

New York, 5 January 1946:

In ragged clothes, but as usual wearing elegant white gloves, Paul Abraham steps on Madison avenue, positions himself on a socket in the central reserve of the roadway and starts to direct an imaginary orchestra. This last 'performance' would take the most successful composer of the early 1930s to psychiatry. The game is over...

On this homepage you will read everything about the triumphs and defeats of this creator of immortal tunes.

The biographical homepage of the operetta composer

# PAUL ABRAHAM (1892-1960)

His life - His tunes - His influence

by Klaus Waller (*Translation: Nardina Alongi*)

## From Apatin to Budapest

Paul Abraham was born as *Ábrahám Pál* on 2 November 1892 in the provincial town of Zombor (in modern Serbia), which at that time belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire of the Habsburgian monarchy. He grew up nearby in the town of Apatin. We know close to nothing about his childhood. It seems certain that his mother, a piano teacher, introduced him to the world of music - as well his father, vice manager of a bank, had influenced him with his profession - for both his interests, for music and for financial business, he tried to unite when he was a young man, and this would make his life rather adventurous.

After attending the Swabian village school of Apatin and his father's early death, Abraham came to Budapest when he was still a child. A music professor in Apatin had heard him playing piano when he was seven and recommended to his mother to move to Budapest, where he promoted Abraham further. Budapest was at that time a culturally vivid urban centre with a great deal of ethnic German population. 67 percent of Magyars were facing almost 24 percent of Germanophone people, in addition there were approx. 6 percent of Slovenes and a similar number of other nationalities. Numerous inhabitants of Budapest turned towards Austria or Germany during the first third of the 20th century and some of them even emigrated to there - Paul Abraham was among them.

## An early great talent

But first it was important to make a career in Budapest. Abraham tried in two different ways: First by visiting the commercial school and committing to a subsequent apprenticeship at a bank, second, by studying music, originally at the conservatoire, then at the Royal Hungarian Music Academy (1910-1916).

His musical talent had been recognised early, and it was striking. On governmental decision, Abraham was already allowed to study music history, theory and composition from Viktor Herzfeld before he had achieved the standard minimum age. Piano lessons he was taught by Albert Siklós. Instead of taking five years, as would have been common, Paul Abraham mastered the required content within three years. (1) Allegedly the academy appointed him already in very early years as a professor of music theory and liturgical music. (3)

Not much is known about his early compositions. In early 1916, a cello concert written by Abraham was performed at the Academy, his Hungarian Serenade followed in December, as well as a string quartet in four movements. Several of his opera were performed by the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra. 'A mass followed a year later which even received a well-endowed award.' (8) A requiem is also said to have belonged to his compositions. However, this could refer to the very same opus. A string quartet was played on the Salzburg Festival in 1922. Research dedicated to a Paul Abraham commemorative exhibition in the Hungarian embassy in Berlin produced an article, published in the magazine *Színházi Élet* (Theatre Live). There was a note, dated 1918, according to which Abraham had asked the known Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár for assignment of his stage play *Farsang* (Carnival), to compose an opera that would be based on it. (1) The author accepted. Deszö Kosztolány, a poet, was intended to write the verses. It is not known what became of this project.

A minor opera, 'Etelkas Herz', was also mentioned to have been composed by Abraham and

performed by the Budapest puppet theatre in 1917. A text accompanying the exhibition stated: 'The newspaper illustrated the article with a witty portrait caricature of the spirited Abraham, almost taking off while conducting.' (1)

All this came apparently to an abrupt end in 1917/1918. By the end of the World War, Paul Abraham also went as a soldier of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the battlefield.(4) After his return there was for some time nothing any more as it had been before.

## Swinging into bankruptcy

Few reports on Paul Abraham's life are preserved from the post-war period. It seems ascertained that - probably because music offered no financial perspective in those times - he committed at first intensively to the financial business. And that he did in different ways.

He was living out 'the dark side of his mind', as popular saying goes. Paul Abraham was obviously a natural gambler. And this was evident not only from his regular visits to the gambling dens of Vienna (3), but even more so from his risky stock market transactions. From contemporary newspaper reports, which have recently appeared, we know that he speculated for himself and others on the stock market, earned a lot of money there, then slid into the bankruptcy. In a newspaper report was reported that the young "hopeful composer" had opened a stock exchange office for lack of success so far, speculating among other things on the stock exchange for many artist friends (who themselves were partly without money). In the bear market in 1924 he had to declare bankruptcy. Because many small investors did not want to agree on a settlement, he was notified and imprisoned for embezzlement in Budapest's Markó uccai prison. He himself reported on a partner who had brought him into the matter. This was not reported in the present reports. Nor is known the judgment.

