

David Drew

The History of Mahagonny

On January 9 in Stratford, and on January 16 in London, Sadler's Wells stage the first British performance of Kurt Weill's 'The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny'. The available information about this work, and indeed about its composer, is so limited that we have asked David Drew (whose book on Weill is due to appear in 1964) to relate this 'History of Mahagonny'.

*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*¹ is the fifth opera which Weill is known to have completed. The series begins with *Der Protagonist*, composed in 1924 when Weill was 24.² The performance of *Der Protagonist* two years later at Dresden under Fritz Busch made Weill's reputation. The next stage-work was a ballet-opera, *Royal Palace*, composed 1925-6, and performed without success the following year in Berlin under Kleiber. Both *Der Protagonist* and *Royal Palace* are one-act works, but in 1926-7 Weill wrote a full-length opera whose libretto, he fondly hoped, would be in the Hofmannsthal tradition. His publishers thought otherwise (the librettist was a young music critic) and refused to handle it. Tragically—for whatever its defects, the work marked an important step forward for Weill—all the material has been lost except for an incomplete folder of sketches, which show among other things that several of the musical ideas were later to find their way into *Mahagonny*.

After this set-back, Weill wrote a companion piece for *Der Protagonist*, entitled *Der Zar lässt sich fotografieren*. He did not wish *Der Zar* to be performed on its own, as it is to some extent dramatically dependent on its predecessor; but the work proved so popular after a few necessary cuts had been made—it was first performed at Leipzig in 1928 under Gustav Brecher—that it was soon detached from its uncomfortable companion, and performed throughout Germany. *Der Zar* was Weill's first success with the general public, and the only one to be untouched by controversy.³

Shortly before the completion of *Der Zar*, Weill was asked by the committee of the 1927 Baden-Baden music festival to write a short one-act chamber opera for the 1927 festival. He decided against yet another return to the one-act form, and for a time considered writing a *scena* based on a scene from *King Lear*. In the end he settled for a short scenic cantata using for text the five ballads

entitled 'Mahagonnygesänge' which Brecht had just published in his poetry collection *Hauspostille*.⁴ In discussions with Brecht and Caspar Neher a very simple scenario was evolved without characters or plot, and to round it off Brecht added a short finale beginning with the words 'Aber dieses ganze Mahagonny'.

The poems contained no suggestion of dramatic interplay, but for the purposes of composition they were divided between six solo voices (probably the number stipulated by the Baden-Baden committee). Each of the singers was given an English name: Jessie, Bessie, Charlie, Billy, Bobby, and Jimmy. The orchestra consists of 2 violins, 2 clarinets, 2 trumpets, saxophone, trombone, percussion and piano, and the work was given the title of *Mahagonny*, with the subtitle *Songspiel* (a play on the word *Singspiel*, implying the use of that form for which Brecht and others used the English word 'Song'). The score was begun and completed in May 1927 and was first performed at Baden-Baden two months later, on which occasion it caused a great stir.

The structure of the score was as follows (numerals indicating vocal numbers, and letters the orchestral interludes):

1. Auf nach Mahagonny.
- A. Kleiner Marsch.
2. Alabama-Song
- B. Vivace.
3. Wer in Mahagonny blieb.
- C. Vivace assai.
4. Benares-Song.
- D. Sostenuo (Choral).
5. Gott in Mahagonny.
- E. Vivace assai.
6. Finale, 'Aber dieses ganze Mahagonny'.

For reasons which will now be explained, this *Songspiel* score was temporarily withdrawn after the Baden-Baden Festival—temporarily in intention, at least, for in fact it was not performed again for over thirty years.

At the beginning of May 1927 Weill announced to his publishers that 'a subject for a large-scale tragic opera is already worked out'. This must have been the beginnings of what we now know as the opera *Mahagonny*, though Weill was perhaps exaggerating when he said that the subject had been 'worked out'. The 'theme', perhaps. But there is some reason to suppose that the *Mahagonny*-

¹Pronounced 'Maha-gonny', all short vowels. The word has a purely phonetic significance, and is not to be confused with 'mahogany'.

