



Re-Contextualizing Viktor Ullmann's "Der Kaiser von Atlantis" within Twentieth-Century German Opera

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Abstract:

Viktor Ullmann's opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, composed in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, has received regular performances since its belated first performance in 1975. Research on this opera has been restricted to the confines of Theresienstadt, with limited connections made to the outside world. Nevertheless, when Ullmann's work is viewed within the artistically evolving context of the interwar formative era in Ullmann's life – new light is shed on his artistic achievements. This era of change between 1918 and 1930 gave rise to new artistic movements such as *Neue Sachlichkeit* and produced the genres of "Brechtian Epic Theatre," and Kabarett. Artists of staged works used their artistic freedom to challenge the status quo, most obviously with techniques such as Bertolt Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt." In the freedom of the newly established Republics, political commentary and the representation of contemporary life became material for libretti. It is within this era that we find the inspiration and source of Ullmann's representation of Theresienstadt within *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*. Indeed, examining the opera within the context of the interwar period expands many elements beyond the representation of Theresienstadt. By investigating the symbolisms within the opera to the spirit of the new Republics, we can re-contextualize the modest but significant place *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* holds in the operatic repertoire. For it is only by combining these two contrasting worlds – the freedoms associated with the artistic experiments in liberal democracy typical of the interwar period and the restrictions of detention in Theresienstadt at the hands of the National Socialists – that a robust understanding of the mastery of defiance and irony that is *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* becomes possible.

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Re-Contextualizing Viktor Ullmann's Der Kaiser von Atlantis within Twentieth-Century German Opera, deposition, in agreement with traditional concepts, is non-trivial.

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