

Kurt Weill

Volume 24

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Spring 2006

Newsletter



Lys Symonette 1914–2005

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A variety of opinions are expressed in the Newsletter; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

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Cover photo: Lys Symonette standing behind Lotte Lenya, 1976.

Letters

In her review of essays from the 2000 Vienna Weill Symposium (*Nemsletter*, vol. 23 no. 2, p. 16), Ricarda Wackers draws attention to “light [shed] on the connection between Weill and Zemlinsky. . . . [Eike] Rathgeber tells us that it was during the rehearsals for *Mahagonny* in 1931 that Zemlinsky began work on a new opera (*Der Kreidekreis* after Klabund) that showed Weill’s influence.” Such an influence, though undeniable, needs to be evaluated in the context of Zemlinsky’s own preferences, as articulated in an interview for the *Neues Wiener Journal* on 12 October 1932: “[In Austria] three composers strike me as being particularly distinguished in their respective fields: Berg, v. Webern . . . and Krenek. . . . Of the German composers, Hindemith is in my opinion the most individual, the greatest, and can hence justifiably be described as the most outstanding. And Weill of course is an original figure who also ranks amongst the foremost.” But admiration does not necessarily imply influence. More plausible, if less tidy, is the concept of pollen flying in all directions on changing winds of the zeitgeist.

So which came first: the plant or the seed, the chicken or the egg? “One could well believe,” wrote Adorno, “that Zemlinsky, who certainly knew the *Threepenny Opera*, finally came under its sway. But if one considers Zemlinsky’s complete line of development, one comes to realize the injustice of such conclusions. The process of reducing everything to its most concise form of musical characterization . . . is already clearly detectable in *Kleider machen Leute* [1907–09]. A small adjustment to the stylistic procedure suffices to achieve results similar to those of Brecht and Weill—almost as if Zemlinsky had been the first to evolve the style of the *Threepenny Opera*.”

Finally the question of chronological plausibility: Zemlinsky began work on the partcell of *Der Kreidekreis* on 3 July 1930 and completed it on 8 October 1931—eight weeks before the Berlin production of *Aufstieg und Fall* went into rehearsal. During the process of orchestrating his opera, in 1932, he made only minimal changes. “Be rigorous in checking . . . sources,” admonishes David Drew on p. 8 of the same *Nemsletter*. Those words should be graven on the heart of every scholar.

ANTONY BEAUMONT
Bremen

Antony Beaumont is the author of Zemlinsky, published by Cornell University Press in 2000.

Note from the Editor

In this Newsletter I have the sad duty of informing readers of the passing of Lys Symonette, Weill’s former musical assistant, Lenya’s confidante, and a much-loved, long-time mainstay of the Kurt Weill Foundation. Lys’s consummate musicianship and her inexhaustible knowledge of all aspects of musical theater had a profound impact on both performers and scholars of Weill’s works. On the following pages, several friends and colleagues honor her legacy with personal observations and recollections. All of us here at the office on 20th Street sorely miss her daily presence.

Elmar Juchem



Weill, Zemlinsky, and Brecht during rehearsals for *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in December 1931

Woman with a Mission

by Kim H. Kowalke



Lys Symonette in the Dessau Stadtarchiv in 1999. Photo: Bernd Helbig

“Make way for the Duchess,” the “blackamoor” page was supposed to sing in *The Firebrand of Florence* as Lotte Lenya made her grand entrance (which also heralded her debut in a Broadway musical) in 1945. But when the young Billy Dee Williams couldn’t hold pitch, a boyish-sounding soprano, the general understudy for all female chorus roles, sang his part from the wings. Credited in the program only as the rehearsal pianist, Lys Bert was making her own Broadway debut—in fact, it would be her only such “appearance.” Nevertheless, it was an auspicious debut. She would eventually marry the Hangman from *Firebrand*, Randolph Symonette, and thereby complete the transformation from the Mainz-born Bertlies Weinschenk to Lys Symonette. With tireless energy and commitment, as well as extraordinary warmth and kindness, Lys would devote the remaining six decades of her own long and productive life to the composer whose songs she had loved as a teenager in Germany and whose devotion to his adopted country and its musical theater she passionately shared.

In retrospect, Lys’s offstage introduction into Weill’s and Lenya’s theatrical world would prove to be an apt metaphor, in that she consistently and conscientiously shunned center stage and the spotlight. No prima donna, she preferred to work behind the scenes in a collaborative capacity. Yet such self-effacing modesty masked a fierce commitment to musical excellence and nearly unassailable belief in her own aesthetic judgment. She was anything but a “pushover” when it came to Weill’s music. Perhaps that rare combination of personal humility and artistic authoritarianism accounts for her effectiveness as a custodian of his musical legacy—“old

world graces to match her brains, talent, and loyalty,” as Hal Prince described her. Although whenever possible avoiding direct confrontation and conflict, once Lys had chosen to engage in battle, she defended Weill’s music tenaciously, especially against those who wanted to adapt it for their own purposes.