²At various times Weill himself spoke of three earlier 'operas', without giving any indication of whether they were completed. The first belonged to his juvenilia, for it was written around his twelfth year—the subject being taken from a play by Karl Theodor Körner. Two others, adapted from Hermann Sudermann and Ernst Hardt respectively must be placed somewhere between 1917 and 1921. An unidentifiable sketch of an ensemble from one of these works—in a highly chromatic style—has survived.

³*Der Zar* has been revived several times since the war, but only once with any notable success—partly because the other productions did not trouble with the cuts, and partly because the work requires the most skilful production and acting.

⁴According to Brecht's account in the essay 'Über die Verwendung von Musik für ein episches Theater' (*Schriften zum Theater*, Suhrkamp Verlag) he, Brecht, asked Weill to set these verses.

gesänge did not enter the picture until a slightly later stage—either when Brecht added the extra verse, which begins to 'interpret' them, or even as late as the Baden-Baden performance. In the *Songspiel*, the characters all wore evening-dress, and had no individual dramatic identities. When Weill later incorporated the music of the *Songspiel* in the opera, he revised the vocal numbers and modified the orchestration. The 'verses' of the original Alabama Song had a progressively intensified dissonant accompaniment somewhat in the manner of middle-period Bartok, and the third refrain took the form of a duet in canon. Only a few fragments of the *Songspiel's* orchestral interludes were transferred to the opera.

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During the late summer and early autumn of 1927, Weill worked almost daily with Brecht on the libretto of the new opera. The bitter experience of his previous full-length opera had taught him the necessity of supervising the literary side as closely as possible. In the present instance there was the added difficulty that Brecht had been persuaded somewhat against his will to embark on a libretto, and needed to be constantly reminded that musical considerations must come first. Miraculously (as it later turned out) the collaboration remained fairly amicable.

The first slight check came when Weill sent a synopsis of the libretto to the director of Universal Edition, the formidable Dr Hertzka (who might well be called the Ricordi of the time). With great prescience Hertzka warned Weill that his opera would meet with fierce opposition, and that if he had any hope of popular success or financial reward (Weill at that time was very hard up) he should realize how much he was risking with this work. But, Hertzka added nobly, if Weill was really determined to continue with it, he, Hertzka, would give all the support he could. Weill continued.

After a number of minor interruptions, of which the most substantial was a period of a few weeks during the middle of 1928 spent writing *The Three-penny Opera*, the score of *Mahagonny* was completed—in April 1929, two years after the start. On receipt of the score and libretto, Dr Hertzka once again became alarmed. Above all he was convinced that if the Act 3 brothel scene were left as it stood, no opera house in Germany would accept the work. After much pressure, Weill agreed to make some changes, but these did not succeed in making the scene acceptable. Finally, he consented to write an alternative version including a love-duet for Jim and Jenny. His comments are worth quoting:

As far as the 'Love-Scene' is concerned, it goes without saying that a subsequent piano score, to be seen by public and critics, must include the original version of the scene, for it is one of my best pieces, and it is only owing to the initial lack of understanding and cowardice of theatres that it cannot yet be played. The new version of this scene is merely a matter of temporary expediency, and also can only be established as such.

When Weill forwarded the new duet (the now famous Crane Duet), Hertzka and his colleagues were with

good reason delighted, and redoubled their request that the remains of the original scene (the 'Mandelay' music) be removed altogether. But Weill remained adamant, and the most he would consent to was an optional VI=DE mark in the score.

Meanwhile the negotiations for the first performance were running into difficulties. A premiere in Berlin was in some ways the most desirable, and for some time Weill had wanted *Mahagonny* to go to Klemperer's Krolloper. But the poor houses for Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*, which had been presented there in June 1929, were discouraging, and moreover the future of the Krolloper was uncertain. By midsummer the idea of a Berlin premiere was dropped, and a contract was made with Leipzig, whose music-director, Gustav Brecher, was a fearless champion of the younger composers, and incidentally a one-time associate of both Mahler and of Weill's teacher, Busoni. The contract stipulated that in view of the very special nature of the work, both composer and librettist should be allowed full supervision of rehearsals.

