

# WEILL AND DIE DREIGROSCHENOPER

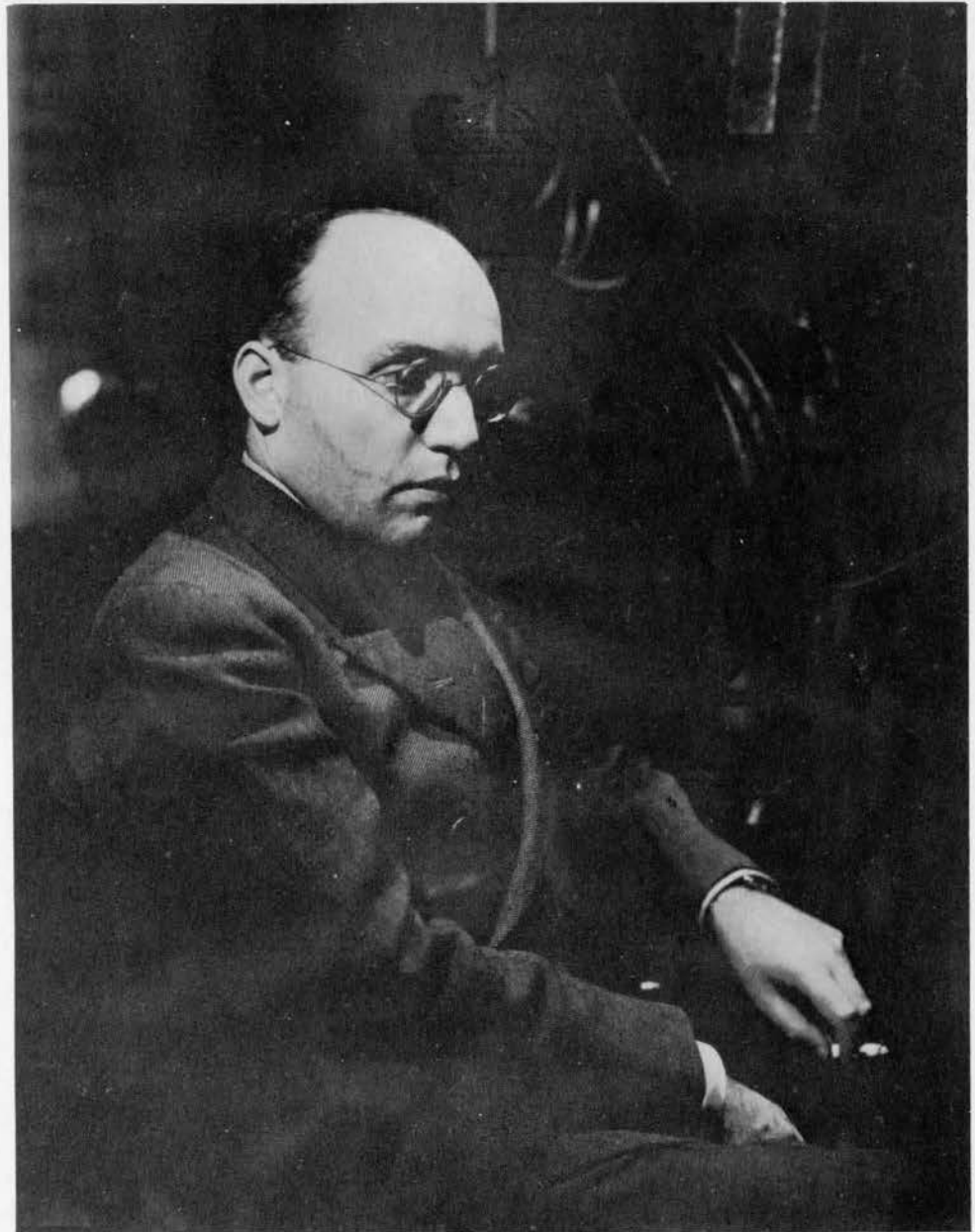
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Success that endures, and eventually becomes a classic achievement, is not to be begged, bought or stolen. It is the just reward of those who are worthy of their Muse. In the arts of our own time, true success is apt to be a posthumous gift, and even when it does arrive earlier, the artist is caught by surprise. Those who attended the first rehearsal of Weill's *Dreigroschenoper* decided that it had only a slender chance of survival, and indeed a substitute production was prepared in case of its sudden demise. But the volcanic premiere changed all that and appreciably transformed the face of the musical and theatrical world. Within five years *Die Dreigroschenoper* had reached almost every corner of Europe, East and West. Yet when the Nazis placed it under a total ban in 1933 and requested foreign organizations to return all full scores to Germany for immediate destruction, the ultimate fate of the work was once more unpredictable. Even those who loved *Die Dreigroschenoper* and bravely believed that Europe's darkness would some day be dispelled might well have feared that the work would only survive as a museum piece. In a sense, it had still to reveal itself as the timeless masterpiece that it undoubtedly is.

