
Von heute auf morgen [From Today till Tomorrow], op. 32



Title	Von heute auf morgen [From Today till Tomorrow], Opera in 1 act, op. 32
Time of origin	1928–1929
Premiere	1 February 1930, Frankfurt am Main, Opernhaus
Duration	ca. 53 min.

In the late 1920s, one of the reactions to the much-discussed “crisis of opera” was the adaptation of current themes in the so-called “Zeitoper” (opera of the time). Set in the present, mostly humorous, and invariably addressing the fashions of daily life, the genre enjoyed great popularity for a brief period. In the fall of 1928, Arnold Schönberg became convinced that he could write a similarly successful contemporary opera as Ernst Krenek and Kurt Weill without adopting, but rather questioning the musical styles associated with the genre.

“‘Von heute auf morgen’ is intended to be a light comic opera: reflecting only what takes place from one day to the next, something ephemeral, impermanent. Even assuming that the ‘what’ of the plot were more significant, the ‘how’ of presentation must be light: an everyday, almost banal story. Only those who are so inclined can find deeper meaning.

“It reveals that it would be precarious to rock foundations for the sake of fashion.

“It is a portrait of people who are silly enough to convert principles that fashion only uses to show off into practice; people who risk their marital happiness without suspecting that fashion, which is content with outward appearances, will perhaps glorify this marital happiness again on its next whim.

“Those who pay attention to the double sense of the numerous witticisms in addition to this very obvious statement will quite easily understand these additional themes and be able to take pleasure in following them.

“The development of thoughts is unveiled in the following:

“The couple returns home from an engagement, the husband ‘once again’ raving about an elegant, fashionable woman. His much too domestic spouse, annoyed and feeling her happiness threatened, shows him: ‘every woman can do both’ by dressing like a dancer, assuming the pose of a ‘woman of the world,’ and slipping into the role of a mischievous imp in a way that corresponds to that view of life. In the beginning she charms her husband, who takes her seriously, but eventually he wishes she were ‘the way she was before.’ Almost reconciled, they must undergo one more trial, namely the approaches of the ‘people of today’: the ‘charming vivacious woman’ and the ‘famous tenor,’ who attempts to win over the wife, appear and seductively espouse the modern view of life. In vain: when, without having achieved their end, they have to leave, even the husband finds that they are ‘not even quite modern any more.’” (Arnold Schönberg: notes for a publicity flyer about “Von heute auf morgen,” April 1930)

"Very few people have an idea how things would be if the slogans on everybody's lips became reality. How much evil would remain undone in life, in politics, in art, in all private affairs if everyone could imagine the consequences of their actions: if a politician, for example, could picture those whom he sends to their death, if an employer could see the effect of a dismissal, or the employee the consequences of an omission. However harmless the catchwords of fashion may be, how unimportant it is to imagine how one looks in a wide or narrow tie, tight or wide trousers, long or short hair or dress – one is, after all, in concordance with fashion, and the next fashion will bring something different –, the matter becomes alarmingly serious when the slogans of fashion touch the foundations of private life, the relationship between the sexes, and the institution of marriage: for the next fashion will again bring something different." (Arnold Schönberg: introduction to a broadcast of the opera "Von heute auf morgen," Funkstunde Berlin, 1930)

"One ought to feel or sense that behind these simple events something else is hidden; that these everyday characters and happenings are being used to show how, above and beyond this simple story of a marriage, the so-called modern and merely modish exists only from today till tomorrow, from an uncertain hand into a voracious mouth – not only in marriage, but no less in art, in politics and views of life." (Arnold Schönberg to Wilhelm Steinberg, 4 October 1929)

Schönberg's modification to the genre "Zeitoper" principally took the form of applying his now fully developed and mature twelve-tone method while eschewing the most important musical attribute of the genre: the imitation of American dance music and jazz. Clearly Schönberg was confident that the twelve-tone method and his mastery of it were now flexible enough to enable him to write an entirely original popular comic opera.

"The main advantage of the method of composing with twelve tones is its unifying effect. In a very convincing way, I experienced this satisfaction of having been right about this when I once prepared the singers of my opera 'Von heute auf morgen.' The technique, rhythm and intonation of all these parts were tremendously difficult for them, though they all possessed absolute pitch. But suddenly one of the singers came and told me that since he had become familiar with the basic set, everything seemed easier for him. At short intervals all the other singers told me the same thing independently. I was very pleased with this, and, thinking it over, I found ever greater encouragement in the following hypothesis:

"Prior to Richard Wagner, operas consisted almost exclusively of independent pieces, whose mutual relation did not seem to be a musical one. Personally, I refuse to believe that in the great masterworks pieces are connected only by the superficial coherence of the dramatic proceedings. Even if these pieces were merely 'fillers' taken from earlier works of the same composer, something must have satisfied the master's sense of form and logic. We may not be able to discover it, but certainly it exists. In music there is no form without logic, there is no logic without unity.

"I believe that when Richard Wagner introduced his 'Leitmotiv' – for the same purpose as that for which I introduced my basic set – he may have said: 'Let there be unity.'" (Arnold Schönberg: Composition with Twelve Tones)

For Schönberg, the twelve-tone method represented a key to the future in compositional terms, and in "Von heute auf morgen" he attempted to prove that that this key was not incompatible with popular success. The 1930 performances at the Frankfurt Opera and over the radio disappointed the composer. His hopes for popular success were not realized. Approximately two months after the premiere Schönberg was to write the rather defensive essay "My Public," an essay in which he argues that the "expert judges" – principally conductors, performers, and others with influence in the musical world – should be held responsible for the lack of understanding of his music.

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