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Apart from a few requests from Leipzig for minor 'mollifications' of the text, the period before the premiere passed without ill omen. The most important event was a letter from Weill to his publishers pointing out that

the use of American names for *Mahagonny* runs the risk of establishing a wholly false idea of Americanism, Wildwest, or such like. I am very glad that, together with Brecht, I have now found a very convenient solution...and I ask you to include the following notice in the piano score and libretto: [For some reason this never reached the piano score, and only appears in the full score] 'In view of the fact that those amusements of man which can be had for money are always and everywhere exactly the same, and because the Amusement-Town of Mahagonny is thus international in the widest sense, the names of the leading characters can be changed into customary [i.e. local] forms at any given time. The following names are therefore recommended for German performances: Willy (for Fatty), Johann Ackermann (for Jim) Jakob Schmidt (for Jack O'Brien) Spärbüchsenbeinrich (for Bill) Josef Lettner (for Joe).⁵

The premiere took place at the Leipzig Opera on 9 March, 1930. The conductor was Brecher, the producer was Walter Brüggemann (who had scored a great success three years earlier with his production of Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*, and who had also produced *Der Zar* and the *Mahagonny Songspiel*), and the decor and projections were by Caspar Neher. Paul Beinert sang Johann (Jim); Marga Dannenberg, Begbick; and Mali Trummer, Jenny. As is now well known, the performance was continually interrupted by demonstrations from sections of the audience, and this developed into a full-scale riot. The second performance was given with the house-lights on.

⁵ This recommendation, which is perhaps less convenient though no less important than Weill imagined, was undoubtedly inspired by Stravinsky's and Ramuz's similar recommendation for performances of *The Soldier's Tale*. It is also of interest that Ackermann was one of Weill's family names, on the maternal side.

Weill's distress was, however, greatly alleviated by the unexpected success of the production which followed three days later at Cassel. For this performance he made several changes, of which musically the most important was the substitution of the Chorale 'Lasst euch nicht verführen' for Jim's aria 'Nur die Nacht' at the end of Act 2, and the transfer of Jim's aria to the beginning of the third act. One other change is best described in his own words:

For two whole days now I have worked with Brecht at a clarification of the events in Act 3. We now have a version which the Pope himself could no longer take exception to. It is made clear that the final demonstrations are in no wise 'Communitic'—it is simply that Mahagonny, like Sodom and Gomorrah, falls on account of the crimes, the licentiousness and the general confusion of its inhabitants

Commenting on the Cassel performance, Weill adds:

Altogether everything has finally convinced me that the path which I have hacked out for myself is the right one, and that it is absolutely out of the question for me to renounce this path simply because its beginnings accidentally became involved with the direst cultural reaction and because, like all challenging innovations, it was powerfully resisted.

Meanwhile the opposition in the opera world to Weill and to *Mahagonny* grew, and the few music-directors who wished to stage it were anxious to do so only with 'closed performances'—a Leipzig performance for the benefit of the Arbeiter-Bildungs-Institut had been a great success, and other conductors proposed the work only for their Volksbühne members. In September 1930 *Mahagonny* was included at a 'closed' festival of modern opera in Frankfurt, where the other important item was Schoenberg's comedy *Von Heute auf Morgen*. Weill was disturbed by reports that Schoenberg had been prevented from attending rehearsals, and that when he had wished to make some comments at the Generalprobe, had been politely led out. However, all seems to have gone well with *Mahagonny*. The performance was conducted by Hans Wilhelm (now William) Steinberg, Jenny was sung by Else Gentner-Fischer (who had taken the part of the Wife in the Schoenberg opera), Bill by Benno Ziegler (the Husband in the Schoenberg) and Jim by Wilhelm Wörle. Caspar Neher's projections were used, but the scenery and costumes were newly designed by Ludwig Sievert.

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The production was warmly received, and was the last one in a pre-1933 German opera house to pass without untoward incidents. During the early winter of 1930 there were numerous riots at other performances, and these far surpassed in virulence that of the more famous Leipzig riot. In October, the National Socialists successfully lodged a protest against the performance of *Mahagonny* in Oldenburg on the ground that it was 'a rubbishy work with inferior and immoral content'. Thuringia, in which Oldenburg is situated, even at that time had a Nazi-controlled Provincial Government.

Although the constitution of the Weimar Republic

expressly forbade censorship of this kind, there were loopholes. However, the opponents of Weill and Brecht had little need to use them, for by this time the managements of the State Theatres were thoroughly frightened. Weill was not the only composer to suffer; nor were the controversial composers the sole victims. (There was for instance a campaign against the works of Weinberger and Janacek.)

