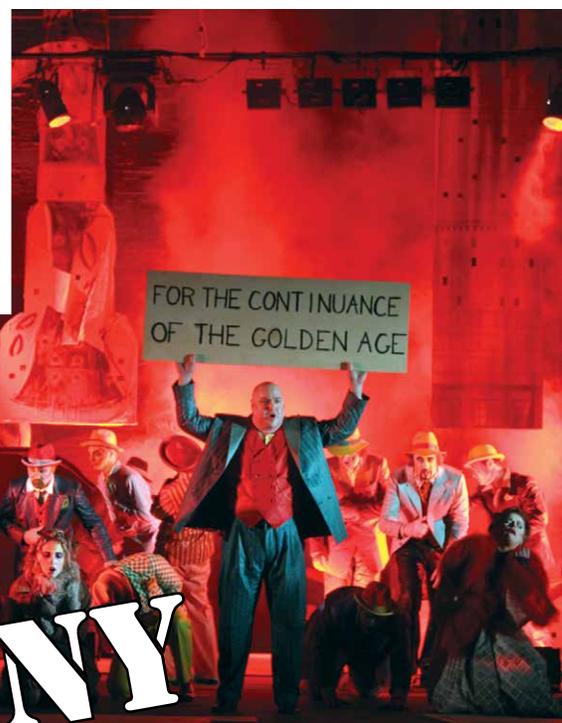


Kurt Weill Newsletter

VOLUME 32

NUMBER 2

FALL 2014



MAHAGONNY

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Mahagonny Rising: The Royal Opera Production

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A variety of opinions are expressed in the *Newsletter*; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editors are welcome (newsletter@kwf.org).

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UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

Die sieben Todsünden

China Philharmonic Orchestra, Beijing
Lawrence Foster, conductor; Heidi Brunner, Anna I.
29 November 2014

Weill songs

Berliner Philharmoniker, Kammermusiksaal, Berlin
Angela Denoke, vocals; Tal Balshai, piano; Norbert Nagel,
saxophones and flute.
1 December 2014

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Staatsoper Berlin
Vincent Boussard, director; Wayne Marshall, conductor.
16, 23, 25, 31 January; 9, 11, 16 April 2015

Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny

Royal Opera House, London
John Fulljames, director; Mark Wigglesworth, conductor.
10, 12, 14, 24, 28 March; 1, 4 April 2015

Violin Concerto

Tapiola Sinfonietta, Espoo, Finland
Gordan Nikolić, leader, violin.
13 March 2015

The Seven Deadly Sins

Robert Moody, conductor; Storm Large, Anna I.
Memphis Symphony Orchestra, 21 March 2015
Portland Symphony Orchestra, 19 and 21 April 2015

Lady in the Dark

Lyric Stage, Irving, Texas
24 April–3 May 2015

The Road of Promise

Concert adaptation of *The Eternal Road*
The Collegiate Chorale and Orchestra of St. Luke's
Carnegie Hall, New York
Ted Sperling, conductor/director; Anthony Dean Griffey, the
Rabbi; Mark Delavan, Abraham and Moses; Danny Burstein, the
Adversary; Philip Cutlip, Justin Hopkins, Megan Marino, Lauren
Michelle, Sean Panikkar, soloists.
6–7 May 2015

Weill songs

Schimmel Center at Pace University, New York
Patti LuPone, vocals.
9 May 2015

To learn about the many other Weill performances coming up
around the world, view the performance calendar at:

www.kwf.org

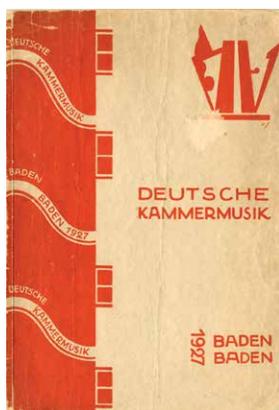
EDITORS' NOTE

Mahagonny has made many a muddle in the nearly ninety years since Weill set a handful of Bertolt Brecht's poems, inaugurating any number of artistic and cultural epochs. It has existed in two versions—short *Songspiel* and full-length opera—almost from the beginning, which didn't stop others from trying to split the difference between the two by stitching together various combinations of numbers from both works. But *Mahagonny* continues to present problems even after the basic distinction between opera and *Songspiel* has been clarified and enforced. There is no fixed text of the opera, and directors and conductors may choose among performance alternatives. (The forthcoming critical edition of the *Songspiel* sets out a definitive text.) After a memorable surge of productions in the last decade or so, we aim to clear the air with commentary on the meaning of *Mahagonny*, historical milestones in the works' composition and reception, and a look ahead at the opera's debut at London's Covent Garden in March 2015. An opera that serves as a barometer of the times as few others do, *Mahagonny* continues to spread its disturbing message from the hallowed halls of the world's great opera houses, just as Weill intended.

Kate Chisholm and Dave Stein

Latest Volume of the Kurt Weill Edition Goes to Press

The critical edition of *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel* will appear early in 2015 as Series I, Volume 3 of the Kurt Weill Edition. Weill's first collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, this short stage work created a sensation at the Deutsche Kammermusik festival in July 1927 with Lotte Lenya in the cast and with sets designed by Caspar Neher, marking the first outing of the Weill-Brecht-Neher team that exerted so much influence during the last years of the Weimar Republic and beyond.



Program cover from the premiere of the *Songspiel* at Baden-Baden, 1927.

Giselher Schubert, a member of the Editorial Board and former director of the Hindemith-Institut in Frankfurt, has edited the work. Schubert is an expert on German music between the wars, as his extensive bibliography attests. In addition to preparing an authoritative musical and verbal text of the *Songspiel*, the editor has carried out extensive research that elucidates the full history of the *Mahagonny*-complex—*Songspiel*, opera, and many attempts to turn each work into a version of the other. The edition will serve not only as a scholarly resource but as the basis of rental materials for future performances of the *Songspiel*.

The Kurt Weill Edition is a long-term publishing project, the goal of which is to present all of Kurt Weill's completed musical works in new critical editions. Each volume presents the complete score along with dialogue and lyrics, a separate critical report explaining editorial decisions and practice, an extended introductory essay, facsimiles of significant sources, and supplementary material.

MAHAGONNY

THEN AND NOW

Adapted from an interview with Kim H. Kowalke,
President of the Kurt Weill Foundation

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

The *Mahagonny Songspiel* was a commission for the 1927 Baden-Baden Music Festival, and it's only 25 minutes long. It was done as a very provocative "Songspiel," a play on the traditional genre "Singspiel" with the notion of the American popular song lurking in the background.

No sooner had it been performed in Baden-Baden, or maybe even beforehand, than Brecht and Weill had decided that they were going to make a full-length opera of the Mahagonny material. So the *Songspiel* went up on the shelf, but Weill incorporated certain sections into the opera, including the "Alabama-Song," but in a newly composed form. He got rid of most of the crunchy, Bartókian dissonance in the accompaniment, simplified the harmonies, reduced three strophes to two, and interestingly made the vocal part much more operatic, with an obligato, coloratura soprano embellishment for Jenny in the second stanza. In the opera it's not a duet for two sopranos, Jessie and Bessie, but an entrance aria for Jenny accompanied by the girls of Mahagonny.