The following years are mostly veiled in darkness, in general, little is known about Abraham's musical creations up to his time when he was conductor of the Budapest Operetta Theatre, beginning in 1927. After his bankrupting disaster, Abraham apparently kept himself afloat by occasionally conducting coffee house bands and teaching singing to young singers and actors.

Robert Dachs, a collector, refers in a contribution on occasion of a Berlin exhibition in 1998 to an article in the Viennese magazine 'Tonfilm, Theater, Tanz', published in the 1930s. Paul Abraham told there in an interview, 'When I was a young, ideally talented musician, I wrote string quartets which yielded no profit. My best sonatas and fugues failed to produce the slightest payment. One day I was in a record shop where a terrible kitsch was played, 'Ich küsse Ihre Hand, Madame'. Yet the shop assistant told me that one and a half million records of this had already been sold. Thus I began to compose crooning. However, I smuggled some minor fugues into each operetta, for I had always enjoyed myself a lot when after the opening night some or other serious music buffs thankfully shook my hand because of that.' (6)

'Ich küsse Ihre Hand, Madame' was sung by Richard Tauber, the very tenor who was later successfully performing Abraham's melodies.

## The first great results

Abraham had obviously in his middle thirties found a tool to match both his brilliant skill and his financial survival. Even though nobody, not even himself, could predict the high tide of his career that would follow this decision.

In 1927, Abraham began conducting the Budapesti Operettszínház (operetta theatre). His first success in composing was the operetta 'Zenebona', to which he contributed four tunes. They hit so effectively that a full operetta was ordered from him. This was 'Der Gatte des Fräuleins', based on a stage play by Gabor Drégely. In this musical comedy, which was played for the first time in 1928, there was 16-year-old Marta Eggerth performing besides established colleagues, girl who was promoted as a wunderkind, and here began her international career as operetta singer and actress.(1)

Then a soundtrack that was written in 1929 initiated Paul Abraham's breakthrough. The motion picture 'Melodie des Herzens', produced in Hungary, had been originally intended as a silent film. However, just at that time the technical possibilities for sound film were developed – at short term it was decided to turn 'Melodie des Herzens' into a musical film. Catchy music had to be found. Abraham and other composers were appointed. He 'recycled', among others, a tune written for 'Der Gatte des Fräuleins'. (2) Willy Fritsch sang in this film Abraham's song, 'Bin kein Hauptmann, bin kein großes Tier', which became a hit in Germany.

When also the operetta 'Viktoria' (after a stage play by Imre Földes) was successfully performed in Budapest, Abraham could no longer be restrained to Hungary. By request of Erich Pommer, a producer of the German motion picture company Ufa, he went together with his wife Sarolta

(Charlotte) Feszelyi, to Berlin, which was at that time the capital of European hedonism.

## Living in a frenzy

Abraham's entry to Berlin was anything but triumphant. Bernard Grun wrote in 'Kulturgeschichte der Operette': 'He hardly gave the impression of a consolidated man, looking rather absent-minded, uprooted and helpless.' (5) A contemporary witness described Abraham's first contact with the music publisher, Armin Robinson, like this: Robinson 'offered 4000 DM ... In view of the sum, despite not having a single crude pfennig in his pocket, Abraham asked a little uncertainly: Can I survive with this? He thought that Robinson was offering him 4000 DM per year, but Robinson was actually speaking about a monthly salary of this amount.' (1)

Abraham could almost dive in money a few months later. The fact contributed that on Robinson's recommendation he got involved with the leading operetta librettists of that time, Alfred Grünwald and Fritz Löhner-Beda. They perfectionised his operetta 'Viktoria', which was published in Germany as 'Viktoria und ihr Husar', and they were also the essential support of the subsequent operettas.

'Viktoria und ihr Husar' was for the first time in Germany performed at the Leipzig operetta festival on 7 April 1930. It was a great success with the audience.

