes of national and ideological conflict, the Jewish cultural tradition of peregrination, the existential alienation of life in the modern age, the political apartness of a radical speaking out against a capitalist orthodoxy, the poetic privacy of a macabre and surreal inner world, and the humorist’s isolation when confronting an audience’s comedic expectations. While the absence of Kreisler’s memoirs is frustrating, his work enriches our understanding of life in the Western world in the twentieth century, and seems consonant with his own experience at the same time as transcending it to acquire an autonomy of its own.

This chapter will first outline Kreisler’s biography, and then comment on three works from different stages of his career that all concern themselves with problems of identity formation and recognition. It will subsequently examine aspects of Kreisler’s songs, and conclude with a reference to the collection of prose texts *Worte ohne Lieder*.

Biography

Kreisler, born 18th July 1922, grew up in Vienna as the only child of a middle-class Jewish family (his father, Siegfried Kreisler, was a lawyer); his memories of the cold and isolated atmosphere of life at home and at school in the years before the family’s flight from the Nazis in 1938 paint a dismal picture.⁵ By contrast, his picaresque journey to the US was an appropriate if abrupt upbeat to a remarkable voyage of discovery; having witnessed the centre of Marseilles go up in flames, and whiled away his time at sea by playing chess with Bugsy Siegel, a prohibition racketeer whom Kreisler’s vessel rescued from a yacht that had run adrift (and who was promptly bundled off by detectives on disembarkation at Los Angeles),⁶ Kreisler exchanged the gloom of Vienna for the warmth of California, where the comparative freedom of professional music-making, the lure of film (Kreisler’s cousin worked in the film industry, which accounted for the family’s destination), and the upheavals of military service awaited him. As befits the Candidian narrative that Kreisler’s life became, Bugsy Siegel reappeared when, one evening after the war, Kreisler’s performance in a Beverley Hills bar was interrupted by nearby gunshots; the victim turned out to be none other than the racketeer with whom he had played chess en route to America.

Los Angeles seemed a promising musical environment. Kreisler was accepted as a student at UCLA by Arnold Schoenberg, but prevented from proceeding with the arrangement by the university authorities. Hollywood’s