Brecht didn't really care about the piece by the time of its 1930 premiere in Leipzig, and that's why he published his own version of the libretto in 1931 that took no account of the music whatsoever and basically sabotaged the joint work by implying, "This is what I would have written if it hadn't been an opera with Weill." Their ideas at this point had diverged completely, largely because Brecht was now very much committed to Marxist theory and "Lehrstücke," the idea that all plays should be didactic and should present the class struggle and so forth. Of course, *Mahagonny* isn't about that at all. If you are a director staging *Mahagonny* and you take Brecht's script from 1931 and Weill's score from 1930, the two don't match, and you can't make them work together. You have no choice but to start with the text that was actually performed in 1930, the one contained in Weill's score.

For the Berlin production in December 1931, Lotte Lenya sang Jenny for the first time, a role that Weill had never intended for her. That casting decision required a good deal of adaptation, but the conductor was Alexander von Zemlinsky, and it was, according to T.W. Adorno, musically the finest production until then. But the run at the Kurfürstendamm-Theater was really the last performance of a recognizably "whole" *Mahagonny* during

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny has enjoyed many high-profile stagings in recent years; this opera composed almost a century ago continues to fire the imaginations of producers. To this day, no definitive text has been established, but scholars have explored and mapped the complicated terrain to offer clear choices to directors and conductors. In the following pages, we offer commentary on history and interpretation by Kim H. Kowalke, a detailed chronology covering the prehistory of *Mahagonny* to the present day, guidance on performance alternatives, and an interview with the creative team for the spring 2015 production at Covent Garden.



Jenny (Lotte Lenya) and the girls sing "Alabama Song," Berlin, 1931.

PHOTO: LOTTE JACOBI

Weill's lifetime. *Mahagonny* never had a chance to establish itself, largely because the Nazis succeeded in wiping it from the operatic stage in Germany.

The complete recording made in 1956 was the beginning of the second life of the full-length *Mahagonny*, which entailed still more revisions for Lenya, because she was singing at least a fourth or a fifth lower than she had been in 1931. So, on the one hand it was an *echt Mahagonny* in that it was the first time since before the war that the whole opera had been done, with a good conductor, Brückner-Rüggeberg—but with lots of adaptations so that Lenya could sing it, and with no indication anywhere of these changes. It has nevertheless assumed authority for a performance practice that some people still regard as the sole "authentic" one.

After a number of revivals in European opera houses in the sixties and seventies, the opera gradually re-entered the repertoire. But it was the production at the Met in 1979 that decisively established *Mahagonny's* legitimate claim to a secure spot in the 20th-century operatic canon. The debate over whether *Mahagonny* is really an opera died out after that. Of course it is; it's in the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera—and by now of most of the other great houses in the world. Very few major houses have yet to produce a *Mahagonny*.

(For more of Prof. Kowalke's discussion of the opera, see p. 8.)

MAHAGONNY: A Chronology

1922 | “Komm nach Mahagonne,” a popular song by Leopold Krauss-Elka and O.A. Alberts, published and recorded in Germany.

1924 | Brecht begins writing “Mahagonny-Gesänge,” a series of short poems expressing disenchantment with modern life. He makes a note in his journal about creating a Mahagonny-themed opera for his wife, singer Marianne Zoff.

1925 | Elisabeth Hauptmann joins the “Brecht Collective” as a full-time collaborator. Later in the year, she provides lyrics for two English songs, “Alabama-Song” and “Benares Song,” both of which will appear in *Mahagonny Songspiel*.

1926 | Private publication of the “Mahagonny-Gesänge” in Brecht’s *Taschenpostille*, a predecessor of *Hauspostille* (1927).

Autumn 1926 | Hauptmann compiles press clippings on a disastrous hurricane in Florida, which will inspire the climax of Act I of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

27 March 1927 | Weill publishes a favorable review of a radio performance of Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann*.

April 1927 | Kiepenheuer publishes *Hauspostille* (“Domestic Breviary”), Brecht’s first collection of poems, which includes five “Mahagonny-Gesänge.”

2 May 1927 | Weill writes to his publisher, Universal Edition, to announce a plan to create a “Songspiel” from the “Mahagonny-Gesänge” for the Deutsche Kammermusikfest Baden-Baden. Weill sets the five poems from *Hauspostille* and a closing strophe written by Brecht specifically for the *Songspiel*, completing the composition before the end of May. (“Songspiel” is a pun on the German word “Singspiel,” a traditional musical theater genre.)

17 July 1927 | Premiere of *Mahagonny: ein Songspiel* at Baden-Baden, on a program with three one-act operas: *Die Prinzessin auf der Erbse* (Toch), *Die Entführung der Europa* (Milhaud), and *Hin und Zurück* (Hindemith). Walter Brüggmann and Brecht direct, Ernst Mehlich conducts, and Caspar Neher designs the set. After an operatic soprano drops out of the cast, Lotte Lenya takes over the role of Jessie, her first appearance in a Weill work. The *Songspiel* creates a sensation and arouses substantial critical debate. Weill contemplates further productions.

25 August 1927 | Weill writes to Universal Edition to confirm that he and Brecht intend to create a longer work on the Mahagonny theme.

18 November 1927 | Weill reports to Universal: “I am working with Brecht every day on the libretto, which is being shaped entirely according to my instructions.” By early 1928, Weill, Brecht, and Hauptmann complete a draft libretto of the three-act opera, and Weill begins composition.

February 1928 | Universal publishes radically simplified sheet music for “Alabama-Song.”

31 August 1928 | Premiere of *Die Dreigroschenoper* at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin. It becomes a smash hit.

April 1929 | Weill completes the orchestral score of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, which is dated at the end “April 1927–April 1929.” “April 1927” refers to composition of *Songspiel* material incorporated into the full-length opera.

September 1929 | Universal Edition publishes the vocal score of *Aufstieg* and goes on to publish the libretto in November.

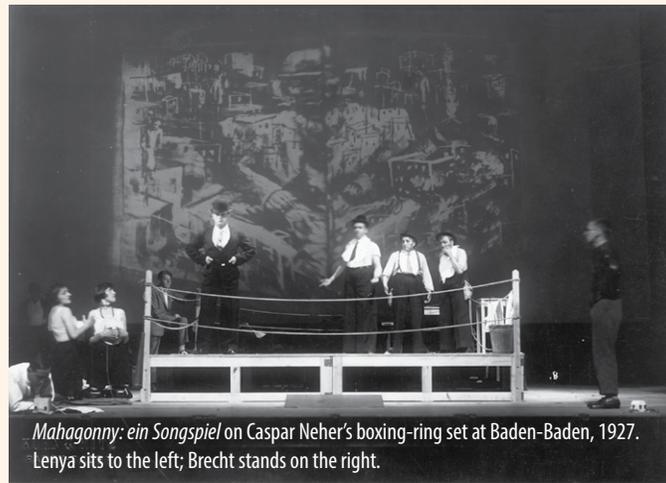
24 February 1930 | Lotte Lenya records “Alabama-Song” and “Denn wie man sich bettet” for Ultraphon in Germany.