The world waited another twenty years for this revelation—and it occurred, ironically enough, in New York, a city that before the war had greeted *Die Dreigroschenoper* without enthusiasm. The resoundingly successful revival of *Die Dreigroschenoper* at the Theater de Lys in 1954 has now become a part of theatrical history, and the work itself has again become a part of our musical present. During the past five years Germany too has rediscovered Weill—thanks

Photograph of Kurt Weill taken in Paris by Hoenigen-Huene, 1933.



in no small measure to the recordings of his widow, Lotte Lenya—and the experiences of the past three decades are seen to have given new meaning to his urgently “contemporary” expressions of thirty years ago. When topical comment acquires universal significance in this way, we may be sure that a genuinely inspired artist has been at work.

From the standpoint of today we can more easily perceive the *unity* of Weill's German works. His four major products of the time—not to speak of smaller pieces such as the masterly school opera *Der Jasager*—seem to follow a logical order of succession and to present a rounded whole, as if they were intended as a kind of modern counterpart to the medieval morality-play cycles. Thus the admonitory fierceness of *Die Dreigroschenoper* leads to the purging despair of *Mahagonny* (that monument to a nation's zero hour) and thence to the ascendant humanism of the opera *Die Bürgschaft*. This in turn gives rise to the heartfelt personal drama of *Silbersee*, while *Die Sieben Todsünden* of 1933 stands as the moralizing epilogue to the cycle. The meaningful unity of this large-scale conception may well have been unconscious, but artistic creation tends to follow that course. As Weill himself once wrote: “it is one of the main factors of creative art to keep a certain innocence about the process of creation, to follow that stream of imagination (or, to use a much abused word, of inspiration) without looking round for the source of the stream.”

Since *Die Dreigroschenoper* had the crucial function of representing a kind of “call to arms,” one can understand why it has so far attracted the most attention. Nor is it surprising that the work was first appreciated as a classic, and indeed as a work of genius in the strict sense of the term, by certain of Weill's fellow composers. Its phenomenally sure-footed solution of certain very real musical and aesthetic problems was bound to attract their attention, while the marked individuality of its language inevitably inspired imitation. Strange as it may seem, Weill's influence was, and is, quite as strong in many quarters as that of Hindemith, and unlike Hindemith he attracted several composers who were followers of Schoenberg. Amongst the composers who stayed in Germany after 1933—of whom Boris Blacher was undoubtedly the most talented and Carl Orff the most successful—there is hardly one who did not owe something to Weill's example.