When Lys and I met in 1975, at a concert by some of her Curtis students at Lincoln Center in celebration of Weill’s 75th birthday, struggles for priority and proximity within Lenya’s inner circle were already apparent. Initially Lys deemed our shared allegiance to Weill’s music, evinced in my “academician” case by an incipient doctoral dissertation in musicology at Yale, sufficient for a tentative alliance at the periphery. She answered my numerous inquiries and requests for materials, sometimes on her own (but on Lenya’s behalf, she said), sometimes ghostwriting letters over Lenya’s signature. By the time we both joined the Board of Trustees at Lenya’s invitation in 1979, we trusted each other enough to share our concerns for the future of the manuscript collection and the Foundation. The intrigues swirling around Lenya’s deathbed and the ensuing court battles over the administration of Weill’s legacy (which, Lys suggested, would make a gripping tragic opera entitled “The Last Days of Lenya”) cemented our friendship in many a strategic planning meeting over *Kuchen* at Eclair on 72nd Street. But the shared intimacy of sifting through the contents of Brook House for archival materials awarded the Foundation by the Surrogate’s Court (even finding a letter to Otto von Pasetti between Lenya’s mattress and box spring) and the hard labor of carting boxes filled with books and scores up and down two narrow stair-

cases in the dog days of August strengthened our bond: she dubbed us “the two Schlepplers.” The pair named in Lenya’s will as her successors in administering Weill’s legacy became an indissoluble team.

After the Foundation found its financial footing and an evolving staff abetted our efforts, Lys relished the opportunity finally “to get back to the music,” editing, translating, and making annual promotional tours of German opera houses. No assignment pleased her more than coaching an important production or supervising a new recording. Any resistance to such oversight from the “Weill estate” usually evaporated as Lys rolled up her sleeves and joined the cause at hand: teaching a famous actor his role by rote after he had arrived at the recording session without any musical preparation for Peachum; rehearsing the children’s game in *Street Scene* when everyone else had given up; filling in for an indisposed pianist or coach and noticeably transforming the musical experience of the entire enterprise.

Publicly always the optimistic cheerleader, privately Lys might share her frustrations over the lamentable state of Weillian performance practice, according to a rigid hierarchy of expectations. Singers could be forgiven their inexperience or ignorance (given the sad state of vocal instruction). Accompanists and coaches bore more responsibility (most of them just needed to be shown). But because of their ambition to run the show, Lys held conductors fully accountable, and they fell into just two categories: “hackers” (who disregarded her suggestions and the composer’s obvious intentions in direct proportion to their own ignorance and arrogance) or “maestros” (such as Abravanel, Bernstein, and Rudel, whom she revered).

When Richard Pearlman invited me to conduct *Street Scene* at Eastman Opera Theatre in 1991, I accepted, but on the condition that Lys coach the talented cast which included John McVeigh as Sam and Anthony Dean Griffey as Lippo (both of whom now sing at the Met). Fortunately, we had the foresight to videotape those sessions—they are the only documentation of Weill’s musical assistant passing on her firsthand knowledge of the composer’s interpretive wishes. Virtually a master class in theatrical performance, Lys’s coaching sessions always began with the text: how would the character speak the lyrics?; how would s/he inflect them?; what thoughts are motivating those particular words at that point in the plot? Only after she had gotten satisfactory responses would she allow the words to be sung, and she expected the pace and naturalness of speech to be carried over into song with every inflection, every emphatic consonant, every nuance of meaning preserved. Never would she allow vocal technique to interfere with either textual intelligibility or dramatic veracity. “Again,” she’d insist. “This time lean on the ‘L’ in ‘Lonely,’” both anticipating the downbeat and prolonging it beyond for emphasis. “Don’t just touch the ‘n’ in ‘town,’” she’d advise, “those liquid consonants are like vowels. Sing on them and you’ll be able to hold the final note pianissimo much longer. Go listen to Streisand or Sinatra!” When the accompanist made “What Good Would the Moon Be?” seem more like a march than a foxtrot, she politely asked, “Can I demonstrate?” and then worked magic by de-emphasizing the downbeat and highlighting the countermelody in the cello (which didn’t appear in the piano reduction). In orchestra rehearsals, when “Wrapped in a Ribbon” failed to soar, she advised: “Maurice never gave downbeats in this number—just side to side.” Suggesting that I conduct what theorists might call the hyper-phrase transformed the number instantaneously—suddenly it levitated instead of clunked. “Not so sentimental, it’s not Bellini!” she continually admonished. “Keep the

underlying pulse in the accompaniment steady so that the singer’s liberties make their expressive points without bogging down.” And she managed to teach all of us these basics without any condescension, always motivating us to do better and instilling us with confidence that we could and would!

