

Weill and Schoenberg

by David Drew

The following essay is reprinted from *Sundry Sorts of Music Books: Essays on The British Library Collections, presented to O.W. Neighbour on his 70th birthday*, edited by Chris Banks, Arthur Searle, and Malcolm Turner (London: British Library, 1993). From 1974 until his retirement in 1981, Neighbour was superintendent of the Music Library of the British Library (having begun his notable career in the British Museum in 1946).

Introduction: An open letter to O.W. Neighbour

The letter below is dated 30 July 1992, and was in fact the preface to the Schoenberg-Weill essays which I drafted that August. I realized at the time that many other contributors to the Festschrift would be sending similar letters, and that there might not be room for them (I was right); but I hoped that there might be another opportunity for publishing it (and so there is).

Dear Tim

In your advocacy and analysis of Schoenberg during the decisive years following his death, your many early admirers could already recognize the qualities that distinguish your critical and scholarly work in every field. Your dedication to musical realities -- to the audible sense -- was present and passionate from the start. With it went your principled inclusiveness and your freedom from critical prejudice of any sort: while the partisans of Schoenberg and Stravinsky were still squabbling about territorial rights or historical necessity, you quietly occupied yourself with the music of both masters, as of every other.

*From those far-off days you will certainly recall the magazine poll of American concert-goers which placed Schoenberg a long way behind Vaughan Williams. Much amused, you had speculated about Schoenberg's conceivable reaction to such a result -- not "who is whose contemporary?", but rather, "who is this Williams?". You, of course, have always known exactly who that particular Williams was (not to mention other Williams before and after him); and you never hesitated during the 1950s to speak up for him in circles where it was heretical to do so. [The author refers to the forename of the composer whose music was the subject of Neighbour's largest undertaking to date -- *The Consort and Keyboard Music of William Byrd, The Music of William Byrd*, vol. iii (London 1978) -- and also to that of (Sir) William Glock, who as Editor of *The Score*, published Neighbour's two articles on Vaughan Williams (March 1955 and November 1958). -- Eds.]*

Equally dangerous to a comfortable life in the 1950s was the music of Weill as it began to emerge from the shadows (unnoticed, of course, by the American pollsters). While the Brecht battalions were pulling it in one direction and the nostalgia-merchants in another, you were one of the very few who took the trouble to listen and then steadfastly to read and play and consider whatever the printed pages had to offer.

*In principle, and by example, it was a true service to Weill's cause. Perhaps your first small reward for it was your delight at discovering in a Paris bookshop a manuscript copy, signed by the composer, of his unpublished a cappella work, the *Recordare* of 1923. Until that discovery in 1971 the work had been lost without a trace (as you, almost uniquely, had reason to know). Since then, no other copy has come to light.*

Recollections are proper to the celebration of an anniversary such as yours, and there are perhaps more of them reflected in this modest contribution to your Festschrift than are apparent to the naked eye or the nostalgic lens. But if its subject-matter reminds us of what had seemed, in our discussions three decades ago, to be as provocative as it was speculative, it is also a reminder of how easily the wilder speculations of yesteryear can become the commonplaces of today. Weill and Schoenberg? But of course...

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Until recently, there were only three sources to which students interested in the relationship – if any – between Weill and Schoenberg could safely be referred: Weill's published writings,¹ his music,² and Schoenberg's gloss on a *Feuilleton* item by Weill.³ To these sources might be added a few scraps of more-or-less reliable hearsay.

