I cannot think of a single living classical musician whose biography could be subtitled "His Life and Times." (Imagine: Luciano Pavarotti? Itzhak Perlman? James Levine?) But "Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times" sounds right. A physical giant, a wild yet austere personality, Klemperer occupied a vast stage. Purposefully and fortuitously, heroically and clumsily, he tangled with political and intellectual affairs far beyond the scope of mere music in performance.

As director of Berlin's Kroll Opera from 1917 to 1931, Klemperer personified Weimar culture -- new music, new aesthetics, new thought. His fitful American career, in Hitler's wake, exposed both his Goliath-like psychological instability and the philistinism of certain American musical and political mores. His reputation was ultimately regenerated in London, where he acquired a cult status inimical to the manic-depressive tumult of his five previous decades in music.

We learn from the late Peter Heyworth's biography that Klemperer himself regarded his musical directorship in Wiesbaden -- where he presided over innovative stagings of Busoni, Ravel, Strauss, and Stravinsky between 1924 and 1927 -- as the happiest period of his life. Heyworth plausibly regards the subsequent Kroll years as Klemperer's most fulfilled. Established by the Prussian Ministry of Culture as a progressive branch of the Berlin Staatsoper, the Staatsoper an Platz de Republik occupied the renovated Kroll Theater as part of an agreement that reserved half the seats for the Social Democratic Volksbuhne at prices geared to the wages of a twenty-five-year-old manual worker.

Klemperer was consumed by a reformist mission: to present recent operas of quality; to challenge the "star system"; to replace naturalistic stagings with the scenic creations of such artists as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer; to achieve a new unity of music and drama. He championed Hindemith, Weill, Janacek, and -- above all -- Stravinsky. At the same time, the latest Schoenberg and Berg, even Weill's Der Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny, were not for him. In fact, Klemperer's penchant for neoclassicism made him an important advocate for a new kind of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, purged of Romantic nuance and rubato.

If Klemperer's interpretive austerities resonated powerfully with the neue Sachlichkeit (new objectivity) of the Bauhaus, his temperament was an Expressionistic cauldron. Here is Lotte Lehmann on rehearsing Lohengrin in Hamburg in 1912, when Klemperer was twenty-seven:
"Klemperer sat at the piano like an evil spirit, thumping on it with long hands like a tiger's claws, and dragging my terrified voice into the vortex of his fanatical will. Elsa's dreamy serenity became a rapturous ecstasy, her timorous pleading, a challenging demand."

In certain respects, Klemperer resembled Gustav Mahler, whom he assisted as a youth, and whose memory and example he revered. Mahler, too, was an inferno who, as director of the Vienna Staatsoper (like Klemperer at the Kroll), dominated and unified every aspect of repertoire, production, and performance. Like Klemperer at the Kroll, Mahler overturned canons of verisimilitude. And Klemperer followed Mahler the conductor in passionately demanding a dispassionate clarity of texture.

Mahler's signature achievements in Vienna included revisionist stagings of Fidelio and Tristan and Isolde, both designed by Alfred Roller: Klemperer's signature achievements at the Kroll included a famous 1929 Flying Dutchman, designed by Ewald Dulberg and purged of what Klemperer's friend Ernst Bloch memorably termed "Traumkitsch." Klemperer restored the opera's 1843 Dresden version, in which the overture and finale had yet to acquire the shimmering "redemption" theme. As Wagner's original instrumentation eschewed the harp he added in 1860, the stark, stylized Kroll staging was stripped of naturalistic detail. The Allgemeine Muzikzeitung reported:

The Dutchman, naturally beardless, looks like a Bolshevist agitator, Senta like a fanatical Communist harridan, Erik ... a pimp. Daland's crew resemble port vagabonds of recent times, the wretched spinning chamber a workshop in a woman's prison.... What Klemperer and his helpmates offer ... amounts to a total destruction of Wagner's work, a basic falsification of his creative intentions. That goes in almost equal degree for the musical performance, which coarsened the sound to an intolerable extent.... Tempi were ridiculously overdriven, finer dynamic shadings eliminated and all expression reduced to a minimum.... The way the State Opera in the Tiergarten functions is damaging to Berlin's reputation as a cultural center. Either its methods must be changed ... or it must be shut.

