

# HAPPY END

Music : KURT WEILL

Text : BERTOLT BRECHT

with **LOTTE LENYA**

and Chorus and Orchestra

conducted by

**WILHELM BRÜCKNER-RÜGGEBERG**

Production supervised by : LOTTE LENYA

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## SIDE 1

**Introduktion (Hosiannah)**

**Bilbao-Song**

**Der kleine Leutnant des lieben Gottes**

**Geht hinein die Schlacht**

**Matrosen-Tango**

It was always Weill's main intention to write operas, and in the period 1924-32 he composed three of full length, and four shorter ones. The famous *Threepenny Opera* is sometimes added to this number, though it should not be, as it is a play with music designed for the theatre, not the opera house. The *Threepenny Opera* might never have been written but for the fact that Weill and his collaborator Bertolt Brecht were already engaged on a full-scale opera, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, and having no private means, required some immediate source of income while they were working on it. Thus the *Threepenny Opera* was essentially a by-work, written at speed in response to a request from a Berlin theatre director. Naturally, Weill hoped that it would be successful, but he did not attach any great importance to it, since his main concern was to finish the opera.

The tumultuous success of the *Threepenny Opera* took him very much by surprise, and it was only then that the real significance of what he had done dawned upon him. This new awareness did not affect his intention to write operas, but it did indicate a hitherto unsuspected aptitude. In a letter to his publishers, he said that the *Threepenny Opera* had shown him the way to "a new kind of popular (*volkstümlich*) melody," which, he said, might in Germany supersede "the now exhausted American jazz." The idea appealed to him on social and artistic, rather than commercial, grounds, and he determined to pursue it in a succession of works that would be subsidiary to his operatic output.

Immediately after the completion of *Mahagonny*, Weill decided to return to the field he had begun to cultivate in the *Threepenny Opera*. He was very much alive to the danger of self-copying, and had no desire to repeat the methods of the *Threepenny Opera*. Unfortunately, others did not share his discernment in this respect. Plans were laid for a new musical play to be given at the theatre which had staged the *Threepenny Opera*. It was to have the same director (Erich Engel), the same designer (Caspar Neher), the same conductor (Theo Mackeben); and the same author and composer. Once again the subject was to be the underworld, though this time the action was set in modern Chicago. The work was given an English title "Happy End," and the première was planned for a date as close as possible to the first anniversary of the *Threepenny Opera*.

Brecht took the whole venture very lightly—as well he might. Indeed, the song-texts were all that he was prepared to acknowledge as his own. The play itself was ascribed, with doubtful justification, to his amanuensis, Elisabeth Hauptmann. As a drama it is without any deep significance—unlike the *Threepenny Opera*, whose comedy is deadly serious—and it cannot be regarded as more than an "entertainment" in Graham Greene's sense.

For purely technical reasons, the project meant much more to Weill than it did to Brecht, since it allowed him to concentrate on a pure song-style. Most of the music was written in August 1929, during a holiday on the Ammersee near Munich. The songs, unlike those of the *Threepenny Opera*, are decorative interpolations, and have only the most tenuous connection with the dramatic context or with the characters who sing them. So far from owing anything to the new aims of the Brechtian theatre, they belong, if anything to the tradition of the old Berlin *Gesangsposse* or *Volksstücke*, whose naïve gusto Weill had admired since an early age. Except for the choruses, all the songs may be performed as in this recording, by one singer, without any damage to their effect. Indeed, Weill himself contemplated extracting the songs from the play, and making a recital of this kind, linked with brief texts. (Lotte Lenya did not take part in the original production, but she broadcast five of the songs on Frankfurt Radio shortly after the première).

Weill's anxiety to save the music for posterity is understandable. The première of the play, at the Theater am Schiffbauerdam on 2 September, 1929, ended disastrously. During the first part of the evening, a success even greater than that of the *Threepenny Opera* seemed assured. The play was simple, there was no worrying political undercurrent, and

none of the characters seemed particularly unhappy, even at the outset. But in the last act the illusion was shattered; the play took a sudden sharp turn to the Left, and ended with an anti-capitalist chorus which was considered both scurrilous and blasphemous. The Press notices next day were little more than gleeful obituaries. Brecht was fair game, as he was not popular with the critics, and had no wish to be. Weill was merely in the line of fire, and since the drama critics were in charge of the occasion, they did not scruple to complain about what they couldn't hear anyway. So *Happy End* soon made an unhappy exit, and was not seen again until the early 1950s, when a suitably bowdlerised version was presented with great success in several German cities; and then, some thirty years after its composition, the complete score was published for the first time.

Although *Happy End* was not a major artistic statement, Weill was bitterly distressed by the way the score was received by those unqualified to judge. "Formally, instrumentally and melodically," he said, "it is so clear an advance on the *Threepenny Opera* that only such helpless ignoramuses as the German critics could overlook it." In truth, this forgivable *cri de coeur* was not entirely fair. The première of *Happy End* had been covered by one (and only one) music critic, who happened to be a man of real substance: Max Marschalk, once a friend and advisor of Mahler. Marschalk praised the score unreservedly, finding a distinct advance in mastery, and a true artist's refusal to be trivial or unfeeling, even in the face of trivialities. Since then, several other responsible critics, including T. W. Adorno, have selected *Happy End* for special praise among Weill's smaller theatre scores.

Without belittling the remarkable but very different qualities of the *Threepenny Opera*, the special features of *Happy End* are worthy of notice. The harmony has been enriched by new kinds of suspension and chromatic alteration, and pervasive shifting between the major and minor mode evokes that *demi-monde* between gaiety and sadness which is so typical of German late-romanticism. The equally romantic sweetness of the added-sixth is challenged by such things as the rasping sevenths and ninths which open the *Bilbao Song*, or the related harmony in the section preceding the refrain in the *Matrosen Tango*. Rhythmically there is a new tautness and also a new flexibility—qualities which are reflected in the melodic writing. The *Threepenny Opera* contains no melodic contrast quite so powerful as the one from which begins the rocket-climb of the big C major tune in the *Mandelay Song*. Undoubtedly it was the growth in the formal versatility of his song style that gave Weill most cause to be proud of *Happy End*. In the larger songs, the accompaniments have much more than a mere supporting role, and they develop across the *da capo* melodic forms, challenging or commenting on the vocal part and its text. By means of dual imagery unvaried repetitions are avoided as far as possible. For instance, each verse and refrain of *Surabaya-Johnny* has a new colour and texture, culminating in the piano's beautiful counterfigure to the last refrain. With the most scrupulous attention to detail, throughout the work Weill brilliantly rings the changes on his small ensemble of two saxophones (doubling flute and clarinets), two trumpets, trombone, accordion (doubling mandoline, banjo, etc.) piano, harmonium and percussion. *Happy End* was never intended to have the weight or scope of the *Threepenny Opera*; but if it is slender, it has sinews of its own, and if it is "light," it does not forget the darkness. In *Happy End*, Weill looks upon the world with more fondness than he could usually find room for at that time. (It is significant that he was able to smile at the simple fundamentalism of the church militant without closing the doors on affection and respect; his religious roots died hard.) Because there are no ideological or philosophical complications, *Happy End* is perhaps the friendliest introduction to Weill. But when shaking hands, observe that the other fist is clenched . . . .