Lys joined the Kowalke family while we worked on the edition of the Weill-Lenya correspondence. Sometimes “Tante Lys” would stay at our home in Rochester for several weeks at a time so that we could make real progress on the book during the summer. Bouncing my son on her knee before dinner, she taught him “Hoppe, hoppe, Reiter” to squeals of glee. She spoiled Nikisch and Zar, our two dogs, with bits of her breakfast smuggled under the table. Although suspicious of any technology beyond the electric typewriter, she took pride in being computer-literate. But I still don’t think she ever believed me when I told her that all computers weren’t hooked together (“why can’t you pull up what I typed into the computer in New York?”). Yet, if *Speak Low* eventually evolved into something of a double biography of Weill and Lenya, it was Lys’s doing. She goaded me incessantly to fill in the gaps: we need to establish what they were like before they met; the reader has to know what happened when they weren’t writing to each other; no one will understand what they’re talking about if we don’t provide the context, she insisted. After the books had been optioned for both film and stage treatments, she had second thoughts: no one should ever be allowed to portray Weill or Lenya on stage or screen. Last June she attended the first reading of Alfred Uhry’s and Hal Prince’s *LoveMusik*, suggested by the letters, only under duress, but at the end enthusiastically endorsed the project. Sadly, she didn’t live to see it produced on Broadway.

As the worldwide celebrations of Weill’s centenary came to a close and Lys turned 85, she finally began to slow down a bit—twenty years later than most. Solo travel proved more difficult, coaching less appealing, so her duties in recent years became less public, though no less valuable.

Variations on the imperative “Ask Lys” still echo in the halls and offices of the Kurt Weill Foundation, months after her passing. Her colleagues routinely expanded that two-word Leitmotif into a recurring set of variations: “Lys’ll translate it,” “she’ll decipher and transcribe it,” “she’ll play it,” “she’ll remember,” or, most often, simply “she’ll know.” On her desk the stack of clippings and correspondence to be translated, transcribed, or annotated never seemed to dwindle, yet she seldom complained about the often tedious work. One day David Farneth posted a sign above the stack: “Job security,” which remained there until her death. Indeed, it was all too easy to take for granted such daily access to the storehouse of knowledge, expertise, and memories she had acquired in her sixty years of immersion in matters Weill. Now she’s gone, and with her the last direct link to Weill and Lenya. She and it can never be replaced.

I like to think that it was no coincidence that Lys died on November 27, exactly 24 years to the day after Lenya. On several occasions Lys confided to me that in naming her “musical executive” Lenya had bequeathed to her something far more precious than the money left to others: a mission to preserve, promote, and perpetuate the music Lys loved above all else. Mission accomplished. *Schlepp* no more, dear Lys.

Tributes to Lys Symonette



Lys with Lotte Lenya outside of Brook House, ca. 1975

“No one should be allowed to be as stupid as Siegfried.” Thus began Lys’s primer on Wagner, which, in turn, provided an entrée into her vast repertoire of amusing and harrowing anecdotes about the famous and infamous of opera and Broadway, including Nielsen, Tucker, Toscanini, and Gershwin. Lys did not share personal feelings with others easily, but these stories provided insight into her wit, sense of humor, and experience with the darker side of human nature.

It is impossible to explain or quantify how much Lys taught me and other fledging staff members during the early years of the Kurt Weill Foundation. She gave us all a new world view and a tangible connection to the masters of 19th- and 20th-century music. Along the way she illuminated the intricacies and nuances of Goethe, Rilke, and Brecht.

Singers would flock to Lys for advice. As a vocal coach, she was tough, exacting, merciless. Text was supreme. If you could sing the notes and deliver the text, the music took care of itself. That, after all, was the composer’s responsibility (and genius), not the singer’s.

But more than anything else, Lys’s passionate and tireless efforts to unlock the mysteries of Weill’s extraordinary music—through teaching, editing, writing, translating, networking, and example—have stimulated countless new performers, directors, conductors, and fans to explore and communicate the messages encoded in it. The resulting celebration of life, learning, and experimentation remains Lys’s legacy. Its domino effect will spread and intensify into the future.

Thank you, Lys, for enriching so many lives.

David Farneth

I was fresh out of college when I came to work at the Foundation, Lenya had been dead two years, and Lys (I now know) was almost seventy. Almost a decade later, she calculated that we could begin to address each other informally, as “du” instead of “Sie,” but only after we’d shared a glass of wine—and it had to be white wine, and German, in a specific sort of glass. Otherwise, the deal was off.

Lys was small, shy, soft-spoken. Yet her passions were outsized, fierce and unwavering. One thinks immediately of her late husband, a distinguished Heldenbariton, and of their son, a gifted conductor: no one ever had a more ardent champion than Randy and Victor found in Lys. Yet the longest lasting of her passions was that for the music of Kurt Weill. Her last act before fleeing the country, in 1936, was to play *Dreigroschenoper* records, already banned by the Nazis as “degenerate art,” from the balcony of her hotel room.