9 March 1930 | World premiere of *Aufstieg* at the Neue Oper in Leipzig. Walter Brüggmann directs; Gustav Brecher conducts; Caspar Neher designs the sets and projections. The premiere is greeted with a riot by Nazi sympathizers. Three days later, another production opens in Kassel under the baton of Maurice Abraham, Weill’s friend and former student.

March 1930 | After months of indecision, Otto Klemperer decides not to stage *Aufstieg* at the Staatsoper (Krolloper) in Berlin. Later in the year, Max Reinhardt reaches the same conclusion at the Deutsches Theater.

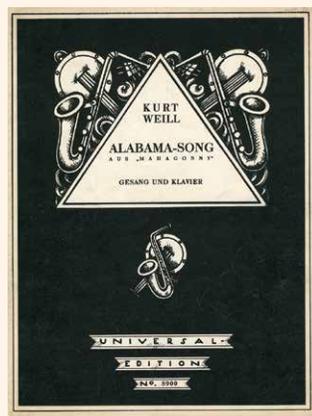
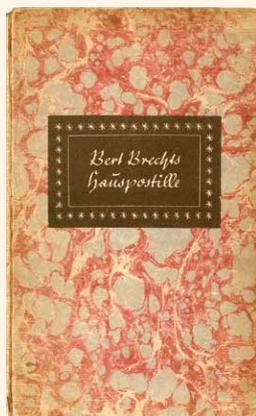
12 July 1930 | First performance of *Aufstieg* outside Germany, at the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague. Max Liebl directs; George Szell conducts.

Images below, left to right: Sheet music for “Komm nach Mahagonne,” 1922; Brecht’s *Hauspostille*, 1927; “Alabama-Song” sheet music, 1928; *Aufstieg* premiere program, Leipzig, 1930.



Mahagonny: ein Songspiel on Caspar Neher’s boxing-ring set at Baden-Baden, 1927. Lenya sits to the left; Brecht stands on the right.

PHOTO: KUHN & HIRTZ



1931 | Brecht publishes a revised “literary” libretto that does not match the score and adds “Anmerkungen” which flatly contradict Weill’s views on the opera.

21 December 1931 | Berlin premiere of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in a revised version at the Theater am Kurfürstendamm in Berlin. The cast includes Harald Paulsen and Lotte Lenya, both of whom had appeared in *Die Dreigroschenoper*. By this time, Weill and Brecht are no longer collaborating, and producer Ernst Josef Aufricht must arrange a production of Brecht’s play *Die Mutter* in order to keep him from interfering with *Mahagonny* rehearsals. Cast members record a “Querschnitt” (selections) from *Aufstieg*, which is released on Electrola.

26 April 1932 | Abridged version of *Aufstieg* produced at the Raimund-Theater in Vienna, with Lenya and Otto Pasetti in the cast. Hans Heinsheimer directs; Gottfried Kassowitz conducts.

13 October 1932 | Second (and last) production of the original version of the *Songspiel* in Weill’s lifetime, at the Schilleroper in Altona, near Hamburg.

11 December 1932 | First performance of the “Paris version” of the *Songspiel*, which incorporates four numbers from the opera into the *Songspiel* score. Abrahams arranges the insertions and conducts; Hans Curjel directs. This version is performed again in London (June 1933) and, slightly altered, in Rome (December 1933).

February–March 1933 | Weill and Brecht go into exile separately as the Nazis take over the German government.

January 1934 | Last production of *Aufstieg* during Weill’s lifetime at Det ny Teater in Copenhagen, with a run of eight performances. For the next twenty-five years or so, performances of *Mahagonny* will all be based on the “Paris version,” as the distinction between the *Songspiel* and the opera effectively disappears.

Between 1938 and 1945 | Gottfried von Einem and employees of Universal Edition hide manuscripts of “degenerate” composers, including Weill’s, from the Nazis.

26 September 1946 | Alfred Schlee of Universal informs Weill (mistakenly) that the holograph full score of *Aufstieg* is irretrievably lost.

8 September 1949 | A revised “Paris version” with the “Crane Duet” added is produced at the Venice Biennial without Weill’s participation or endorsement.

3 April 1950 | Weill dies in New York.

August 1952 | Lenya receives an inventory of Weill scores from Universal that lists the holograph full score of *Aufstieg*.

8 March 1954 | *The Threepenny Opera* opens off-Broadway in a new translation and adaptation by Marc Blitzstein, produced and directed by Carmen Capalbo and Stanley Chase. It becomes a smash hit.

February–March 1955 | Lenya asks Universal about the score of *Aufstieg*, and Schlee tells her, “We do in fact have the complete manuscript score of the opera.” He notes that it would be possible, but expensive, to create performing materials.

14 August 1956 | Brecht dies in East Berlin.

3–11 November 1956 | Lenya sings Jenny and supervises the first recording of *Aufstieg*, released on Philips and Columbia. Her vocal parts are transposed down, without comment.

1957 | First post-war revival of *Aufstieg* in Darmstadt, Germany, described by David Drew as a “garbled version.”

11 March 1960 | The New York Philharmonic cancels a scheduled concert performance of *Aufstieg*, to have been translated by Marc Blitzstein and conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Blitzstein never completes his draft translation.

2 March 1961 | First post-war production of the original *Songspiel* by the Städtische Bühnen in Gelsenkirchen.

May 1962 | Production of *Aufstieg* in Heidelberg that attempts with reasonable success to stage the original version.

16 January 1963 | First U.K. performance of *Aufstieg* at Sadler’s Wells, London; Michael Geliot directs; Colin Davis conducts. English translation by Michael Geliot and David Drew.

10 February 1963 | First performance of “Das kleine Mahagonny,” a pastiche of the opera and *Songspiel* assembled by the Berliner Ensemble without regard for Weill’s score. Lenya objects, but finally permits the Berliner Ensemble to keep the pastiche in repertory and to release a recording. On Lenya’s instructions, Universal prohibits all other performances of this version.

December 1963 | Universal publishes a vocal score of the *Songspiel* edited by David Drew, although Drew protests that he had not given final approval. A second edition, published in 1967, likewise appears without Drew’s consent.

1964 | *Aufstieg* returns to Berlin for the first time since 1932 in a new production at the Deutsche Staatsoper. Fritz Bennewitz directs; Heinz Fricke conducts.

1964 | Weill–Brecht–Harms, part of Chappell, publishes sheet music for a solo piano arrangement of “Denn wie man sich bettet” under the title “Kurt Weill’s Melody.”

2 July 1965 | North American premiere of *Aufstieg* in Stratford, Ontario in the Geliot–Drew translation. Jean Gascon directs; Louis Applebaum conducts.

