

# Kurt Weill: Doubtful and Chimerical Works

David Drew

The 'lost' Symphony of 1920 noted in the work-list that follows my Weill entry in *The New Grove* is not lost: it existed only in the minds of those of us whose first attempts to decipher the German script of Weill's postcard to his father of 10 December 1920 led to the conclusion that it was 'meine Sinfonie' which Weill had just finished and was pleased with. Recently discovered correspondence, and a further inspection of the postcard, confirm that Weill was in fact announcing the completion of 'mein Vortrag', 'my talk'. Although he says he has been working in the Staatsbibliothek 'to keep warm', and for the same reason could equally well have been writing music there, the library's official purposes were better served by a talk than by a symphony. In a letter to his brother Hanns from Berlin of 3 July 1919, Weill mentions the 'Mahler talk' he is planning, and the problem that he can work on it only in holiday time, but will then be in places (including Dessau) where he will not have access to the material he needs – 'especially the symphonies'. Like the Beethoven talk he prepared 18 months later, the Mahler one would have been intended for the Jewish cultural circle in Halberstadt. His brother was responsible for the circle's musical activities.

In interviews with American journalists during the period 1937–41 Weill occasionally alluded to his musical beginnings, but the details in their published form are unreliable. One example is the 'opera' supposedly based on Sudermann's *Das hohe Lied* which is mentioned by Louis M. Simon in his *New York Times* feature 'Up the Rungs from Opera' (13 April 1941). Another, from the same source, is Weill's reported claim to have orchestrated parts of Engelbert Humperdinck's opera *Gaudeamus*. Weill studied composition with Humperdinck at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik in 1918–19, and *Gaudeamus* was his master's last opera. The holograph full score (in the Humperdinck Archive in the music library of Frankfurt University) has the end date 4 August 1917 – some six months before Weill left Dessau for his studies in Berlin. There is no sign of any other hand than Humperdinck's in the score of the opera, or in the overture that he wrote in Berlin (Wannsee) in the summer of 1919.

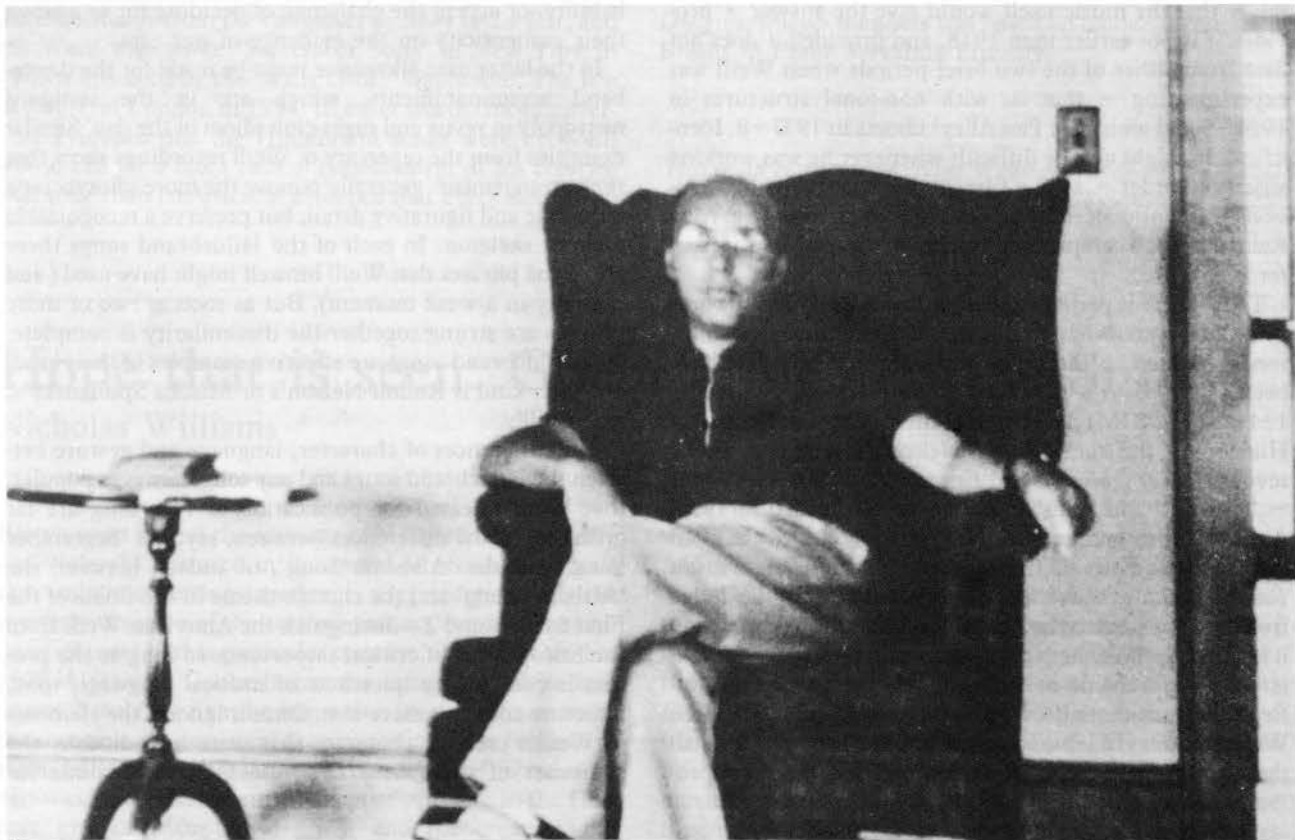
One would hardly expect otherwise, even if the dates matched. Humperdinck was a fine craftsman, and it is inconceivable that he would have entrusted the orchestration of part of an opera to a young composer whose orchestral technique was as rudimentary as Weill's demonstrably was at the time when he began his studies at the Hochschule or as fallible as it still was a year later (in the Suite in E). Weill's remarks to Louis Simon was surely misreported: no doubt Humperdinck had given him the exercise of orchestrating one or two passages from the vocal score of *Gaudeamus* and comparing the results with