For more than a half century after Weill’s death, she coached innumerable singers and conductors on the necessary pliancy and bite of Weillian style. Not everybody listened to

her, she acknowledged, and at concerts it sometimes was difficult to restrain her when the conductor started “hacking” (as in *Fleischhacker*, or butcher). When it was a singer who went astray, Lys would turn to stone, staring straight ahead and saying nothing until she was well clear of the auditorium. Yet when singers did follow her advice, the most Lys would permit herself was to say, “She’s smart.”

Though she might find fault in a phrase or a gesture, and criticize it tartly, she never lost confidence in the artistic excellence of those she cared about. If a few (okay, one) of us were not the greatest talents of our time, she never mentioned it. She held indefatigably the highest hopes for each of us, no matter how long the wait between our triumphs. Because we were human, it was reasonable to expect that we might make mistakes or encounter obstacles, but ultimately we would prevail: after all, that’s what Lys had done.

She may have looked cuddly, but she was tough. Intelligence and independence combined to make her the most stubborn person I ever knew. Just when you thought she might back down, she was gearing up for another round. And while she adored her colleagues at the Foundation, she didn’t necessarily agree with us.

She never let my lack of musical ability prevent her from mentoring me. Thanks to Lys, I have an (almost) firsthand knowledge of operas, shows, and artists I’d otherwise have missed. Though she might forget where she left her glasses, she could recall every detail of performances by Gertrude Lawrence or Jarmila Novotná, Karl Valentin or Karl Böhm, Richard Tauber or Ezio Pinza, and she’d mimic them all (usually in the same voice). She told stories about Lenya so vividly that I feel as if I knew her (Lenya still appears in my dreams sometimes, bossing me around).

At one point, Lys decided that I needed to know *The Firebrand of Florence*, the first show on which she worked with Weill and Lenya, and the one in which she met her husband, the Hangman. Until recently, there was no recording of the score, so Lys devoted a precious Saturday afternoon to singing and playing every damned note for me on the Foundation's piano, and she described set changes and costumes, too. If I'd asked, she'd probably have recreated the original choreography.

The Weill-Lenya Research Center prides itself on preserving everything—every available scrap of the past. But we didn't save that performance, and somehow the scraps we do have of Lys will never seem sufficient. She can't be replaced.

William V. Madison

I met Lys on a visit to my home town of New York when Astrid Varnay and I were contemplating a collaboration on her memoirs for which I ultimately became the ghost writer. During our first phone conversation, I mentioned my passion for Kurt Weill, in particular the American Kurt Weill, who was undergoing a drubbing at the time by the Central European “new music” apostles of Theodor W. Adorno, who had with singular injustice declared that phase of his creativity off limits as a sell-out to commercial interests. The current position of Weill as one of the pillars of 20th century music on all continents and Adorno as a cranky curmudgeon on the outskirts of the craft speaks volumes.

I was overjoyed to be invited to visit the Foundation and have lunch with the keeper of the flame, a role she continued to play in our collaborations from then on, which included a radio production of *Street Scene* in Cologne, which I directed for radio and Lys supervised musically. It was during those weeks that I was not only blown away by her pianistic skills but also by her uncanny ability to work with the remarkable collection of soloists needed to perform that germinal work. As just one illustration of her capacious memory and her inborn sense of practicality, she expressed some reservations on one of the tempos the conductor was taking in an orchestra rehearsal. The tune, she told me, had been inserted by the composer because the producers enjoyed a small side income from the publication of sheet music and the release of recordings for dancing, and they needed a fox trot, whereupon she convinced the conductor with the rightness of the tempo she wanted by simply rising to her feet and dragging me into the middle of the floor to see how comfortably we could dance to the music. Needless to say, that convinced the conductor.



Lys with Siegfried Köhler and Josef Protschka during the recording sessions for *Der Jasager*, 1955, where she sang the role of the Mother.



Burgess Meredith with Lys in Aspen, 1981

Lys was anything but pedantic, but she saw no reason why anybody, conductors, producers or performers should place themselves above the original creator's intentions, when they were so clear and utterly plausible and had been devised for the likes of Gertrude Lawrence, Todd Duncan, Mary Martin, Danny Kaye, Inez Matthews and his own beloved Lenya. While she loved the idea of building on the musical inspiration, she still insisted on that inspiration enjoying pride of place and not being obfuscated by the ill-

conceived smokescreens of anyone else's alleged vision. It was a lesson I have never forgotten.

Appropriately enough, it was Astrid who performed the sad duty of communicating the news of Lys's passing to me. Her contribution was immeasurable, and she will never be forgotten by the musical world. And she was a dear friend I shall always miss.

Donald Arthur



Lys in her office at the Kurt Weill Foundation, 1988

“Oh, if only we still had that house on Fischtorplatz . . .” she wrote from New York while I was looking for a new place in Mainz. She had spent her childhood and youth in that house, and as late as the 1990s one could still read “Weinschenk” in faded letters on one of the walls. I never heard her complain about losing the house, losing her homeland, Nazi atrocities—after all, she had reason enough to do so, even though she escaped the Hitler regime in time and went to the U.S. Her nature seemed upbeat and she always looked ahead. Perhaps her early years in America were made easier by the fact that Weill, whose music she had adored as a teenager, also settled on the same shores.

