
ARTS & LETTERS

complains, "there just isn't much new opera to be seen." Among the 87 opera companies that make up OPERA America, opera's equivalent of a national trade association, the most frequently performed work during the 1981-82 season was Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, written in 1851. Of the 47 operas that were performed at least 10 times during the season, only 13 were creations of the 20th century (and six of those were Puccini operas from the early 1900s).

A look at the 1983-84 production schedule of the OPERA America companies suggests that the situation is getting worse. Out of 263 planned presentations, 222 were written before 1930.

The companies reply that because of cuts in subsidies from the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), they cannot afford to take chances on modern works that might not draw large audiences. Lipman is skeptical: The NEA's grants to opera companies totaled only \$2 million in 1975, peaked at over \$6 million in 1981, and fell only to \$5 million in 1983.

But the NEA is responsible in another way for at least some of opera's ossification, he argues. In 1978, it lumped together its subsidies for opera and for more popularly oriented musical theater. Ever since, opera companies have had to contend with "arts bureaucrats" who often prefer lighter musicals. Lipman insists, however, that the opera companies themselves are most at fault. He says that it is the responsibility of the top companies, such as New York's Metropolitan Opera, to present new works regardless of how many people turn out to hear them.

The classic operas of Mozart, Verdi, and others are "treasures of civilization" and must be performed. But if newer works—e.g., Dominick Argento's *Miss Havisham's Fire*, Roger Sessions's *Montezuma*—are not staged more often, opera itself could face eventual extinction.

OTHER NATIONS

Does Europe Still Exist?

"The Tragedy of Central Europe" by Milan Kundera, in *The New York Review of Books* (Apr. 26, 1984), P.O. Box 940, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

In November 1956, as Soviet troops moved in to suppress a rebellion in Budapest, the director of the Hungarian News Agency telexed a last message to the outside world: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe."

Sadly, most of those for whom his message was intended could not quite comprehend it, writes Czechoslovakian-born novelist Milan Kundera. To Western Europeans, Hungary and the other nations of Central Europe—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania—had become part of the Soviet bloc after 1945. They had already "vanished from the map of the West." How could Hungarians choose to die for something to which they no longer belonged?

OTHER NATIONS

In fact, says Kundera, the European continent had been naturally divided between East and West centuries before the Soviet "iron curtain" descended in 1945. Eastern Europe, which included Russia, was "anchored in Byzantium and the Orthodox Church," while Western Europe was "tied to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church." Kundera's homeland and its neighbors were clearly tied to the West. "After 1945," Kundera writes, "the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations . . . woke up to discover that they were now in the East."

Culturally, however, Central Europeans still considered themselves part of the West. As their native political institutions were stamped out, they clung ever more tenaciously to their culture, the culture of Europe. It is no coincidence, Kundera says, that the region's frequent anti-Soviet rebellions—the Hungarian uprising in 1956, Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring of 1968, and the Polish dissident outbreaks in 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1980—were sparked and nourished by an efflorescence in the arts. "The identity of a people and of a civilization is reflected and concentrated" in culture, Kundera writes. "If this identity is threatened with extinction, cultural life grows correspondingly more intense."

But even as culture was increasing in importance in captive Central Europe, it was declining in Western Europe. Indeed, Kundera believes, the mass-communications media have supplanted culture there: Sophisticated Western Europeans now discuss TV programs, not poetry, painting, or philosophy. They would scarcely notice if their "highbrow" literary journals disappeared, Kundera argues. But the Czechs were "in a state of anguish" when the Soviets shut down such publications in 1968.

The "real tragedy" for Central Europe, Kundera concludes, is not Soviet domination, grim as it is, but the demise of traditional European culture. In 1956, the director of the Hungarian News Agency did indeed die for Europe: "Behind the iron curtain, he did not suspect that the times had changed and that in Europe itself Europe was no longer experienced as a value."

Nigeria's Retreat From Democracy

"Dateline Nigeria: Democracy Down but Not Out" by Jean Herskovits, in *Foreign Policy* (Spring 1984), P.O. Box 984, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Nigeria was the world's fourth largest democracy until a bloodless coup toppled President Alhaji Shehu Shagari's government on New Year's Eve day of 1983.

Major General Muhammadu Buhari took over "with no resistance and to wide popular acclaim," reports Herskovits, a historian at the State University of New York at Purchase. But Nigerians have not permanently turned their backs on democracy, she says.

The West African nation adopted a parliamentary system when it gained independence from Great Britain in 1960, but an army coup