his own versions.

Both for personal reasons and because of the cultural climate, Weill did not encourage serious interest in his European work during the 1940s – his few references to it in public are pointedly casual. After his death, Lotte Lenya became his apologist and brave advocate in countless interviews for the media. Her recollections of Weill's work during the two periods of their life together – that is, from 1925 to 1930, and again from 1937 to the end – were always vivid, and generally consistent with the facts. There is, however, one case where she is the sole authority for the existence of a particular score: in discussions with me during the 1960s she maintained that Weill had written incidental music for Karlheinz Martin's staging of Büchner's *Dantons Tod* in September 1929 – a historic and, in Büchner's spirit, revolutionary production for the Berlin Volksbühne, with Hans Ruhmann as Danton and Walter Franck as Robespierre. Music is not mentioned in any press notices traced so far, but Lenya was not relying on hearsay, as she was obliged to do in her accounts of the opening night of *Happy End* on 2 September 1929: she was unable to attend that premiere (or the few performances that followed) because she was playing the role of Lucille in *Dantons Tod*, which opened one day earlier. It is just possible that Weill contributed to the Volksbühne production two or three anonymous arrangements of historically authentic material – for instance 'La Carmagnole'. But he would not have had much time to spare in August: it was only in that month that he began work on the orchestral score for *Happy End*.

Another Berliner Volksbühne production to which Weill is said to have contributed and in which Lenya played a supporting role was *Das Lied von Hoboken*. Directed by Heinz Dieter Kenter and designed by Caspar Neher, with Albert Hoerrmann, Leonhard Steckel, Hermann Speelmanns and Dolly Haas in the principal roles, it opened at the Theater am Bülowplatz on 30 March 1930 – just three weeks after the première of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. *Das Lied von Hoboken* was a free adaptation by Günther Weisenborn (1902–69) of a play by Michael Gold, one of the many American writers who openly associated themselves with the struggles of the American Communist Party during the inter-war years. Weisenborn had made his name in 1928 with a pacifist play *U-Boot S 4*, and was an early recruit to Brecht's circle in Berlin. In adapting Gold's play he followed the current post-*Dreigroschenoper* fashion and interpolated a few topical songs.

According to Lenya's recollections in the early 1960s, Weill had written the score for the play and composed one of the songs expressly for her. On 24 September 1963



Snapshot of Weill by Lotte Lenya, c1930

Weisenborn replied to my inquiry, and confirmed that Weill had written 'ein langes Chanson' entitled 'Tango Locarno', and that it had indeed been performed by Lenya. Further inquiries from Lenya prompted a letter of 28 November 1963 in which Weisenborn declared that there had been a misunderstanding, and that the song she had sung was 'Das Lied vom blinden Mädchen' (from which he quoted two verses from memory). Later in the letter he quoted a couplet from another of her songs, and declared that he had written 'only a few Chansons' for the play, and held out hope of finding 'das Manuskript der Lieder und des Stücks'. That was the end of the correspondence, but not of the problem, which was transformed if not entirely solved when my researches in newspaper files and at the University of Cologne's Institut für Theaterwissenschaft revealed that the music for *Das Lied von Hoboken* had from the start been attributed to the Austrian-born composer and conductor Wilhelm Grosz (1894–1939), and that there was no mention of Weill's name in the press or in the Volksbühne programme.