The first source remains the largest, and although it is no longer the most revealing, it serves an indispensable purpose. References to Schoenberg in Weill's contributions to the Berlin radio journal *Der deutsche Rundfunk* during the crucial years 1925-7 are quite numerous and uniformly positive, whether his subject be the composer of *Gurrelieder* or of *Pierrot Lunaire*. "Even his opponents," he wrote in the issue of 28 February 1926, "have to recognize in him the purest and most noble artistic personality and the strongest mind in today's musical life."⁴

No such awe informs the handful of published references to Schoenberg that Weill permitted himself in his Broadway years. Nevertheless, one trace of the early attitude survives in an inverted form: whereas the Weill of February 1926 lauded a Schoenberg "who regards success in his own lifetime almost as a setback for his art," the Weill of 1940 declared that whereas he himself composed "for today" and didn't "give a damn for posterity," Schoenberg wrote for a time "50 years after his death."⁵ Merely attributed to Weill by the writer of the newspaper article – and indebted, perhaps, to a view of posterity already offered to the American public by Stravinsky – Weill's most celebrated *aperçu* fulfills a need but lacks a context. Whether a relevant one is provided by another remark attributed to Weill is a matter of opinion: as recalled some thirty years later by no less an authority than T.W. Adorno,⁶ Weill apparently suggested that his "way" was the only valid alternative to Schoenberg's. Flattering on all three sides, it is the kind of drastic formulation that serves its defensive purposes without inhibiting conversation. Although the remark, if authentic, must have appealed to Adorno's dialectical imagination, it was not necessarily calculated to do so, and certainly cannot be brushed aside as opportunistic. Weill's experience of Schoenberg may well have been remote in time, yet it had played a significant if restricted part in his creative development (and indeed in his early musical life, as we shall see).

According to Heinrich Strobel⁷ – who may simply have been relaying information from Weill himself – the (lost) symphonic poem of 1919 based on Rilke's *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* was influenced by Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*. The first known traces of Schoenbergian interests appear in the second and third movements of the Cello Sonata, which date from the summer of 1920.⁸ While there is no irrefutable evidence that Weill at this stage had studied Schoenberg's opp. 9 and 10 – rather than merely read about them and seen a few music examples – the influence of the *Kammersymphonie*, op. 9, on Weill's one-movement Symphony of 1921 is unmistakable, as is the intervention of Busoni in the Symphony's final chorale-fantasy. Apart from the scherzo

of the *Divertimento*, op. 5 (1921-2) – some of whose non-tonal material pre-dates Weill's studies with Busoni – the "new classicality" of Busoni now ousted all overt Schoenbergian influences (though the impressive and technically demanding *Recordare*, op.11, for unaccompanied four-part chorus and children's chorus, surely acknowledges the precedent of Schoenberg's *Friede auf Erden*, op. 13).

In so far as Weill was liberated by Busoni's death in 1924, it was in the non-tonal direction indicated by the first movement of his Violin Concerto, op.12, of the same year. In a letter to Lotte Lenya of 28 October 1925 he described a disastrous performance of the work in his native town of Dessau and declared that the piece presupposed knowledge of Schoenberg and was (therefore?) far above the heads of the local public.⁹ Although from a strictly musical point of view no Schoenberg influence is audible in the Concerto, the sense of Schoenberg's spiritual leadership to which Weill's radio notes of February 1926 pay tribute is perhaps implicit in some of the Concerto's characteristic attitudes.

With his discovery – partly a rediscovery – of his own tonal voice in 1926-7, Weill removed himself from anything suggestive of Schoenberg. Yet it was precisely in this period that personal encounters would have been almost inevitable. Once Schoenberg had succeeded to Busoni's position as director of the Masterclass in Composition at the Prussian Academy of Arts, the circle of their mutual acquaintances was notably enlarged – in addition to Fritz Stiedry, who was more than a mere "acquaintance" of both composers, and Scherchen, who was a key figure for Weill, there were links through several composers and critics, including H.H. Stuckenschmidt, Heinz Tiessen, Stefan Wolpe, and Wladimir Vogel (good friends with Weill since the Busoni days). Towards the end of 1927 – that is to say, some months after Weill's *Mahagonny Songspiel* and Berg's *Lyric Suite* had been the outstanding successes at Hindemith's international "chamber music" festival in Baden-Baden – Schoenberg recommended Weill, unsuccessfully, for membership of the Prussian Academy of Arts, together with Zemlinsky, Tiessen, Berg, Webern, Hauer, Kaminski, and Krenek.¹⁰ Schoenberg would certainly have known Weill's friendly words in *Der deutsche Rundfunk* and may even have heard one or two of his pieces at concerts presented by such bodies as the (very active) Berlin section of the International Society for Contemporary Music.