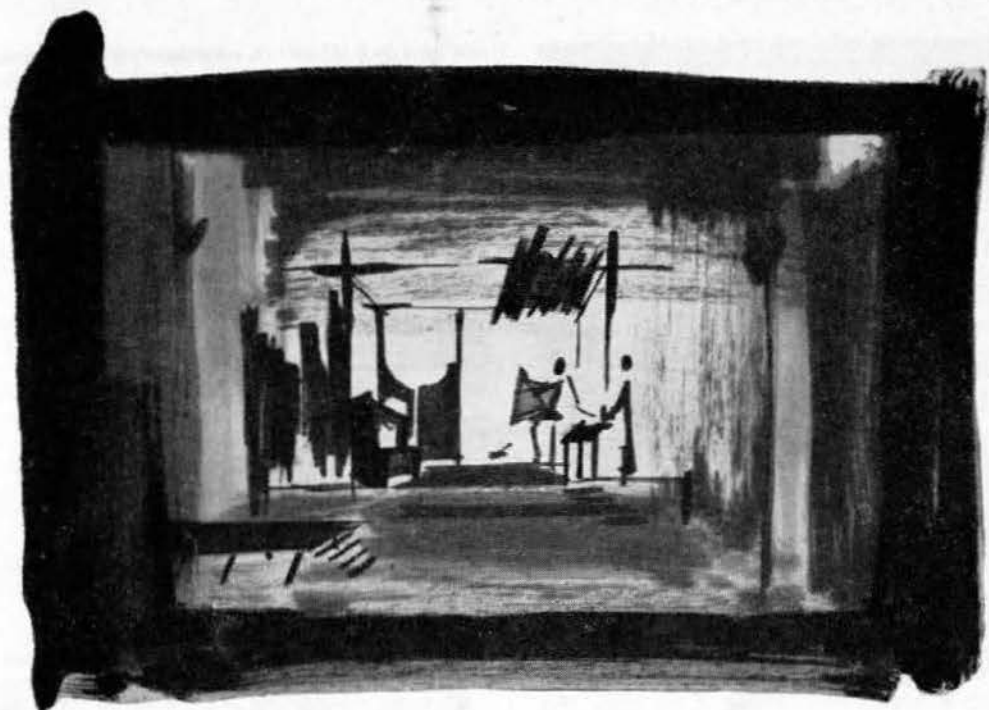
The press reactions to *Mahagonny* gave Weill little cause for comfort. Many of the friends he had won with the *The Threepenny Opera* were either nonplussed by the new work, or deemed it wiser to hold their tongues. Only a few critics of any stature came out in favour of the work—most notably H. H. Stuckenschmidt* and Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno. After the Frankfurt performance, Adorno wrote:

Apart from the diametrically opposed operas of the Schoenberg school, I know of no work better or more strongly in keeping with the idea of the Avant-garde than *Mahagonny*...Despite and on account of the primitive façade it must be counted among the most difficult works of today.

For the most part this 'difficulty', which is still as real as it was thirty years ago, was brushed aside, and *Mahagonny* with it. It was symptomatic that in Berlin, where Weill's reputation stood highest, negotiations for a production were continually breaking down. Finally, when the work had effectively been driven from the German provincial stages, *Mahagonny* at last reached the city which (to a certain extent) had inspired it. That it did so at all was due not to any official move, but to the enterprise of a distinguished Berlin producer, Ernst-Josef Aufricht (who in 1928 had bought the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm and opened it with the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera*). Aufricht founded a special company for the *Mahagonny* production, borrowed the Theater am Kürfürstendamm from Max Reinhardt, and at Weill's suggestion obtained the services of Alexander von Zemlinsky as conductor. Zemlinsky (incidentally the brother-in-law of Schoenberg) had been Klemperer's assistant at the Krolloper.

Aufricht realized that unless he could attract the normal theatre-going public, the project would be a financial catastrophe. He also realized that the special demands of the work were such that an *ad hoc* company drawn from out-of-work opera singers would be worse than useless. He therefore engaged experienced singing actors from operetta and cabaret. Weill, seeing that by this time there was no other hope of *Mahagonny* reaching his home city, was in full agreement with this plan, though he was naturally somewhat fearful about the possible fate of his own peculiar brand of *bel canto*. (It is of some interest that he did his utmost to persuade the great singer Marie Gutheil-Schoder, who was on the point of retiring from the stage and wished to close her career with 'something different', to take the role of Begbick. He believed she would be perfect in its 'dämonische Darstellung'. The

* Stuckenschmidt's review of the Leipzig premiere is reprinted in the current number of *Opera*.