The *public* success of *Die Dreigroschenoper* when it first appeared demands a different explanation. The peculiar violence of the reactions suggested that this success was more complex than it seemed. Such passions are only aroused when a work combines an attack on sacred conventions with an unprecedented positive content of its own. It is only then that the world experiences what Herman Melville, describing the nature of genius, calls “the shock of recognition.” One could argue that since Beethoven, who remains the most profoundly “shocking” of all great artists, this element of shock has been present in all the absolutely major masterpieces and all the relatively minor ones. In Act I, Scene 2, of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Brecht makes Peachum say: “Between ‘giving people a shock’ and ‘getting on their nerves’ there's a difference, my friends. Only an artist can give people *the right kind of shock!*” Today it is evident that much of the superficially revolutionary art of the inter-war years possessed no more than the crude capacity of “getting on people's nerves.” That is to say, it was not truly *creative*. The right kind of shock, the right kind of impulse, is always that which goes beyond the mere attack on outworn convention and constructs new conventions which excite a freshly determined response. Amongst the musical avant garde of the twenties and thirties this was most fully achieved by Arnold Schoenberg, and to a lesser degree by his pupils Alban Berg and Anton Webern. But artistic revolution is by no means the prerogative of the avant garde. There is a kind of “conservative revolution” which can be almost as significant, and in Germany Brecht and Weill stood at the head of this movement. Yet for certain of the cognoscenti, as one writer has observed, “the jazzy Weill is as sealed a book as the twelve-tonal Schoenberg, and they would be unable to explain the popular and musical success of either *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *Moses und Aron*. The isolation of our age's masters is indeed diminishing fast. It is the music critics that are becoming isolated.”

Brecht himself, for extramusical reasons which are respectable if mistaken, came to reject the work of the “advanced” composers, and his attitude was sharply reflected in the career of Weill, who became more of a revolutionary as he became more of a conservative. As early as the cello sonata which he wrote in his sixteenth year, Weill had shown his eagerness for experiment, and his first major work, the *Berliner Symphonie* of 1921, is a remarkable attempt to extend the sophisticated symphonic tradition of Mahler. His subsequent period of study with Busoni gave his music a more classical bias, though his debt to the late Romanticism persists. The influences of Wagner, Mahler, Strauss and even Schreker are intelligently absorbed in the three one-act operas which Weill wrote prior to his collaboration with Brecht. Over and above that, one notes that the second and third of these operas—*Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren* and *Royal Palace*—contained elements of popular dance music,

(including tango finales in both cases) which held the seeds of future development. But apart from these “popular” episodes, the music was still somewhat esoteric in appeal.

Despite certain innovations, Weill's three one-act operas belong to the conventional tradition of opera. Brecht, who questioned everything, did not fail to question that tradition too, and he attacked those composers who accepted what he called “the apparatus of bourgeois operatic entertainment.” It was obvious that such an “apparatus” was not capable of conveying criticism of the society that had evolved it. Yet criticism of this kind seemed to be increasingly necessary in the social and political context of the late twenties. In his own plays, Brecht revolutionized theatrical forms in order to make such criticism possible, and if, as he believed, the theater could help to change the world for the better, then opera, which was a part of theater, should do so too. But again, it must first be reformed. Weill was in sympathy with this aim, and in 1927 the two men collaborated on a musical work, *Das kleine Mahagonny*. In form it was a condensed version of the classical *Singspiel*, but the content violently broke with tradition and embraced the popular style which had been hinted at in Weill's previous operas. Stylized contemporary dance idioms insured ready access to a wide public, while the purely musical invention retained the attention of musicians.

The use of musically untrained actors to sing the numbers was another means of breaking with the sophisticated operatic convention. In this respect, Brecht's attitude to music was somewhat cavalier, and he seemed little concerned about the possible dangers to the music in the hands of unmusical amateurs. However, the project was saved by the presence of Lotte Lenya, a remarkable actress whose innate musicality was precisely suited to the demands of the music. Clearly, the music required something quite different from the “cultivated” style of opera singing. Nonetheless, like any other music, it called for a vital sense of phrasing and expression. In the light of Brecht's expressive requirements (*direct* attack, without any sophistication) Lenya's talent was ideal: an intense awareness of what is artistically true, a kind of adult child's-eye view, brought her to the heart of the music and enabled her to make the desired comment on the highbrow Emperor's New Clothes. The style of performance which she established was forgotten after the holocaust of 1933, but fate was kinder than it seemed at first, and Lenya was able to revive and greatly enrich the tradition when the world was again ready for it.