## In 300 theatres all over Europe

The ultimate breakthrough came then in the Berlin Metropol Theatre. Abraham had for this production invited a soubrette, Rosy Barsony, and a buffo, Oskar Dénes, both from Budapest, and henceforth they would become favourites of the German audience. Abraham himself was conducting the opening night on 15 August - wearing fine, white gloves as usual - at the desk. A triumph! Tunes such as 'Meine Mama war aus Yokohama', 'Do-do-do', 'Mausi, süß warst du heute Nacht' and 'Pardon, Madam' became popular tunes over night. The composer is said to have earned half a million DM just from 'Viktoria und ihr Husar'. Within one year, 'Viktoria' was performed at more than 300 theatres all over Europe!

Life in a double frenzy followed. One being that success which made everything possible, also in terms of material goods. The other being Abraham's simultaneous working frenzy. He composed countless soundtracks and also performed them with his orchestra. Every opening night of 'Viktoria und ihr Husar', whether in Germany or abroad, he performed at the conductor's desk.

In addition, he celebrated in Berlin. The composer bought a minor fake rococo-style palace in Fasanenstrasse 33, just near the Kurfürstendamm, and in the swiftly collected ambient of valuable paintings, carpets and porcelain he celebrated several evenings per week his famous 'goulash parties', inviting 'tout Berlin'. He got sixty suits and 300 silk shirts at once. (3). 'He let bring champagne and caviar for his friends. And, tender-hearted as he was, he helped everybody who would ask him.' (20)

However, overpowering success also had its dark side. At night Abraham often could not sleep, was wandering through the city streets and trying to get distracted in bars and gambling houses. (20) Neither got his wife acquainted to the rapid speed: Sarolta Feszely moved back to Budapest ... (1)

## Swan song with chancellor and ministers

'Viktoria und ihr Husar' was soon performed everywhere in Germany. In 1932, the operetta was filmed (as were his next ones), supported by Abraham's musical conduction. But 'Viktoria' was only the beginning. Aforesaid soundtracks followed (i.a. an aria for the worldwide renown tenor, Jan Kiepura, in 'Die singende Stadt') and above all, in 1931, the new operetta 'Die Blume von Hawaii', which even excelled the success of 'Viktoria'. The operetta was performed for the first time in Leipzig on 24 July 1931 and immediately celebrated triumphs, also in Leipzig. It was a 'top-of-the-range revue operetta'. (21) Some of the included songs were 'Bin nur ein Jonny', 'My golden Baby', 'My little Boy' or 'Du traumschöne Perle der Südsee': they became evergreens until the present day.

Then the opening night of 'Ball im Savoy' took place on 23 December 1932, just in Berlin. It was *the* cultural event in the last days of the Weimar Republic. Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher was present, also his ministers and everybody else of name and fame in Berlin. Gitta Alpar, Rosy Barsony and Oskar Dénes impressed on the stage. The songs - as for example 'Es ist so schön, am Abend bummeln zu geh'n', 'Wenn wir Türken küssen' or 'Toujour l'amour' - were cheered, the applause was unceasing. 'After midnight, Gitta Alpar and the whole ensemble are moving with coloured lampions through the arena-style auditorium - and everybody sings together the song "Toujour l'amour".' (1)

## Escape - and worse: betrayal

However, such a sensitive feeling for the zeitgeist of the early 1930s could hardly ignore the clouds that were gathering all around the operetta stages of Berlin. Fascist extras unabashedly attacked Paul Abraham in the film studio, other Nazis denied to him admission to the 'Ball im Savoy' at the Great Theatre (run by the Jewish family Rotter!).

'The more frantically he delved into his various projects or night after night into the distractions that were offered by bars, cafés and gambling casinos or into sexual adventures, meant to drive out his latent depressions.' Moritz Pirol, a journalist, wrote so. (11)

Kurt von Schleicher resigned only about one month after the sensational premiere of 'Ball im Savoy', on 28 January 1933. On 31 January, Adolf Hitler assumed the office of Prime Minister. Abraham and his wife, who had meanwhile returned to Berlin, had to escape in a hurry to Budapest. Though there were in March and April still the German film opening nights of 'Die Blume von Hawaii', Abraham's opera were soon after prohibited. (11) His property was confiscated by the National Socialists.

Before departure, Abraham gave to his chauffeur, whom he trusted, the key of his safe in which he kept 200 unpublished compositions. However, the chauffeur sold the music sheets bit by bit to 'aryan' composers, so they were published under different names. (12) The ostracised composer and his tunes thus went on to remain present in Nazi Germany, unrecognised. Officially, however, there was no Abraham in the Third Reich any more.