In the 1950s she returned to Mainz for a while, where her husband, Randolph, had a contract at the Stadttheater (Hans Sachs was his major role in the 1953/54 season) before he accepted a position in Düsseldorf. But Lys kept revisiting Mainz, whether for personal or business matters, or a visit to the family grave in the Jewish cemetery in Mainz-Zahlbach (one time, she confided to us, she had found the doors closed, forgetting that it was the Sabbath).

I first met her in Mainz with a group of mutual friends. “Paarweck! Fleischwurst!” she exclaimed, when she saw a table laid with local specialties. When we met again a few years later, she was still drawn to a small restaurant with “good plain German food.” Since she was always busy and Weill was constantly on her mind, she didn't say much about the old Mainz from prewar times or

Mainz during its reconstruction. Just a glimpse here and there, as when she quoted a now mostly forgotten act from the Mainz carnival, the cleaning-lady duo “Fra Babbisch un Fra Struwwelisch.”

Of course her heart belonged to the theater. Her dream of seeing one more new Weill production in the venerable house on Gutenbergplatz remained unfulfilled. She probably never set foot in the Kleines Haus, which opened in 1997, but four years later she attended the newly renovated Großes Haus for its grand opening, which was clouded by the attacks of September 11 just a few days earlier. “They have done a beautiful job,” she said. It proved to be her last visit.

What Josef Heinzelmann, not only an expert on Weill but also on Mainz, once told me makes perfect sense: the city's rather provincial character, despite its location in the prosperous Rhine-Main area, is at least partly a result of the expulsion of the Jews, who formed a significant part of the intelligentsia which was also deeply involved in the arts. Lys was a part of that circle. In meeting her I realized what Germany had lost and America had gained after 1933. For me as a young man, the German-Jewish emigration suddenly had a face. No history lesson in school, no book, no lecture could have replaced this personal friendship.

Andreas Hauff

Lys, in Her Own Words . . .

Excerpts from an Oral History Interview
with Lys Symonette conducted by Suzanne
Goldklang on 8 December 1988 at the
Kurt Weill Foundation.

I first met Kurt Weill through Maurice Abravanel, who was a student of Weill's, and who conducted his operas in Europe and most of his Broadway shows. He's a classically trained conductor, and eventually became conductor of the Utah Symphony. I had just come over here as a refugee and went to the Curtis Institute, where I had a scholarship in voice and piano. And I was looking for a job, and Maurice Abravanel said, "Well, Kurt Weill is looking for a rehearsal pianist for his new show, *The Firebrand of Florence*." And when I heard the name Kurt Weill I thought I'd go see him. Boy, you know, because when you came from Germany you *knew* who Kurt Weill was. We all grew up with the songs from *Threepenny Opera*, they were like protest songs in those days. Because nobody in the cast knew who he was, least of all the singers, they had no idea. Well, I thought, "Oh, boy, this is terrific," you know? And so he said "Well, first you have to play auditions, so he can see how you play, how you sight-read and all that," so I had to do that for three days. Cattle calls. And that was quite an experience for me because, coming from Europe, we don't do anything like that. They're all subsidized theaters, you know. Everything goes through agencies, very proper. I saw these poor kids, they're standing in line for blocks to get into a show, in the chorus. Anyhow, it was quite an experience, and it lasted for about three days. And then I was left alone on the stage, and I didn't know what was going to happen, whether I got the job or not. And finally, out of the dark, you know how they come out of the dark theater, the big shots. First there was a little man came to me in shirtsleeves and he had a big cigar in his mouth, and an open collar. And I was sure that it was a stagehand. And he said to me, "Ma'am, it must be pretty tough to be playing these kind of things day after day after day, and with lousy music sheets, they're falling off the piano." And I said, "Oh, well, you know, this is one of those things, one has to either do it or not do it." Then I said to him, "And who are you?" And he said, "I'm Ira Gershwin" [*laughs*]. I tell you, I was absolutely ashamed of myself. I thought I'd die. Because he was so casual, you know, and he had this thick Brooklyn accent; which I didn't know then so well, but I did know that he didn't speak very refined English. But he was darling; he was a very sweet person. And, well, that sort of shook me up, and I thought, "Oh, my God. What's gonna happen next?" And there comes another—Ira Gershwin was very short, too, and fat—this other young man, who was very slender, but also short, bald-headed, big, thick glasses. And he sort of grinned and he looked at me and said, "I'd like to have you in the show. I'm Kurt Weill." Oh, boy. I'll tell you. It was really—I'll never forget that moment. And I said, "Thank you, Mr. Weill." That's all I could say, you know? And he said, "Call me Kurt. They all call me Kurt." And I couldn't, not as long as I knew him, and we became very good friends. I

just couldn't. When you were born in Europe you're brought up that way: not to address an older person, or person that you respect a lot, by their first name. It's very difficult for me, to this day I can't do it. Well, anyway, so I got hired. That's how I met him. [. . .]