'Inside Inn. Bar with MOSES serving L. FATTY on stool other side reading *Financial Times*. Saloon-type doors R of centre upstage. Piano R. BEGBICK enters through saloon doors'—one of Ralph Koltai's production-sketches for 'Mahagonny'

distinguished lady was attracted by the suggestion, wavered, and then, not surprisingly, declined.)

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In view of the special conditions of the production, it was agreed that the work should be streamlined for the benefit of audiences which for the most part would be unused to sitting through more than 2½ hours of music. Weill had authorized a number of different cuts for various opera-house performances since the Leipzig premiere—the 'Benares Song', for instance, had disappeared almost immediately, and Brecht even omitted it from his published version of the libretto. These cuts were collated and enlarged for the Berlin performance. There were, however, some compensations. The original setting of the 'Havanna Lied' in Act 1 proved to be quite unsuited to Lotte Lenya, who was taking the role of Jenny. Weill therefore composed a new setting—the one that has since become celebrated. (Characteristically, he sketched this superb piece *in toto* from a seat in the back of the stalls during a rehearsal, and presented it in full score to the copyist the following day.) The second accession was a new chorale to end the second act—a setting of one verse from 'Lasst euch nicht verführen'. Lastly and most significantly, he wrote an orchestral interlude to be used after the execution of Jim Mahoney.

The Berlin run of *Mahagonny* (premiere 21 December 1931) continued unbroken into the early months of 1932, amid the dying embers of the Republic, was the last popular success Weill was to

know in Germany. Berlin, the only remaining stronghold of liberalism in Germany, received the work enthusiastically, and there were no disturbances. For Weill it was not perhaps an unmixed joy. Something of the work's musico-dramatic stature was inevitably lost, and the necessary disappearance of perhaps the finest number in the score, the Crane Duet, after an attempt had been made to have it sung off-stage by two chorus members, was a bitter blow. (Ironically enough the result was to leave the brothel scene in the form which had offended Dr Hertzka; it also brought home to Weill that the only logical place for the duet, musically, dramatically and poetically, was in the last act. But there was to be no other opportunity of carrying out that transfer.)

What delighted Weill more than anything was his association with Zemlinsky. 'Zemlinsky ist grossartig' he wrote in a letter, and that coming from one who was always sparing with superlatives was high praise indeed. It is unlikely that Weill ever heard a better interpretation of one of his works. Adorno's comments are worth quoting:

Zemlinsky, who on the detour through Mahler and the fluorescence of the banal may feel a so-to-speak apocryphal relationship to Weill's music, has at last rescued this music from the misconception of élan, jazz, and infernal entertainment, and demonstrated what it really is: music with a smouldering vividness and at the same time a mortally sad and faded background, music with a circumspect sharpness which by means of its leaps and side-steps makes articulate something which the 'Song-public' would prefer not to know about, music above all with a

sonority that is filtered by a handful of instruments and that possesses a power of expansion that routs and leaves behind the diffuseness of a much larger orchestra—provided of course that this sonority is realised in Zemlinsky's manner.

Within a year of the Berlin *Mahagony*, the Thousand-Year Reich had established itself and Weill had fled from Germany, his career in ruins. Almost everything stood in the way of the performance of his music abroad, and as far as the larger works were concerned, the situation was hopeless. As early as December 1932 he had consented to the performance in Paris of a spurious piece, under the title 'Mahagony', which represented the very thing he had most wanted to avoid. In Germany only a few months before, he had written as follows to an amateur organization which proposed to perform a shortened version of the opera:

The thing that I wish to prevent before all else is that the piece should simply be cut down to the basis of Songs or song-like pieces. In principle I would much prefer that here and there a song is dropped than that the more exacting passages be cut.