## Contemporary history -frivolously commented

Paul Abraham lived after his escape from Germany in 1933 again in his Hungarian native country. There the Nazis had (yet) no word, and there he could, as in nearby Vienna, take other opera on the stage, as well as work for the film business. Within the single year of 1937 Abraham is said to have composed six (!) complete Hungarian operetta films in Budapest. (11) With regard to his work, thus, there was nothing different to report, nor of its amount. But the time of grand triumphs was over. Though the Viennese premieres of his operettas 'Märchen im Grandhotel' (1934), 'Dschainah, das Mädchen aus dem Tanzhaus' (1935) and 'Roxy und ihr Wunderteam' (1937) were quite successful. But all of this did not match the triumphant results of his time in Berlin

Anyway: His opera also commented on current events. 'After having written another trans-Atlantic operetta, 'Märchen im Grand Hotel' ..., Abraham composed in 1937 'Roxy und ihr Wunderteam', being an opus which exemplarily presents again all the ideals of the 'authentic' operetta, while frivolously commenting on contemporary history and slating, one year after the Olympic Games, the new German ideals of purity, virtue and race. The plot is telling of a football team trying to prepare in the training camp for the next game, without sex, without alcohol. Just consecrated to sports and victory. This works well until eleven ladies of the gymnastics club show up (enjoying the same training rules). Within shortest time, the heroic image of men à la Leni Riefenstahl collapses and a wild amorous play begins." (10) The title is an allusion to the so-called Austrian Miracle Team. The national football team had in 1931/1932 gained several sensational victories. Some players of the team even appeared on stage then during this very first 'sports operetta'. (19).

## Via Paris and Havana to the USA

Political realities caught up with Abraham in Budapest in 1939. Austria was already 'returned home into the Reich', now the fascistic machinations had also reached Hungary. Paul Abraham went to Paris - without his wife, who remained in Budapest and whom he would see again only more than 15 years later. Yet he appeared in Paris in female company – that of Yvonne Louise Ulrich. Abraham introduced her there among the groups of emigrants to Robert Stolz, whose fifth wife she would later become (nicknamed 'Einzi').

Abraham could live and work in Paris quite peacefully for a year. Compared with his former amount of work, the contracts remained scarce, though: He received (from film director Jean Boyer) merely the order for the soundtrack of one French motion picture, *Serenade* (starring Lilian Harvey and Louis Jouvet).

But Abraham had to flee also from Paris before the Nazis. Via Casablanca and Havana, where he stayed nearly one year, he finally reached Miami. From there he went by rail to New York. 'This was eight vital dollars cheaper than the direct ship passage.' (11) Abraham, cut from all profits, was so impecunious that his Hungarian friend, Paul Alexander (Alexander Pál), had to deposit the security of 500 dollars, without which Abraham's entry into the USA would have been impossible.



## There was no need for Abraham...

However, the USA became a persistent disappointment for Abraham. He who was acknowledged in Europe as one of the most modern popular composers of his time, he got here, in the motherland of jazz, no hold at all.

'There was no truth in Abraham's hopes that all would do well in "happy Hollywood" and that "Johnny, if he needed money", only "has to go to the Broadway", because it was lying around there, as he once wrote in the tunes of *Julia* and *Märchen im Grand-Hotel*. Abraham was absolutely impecunious and without a single contract. If the jazz-style was a sensation in Europe, the Americans had heard it ad nauseam from George Gershwin already - there was no need for Abraham.' (8)

Although Jacob J. Shubert, the theatre magnate, had already acquired the rights for 'Ball im Savoy', he did not intend to actually perform this operetta or other plays of Abraham at the Broadway. All attempts failed to gain success with new projects. In 1945 he wrote, together with Alfred Grünwald, librettist, one further operetta, named 'Tamburin'. It was never performed.