1969 | Universal publishes David Drew’s edition of the vocal score of *Aufstieg*, which incorporates Weill’s revisions made after the premiere.

28 April 1970 | After three months of previews, the U.S. premiere of *Aufstieg*

Images below, left to right: Kassel, 1930; Trude Hesterberg (Begbick) and Lenya (Jenny), Berlin, 1931; first recording of *Aufstieg*, 1956; *Aufstieg* vocal score, 1969.



PHOTO: NEHRDICH



opens off-Broadway in an English translation prepared by Arnold Weinstein and Lys Symonette after Stephen Sondheim declines. Carmen Capalbo directs; Samuel Matlovsky conducts. The score was extensively altered over Lenya's protests, and she initiated arbitration proceedings during previews. When the production finally opens after arbitration, the run lasts only eight performances.

1972–1973 | Productions in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Boston bring *Aufstieg* to a wider U.S. audience.

1 February 1974 | A production of *Aufstieg* in a new translation by Michael Feingold begins a six-week run at Yale Repertory Theatre. Alvin Epstein directs; Otto Werner-Mueller conducts.

1975 | First recording of the *Songspiel* issued on Deutsche Grammophon, as part of *Kurt Weill*, the three-LP set recorded after performances at the Berliner Festwochen. The London Sinfonietta and singers conducted by David Atherton.

1977 | Second recording of the *Songspiel*, issued on Vox Turnabout. The Jerusalem Symphony and singers conducted by Lukas Foss.

16 November 1979 | First performance of *Aufstieg* at the Metropolitan Opera in the Geliot-Drew translation, revised by Drew. Teresa Stratas, Richard Cassilly, and Astrid Varnay sing the lead roles. John Dexter directs; James Levine conducts. The performance is televised on "Live from Lincoln Center"; Lenya gives an intermission interview and hails Stratas as her "dream Jenny." The production is revived in 1981, 1984, and 1995.

1980–85 | Major productions of *Aufstieg* in East Berlin, Sydney, Graz, Paris, and West Berlin (Theater des Westens).

1983 | Productions of unauthorized adaptations of *Aufstieg* as a "play with music" in Bochum and Chicago are closed.

1986–1990 | Major productions of *Aufstieg* in Buenos Aires, Glasgow, Tel Aviv, Los Angeles, Frankfurt, Florence.

1988 | Release of recording of *Aufstieg* on Capriccio. Anja Silja, Wolfgang Neumann, and Anny Schlemm sing the lead roles; Jan Latham-König conducts the Kölner Rundfunkorchester.

1990 | Recording of the *Songspiel* released on Decca. RIAS Berlin Sinfonietta and singers conducted by John Mauceri.

1991–1995 | Major productions of *Aufstieg* in Stuttgart, Geneva, Düsseldorf, London, Paris.

1993 | Recording of the *Songspiel* released on Capriccio. König-Ensemble and singers conducted by Jan Latham-König.

1996–2000 | Major productions of *Aufstieg* in Salzburg, Chicago, Sofia, Berlin (Deutsche Oper), Hamburg.

1998 | Release of the Salzburg Festival production on Kultur home video, the first video recording of *Aufstieg*. Catherine Malfitano, Jerry Hadley, and Gwyneth Jones sing the lead roles. Peter Zadek directs; Dennis Russell Davies conducts.

2001–2010 | Major productions of *Aufstieg* in Buenos Aires, Dresden, Rome, Berlin (Komische Oper), Spoleto USA, Los Angeles, Toulouse, Munich, Madrid.

2008 | The Los Angeles Opera production is released on EuroArts home video and goes on to win two Grammy Awards in 2009: Best Opera Recording and Best Classical Album. Audra McDonald, Anthony Dean Griffey, and Patti LuPone sing the lead roles. John Doyle directs; James Conlon conducts.

2010 | The Metropolitan Opera releases its 1979 production of *Aufstieg* on home video.

2011–2014 | Major productions of *Aufstieg* in Antwerp, Cologne, Bremen, Dublin.

2011 | The 2010 Madrid Teatro Real production is released on Bel Air Classiques home video. Measha Brueggemann, Michael König, and Jane Henschel sing the lead roles. Alex Ollé and Carlos Padrissa of La Fura dels Baus direct; Pablo Heras-Casado conducts.

2012 | First production of *Aufstieg* at Vienna Staatsoper. Jérôme Deschamps directs; Ingo Metzmacher conducts. Unauthorized changes to the score necessitated by casting. Critical and box-office failure.

2012 | Universal prepares new scores and parts for *Aufstieg* that include all performance alternatives.

2014 | Production of *Aufstieg* by the Berlin Staatsoper (at the Schiller-Theater). Vincent Boussard directs; Wayne Marshall conducts.

2014 | Critical edition of *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel*, edited by Giselher Schubert, in press.

2015 | First production of *Aufstieg* at the Royal Opera House in London. John Fulljames directs; Mark Wigglesworth conducts.

We gratefully acknowledge Giselher Schubert and Elmar Juchem, whose research in the course of preparing the critical edition of Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel (see p. 3) informs this chronology. We are also indebted to the work of Josef Heinzelmann and Jürgen Schebera.

Images below, left to right: Off-Broadway, 1970; Kennedy Center, 1972; Grammy-winning DVD of Los Angeles Opera *Aufstieg*, 2008; DVD of Teatro Real Madrid *Aufstieg*, 2011.



Teresa Stratas as Jenny, Metropolitan Opera, 1979.

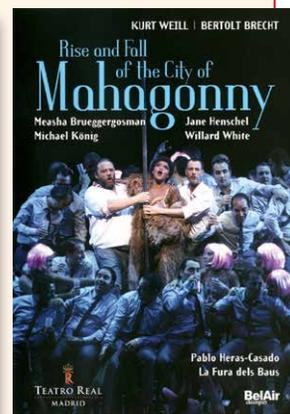
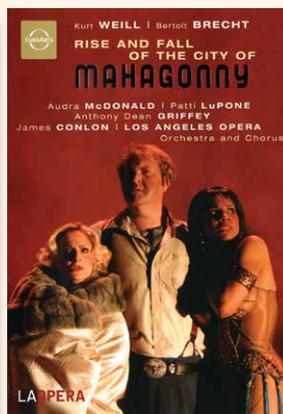
PHOTO: J. HEFFERNAN



