Ernst Krenek Biography

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Contents

Ernst Krenek Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Prolific Austrian-American composer Ernst Krenek (1900-1991) experimented widely with styles and techniques of composition, including atonality, neoclassicism, the twelve-tone system, serialism, and electronic music.

Ernst Krenek was born on August 23, 1900, in Vienna, Austria, to Czech parents. His musical instruction began when he was six years old, and in 1916 he studied with the famous opera composer Franz Schreker--first at the Academy of Music in Vienna and later at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. By his early twenties, Krenek was composing distinctive works of his own, such as the opera *Die Zwingburg* (text by Franz Werfel).

In 1923 Krenek was invited by a patron of contemporary music to spend two years in Switzerland, where he produced two more operas, *Der Sprung über den Schatten* and *Orpheus und Eurydike*. However, his greatest operatic success, *Jonny spielt auf* (Johnny Strikes Up the Band!), came in 1927. This opera about a black jazz musician is rarely staged today, but was originally received with great enthusiasm and performed worldwide.

In 1928, after three years as an assistant at opera houses in Kassel and Wiesbaden, in Germany, Krenek returned to Vienna. His hopes for artistic success in his native city were shattered in 1934, when the performance of his twelve-tone opera *Karl V* at the Vienna State Opera was canceled for political reasons. Four years later he emigrated to the United States.

Citizenship and Work

Krenek taught composition at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, from 1939 to 1942 and at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, from 1942 to 1947. He became an American citizen in 1945 and settled in California.

An intensely productive composer, Krenek's list of compositions included 195 opus numbers by 1965. He became increasingly interested in serial composition as well as in electronic techniques. Some works including these elements are *Spiritus Intelligentiae, Sanctus* (1956), for voices and electronic sounds; *Sestina* (1957), for soprano, violin, guitar, flute, clarinet, trumpet, and percussion; *Ausgerechnet und verspielt,* a television opera (1959); and *Quintina* (1965), for soprano, six instruments, and audio tape. A more conservative work is the *Deutsche Messe* (1968), which displays Krenek's willingness to use any style that serves his needs of the moment.

In addition to several books and the operas *Pallas Athena Weeps* (1955) and *Sardakai* (1969), Krenek composed the oratorio *Opus sine nomine,* his final work, which was performed in Vienna in 1990. He died in Palm Springs, California, on December 23, 1991.