

Off to Mahagonny

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On Sunday a television production of Weill's and Brecht's opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* will be shown on BBC-2. In the circumstances some preliminary observations may be more useful than a review. *Mahagonny* is not Weill's masterpiece, but it is the key to those works – some two dozen of them – on which his reputation as a major 20th-century composer should rest, but as yet does not. Because of the work's central position, a good performance of *Mahagonny* is particularly valuable. But what are the criteria? I must incidentally declare my interest. Acting within its legal rights, the BBC has used, without reference to us, the translation prepared by Michael Geliot and myself for the 1963 Sadler's Wells production. We have been at odds with the Corporation over this. Nevertheless we wish the broadcast whatever success it deserves, and my present comments are intended only to suggest certain principles relevant to the composer's interests. Brecht's position, fortunately, is well-known.

'The material of the opera *Mahagonny*,' wrote Weill, 'makes possible a construction according to purely musical laws.' This remains true despite the fact that for various reasons *Mahagonny* has often been commandeered by the musically ignorant, who are attracted either by its liberal-leftish reputation or, less justly, by the old tale that it is an 'attack on opera'. The BBC doubtless knows better than this. However, the 'purely musical' aspects of the work give rise to certain problems from the television point of view. Weill declared that in the production:

constant attention must be given to the fact that closed musical forms are involved. Thus it is essential to safeguard the purely musical thread, and to group the performers in such a way as to facilitate an almost *concertante* style of music-making.

An extreme example of the *concertante* style is the madrigal duet 'The Cranes'. The fact that Weill wanted the two lovers to be placed far apart and facing the audience is already implied by the music. Of erotic realism there is not a trace. It will be interesting to see on Sunday how the required sense of remoteness has been reconciled with the unavoidable intimacy of the medium.

Such matters, however, are incidental to the broader question of musical form; and here the difference between theatre and television tempo is all-important. The BBC version of *Mahagonny* is billed to last 90 minutes, which in itself is not an unreasonable allowance for the medium, though it means that about a third of the score has been cut. It is important to distinguish between such a version and the work as originally conceived.

Although ostensibly a number-opera, *Mahagonny* is in effect through-composed. Thus the 11 numbers of Act One divide into an exposition, a development and a dénouement, each with its own climax. The stepwise progression is interrupted by the first three tableaux of Act Two (a subordinate form) and then completed in the crucial scene of Jim's 'voyage' to Alaska. The four principal climaxes are musically and dramatically interdependent. On a lower formal level, the characteristic antithetical progressions must also be observed. Nothing – including the famous 'hit-songs' – exists for itself.

Bad music-making would be too high a price to pay for good television. If the BBC's

90-minute version of *Mahagonny* makes musical sense it will also make dramatic sense, and the rest is up to the cameras. 'A simple, natural interpretation of the music,' Weill maintained, 'already indicates the production style.' Conversely, a coarse and self-conscious production style – for instance, stressing the brothel milieu which some regard as the clue to the 'toughness' and indeed the meaning of *Mahagonny* – is bound to impose its values on the musical interpretation. In that case the music's conscience is silenced and the vulgarity which is one of the opera's subjects becomes its ruling passion.