PHOTO: LEE BOLTIN



PHOTO: FLETCHER DRAKE



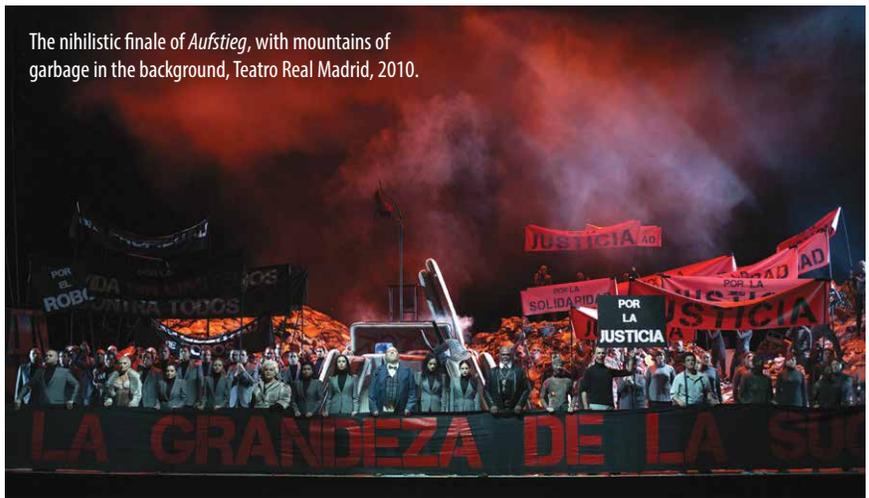
TELLING THE STORY

Weill and Brecht

If you read Weill's own synopsis of the plot of *Mahagonny* (see below), the word that occurs, I think fourteen times, is "city." So this is a piece about the rise and fall of the city, not of Jimmy and Jenny or their personal relationship. Weill made it clear that this is not about the psychological portrayal of individuals, but rather a story of a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, of the ills of modern society and how they impact individual lives. One must never lose sight of the fact that the story is a modern morality tale. It is not primarily a Marxist critique of capitalism.

Of course, there is some of that in Brecht's indictment of modern society, but it's also an attack on excess. A culture given over to the prime directive of "Du darfst" is doomed to extinction.

John Willett, the great Brecht scholar, used to say that *Mahagonny* was actually not authored just by Brecht and Weill, but by Brecht, Weill, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and Caspar Neher, the designer, who was really the brains behind "Brechtian staging," or the basic principles of "epic theater." But anyone who wants to do an "epic staging" today and copies all the things that Neher did in 1930 will end up with a museum piece that doesn't shock, entertain, or invite people to think. If Neher had had today's technology he would surely have done live video projections, and you would have seen the set change magically in front of your eyes, with every theatrical effect that you could imagine. Today, if you put a half-curtain on stage and draw it back and forth on a wire, it just looks ridiculous. I saw it done precisely that way at the Vienna State Opera's completely misdirected, supposedly Brechtian, production of *Mahagonny* in 2012, and it came off as almost laughable. Yes, the Met did it that way back in 1979, too, as if that was the only way you could remain true to Brecht. But today the best way to remain true to Brecht is to use the most imaginative technological possibilities of theater to achieve the same effect that was achieved back in 1930. For a good example



The nihilistic finale of *Aufstieg*, with mountains of garbage in the background, Teatro Real Madrid, 2010.

PHOTO: JAVIER DEL REAL

of that, watch the video of the production at the Teatro Real in Madrid (2010), directed and designed by La Fura dels Baus and brilliantly conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado.

Act III

Those *Songspiel* sections that are simply stuck into Act III of the opera have always been a problem. How do you fit them into that larger structure? Some productions have omitted them, and there is a persuasive case to be made for that. David Drew suggested that the "Benares Song" might best be "quietly dropped," particularly if the "Crane Duet" is included in Act III. There's a domino effect on the dramatic structure, of course. It's complicated.

The people of Mahagonny say "Nein!" to God in Mahagonny. Basically we are seeing the death of God before our eyes. What comes right after that is the finale, a funeral march which a number of conductors have likened to the end of *Götterdämmerung*. It's the final fatalist, nihilist moment: "There is nothing that can help a dead man, nothing that can help him or us or you." In the end all they can do is march aimlessly, carrying placards with conflicting, empty political slogans. There is no way out, and there are no pat answers, no mounted messengers to save the day. This is why the ending of *Mahagonny* is so disturbing, so overwhelm-

IN WEILL'S WORDS

"Two men and a woman, fleeing from the police, get stuck in a desolate area. They decide to found a city in which men coming from the Gold Coast will have their needs satisfied. In the 'paradise city' that emerges people lead a tranquil, idyllic life. In the long run, however, such a life cannot satisfy the men from the Gold Coast. Dissatisfaction prevails. Prices go down. In the night of the typhoon that approaches the city Jim Mahoney invents the new law of the city. The law is: 'You may do everything.' The typhoon changes course. People continue to live according to the new laws. The city flourishes. Needs increase—and with them, prices. You may do everything—provided you can pay for it. Jim Mahoney himself is condemned to death when he runs out of money. His execution gives rise to a huge demonstration against the inflation that heralds the city's demise. That is the story of the city of Mahagonny. It is represented in a loose juxtaposition of 'images of twentieth-century customs.' It is a parable of contemporary life. The main character of the piece is the city, which

emerges from people's needs. It is people's needs that bring about the city's rise and fall. We merely show the individual phases in the city's history and how they affect people. Just as people's needs influence the city's development, so in turn the city's development changes people's attitudes. All the opera's songs are an expression of the masses, even where they are performed by the individual as spokesman of the masses. The group of founders at the beginning confronts the group of new arrivals. At the end of the first act the supporters of the new law struggle against its opponents. The fate of the individual is portrayed only where it exemplifies the fate of the city. Looking for psychological or contemporary relevance beyond this basic idea would be wrong. The name 'Mahagonny' connotes merely the name of a city. It was chosen for timbral (phonetic) reasons. The city's geographical location is immaterial."

From Weill's "Vorwort zum Regiebuch," translated by Stephen Hinton, reprinted from Hinton's *Weill's Musical Theater: Stages of Reform* (University of California Press, 2012), pp. 148–149.

ing. Unfortunately, it's often trivialized by conductors who ignore Weill's tempo indications and initially take the funeral march too fast and then keep it at that tempo or speed it up towards the end. Weill writes *Più largo* as we approach the final strophe, and then *Molto largo* for the final phrase. It really is the end of *Mahagonny* at that point, and it has to carry the full weight of an apocalyptic Mahlerian funeral march. Mahler was one of Weill's gods, second only to Mozart. It's surely no coincidence that the finale of Act I of *Mahagonny* begins and ends with a chorale sung by the men of *Mahagonny* alone, "Haltet euch aufrecht fürchtet euch nicht." It unmistakably invokes the chorale prelude accompanying the two armored men in Act II of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, "Der, welcher wandert diese Strasse voll Beschwerden." Late in his career Weill recalled that in Busoni's master class they had spent a good deal of time studying *Die Zauberflöte*, which Busoni regarded as the ideal synthesis, not only of *seria*, *buffa*, and *Singspiel* traditions, but of seriousness and popularity, of the everyday and the eternal. We can now view Weill's entire career as an attempt to follow in those footsteps, developing hybrid forms of musical theater of social and moral significance for a wider audience, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Audience

The idea is that we're not going to pretend that what the audience is seeing is real, that you're not in the theater. Rather, Brecht wanted audience members always to be conscious of where they are. You're being entertained, but you're also being challenged to engage rather than to sit passively. Cheer, be repelled, be alienated, but don't just sit there.