Klemperer marched into the office of another Berlin paper and threatened to attack its music critic.

The Kroll Flying Dutchman left a permanent imprint. Of the Kroll years generally, the eminent musicologist Alfred Einstein later wrote: "For the first time on such a scale a German opera house had basically turned its back on museum-like attitudes and set out in quest of living art." But economic and political pressures were fierce. On the right, the Kroll was denounced as anti-German and anti-Christian. Klemperer, born a Jew, was said to perpetrate "Jewish pessimism" and "Jewish negroid" decadence. And the idealism of opera for the people proved deluded: far from supporting Klemperer, the Volksbuhne wanted Aida and Carmen. Thomas Mann summarized why the Kroll was closed: "Because (it) occupies a strong position on the intellectual left, because it stands at the crossroads of social and cultural interests and is a thorn in the eye of ... obscurantism. If opera today is still or has once again become an intellectual issue and a subject of intellectual discussion, that is in the first place the merit of this institution."

The Kroll years dominate volume 1 of Heyworth's biography. Volume 2 concentrates on
Klemperer's mainly hapless American years, and his Indian summer in London after 1954. Klemperer moved his family to southern California in 1935. Two years before, he had become music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic -- not a post he coveted, but a foothold in American musical life. "My task here is that of a pioneer ...," he wrote to a friend. "But the people are endlessly grateful and really love me... About the life (and everything that goes with it) I still often have doubts."

The manager of the Los Angeles orchestra was the stout and exuberant Mrs. Leland Atherton Irish. She was devoted to Klemperer; he regarded her, Heyworth tells us, "as a vulgar busybody." She once urged Klemperer to omit the mournful finale of Tchaikovsky's Pathetique Symphony. On another occasion she insisted that the pianist Eduard Steuermann be photographed in a chef's apron and hat. One of Klemperer's duties was the annual Easter Sunrise Service at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, at which he had to conduct excerpts from Parsifal and Die Meistersinger for an audience of thirty thousand at daybreak. His important Los Angeles performances included the premiere of Schoenberg's transcription of Brahms's G Minor Piano Quartet -- a memorable symphonization (it was later brilliantly choreographed by Balanchine) suggested to Schoenberg by Klemperer himself. Among the orchestra's guest conductors were Stravinsky and Hindemith.

Musically, Los Angeles was a backwater; Klemperer sought a beachhead in New York or Philadelphia. But he was too much a product of Weimar Germany. American symphonic culture was in thrall to the celebrity conductors Toscanini, Stokowski, and Koussevitzky, and to their glamorous and virtuosic orchestras. The leading music critics were out of sympathy with modernism, with neue Sachlichkeit, with Stravinsky and Schoenberg. The leading classical music businessman was Arthur Judson, who ran both the New York Philharmonic and Columbia Concerts (later Columbia Artists Management). Judson was well aware of Klemperer. And he recognized that he needed a conductor to counterbalance Toscanini's conservative New York repertoire. Klemperer was engaged by Judson to conduct the first fourteen weeks of the Philharmonic's 1935-36 season. He insisted on programming Mahler's Second Symphony. Judson said no. Klemperer won a Pyrrhic victory: he led the symphony with notable success, but Judson abandoned him. When Stokowski resigned in Philadelphia in 1936, he was succeeded by Eugene Ormandy. When Toscanini resigned later the same year, John Barbirolli and Artur Rodzinski were initially the chief replacements. Ormandy, Barbirolli, and Rodzinski were not in Klemperer's league. Klemperer wrote to Judson:

You made it clear to me in different letters, that you wished to establish for me a permanent situation in New York, that the last season should be considered only as a through-way.... Because I was convinced that the situation would become for me a permanent one as musical direktor (sic), that the society did not reengage me is the strongest offense, the sharpest insult to me as artist, which I can imagine. You see, I am no youngster. I have a name and a good name. One could not use me in a most difficult season and then expell me. This non-reengagement will have very bad results not only for me in New York but in the whole world.... This non-reengagement is an absolutely unjustified wrong done to me by the Philharmonic Society.