That was all changed by *Die Dreigroschenoper* and its sensational success in September 1928. According to some of the younger members of his Masterclass,¹¹ Schoenberg was affronted and felt betrayed: to the Masterclass he declared – or, as some would have it, demonstrated – that Weill as a composer of "*Unterhaltungsmusik*" was immeasurably inferior to Léhar. This was still his position five years later. At the time, both he and Weill were refugees in Paris; but whereas Weill was the toast of the salons, Schoenberg was in every sense an outsider. "Franz Léhar, yes," he told Virgil Thompson, "Weill, no. His is the only music in the world in which I can find no quality at all."¹²

Although an unknown item entitled "Der Musiker Weill" was listed in 1960 by Josef Rufer in his catalogue of the Schoenberg *Nachlass*,¹³ a further 20 years were to pass before any notice was taken of it (my own earlier attempts to obtain a copy of it having been only half-heartedly pursued, perhaps for fear of what might be uncovered). In 1980 Professor Alexander Ringer published an essay, "Schoenberg, Weill and Epic Theater,"¹⁴ which reproduced and discussed the item catalogued by Rufer – a newspaper cutting, without date or source, containing a short article by Weill, copiously and angrily annotated by Schoenberg. Though not identified as such by Professor Ringer, Weill's article was in fact an excerpt from a symposium for serious-minded 12-year-olds, published on Christmas Day 1928 by the *Berliner Tageblatt*. Both as a would-be humorous sally and as a light-hearted, not to say irresponsible, disavowal of Wagner, it could hardly have been better calculated to upset Schoenberg.

In 1980 it had seemed that the material published by Professor Ringer was likely to constitute the third and last source for our knowledge of the constant if vacillating relationship between the two composers. In 1989, however, the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music acquired a substantial collection of Weill's letters to his family, the majority dating from the formative years about which little had hitherto been known. Indeed, the very existence of the letters had been unsuspected until about two years beforehand. Now that they are available for research, they are proving revelatory in many respects, not least with regard to our present topic.

First, however, a word about Weill's early music education. The bare facts have long been known: initial studies in Dessau (1917-8) with the conductor and pianist Albert Bing, a pupil of Pfitzner and a close family friend of the Weills, followed by a year (1918-9) at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin, studying composition with Humperdinck and conducting with Krasselt. Weill's reasons for interrupting his studies at the Hochschule had always been a matter for reasonable surmise, based on a few remarks and asides in the handful of long-familiar letters to his parents and to his sister Ruth. From the latter source we have also known of his interest in Schreker both as a composer and teacher – an interest spanning the winter of 1919-20 and connected with hopes or dreams of finding some way of studying with Schreker in Vienna. Until now it has been assumed that the Vienna plan was postponed for financial reasons and then dropped after the first news, or rumors, that Schreker would be moving to Berlin in the early autumn of 1920 and taking over the direction of the Hochschule für Musik. Weill's return to Berlin in September 1920 seemed to support that assumption, though there was (and still is) no record of his having applied to the Hochschule for readmission. By December he had entrusted his future to Busoni and the Academy of Arts.

In the course of a brief discussion with the present writer some thirty years ago, Hermann Scherchen spoke of Weill bringing the score of a string quartet to him in the early 1920s.

At that stage I knew of no quartet by Weill prior to his op.8 of 1923, and so it did not occur to me to ask Scherchen whether he had played any part in Weill's modulation from Schreker to Busoni. The newly discovered letters explain everything. Most of them are addressed to Weill's brother Hans who was a year older than Weill but obviously respectful of his musical, literary, and philosophical outlook. It is clear that Hans was passionately interested in music and not without technical training.