This was undoubtedly a reflection of his feeling that the numbers which had been transferred from the Songspiel to the opera were those most likely to obscure a proper understanding of the score. Yet the so-called 'Paris version', which was not a version at all but a mere patchwork in which the composer had taken no active part, consisted of the skeleton of the Songspiel filled out with those pieces from the opera which required only a small instrumental accompaniment.⁷ This made little dramatic or musical sense, but it did at least mean that some of the music might be heard. Unfortunately it was presented in Paris and later in London as if it were an authentic 'work' (this is the 'Mahagony' to which Constant Lambert refers in *Music Ho!*).

⁷ A misunderstanding of the situation has led to reports that Weill arranged *Mahagony* for chamber orchestra.

Included in a concert of contemporary music given in London in July 1933, the 'work' was for the most part received with blank incomprehension, and of the daily papers, only the *Daily Telegraph* spoke well of it, mentioning its 'infinite pathos' and adding 'It is very serious and a little too solemn. At the same time, there is the real stuff of music in it'.

Two years later Weill left a Europe which seemed to have no place or time for him, and soon after his arrival in the United States discouraged a suggestion that the 'Paris' *Mahagony* should be performed there. In 1938, immediately after the Anschluss, agents from the Gestapo raided the offices of Universal Edition and took away many of Weill's scores, including the full score and orchestral parts of *Mahagony*. Thus the unhappy history of the work seemed abruptly to have ended.

For some years after the war, it was thought that nothing had survived of the opera other than a few printed piano scores. But as there was no demand for the work, the appalling problem of re-orchestrating it from a much simplified and inadequate piano reduction did not have to be faced. In 1949 and the early 1950s there were several performances in Germany and Italy of a version of the little 'Paris' *Mahagony* made by Hans Curjel.

In the mid-1950s a project to record the authentic opera under the direction of Lotte Lenya led to the rediscovery of an intact orchestral score. The first post-war stage performance took place at the Landestheater Darmstadt in November 1957. This garbled version, dressed in full Wild-West regalia, was widely acclaimed, and the production was reproduced with similar public success in Kiel in 1961. Another and by all accounts more reputable production was seen in Lucerne, and to everyone's amazement was warmly received. Further mildly successful productions followed in smaller West German opera houses, and there was also one in Prague, which was a failure.

Soon after the Kiel production, the Hamburg

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Alexander von Zemlinsky, and standing behind him Kurt Weill, at a rehearsal for the Berlin premiere of 'Mahagonny'

State Opera announced that it would open its 1961-2 season with *Mahagonny*. At the last moment this production was postponed on account of the political situation following the building of the Berlin wall. The small company at Heidelberg then stepped in and, greatly daring, produced what seems to have been the nearest that has yet been achieved in Western Germany to a truthful presentation of the work. They were rewarded by enthusiastic notices. Finally, in September of this year Hamburg presented its long-awaited production. The praise which was lavished on a pitifully inept production and a wholly unsympathetic musical performance—no fault of the singers—would have been sufficient evidence of how little this work is understood, even without the helpless judgments which were passed on its intrinsic merits. Weill's reputation in Germany still hangs on a thread.

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All the productions in Germany since the war have been based on the score which was published before the 1930 Leipzig performance, and thus take no account of Weill's revisions (though a few minor points have sometimes been incorporated from Brecht's published text). With the certain exception of a recent production in Dresden (which was arranged as a full-scale attack on the Bundesrepublik, equated of course with *Mahagonny*) and the possible exception of the Heidelberg production, on which I have no information, all post-war German stagings of the work have carefully preserved the *American* names in the libretto; and the Hamburg production used an American-style backdrop for Act 2, thus completely contradicting the clearly expressed intentions of composer and author.

For the forthcoming production at Sadler's Wells, an attempt has been made to incorporate the traceable revisions made by Weill after the Leipzig performance. Most but not all the cuts that he authorized at one time or another after the Leipzig performance have been adopted. But so far as the additions are concerned, there is a difficulty. The records of Universal Edition show that the full-score confiscated by the Gestapo in 1938 contained '2 *Einlage*'. These must have been the new chorale written for the end of Act 2, and the orchestral interlude for Act 3. (The new 'Havanna-Lied' would have gone the same way, but for a stroke of luck—the score had been borrowed for inclusion in the 'Paris' *Mahagonny* and not returned.)

As for the chorale, the present writer was fortunate enough to discover the sketch of this while cataloguing the Weill legacy for the Academy of Arts in Berlin. Except in complex textures, which are not present in the chorale, Weill's sketches were invariably close to the final version. The chorale has therefore been orchestrated (by Leonard Hancock) and will be performed in the Sadler's Wells production.