The experiment of *Das kleine Mahagonny* was, then, a success. But since it had been tried out on an exclusively highbrow audience at a contemporary music festival, its social function was not fulfilled. That had to wait until *Das kleine Mahagonny* was expanded into the full-length opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1929). But in the meanwhile, Brecht had discovered a perfect vehicle for his operatic-social onslaught: John Gay's famous *Beggar's Opera* (1727). Its two-hundredth anniversary was a fitting occasion. Gay had written *The Beggar's Opera* with a double purpose. Aesthetically, it was a parody of the style of Italian opera which was fashionable in London at that time. (In this respect its success was such as to drive Italian opera from the English stage during the season of its first performance.) Socially, it was an attack on the Walpole administration and on the Royal Court, by whom Gay thought himself ill-treated.

Gay's satirical method is very simple. The conduct of established government is equated with the conduct of the criminal underworld, and amoral self-interest is proposed as the common factor between them. Gay's humor relied for its effect on presenting an exact inversion of conventional morality as if it were the morality itself. This was a favorite satirical gesture of the time; Fielding's famous novel *Jonathan Wild* depends upon it almost exclusively, though the tone there is much harsher than it is in Gay. *The Beggar's Opera* was indeed calculated to entertain rather than to offer serious criticism: its predominating love interest is proof enough of that. In his adaptation, Brecht generally followed Gay's dramatic framework, but the actual material is almost entirely his own and is much closer in spirit to the savagery of Fielding. But of course Brecht was thinking first and foremost of his own time. By transferring the action to late-eighteenth-century London, Gay's attack on Western society was given a new blade which cut both ways, for the westward aspirations of the Hanoverian monarchy were reflected in the German culture and economy under the Weimar republic of the 1920's. History repeats itself more than once, and in so doing it has given Brecht's irony another twist. For today Germany looks west once again, and Brecht's topical satire of 1928 finds its mark as surely as ever.

Weill benefited in his own way from the precedent of *The Beggar's Opera*. In revolting against operatic convention, Dr. Pepusch had compiled his score for Gay's play from popular airs. Weill went one step further and wrote his own airs, retaining only one of the originals—the G minor song “Through all the Employments of Life,” which becomes the “Morgenchoral des Peachum” in *Die Dreigroschenoper*. It is interesting that Weill should choose from *The*

*Beggar's Opera* the tune which is the darkest in tone and the most primitive in structure. Neither Brecht's play nor Weill's music are understandable if one overlooks their consistently tragic implications. It is no accident that *Die Dreigroschenoper* has sometimes been compared to the overtly tragic *Wozzeck* of Berg and Büchner. Wozzeck's cry, "With us poor people—it's money, money . . . People like us can't be holy in this world," would have found a sympathetic hearer in Brecht.

The seeming primitivity of the "Morgenchoral des Peachum" is as characteristic as its pessimism. The fact that Weill was writing for singing actors and not for operatic singers forced him to discipline his musical materials drastically. But for the true artist, discipline is the father of invention, and behind the deliberately primitive exterior of the *Dreigroschenoper's* score there is a remarkable complexity of musical thought and feeling. Weill saw that the only way of infusing trivial dance-music forms with the profound emotions inherent in Brecht's text was by way of a highly charged though simply expressed functional harmony. The melody is, of course, inseparable from the harmony and the subtle structure of key relationships. But the harmony is the primary source of events, and by taking a road that diverges sharply from Tin Pan Alley, it discovers altogether new territory. It is partly for this reason that *Die Dreigroschenoper* has been so aptly described as "the weightiest possible lowbrow opera for highbrows and the most full-blooded highbrow musical for lowbrows." The appalling chasm which divides our contemporary culture into two, and unfortunately necessitates the use of such terms as "highbrow" and "lowbrow," is something which should never cease to concern the serious artist. For that reason the example of Weill should be a continual inspiration, for he is the only composer to have bridged the cultural chasm since the heyday of late 19th century Italian opera—a period which, incidentally, Weill much admired.