Weill came to all rehearsals [for *Firebrand*]. He was always there, but he never interfered. This is one of the things that I've learned from him that are difficult to do. He felt that once the work starts, he discusses with the conductor what he wants, and then the conductor takes over. And he never interfered. Of course, he was very fortunate: when he had Maurice Abravanel he didn't need to. And that was all set in rehearsals. Before the rehearsals of *Street Scene*—four weeks before the regular rehearsals started—all the soloists used to come to my place, the ensembles especially, there are lots of ensembles in there. [. . .] In *Firebrand* it's more chorus. But I know also in the chorus rehearsals for *Firebrand* Maurice rehearsed those choruses until they were coming out our ears, and until each syllable could be understood. And let me tell you, Rodgers and Hammerstein—Oscar Hammerstein—if they couldn't understand—if somebody couldn't understand his lyrics, he would have a fit. And they used to hire diction coaches. As a matter of fact, in *Brigadoon*, too, a diction coach was hired just for the chorus. So they rehearsed and rehearsed until every single word could be understood. And that was before they had microphones. They didn't use mikes in the theater in those days. I mean, the words really carried. And today they have microphones, and you still can't understand them.

Do you remember anything about what he might have said to Lenya during rehearsals for Firebrand?

This I really don't know. I didn't know them that well at that time. Everybody knew that she had a boyfriend in the chorus, and that their relationship was one of pure friendship. There was no romantic fire any more. They had been married for quite a while. They had been married and divorced. But Lenya used to like to hang around the chorus boys. Sorry to say—or happy to say. But what they discussed personally, I have no idea. Whether he criticized her performance or not, I don't know. According to the letters he always admired what she did. Including *Firebrand*. She must have been pretty crushed because she got really roasted. And I'm sure—he was such a kind person, that he would have done his best to console her. As far as he was able to, but they did not have the ideal relationship as husband and wife, as has been assumed all these years. Very rough going. Which it is very often, I mean, between artists. Like, for a long time people thought Robert and Clara Schumann

had the ideal marriage. It was anything but. You know, it takes history to bring these things out. After *Firebrand* she decided she wasn't going to do anything anymore in the theater. [. . .]

When Weill heard that Abravanel at one time did not conduct the matinee of *Street Scene*, gave it to another conductor, Weill was furious. You see, because he knows this is the man who knows what I want. But he, himself, I just—I don't remember at all that he interfered. And I very often did auditions with him for backers, for record companies. He never told me a darn thing about how to do it. I don't know. That might sound like I'm bragging, but maybe I have a real feeling for his music. I probably did. I probably still do. Like some composers come easier to you to understand than others. [. . .]

Did you ever perform in Firebrand?

Yes, one of the models. And I couldn't fit into the costume. See, I had to understudy all of the small roles. Not the big ones; Angela I didn't understudy. All the other ones. And this—one of the models—they had solos. They had to sing something like "We're models of Florence, and see with abhorrence . . ." Whatever. And they had to be gorgeous, and they wore marvelous costumes. But I was short, and they were all tall. And I hadn't really—that was in Boston—I hadn't really studied all of their steps, you know? I mean, I had steps and dancing with . . . oh, and I had to step into one of those—it was terrible. And they used to cue me, "Left foot now, right foot" [*laughs*]. Because I didn't know what to do. And they pinned up that costume, and I must have looked awfully funny with these tall girls—a real shrimp in there.

What other times did you perform as an understudy? Do you have any particular anecdotes that you remember?

There's a funny one about the *Firebrand*. As a matter of fact, I have living proof of it. See that note from Ira Gershwin?

Yes, I see:

"*Make way for the Duchess For Her Grace the Duchess Make way for the Duchess For the regal, legal Duchess.*"

And then he wrote something on the side. This was very funny. It was—we were rehearsing at a hotel—Hotel Belvedere was the name. And he was gonna write down Hotel Belvedere, and then he said, "No. It sounds too naughty." And he crossed it out. But what happened was the following. The Duchess is being brought in on the sedan chair. You might have seen the pictures. And there were four guys; two in the front and two in the back carried

her. And in front of it was a little black boy. And he was supposed to sing, "Make way for the Duchess . . ." It was Billy Dee Williams! Anyhow, he couldn't learn that tune. But it was so cute with the little boy running there, so they wanted to keep it in. So then Kurt Weill said, "Liesel, why don't you sing this?" And I said, "How does it go?" And then Ira wrote down the words for me, you know? I knew the melody, but I didn't know the words. So he wrote down, "Make way for the Duchess . . ." So I sang it there. And he said, "You're in every night—now, at every performance." Speaking of understudy, I had to sing that from the wings. [. . .]

Weill never spoke German to you?