On the other hand, no trace of the orchestral interlude has yet been discovered. This is particularly regrettable, since according to a contemporary review it was an impressive and substantial piece whose formal function was similar to that of the D minor interlude in *Wozzeck*—a work, incidentally, for which Weill had a profound admiration. (He was one of the first composers outside the Schoenberg circle to defend it in public.)

Among the other departures from the printed vocal score which will be made at Sadler's Wells are the changed positions of 'Nur die Nacht' and the Crane Duet, mentioned above, and the restoration of two important entries for Trinity Moses in the brothel scene (these taken from Weill's autograph score).

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In conclusion, a personal and informal postscript to these necessarily dry details. England was a country that intrigued but puzzled Weill during his lifetime. It would be pleasant if the first occasion on which a full-length work of his is performed here should also be the first occasion since the war that *Mahagonny* has been staged in its full musical and dramatic force, and yet received with tolerance. There are many reasons why Weill's aims and methods should meet with strong resistance in some countries. But one of the blessings of this island of ours is that it sometimes insulates us from undirected heat. It would be a pity to destroy this insulation before the event.

When a composer of genius or great talent is neglected, misunderstood or abused, those who love his music tend to feel these wounds as their own and in seeking to sterilize them, risk opening new ones. There is no valid reason why anyone should be harangued into liking, or feeling he ought to

like, the music of Weill. Let the music first be allowed to speak for itself—it is eloquent enough—and after that can come the exegesis and analysis, for which, indeed, there is ample scope. I know from my own experience that it is easy to be initially repelled by Weill's manner, for he is often concerned with painful things. But if repelled, then leave him alone—though do not be surprised if you later find yourself being drawn back, to discover that the music is not what it first seemed. There are other composers of whom this is true—composers of marked individuality who speak with extreme intensity in a (relatively) narrow defile. This is at once their strength and limitation. (I am thinking for instance of Olivier Messiaen, a figure who in other respects could hardly be less like Weill.)

Those who are able to approach *Mahagonny* with a completely open mind are in a fortunate position. Of the ideas about *Mahagonny* to which others may have been exposed, there is only one which menaces even the most generous-hearted listener—the idea that Weill intended the work as an *attack* on the body of the operatic convention by means of parody or an injected virus (jazz, cabaret etc). This idea is wholly false.

In the first place, Weill had much too deep a knowledge of the operatic repertory to suppose that so trivial and ignorant an aim were feasible even if desirable. Second, although his faith in opera was founded on the classics—above all on Mozart whom he worshipped, but also on Weber, Verdi, Strauss and (uniquely for a composer of his generation) Wagner—he was far too excited by the possibilities opened up by Stravinsky (and in a different way Janacek) to suppose that opera was a

thing of the past. Third, his temperament, for all its ironic and sceptical qualities, was far too creative and *humane* to allow any important place for parody, except as a means of exposing the inhumane. (And whatever first appearances may suggest, I am inclined to think that the only traces of pure parody to be found in *Mahagonny* are the horrifying storm-trooper tunes of the boxing scene and the fairground banalities of the trial scene.)⁸ To say, as some have done, that *Mahagonny* contains parodies of passages from *The Magic Flute* and *Der Freischütz* (two operas which Weill venerated) betrays a total failure to understand the origins and motivations of his art.

I still have said nothing to suggest what *Mahagonny* is about, and therefore nothing to suggest why it has so often been a hated and feared work. One way is to quote some words written about quite another work by a great man who, incidentally, understood *Mahagonny* and was obsessed by it. The words are by Karl Kraus, and they come from his preface to his own vast play, *The Last Days of Mankind*. He is explaining his ironic contention that the play is only suitable for a theatre on Mars:

Audiences here would not be able to bear it. For it is blood of their blood, and its contents are those unreal, unthinkable years, out of reach for the wakefulness of mind, inaccessible to any memory and preserved only in nightmares—those years when the characters from an operetta played the tragedy of mankind.

That too is *The Rise and Fall of Mahagonny*.

⁸ The almost Britten-like comedy (of the play music in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) of the *Maiden's Prayer* variations is much less purely parodistic than one might at first suppose.