After Begbick sentences Jimmy to death for not paying his bar tab, a projection/announcement suggests (I'm paraphrasing): "So great is the love of money in our own time that it's unlikely any of you would volunteer to pay Jimmy's debt either." This moment always provokes a nervous laugh from the audience. The

spotlight has, in fact, turned on the audience, and suddenly the piece is about us and not just the characters on stage.

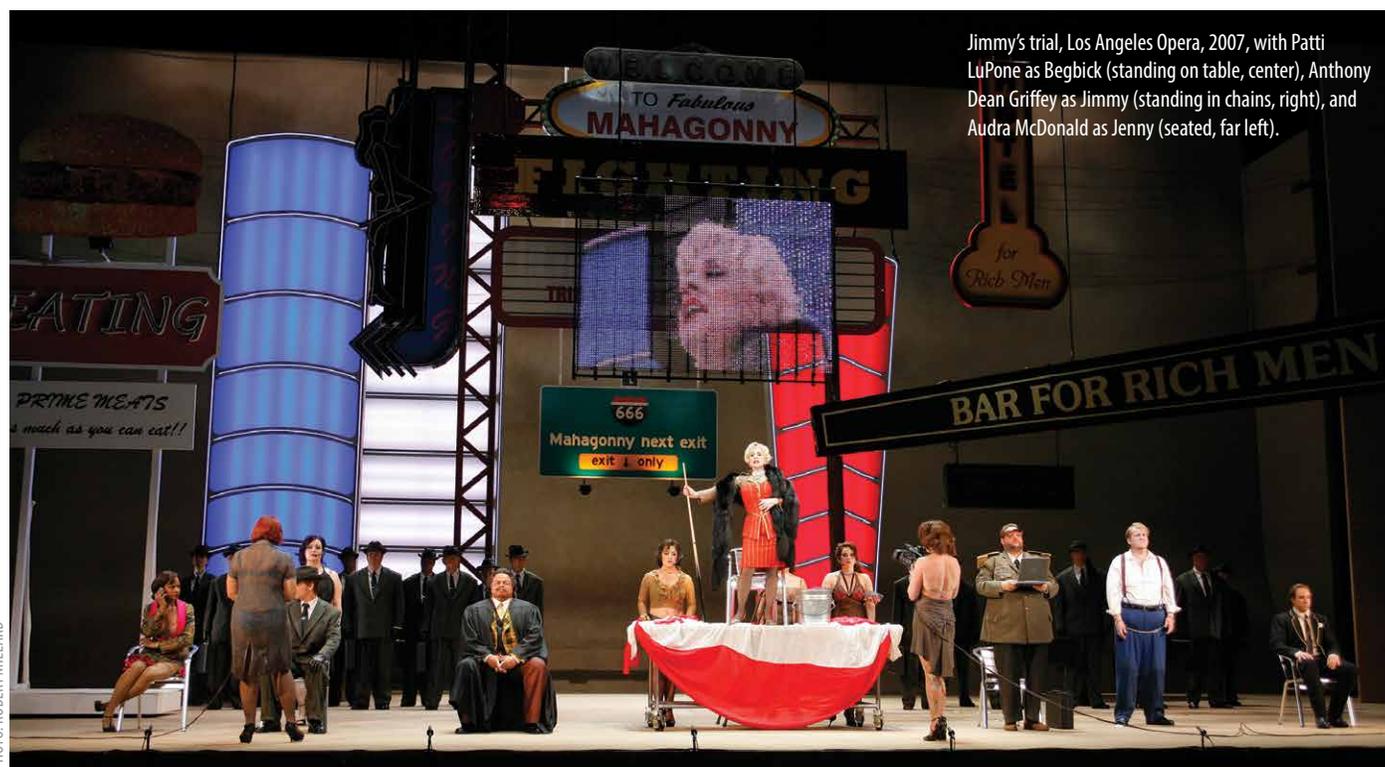
I don't think that there is any question that the frequency of productions of this opera goes through cycles in response to such things as recessions, wars, and new atrocities attributable to human greed. Sometimes it may lag behind actual events by a few years, but I don't think it's accidental that right now *Mahagonny* can be seen in half a dozen opera houses each season. That's probably more than at any other time in its history. I think this is directly related to our times and the relevance of *Mahagonny* to the excesses of today's global capitalism and the inhumanity that comes with the territory. It was intended as a cautionary tale, and it's a sad fact that its warnings have grown, decade by decade, only more prophetic and urgent.

SINGING THE SCORE

I once asked Jon Vickers why he hadn't sung Jimmy, and he said "because Jimmy is tougher on the voice than Tristan." It wasn't the high C at the end of "Nur die Nacht" that was so hard, but all the G's before that, one after another, just constantly F-G, F-G, so that by the time you get to the high C, there's nothing left. He said that he could do it on a recording but he wouldn't want to sing it night after night at the opera.

If there is one thing I'd like to accomplish in the next decade, it would be to get a really terrific audio recording of *Mahagonny* with a first-rate orchestra, conductor, and cast, preferably a group that had already done it together on stage. It should have an appendix that includes all of the options for the various versions, like John McGlinn's *Show Boat* recording. Maybe when the critical edition comes out . . .

The notes above were adapted from an interview with Kim H. Kowalke, President of the Kurt Weill Foundation, conducted by Norman Ryan and published in *Universal Edition's Musikblätter* 3 (May 2012), pp. 36–41, and 4 (November 2012), pp. 36–39. Video of the complete interview is available at <http://bit.ly/Kowalke>.



Jimmy's trial, Los Angeles Opera, 2007, with Patti LuPone as Begbick (standing on table, center), Anthony Dean Griffey as Jimmy (standing in chains, right), and Audra McDonald as Jenny (seated, far left).

PHOTO: ROBERT MILLARD

Building *Mahagonny*: Essential Issues in Staging *Aufstieg*

“There is no ‘ideal’ production of *Mahagonny*, just as there is no ‘definitive’ edition. . . . The very nature of the work compels us to continue searching for ideal solutions long after we have recognized that there are none to be found.” – David Drew

Any production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* must come to grips with the opera’s complicated genesis and confront questions about structure, content, and forces. Kim H. Kowalke has offered guidance on some of the most important issues along with some points to watch out for. Most of the following is derived from his summary of fundamental questions, “Building *Mahagonny*,” distributed by the publisher along with performance materials. There is no definitive version of the opera, but the motto, “Man hier alles dürfen darf” (you can get away with anything here), though a crucial line in the libretto, does not apply to productions of a work still protected by copyright. All changes for performance must be approved by the publisher.

Two acts or three?

Originally Weill conceived No. 17, Jimmy’s aria “Nur die Nacht,” as the end of Act II. Already in the second production, however, the aria migrated to the beginning of Act III, and Weill wrote a new chorale setting to end Act II. Both possibilities are defensible. If there is no intermission at this point, the original conclusion to No. 16, which leads directly into No. 17, is probably preferable. The number and placement of intermission(s) is anything but trivial. Uncut, Act I lasts no more than 65 minutes; Act II only 40 minutes (without either the “Crane Duet” or No. 17); Act III is only slightly longer even if both numbers are included there. Both options are now included in the rental materials.