On 13 June 1919 Weill informed Hans that he would be seeing Humperdinck the next day with very mixed feelings, chiefly because he was unsure of how he would receive the news of his intended withdrawal from the Hochschule and wanted to avoid a row. Krasselt too, he believed, would be astonished: "but that doesn't change things; 3 semesters in the Hochschule are sufficient for my requirements." At the beginning of the following week he would be meeting Scherchen and by the end of it he hoped to have a better idea of where he stood. Meanwhile he would be putting some questions to the Academy of Arts in Vienna.

On 20 June Weill sent Hans news of that morning's momentous meeting with Scherchen:

Naturally, he too advised me to go to Vienna; he doesn't know Schreker very well, but he thinks there is really only one man from whom a talented person (he had looked fleetingly at my string quartet) could still learn something, and the very first through whom I would really understand who the Young Ones in music are, and what they want to be: Arnold Schoenberg, the acknowledged apostle of new music, who accomplishes fantastic things in a private school for composition. He understands his pupils at once, points out even their smallest weaknesses, opens up fantastic new points of view, and does not put them under a yoke and pull them in his own direction, the way Pfitzner and many others do. From the start it was my intention to visit this school in Vienna at some time or other. Then at the same time, I could perfect my pianistic abilities. But probably this private study would cost so much that I couldn't think of it, at least for the time being. Now I'm all the more undecided, because I can hardly remain here. In any case, I shall write to Schoenberg today.

The following week was a turbulent one for Weill. It is clear from the extensive and remarkable letter he wrote to his brother on 27 June 1919 that he was still a long way from resolving the struggle between his innermost wishes and his sense of what was practicable. His argument with himself begins thus:

Again and again the question runs through my head: Can you remain here? And always the answer: To Vienna! And then each time the disappointment: it's pretty well impossible for me at present to realize such a plan.

Impossible for financial reasons, of course; and for the same reasons he has been "seriously" considering wintering in the Dessau opera house in order to gain more conducting experi-

ence and prepare himself for the “massive” experience of Vienna and studies with Schoenberg. But Dessau would be a last resort. He thanks providence for his interest in “the New”:

Strauss has faded. Think of everything in Strauss that is false, trivial, veneered and contrived being replaced by the finest kind of modernism, in Mahler's sense, as the result of a great personality expressing itself in the most profound way: then you have Arnold Schoenberg as I am getting to know him now from his “Gurre-Lieder” ... Together with Cassirer's lecture on Spinoza,¹⁵ this work has kept me calm amidst inner struggles. I don't mind how it comes about, but – sooner or later – I must go to Vienna. What this man Schoenberg brings to me is something so new that I was quite speechless.

By 3 July Weill is reporting that Bing has returned to his earlier recommendation that he go to Munich – much less expensive than Vienna – to study composition with Pfitzner and conducting with Bruno Walter. An even cheaper alternative would be to study both composition and conducting in Cologne with Hermann Wetzler, a Humperdinck pupil of Straussian persuasion, from whom Weill nevertheless believed he could profit “kolossal.” Finally the retirement of the aged and arch-conservative Hermann Kretschmar (1848-1924) from his post as Director of the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin added fuel to his and Scherchen's hopes of a modernist coup in that dusty institution.

On 14 July Weill wrote from Berlin to his brother:

Did I write to tell you that Schoenberg sent me from Vienna an extremely nice card in which he announces, in the most noble fashion, that he will accommodate me in every way. The card is so modern in its formulations that all of us here, and our parents as well, are most enthusiastic about it. In my next letter I will give you the actual words. All the same there is little chance of my getting to Vienna before next spring, and I've already written to tell Schoenberg that.