"Klemperer," Heyworth comments, "usually confronted setbacks with stoical resignation: such an outburst of rage and resentment remained unique in his career."
In 1939, a huge tumor was discovered in Klemperer's brain. Its removal left the right side of his face and body partly paralyzed. Though the tumor was non-malignant, and his mental capacity reportedly not impaired, a period of extreme psychological disturbance ensued. Klemperer left his Los Angeles post. In New York, he took to hiring taxis (for which he could not pay) for entire nights. His clothes were dirty, he ate irregularly, he walked unsteadily and with a stick. He wore an eye patch. He packed a water pistol. His mood careened from hilarity to rage. In 1941, he agreed to enter what he did not realize was a mental institution in Rye, New York. He confronted the medical director, Dr. Daniel J. Kelly, with such anger that Kelly reluctantly allowed him to leave -- and thereupon informed the police, who issued an eight-state warning that Klemperer was "dangerous and insane." The New York Times ran a front-page story about the incident. The soprano Elisabeth Schumann, who knew Klemperer intimately, wrote to a friend: "I don't find him much madder than he was before, admittedly more uninhibited, more exalted -- though as far as music is concerned: wonderful ... but ... no one wants him."

Eventually, Klemperer turned up in Budapest, where from 1947 to 1950 he resumed the important operatic career he had abandoned in Germany in 1933. "I feel well in Budapest," he told a reporter. "I feel as though I am part of it." But Klemperer remained an American citizen, and the State Department and FBI had begun taking notice of his leftist sympathies. In the Hungarian press, he was quoted criticizing American commercialism and "war hysteria." By the time the United States refused to renew his passport, in 1952, Hungary was in the throes of a cultural crackdown and the Klemperers had rented an apartment in Montreal. They were now compelled to return to New York, where Klemperer had to forego important European engagements.

American union policies prevented Klemperer from recording in Europe so long as he remained an American citizen. A concert and recording contract with London's Philharmonia Orchestra came to the rescue in 1954. A German passport was quickly arranged. Almost as quickly, Klemperer's 1955 recordings of three Beethoven symphonies, with the Philharmonia, more than consolidated his reputation in Western Europe. With Toscanini's retirement and the death of Wilhelm Furtwangler, Otto Klemperer, once a wild man, re-emerged a keeper of the flame. During this long final phase of his career, lasting until his retirement in 1972 at the age of eighty-seven, Klemperer rarely ventured into the opera house. He abandoned his advocacy of Stravinsky, Hindemith, and other modernists. And he amassed a legacy of recordings -- hundreds of them -- perhaps unsurpassed by any other conductor.

This amazing life story is painstakingly told by Heyworth. The heroism of it all registers as plainly and objectively as neue Sachlichkeit itself. But much is missing. Klemperer's affect, whatever his aesthetic, was epic. In later life, his extreme age, crippled face, dour intellect, and great height complicated the effect of his intended simplicity. Heyworth tells us little about Klemperer's actual performances. His famous slow tempos are not a feature of his interwar recordings, or of the Budapest Opera performances recorded live by Hungaroton. A more salient, more consistent trait of his conducting was dogged resistance to the vagaries of Romantic Innigkeit, to the subjective probes so special to his antipode Furtwangler. Klemperer's most characteristic performances, rigorously projecting outward design, amassed a magisterial poise and weight.
Klemperer's career of seven decades suggests a final point of reference. Like Toscanini's, Klemperer's signature "objectivity" ironically contradicted an overpowering personal imprint. Like Toscanini, transplanted from Milan to New York, Klemperer found his greatest fame in old age on foreign soil. Like Toscanini, again, he most completely fulfilled his artistic potential conducting opera (including contemporary opera) in his own cultural heartland long before achieving international celebrity as a revered apostle of Beethoven and other old masters.