“Crane Duet” and “Havanna-Lied”

Mahagonny underwent revision after the piano-vocal score and libretto were published by Universal Edition but before the premiere, largely in response to prospective producers’ concerns about censorship of certain scenes. The most substantive alteration, for No. 14 (“Lieben”) in Act II, prompted Weill to write the “Crane Duet” as a temporary replacement for part of the original bordello scene. But less than two years later in Berlin, the scene was performed as originally conceived, and the “Crane Duet” was omitted. Thus, there is no definitive placement for the duet. When the original brothel scene is performed, the “Crane Duet” may seem an odd appendage or interruption. In his 1969 edition of the opera, David Drew placed the duet in Act III as an alternative to the melodrama of Jim and Jenny in No. 19, “Hast du nicht sogar ein weißes Kleid?” But as Drew admitted, this location is not unproblematic. Yet another alternative is to interpolate it into Act I, between No. 7 and No. 8, as an early snapshot of Jenny and Jim’s relationship. Interpolating the duet here requires no modification to the preceding or subsequent numbers.

For the Berlin production in 1931, Weill wrote an alternate version of “Ach, bedenken Sie, Herr Jack O’Brien” (“Havanna-Lied”). Thus producers have a choice between the original “neo-classical” version and the “song-like” setting printed in the appendix of the piano-vocal score. Each has its merits; the original

more closely parallels the musical idiom of the “Crane Duet” and thus resonates with the “neo-classical” dimension of the opera. Both versions are included in the rental materials.

Cuts

Without any cuts, *Mahagonny* lasts no more than 2-1/2 hours, not including intermission(s). All the cuts known to have been introduced during Weill’s lifetime have been notated with “Vi - de” in Drew’s piano-vocal score. Most of them make little sense. As a general rule, sections that are strophic in structure (such as “Alabama-Song,” “Auf nach Mahagonny,” “Denn wie man sich bettet”) contain multiple stanzas for good dramaturgical reasons, and Weill has built variety and momentum into these settings. Decisions concerning these “Vi - de” cuts should take into account not only characterization and plot, but also music and form.

String Section

In Weill’s holograph score, he wrote the numerals 6, 3, 2, and 2 next to violin, viola, cello, and bass, respectively. (*Aufstieg* does not divide the violins into firsts and seconds.) It is not clear whether he meant the numbers as a minimum, or even whether they refer to players or to desks (and therefore must be doubled). Maurice Abravanel, who conducted the second production in 1930, in Kassel, recalled that he utilized the entire string section available in his opera house, with Weill’s full approval. Although the scoring of certain passages might seem consistent with a reduced string section, that of many others requires a substantial string component, whatever the acoustic conditions. In a large theater, of course, a larger string complement is a necessity.

Lenya’s 1956 Recording

Although Lenya’s recording carries tremendous interpretative authority, her range had been so compromised by that time that the role of Jenny was virtually rewritten by the conductor, without comment, to accommodate her vocal limitations. She later regretted that the work had been misrepresented by that endeavor, so crucial to the reception history of the piece. The accommodations made for Lenya are not authorized for performance.

Casting

Weill wrote to Abravanel in 1930, “*Mahagonny* is an opera. An opera for singers. To cast it with actors is absolutely impossible. Only when I specifically have marked passages as ‘spoken’ should there be any spoken words, and changes of any kind are possible only with my explicit permission.” The five principals in particular, Jenny, Jimmy, Begbick, Moses, Fatty, require operatic performers at the peak of their abilities. Rewriting any role in *Mahagonny* to accommodate vocal deficits is forbidden, including transposition of musical numbers.

Mahagonny Rising: The Royal Opera Production

The Royal Opera in London will present *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* for the first time in March 2015. Director **John Fulljames**, conductor **Mark Wigglesworth**, and translator **Jeremy Sams** offer their thoughts on the opera, on Weill and Brecht, and on the upcoming production.

Mahagonny is almost 100 years old. How has it held up?

Sams: *Mahagonny's* message is absolutely current. It's the human condition. Most importantly, it shows how human values like friendship and loyalty get eroded. It's about corruption, it's about greed. *Aufstieg* is neither dated nor prescient. It's so about now. I think you could put *Mahagonny* on stage in any decade and it would be about that decade.

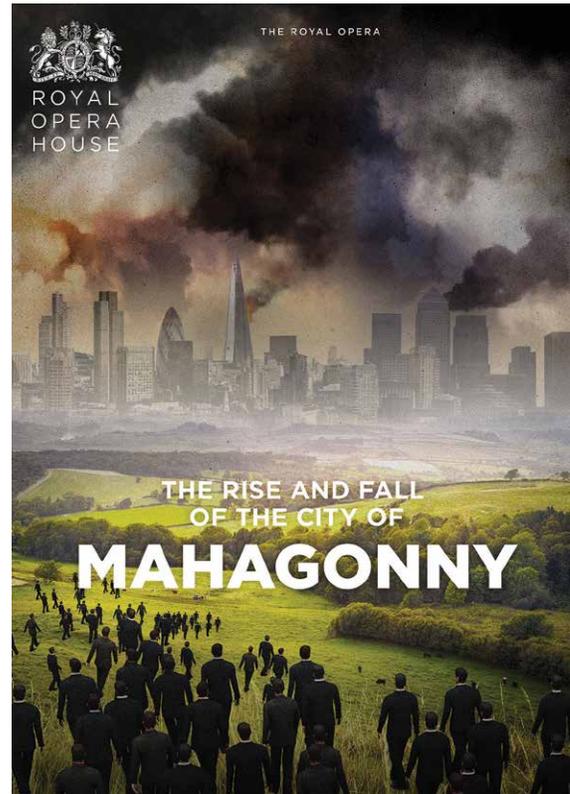
Fulljames: It's remarkable that the shocks of Weill's opera have lost none of their freshness and that the opera still speaks so potently today. Politically, its exploration of a society built on consumption has surely ended up ringing far more true today than even Brecht and Weill could have imagined. What's clear from all the recent productions of *Aufstieg* I've seen is that the opera demands to be set in the present. There is really no sense of realistic space-time in the conception of Brecht and Weill—anything which has a sense of period about it immediately feels both kitsch and clichéd. This is an opera which demands a fresh approach and a contemporary aesthetic. The only place that truly exists is the auditorium on the night of the performance.

Wigglesworth: On the one hand, Weill's jazz numbers are no more than a classical composer using the accepted dance idioms of his day, whether it be a Bach gigue, a Haydn minuet, or a Brahms waltz. But in the 1920s, jazz had a modernity that we cannot now recreate. To us, it can feel so nostalgic and of its time that it can no longer sound ahead of its time. Looking back through the wrong end of the telescope is not easy. Weill wanted the message of *Mahagonny* to be a globally relevant one, and he was at pains to make sure that it did not come across as merely "American." Almost a hundred years later, the historical and cinematic associations that jazz engenders make that harder to achieve.