If we take into account the musical situation in the late 1920's, the score of *Die Dreigroschenoper* is seen to be a most courageous undertaking. In the first place, it entailed the rejection of a promising line of development towards free atonal harmony which Weill had broached in his earlier works. In the second place it was a direct challenge to innumerable fashionable composers who, misunderstanding both Stravinsky and Schoenberg, indulged in a type of dissonant harmony that was, to all intents and purposes, meaningless. Before *Die Dreigroschenoper* exposed the fraud, many so-called serious composers had played a game of Deaf-Man's-Bluff with jazz idiom, having found in its naïve vitality nothing but an excuse for sophisticated grimaces. The example of Erik Satie's wonderful cabaret songs, written in the early years of the century, was overlooked, and Milhaud's expressive jazz ballet *La Création du monde* had no successors. Satie and Milhaud had both used a harmony appropriate to the idiom. Of the composers who employed an alien, non-functional harmony in their jazz works, only Stravinsky, with his two pieces in Ragtime, and his *Soldier's Tale*, achieved anything of note. By the late twenties, Stravinsky had evolved a more traditional harmonic style, and his most straightforward work from the harmonic point of view, *Apollon musagète*, preceded *Die Dreigroschenoper* by only a few months. The rediscovery of tonality stimulated Weill as it had Stravinsky.

Of course, Weill's tonal thinking had a very different ancestry from Stravinsky's, though the influence of the Russian master himself is noticeable in the Overture to the *Dreigroschenoper*. The main roots of Weill's harmony are in the great tradition of the Austro-German *Lied*, a tradition that underlies the work of Weill's most obvious spiritual forebear, Gustav Mahler. The great differences of scale and achievement make this comparison somewhat startling at first, but it is evident that Weill owed much to the marches and *Ländler* of Mahler. Yet it was only after consciously suppressing his romantic background that Weill discovered in himself a vein of the purest romanticism. The infinitely plangent suspensions and subtly roving tonality of *Die Dreigroschenoper's Liebeslied*, the unresolved harmonic yearning of the famous *Moritat*, the breathtakingly varied tensions of the *Zuhälterballade*—all these are new and wholly unexpected applications of techniques that were familiar to the Mahler of the symphonies and songs and, before that, to the Wagner of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*. If Mahler seems closer to Weill than does Wagner, it is perhaps because he shares with him a peculiarly Jewish outlook. We sense behind the music a certain wry acceptance of the instability of human existence; the shabby as well as the heroic is included in its view of tragedy. In both Mahler and Weill, the tragic irony remains strictly musical. As the critic Hans Keller has well said with reference to *Die Dreigroschenoper*, "However paradoxical, for the moment, a surprise turn of chordal events may seem, it never proves unfunctional within the wider whole."

Popular musical guide books, rule-of-thumb their rides through the musical repertoire, tend to refer to the "decadence" of Mahler, and, if they get that far, they say the same of Weill. This is a misunderstanding of the whole aesthetic, and confuses an artist's legitimate sense of unease with a weak-spirited refusal to resist. The charge is refuted by such things as the

*Kanonensong* in *Die Dreigroschenoper*. With its brutally foreshortened rhythms, it is one of the most belligerent passages in all music. The harmonic scheme, together with the melodic developments, expresses both the "threat" and the answer to it. To quote Keller again: "The 'sordidity' of Weill's inventions is very much in the ear of the listener . . . Weill grimly ironizes, amongst other things, our own conception of decadence." It is not hard, then, to understand why Weill's strangely complex musical talent was so well suited to the Brecht who wrote:

Indeed I live in the dark ages!  
A guileless word is an absurdity. A smooth forehead betokens  
A hard heart. He who laughs  
Has not yet heard  
The bad news.