Always English, always English. And he and Lenya always spoke English. And when he wrote to his parents he wrote in German. But there was a rehearsal of *Lost in the Stars*. Maurice Abravanel had gone to Utah, he was no longer available. [Much to Weill's disappointment, Abravanel had agreed to conduct Blitzstein's *Regina*.—ed.] And Weill had a new conductor who was not the greatest. He wasn't too happy with him, but he was very patient. And there was a rehearsal—we were in the Music Box Theater. We sat way in the back, and he always had me sit next to him. Was listening, listening, listening, then came a spot that wasn't right. So, he got up and went to the conductor and whispered in his ear, you know, so the musicians wouldn't hear what he said. And went back there, sat down. Did it over. Well, they did the same thing. It came out wrong again. I can't tell you any more what it was. It was some kind of a finesse. *A subito piano*, something like that. So, anyhow, that went on a few times, and he was very patient. Never once would he say something [aloud] to this man. Always directly into his ear. Didn't want to embarrass him. Weill must have done that three or four times. It was unbelievable. Always walking back again. And there, my God, he sat down and he was getting really angry, and it

was hard to see because he was so calm. But there again came the same mistake, and all of the sudden, as if a flash had struck him, he jumped up like this and said, "Nein!" [*laughs*], in *Deutsch*, you know. Because his anger was so impulsive. Then he couldn't control himself and he spoke German. And just the one word: "Nein." That's kind of a cute story, because usually he never corrected anybody. And even then, I mean, it was so honest and it came so sudden: "Nein!" That was funny. He had a great sense of humor. And he was in general somebody that—I don't think I've ever heard anybody say a bad word about him.

MAX GORDON
Presents
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"MUCH ADO ABOUT LOVE"
by
EDWIN JUSTUS MAYER and IRA GERSHWIN
Music by KURT WEILL

With

Melville COOPER	Earl WRIGHTSON	Beverly TYLER	Lotte LENYA
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Misses: Mary Alice Bingham, Mary Grey, Diane Meroff. Soldiers,
Promenaders, Courtiers: Misses: Suzie Baker, Joan Bartels, Lisa Bert,
Angela Carabella, Jean Crone, Gay English, Donna Gardner, Frances
Joslyn, Julie Jefferson, Lily Paget, Stephanie Turash, Evelyn Ward.
Messrs: Edwin Alberian, Jimmy Allison, Ray Bessmer, Tony Coffaro,
Thomas La Monaco, Ralph Lee, Alan Noel, Walter Rinner, William
Sutherland.

From the program for the Boston tryout of *The Firebrand of Florence*, which opened 23 February 1945. Lys was listed as "Lisa Bert," and her name appears at the far right of the fourth line in the list of dancers.

Liebe Eltern,
 Ich fahre schon morgen, Mittwoch früh, nach
 Dessau, um vor- u. nachmittags bei den Pro-
 ben zu sein, weil der Solist erst Donnerstag
 zur Probe kommt. Donnerstag kommt dann
 mein Stab nach: mein Fräulein Frau, Peter
 u. die Gratenau. Donnerstag abend um 9
 fahre ich nach Berlin zurück, da ich nicht von
 den Dessauer Spielern nicht feiern lassen möchte.
 Ich freue mich sehr auf Mutter u. Fritz. Wenn

An Addition to the Family Correspondence

Original postcard in the Ronald Sanders
 Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division,
 The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox
 and Tilden Foundations. Sanders probably
 acquired the postcard from Rita Weill
 while he was researching his biography,
*The Days Grow Short: The Life and Music
 of Kurt Weill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart
 and Winston, 1980).

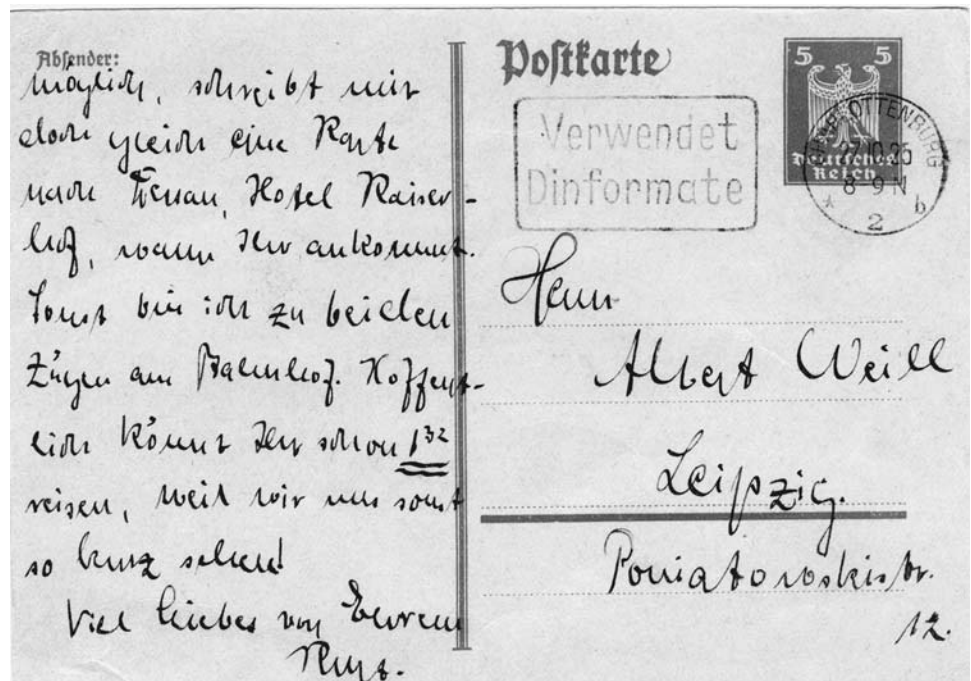
Translation

[Postmark: Charlottenburg,
 27 October 1925]

