

## “Leb wohl, mein Schatz” from Ernst Krenek’s Opera *Jonny spielt auf* (1927)

### Abstract

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The bluesy song, performed by baritone Ludwig Hofmann, comes from the Austrian composer Ernst Křenek’s groundbreaking 1927 opera *Jonny spielt auf*. It highlights just some of the many styles that the opera incorporated, juxtaposed, and parodied, from jazz and tango to operatic arias and crisp homophony and beyond. The plot revolved around Jonny, an African-American jazz violinist touring Europe in the 1920s, with twists and turns that shifted the action from Paris to the Alps to an unnamed central European city and back again. Musicologists consider it as perhaps the best example of the genre known as *Zeitoper* [opera of the moment], a short-lived movement during the Weimar Republic to make opera more accessible by incorporated elements of contemporary life, particularly modern technology and the latest music forms, such as jazz, foxtrot, or even just the sounds of the city. *Jonny spielt auf* also wrestled with social and political issues of the day, especially—as Křenek himself insisted—“the problem of freedom” and the inevitable tension between the individual and the society in which they live. Křenek (1900-1991) grew up in Vienna, but he spent much of his early composing life in Germany, and he premiered *Jonny spielt auf* in Leipzig in February 1927. From there, the opera enjoyed popular acclaim throughout Germany and abroad. A glowing review of the opera after its 1929 American premiere in New York, though, still pointed to the superiority of the Leipzig production, which “gives a spectacle so much more brilliant, modern and imaginative that there is hardly a comparison. If it is desired to see a presentation of a modern opera, reflective of modern life and the age of movement and speed and contemporaneous appliances, go to little Leipzig” (January 20, 1929). The National Socialists, not surprisingly, loathed the opera and disrupted some of its performances in Munich as early as 1929. When the NSDAP came to power in 1933, it banned Křenek’s works. The regime later caricatured the title page of the piano score for *Jonny spielt auf* to create the infamous poster for its 1938 exhibition *Entartete Musik* [Degenerate Music] in Düsseldorf. Křenek had, by this time, emigrated to the United States, where he continued to teach and compose.

### Source

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Farewell, my darling, farewell!  
I'm leaving my homeland.  
Be happy without me  
I will try to be without you  
and will never come back here.

Oh, I got scared after all,  
this is no life.  
In the hotel where I play  
I saw detectives  
things got too hot for me.  
So I bought a ticket to Amsterdam  
and will return to my homeland.  
I will see Alabama again  
and never leave my beloved Suwannee River again.

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Source: “Leb wohl, mein Schatz,” from the opera *Jonny spielt auf*, 1927. Composer: Ernst Krenek, baritone: Ludwig Hofmann, Städtische Oper Berlin orchestra, conductor: Manfred Gurlitt. Recorded December 22, 1927. SLUB/Mediathek, <https://mediathek.slub-dresden.de/ton70925051.html>

SLUB/Mediathek

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