Brecht, to be sure, heard more than his share of "the bad news," yet no one was readier to laugh—albeit with a wrinkled forehead. Weill matches this ability precisely. The score of *Die Dreigroschenoper* has its moments of searching humor. Take for example the brilliant conclusion of the *Eifersuchtsduett*, in which Polly and Lucy, after roundly abusing each other in alternation, join together in "harmony." The cheerful turn to the major and the mocking agreement of their melody in thirds are both belied by the persistence of the accompanying figure which had first signaled their hostility.

Another kind of humor is displayed in the *Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit*. The music, so far from vulgarly underlining the meaning of the words, bedecks them with innocent garlands of forget-me-nots. The sweetly diatonic melody and the gentle modulations are expressive in their own right, but they deceive us. Whereas the beautiful *Pollys Lied* had seemed like a contemporary counterpart to the best side of Mendelssohn's lyric talent, the *Ballade* takes us unerringly to the drawing-room recital, where neither we nor it belong. Thus the song affects a guileless word and achieves an explosive paradox. And because the ironic detonator is at the very center, near the heart and not too far from the loins, the devastation is complete.

The humor of this is relatively carefree, whereas at other points in the work our laughter must remain very much alive to "the bad news." Thus, Peachum's biblical homilies in the Act I finale, and their cunningly related sequel, Macheath's Act III *Grabschift* (with its biblical overtones) inspire a parody of liturgical intonings. But the humor soon recoils in panic, and the snarling harmonic developments of both episodes remind us that biblical injunctions have on occasion been made an excuse for unholy acts.

The serious purpose of the comedy in *Die Dreigroschenoper* is nowhere more apparent than in the vital relationship between the *Seeräuberjenny* song and the finale of the opera. The serious implications of Jenny's daydreams are unmistakable, and the philosopher Ernst Bloch has perceptively described Jenny's cry of *Hopp-la!* as "apocalyptic." Although her vision is expressed in terms of the artificial dream world promoted by the cheap film and the paperback novelette, it is a vision of a day of judgment when the oppressed will be freed and the oppressors destroyed. We need not be surprised at the minatory tread of the song's opening, the funereal accents of the third verse, and the tragi-comic suspense of *Und an diesem Mittag*; they reflect a wider significance. The clue to the situation is to be found in the quasi-religious invocations to the ship. The hope that "the ship" will some day arrive may be only an idle dream, but Jenny has no other consolation for her existence. Like Beckett's tramps, she is waiting for Godot. But in the finale of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, "Godot" eventually arrives—in the shape of the riding messenger. He is, of course, the opposite of what is expected. He comes, not from a ship which has overthrown law and order, but from the Queen, who is the personification of all law and order. He brings last-moment salvation, not for Jenny and her like, but for one who has exploited her. The conventional happy end of commercial fiction is thus turned inside out, and the irony is too appalling to provoke anything but the most uncomfortable laughter.

Weill constructs this finale on pseudo-operatic lines, but the parody is not comic in intent. Its true meaning is revealed when the serenity of the little duet in which Macheath and Polly rejoice over their reunion is shattered by an orchestral coda that lasts no more than five bars. This coda recalls the agonized theme to which Polly sang of her ruin, in the *Barbara-song*. In its new context, it follows Polly's words "I am so happy," and it thereby tells us that she (i.e., the audience and the society it represents) has no reason to be happy about a "happy end" which is more conventional than just. Force of habit encourages the unthinking response: in one of his poems, Brecht wrote, "We particularly ask you—when a thing continually occurs—not on that account to find it natural . . . lest all things be held unalterable."

Are things unalterable? No five bars in modern music pose a philosophical question more directly than those in which Weill reacts against Polly's "happiness." The world will continue to speculate about the answers to its problems until Jenny's ship arrives, and even then *Die Dreigroschenoper* will not again be forgotten. Once was too often.