Slowly, but certainly, the symptoms of mental disease became apparent. An episode which Robert Stolz told later is typical. One day in 1943, Abraham invited all his friends for the next day into the Saint Moritz hotel, because he would marry there the famous Hollywood star of Hungarian origin, Ilona Massey. When the friends showed up the next day, bringing flowers, he knew nothing about it any more ... (4)

## Ten years in Creedmoor psychiatry

On 5 January 1946, his illness achieved a climax. Paul Abraham was expelled from the hotel after letting the liftboy ride 42 times up into the 17th floor and back, persistently shouting 'Faster, even faster'. Paul Abraham stepped out on Madison Avenue, as was told, in ragged clothes but, as usual, wearing white gloves, positioned himself on a socket in the central reserve of the roadway and started to direct an imaginary orchestra. Police arrested him after classifying the situation as hazardous for the traffic. The name Paul Abraham meant nothing to the policemen. His friend Paul Alexander allegedly caused at last that Abraham was appointed to the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center on Long Island. The diagnosis: 'Psychosis with Syphilitic Meningo Encephalitis' (the fourth stage of protracted syphilis). Ultimately incurable.

Paul Abraham would spend ten years in this largest psychiatry of the USA, in which about 6000 patients were treated at the same time in 1950 (today there are even more of them). Naturalisation was according to American law out of any question, on account of his illness, as was any consideration of how he would leave the country without help by third parties. His stay in the clinic was financed by shares in profits that now again had increased. (15)

An eyewitness (see box) reported about his bad mental state. Abraham believed to be in a hotel (despite dwelling in a room with 14 patients) and would play on occasion of a visit his tunes on the piano. 'But - and this is what seems to me so nightmarish - this fine, important musician of old does not notice on what kind of instrument he is playing. It is tinny, completely worn out and desperately out of tune. This seems to make no difference to Paul Abraham ...' (8)

It was again Paul Alexander who became active. He informed Walter Anatole Persich, a writer from Hamburg, about the condition of his friend. (1) Persich and others (such as the young publisher Andreas J. Meyer) founded a 'Paul Abraham Committee', which in co-operation with the Federal Government of Germany enabled Abraham to leave the USA. On 30 April 1956, the composer and 51 other ill emigrants landed by a collective aeroplane transport on the Frankfurt airport.

## The emigrant and his NS doctor

'On the apron", thus Hans-Jürgen Fink, journalist, describes the setting, 'a dark, spacious Opel drives close to the plane from New York which has just landed. Three young men get out: two assistant doctors of the Eppendorf hospital and Andreas J. Meyer, who just became publisher of the small Northern German Merlin publishing company. About 50 ill people who had fled from Hitler's regime returned by that plane from the USA. ... The seriously ill composer is taken down the gangway. A few photographers make pictures, then doctors take him inside the car.'" (14)

Andreas J. Meyer remembers the first impressions, 'the whole journey back to Hamburg he sat inexpressively in the rear.'

First, Abraham is appointed to the psychiatry of the university hospital of Eppendorf and is treated there - another little piece of the puzzle of Abraham's 'mad' life - just by Dr. Hans Bürger-Prinz, the chief doctor. While Abraham had to live in emigration, this physician had made his career among the National Socialists. After 1933, he became member of all relevant NS organisations (NS-Ärztebund, NSDAP, SA etc.) and in 1944 he even advanced to be 'scientific adviser' of Karl Brandt, authorised NS representative for health services and personal physician of Adolf Hitler. (11)

## The last years in Hamburg

Paul Abraham was put under tutelage, in view of his manifest insanity, and received a tutor, Johannes Meyer, the father of the publisher Andreas J. Meyer. He was a top-rank lawyer, dismissed by the National Socialists, who had exerted himself after the war in the Paul Abraham Committee for Paul Abraham's return.

Abraham remained for 16 months in the psychiatry. A senior physician of that time remembered, according to János Davras's portrait of Abraham, that Abraham had arrived almost completely 'cured' from New York. There was little left both of syphilis and the psychosis it had caused. According to his statement, Abraham was only 'slightly demented,' which does not seem to agree with the fact that the patient believed at this time, and continued to do so to the end of his life, to be in New York, regularly announcing in letters to his friends forthcoming premieres of his opera at the Broadway.

In the meantime, Abraham's wife Charlotte had also arrived from the People's Republic of Hungary. She took care of him from 1957 on for the rest of his life in a five-room flat in Hamburg. Abraham received from the German state 500 DM of 'recompensation pension'. Finally, also his back fees and shares in profits were paid. (1)

Paul Abraham had to be admitted again to the university hospital in 1960. A 'black cancer' had struck a knee joint and produced metastases. It was too late. Paul Abraham died on 6 May 1960, as a result of the surgery.

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