Fulljames: If we locate the production in a version of Vegas then we are telling a historic story from the 20th century, but Weill and Brecht are interested in the future, not the past. They were writing about the present in the first act and then projecting forward from there into a dystopian future. In a world which was changing rapidly, and which is changing even more rapidly now,

MAHAGONNY SCREENINGS

The ROH production of *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* will be filmed on 1 April and screened throughout Europe and North America as part of the 2014-15 Royal Opera House Live Cinema Season. To search for a showing near you, go to: <http://bit.ly/MahagonnyROH>



Brecht and Weill ask us to question the value we ascribe to human life. The crux of the argument is the consequence of allowing a society to be defined solely by its consumption, and the inevitable consequence that human life itself becomes commodified in such a world.

Where would you place *Aufstieg* within the operatic canon?

Fulljames: The opera both works within, and also criticizes, the conventions of grand opera, and so it is particularly powerful to see it on the most prestigious of opera stages. To stage it there raises awkward questions about whether the art-form and its institutions have responded to the challenges laid down by Brecht and Weill almost a century ago to become sites of genuine political and social engagement. I'm less interested in *Aufstieg* as an attack on the art-form of opera—that's surely not the central thrust of its political and social charge.

Wigglesworth: Any work that has such a complicated gestation, and for which, as a result, there exists no definitive score, is always going to suffer at the hands of posterity's idiosyncratic prejudices. There tends to be a suspicion at best, or a laziness at worst, about a piece for which one needs to be creative even before one starts rehearsing.

Fulljames: I think this is an opera which cannot fail to connect to its audience—like much of Brecht's work it forces audiences to engage in the conversation whether they agree with his arguments or not. That is so different from so much opera, where the political argument is often buried deep beneath an aestheticized surface and an emotional narrative. The precise nature of the conversation Brecht and Weill want to have with us is harder to pin down. Like much satire, the target is hard to identify amidst the scatter-gun shooting.

What are your impressions of Brecht . . .

Fulljames: So many of Brecht's techniques have now become standard devices of contemporary theatre: the way the register of the text shifts; the way we are constantly reminded that we are watching a constructed argument rather than a reality.

Sams: Brecht is a fantastic poet, as great a poet as he was a dramatist, and they're quite different things. He had equal skill in both areas. You have to go back to Shakespeare, or Goethe and Schiller, to find someone like that. For the greatness of his playwriting, look to the later plays. There's little sign of it in *Dreigroschenoper* or *Mahagonny*.

. . . and Weill?

Sams: Weill was the most pragmatic theater writer you'll ever meet. Absolutely a total professional in that regard.

Fulljames: Weill understood the fractured, disjointed, melting-pot reality of the city—its anonymity, its cruelty and the harsh realities of its impersonal economics. Just as in *Street Scene* we are invited to witness a cycle of birthing and dying in one tenement block, we witness on a more epic canvas the life-cycle of an entire city in *Mahagonny*.

Sams: What you keep hearing about Weill is his massive knowledge of music. He knew his opera really well. He liked his Offenbach. There are references throughout the piece that I'm sure Brecht wouldn't have been familiar with—in Jimmy's big aria before the trial, when he is singing that the night should never end, that could be *Siegfried*. That could be *Freischütz*, or *Fidelio*. Nevertheless, what he does in *Mahagonny* is create a modern operatic style that is like nothing he's done before. I don't quite know how he does it. He squares the circle of fugal, *Bürgschaft* Weill if you like, *Dreigroschenoper* Weill, *Songspiel* Weill: it's all there in this one piece. Somehow he comes up with a single dramatic voice. We hear it again in *Seven Deadly Sins*. Melody coming from harmonic complication, and for me that leads absolutely to American Weill.

Wigglesworth: Although there are references to Bach and Mozart, influences of Schoenberg, Mahler, Bartók, and Stravinsky, along with the breath of both Broadway and Berlin, Weill is actually none of those things. He is simply Kurt Weill. In the case of *Mahagonny*, I realized that the performer's role is to engage in the flavors of the music, not its ingredients. They may seem incongruous on paper, but in reality they have been blended together with such personality and skill that the concern is academic, in both senses of the word.

How would you describe the relationship between the music and the libretto?

Sams: It's funny, because you see two people working in absolute harmony; at the same time, you see two people absolutely at loggerheads, with Brecht trying to influence the piece in ways Weill wouldn't necessarily countenance. There's no alienation in Jimmy's aria, "Nur die Nacht." And the music goes with it; it's plead-

ing, it's desperate, it's lyrical. And Brecht must have thought, "I didn't mean this." Brecht thinks he's controlling things, but he's actually being used by Weill—not in a bad way, but in a wonderful, properly collaborative way—to give him the material he needs to work towards one voice. *Mahagonny* is an absolute ragbag of stuff from Brecht. He's put everything you can think of in there: songs in English, songs in German, poems that existed before, parodies, lines of prose, spoken dialogue, placards, projections. There's no sort of text you can imagine that isn't in *Mahagonny*. Weill is very adaptable.

Wigglesworth: Ultimately opera is about the connection between words, music, and drama. But an intentional disconnect is equally valid and the discomfort that comes from a clash between words and music can be just as valuable an experience. Just as Mozart composed music in the Da Ponte operas that reveal feelings even the characters themselves don't know they are having, Weill's willingness to contradict the text was what made him such an ideal collaborator for Brecht's desire for audience alienation. Though you may feel like humming the tune at the end of Act I, you won't want to sing it with the words as well. In that conflict lies the work's tension.

For performers, to try and marry the horror and intensity of the story with the simplicity and at times banality of the music is to miss the point. The clash between the two is the point. And it is a clash that should be embraced head-on. The beautiful music must never be allowed to sentimentalize or soften the characterization. Though the singing can indeed be "song-like," *Mahagonny* is an opera, not a musical. Singers should sing their melodies with fidelity to the brutality of the text, not the charm of the music. And this is what makes the experience as uncomfortable as the message. It is that combination that lies at the heart of all great opera.

What can you tell us about the production at the Royal Opera House?

Fulljames: We've decided to perform the opera in two acts as this seems to best reflect the musical structure. And we decided to perform the opera in English, an unusual choice for the Royal Opera, because the balance between text and music seems more weighted towards the text than in more lyrical works. Direct understanding of the text seems crucial. But we're desperate that this shouldn't soften the sounds of the opera, by losing all those German consonants and making it sound like an American show.

Sams: I didn't translate the "Crane Duet" because they've decided not to do it in our production. I will do the "Crane Duet" at some point. It's actually a particularly hard piece to translate, for the simple reason that it's not really part of a libretto, it's a poem. And what Weill has written is a *Lied*, a song.

Wigglesworth: The necessary collaboration between director, conductor, and historian, prior to the first rehearsal, leads to a questioning of the material that is as healthy as it is rewarding. I am delighted to be part of The Royal Opera's first-ever staging of this piece. The lack of tradition will be a huge advantage in such an untraditional opera.