It is possible – even, in the circumstances, probable – that Weill was the first composer whom the Volksbühne approached. In view of the pressure of work created by the *Mahagonny* première (and its aftermath), and in the light of his recent experiences over the Grossmann–Hessel *Apollo-Brunnenstrasse*, he may have declined immediately;

or else he may, for Lenya's sake, have given his provisional assent. The latter possibility would increase the likelihood of a confusion in Lenya's mind and in Weisenborn's thirty years later. But in either case Grosz was a logical alternative. A pupil of Franz Schreker who had followed the tonal path of his younger contemporary Krenek and become increasingly influenced by American jazz, Grosz had settled in Berlin, where he collaborated with the left-wing writer and film critic Béla Balász on the dance-pantomime *Baby in der Bar*. Prior to his emigration in 1933 he was artistic director of the Ultraphone recording company. His works, like Weill's, were published by Universal Edition – not without success, especially in circles where Grosz was admired as an outspoken opponent of Schoenberg and his school. Having started his career several years earlier than Weill and taken a quite different path towards popular idioms, Grosz – to judge from his published works – was immune from his influence, but likely to be sympathetic to his aims, and unlikely to have written for *Das Lied von Hoboken* anything so far removed in style from Weill's jazz number in *Happy End*, 'Das Lied vom harten Nuss', that confusions between the two could not eventually have arisen in Lenya's mind, and Weisenborn's also.

Adjacent to every area of potential doubt about the authenticity of missing 'Weill' scores there is the near cer-

tainty that the music itself would give the answer – provided it is not earlier than 1918, and provided it does not date from either of the two brief periods when Weill was experimenting – that is, with non-tonal structures in 1924–5 and with ‘Tin Pan Alley’ idioms in 1937–8. Identification might also be difficult whenever he was working strictly to order – as in a film studio – or when his decisions were influenced by an omnipotent director (e.g. Max Reinhardt) or a complaining producer (e.g. with *A Kingdom for a Cow*).

Today there is perhaps a greater chance of doubtful works being discovered than fictional ones being invented. Two songs credited to the mysterious team ‘Jary/Weill’ have been included in a recent two-disc Electrola album (IC 134–31 782/83M) devoted to archive recordings of Hildebrand, the star of Rudolf Nelson’s last two pre-Hitler revues, *Es hat geklingelt* and *Etwas für Sie*. The two songs – ‘Liebster’ and ‘Einsamkeit’ – were recorded in 1935. A third Hildebrand number, ‘Lächle noch einmal’, is listed under ‘Weill, Kurt’ in Clough and Cuming’s *The World’s Encyclopaedia of Recorded Music*, vol. i (1952). To judge from a copy examined in the BBC’s Record Library in 1960 it belongs to the same period; and again the credit to Weill is without forename or initial. In the absence of any official, circumstantial, or autograph connection between Weill and the Hildebrand songs, we can either exclude all three songs from the Weill canon on the grounds of pro-

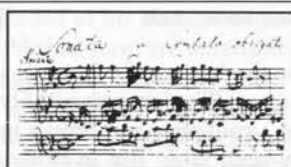
bability, or accept the challenge of deciding for or against their authenticity on the evidence of our ears.

In the latter case allowance must be made for the dance-band accompaniments, which are in the standard metropolitan revue and night-club idiom of the day. Similar examples from the repertory of Weill recordings show that such arrangements generally remove the more idiosyncratic harmonic and figurative detail, but preserve a recognizable melodic skeleton. In each of the Hildebrand songs there are cliché phrases that Weill himself might have used (and not only in a weak moment). But as soon as two or more phrases are strung together the dissimilarity is complete. The Hildebrand songs are effective examples of their kind; but their kind is Rudolf Nelson’s or Mischa Spoliansky’s, not Weill’s.

The differences of character, language and gesture between the Hildebrand songs and any song, however popular, that Weill released for publication or recording are far greater than the differences between, say, the ‘September Song’ and the ‘Alabama Song’, or indeed between the ‘Alabama Song’ and the chorale theme in the finale of the First Symphony. To distinguish the American Weill from the European is of critical importance so long as the process is confined to questions of musical language, tone, structure and expressive aim. Once it ignores the elements in Weill’s creative character that were ineradicable, the composer of the *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* becomes in-

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distinguishable from the composer of *Baby in der Bar*, and the Weill who wrote 'September Song' in New York in 1938 is upstaged by the 'Willy Grosz' who wrote 'The Isle of Capri' in London in 1934. In other words: incontrovertible evidence that the Hildebrand songs were by Weill would call for a more radical reassessment of his creative character than comparable evidence that every one of the

*Dreigroschenoper* numbers was based on models dictated by Brecht to Franz Servatius Bruinier.

*This in an extract from 'Kurt Weill: A Handbook' by David Drew, published in England by Faber on 28 September at £25.*