So ends the Schoenberg-Vienna story, as far as Weill's known correspondence is concerned. The “next letter” to Hans has not survived, and no trace of the Weill-Schoenberg correspondence has yet come to light. Subsequent events are not, however, hard to surmise. In that same letter of 14 July, Scherchen is quoted as telling him that a big upheaval at the Hochschule is imminent, because of the appointment of a “very modern composer” to whom Weill could safely entrust himself. “Ich glaube nicht daran,” commented Weill; and the events proved him right. The “very modern composer” did not materialize, and the “upheaval” did not begin until Schreker's appointment a year later.

All else having indeed failed, Weill duly returned to Dessau, where Bing's new *Generalmusikdirektor* was Hans Knappertsbusch. After three months Weill left to take up a conducting post for which Humperdinck had recommended him. By the summer of 1920 economic conditions in Germany and the domestic circumstances of the Weill family had surely put paid to his dreams of studying in Vienna – but how telling

that “Song of the Wood Dove” from the *Gurrelieder* ends the program of twentieth-century Lieder and piano music (Reger, Schreker, Pfitzner and Weill) which he gave with soprano Elizabeth Feuge on 22 June 1920! Specially devised for the concert series promoted by the music society that his brother Hans was directing in Halberstadt, the program served among other things as a kind of personal statement at a time of crucial transition.

Whatever significance Weill may have attributed to the official announcement of Schreker's appointment to the Hochschule – and the news of that must have reached him by July 1920 – it would be surprising if his enthusiasm were quite the same as a year before. All the stronger, therefore, must have been the impact of the subsequent announcement that Busoni would be leaving the Swiss canton to which he had exiled himself during the war and returning at long last to his Berlin home in order to take up a highly influential position – an event for which Scherchen had been campaigning with his customary vigor. If, however, Weill had been led to believe that Busoni was still in some sense to be identified with Schoenberg's cause, he would soon discover his error.

The concept of Weill as a pupil of Schoenberg, like that of Britten as a pupil of Berg, is not without a certain cryptic charm. Whether or not there is anything more to it remains to be demonstrated.

Notes

¹ Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera, eds., *Kurt Weill, Musik und Theater, Gesammelte Schriften. Mit einer Auswahl von Gesprächen und Interviews* (Berlin: Henschel, 1990). Although this collection largely supersedes David Drew, ed., *Ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), the latter includes several significant items omitted from the otherwise much more comprehensive 1990 collection – among them Weill's Schoenberg tribute of 28 February 1926, cited here in paragraph 2.

² With the following exceptions, all the works mentioned here are published by Universal Edition (Vienna): Symphony no. 1 (Schott, Mainz), String Quartet in B minor, Cello Sonata, *Recordare* (European American Music Corporation, Valley Forge).

³ Original in the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, Los Angeles. See no. 14 below.

⁴ The extracts from Weill's letters are the copyright of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music and may not be reprinted without permission. The translations are by Lys Symonette and the author.

⁵ “Composer for the Theatre – Kurt Weill talks about ‘Practical Music,’” *New York Sun* (3 February 1940).

⁶ In conversation with the author, Frankfurt, 1967.

⁷ Heinrich Strobel, “Kurt Weill,” *Melos* 6 (1937), 427ff.

⁸ The dating is discussed in David Drew, *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (London: Faber, 1987).

⁹ An edition by Kim H. Kowalke and Lys Symonette of the Weill-Lenya correspondence is in preparation.

¹⁰ H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg, His Life, World and Work* (London: Calder, 1977), 325.

¹¹ For example: Roberto Gerhard, Walter Goehr, and Marc Blitzstein, in separate conversations with the author during the period 1957-60.

¹² Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York, Knopf, 1966).

¹³ Josef Rufer, *Das Werk Arnold Schönbergs* (Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1959).

¹⁴ Alexander Ringer, “Schoenberg, Weill and Epic Theatre,” *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 4, no. 1 (June 1980): 77-98.

¹⁵ Among the lectures Weill attended at the University of Berlin during the first semester of 1918-19 were those by the distinguished philosopher Ernst Cassirer.