Dear Parents,

I will travel to Dessau
 tomorrow, early Wednesday, in
 order to attend rehearsals in the
 morning and afternoon,
 because the soloist will not
 arrive until Thursday's
 rehearsal. On Thursday my
 staff will follow: my "Miss
 Wife" [Lenya], Peter [Bing],
 and [Martha] Gratenau.
 Thursday night I will return to
 Berlin at 9 p.m., as I don't want
 to be feted by Dessau's
 philistines. I look forward to
 seeing Mother and Fritz
 [Weill's brother Nathan]. If
 possible, send a card right away
 to me in Dessau, Hotel
 Kaiserhof, telling me when you
 will arrive. Otherwise I will go
 to the station for both trains.
 Hopefully you can make the
 1:32, or else our time together
 will be very short.

Much love from your
 Kurt



Weill wrote this postcard on Tuesday, two days before the German premiere of his Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra, op. 12. In a letter to Lenya written the next day, he complained about the orchestra's poor discipline and conductor Franz von Hoesslin's lack of control. The work, featuring Stefan Frenkel as soloist, was rejected by the audience and the local press reacted with outright hostility. Peter Bing provided a positive review for the December 1925 issue of *Musikblätter des Anbruch*. The discovery of this postcard supports the tentative dating of Weill's much quoted letter to his parents, where he talks about living with Lenya and "advancing toward 'my real self,'" finding that his "music is getting to be much freer, looser and—simpler." That letter mentions simply "Wednesday" as a possible travel date for his trip to Dessau, and it was written just before the eve of the Sabbath preceding the Dessau premiere, i.e., on 23 October 1925.

Weill-Lenya Research Center

Recent Acquisitions

Sheet Music and Scores

“Barbara-Song” sheet music, first printing (October 1928), Universal Edition

Der Jasager piano-vocal score, second printing (August 1930), Universal Edition

“Oh, Heart of Love” and “Oh, the Rio Grande” from *Johnny Johnson*, Chappell, 1936

“This Is New” from *Lady in the Dark*, Chappell (U.K. edition), 1944

“Sing Me Not a Ballad” from *Firebrand of Florence*, Chappell, 1945 (“Much Ado about Love” cover)

“Nergens” (i.e., “Moritat”), accordion edition, Klavarskribo Slikkerveer (Netherlands), 1956

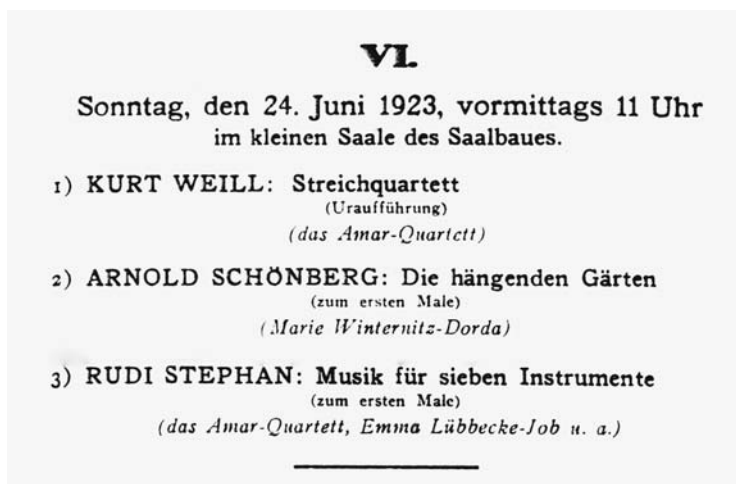
“Alabama-Song” arranged by Morton Feldman, corrected edition, Universal Edition, 2005

Original playbill, showcase performance of *A Flag Is Born*, Madison Square Garden, 5 June 1947

Die Weltillustrierte, 12 May 1949 (full-page cover photo of Hans Albers as Macheath)

Original program, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Dresden, 1962 (first performance in the DDR)

Original program, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Sadler’s Wells, London, 16 January 1963 (opening night)



The Hindemith Institut in Frankfurt obtained a fragment of an original program from the Kammermusikfest “Neue Musik,” 17-24 June 1923, and kindly sent a photocopy to the WLRC.

Programs and Performance History

Photocopied program, String Quartet no. 1, op. 8, Frankfurt, 24 June 1923 (world premiere). *See illustration.*

Original program, *Royal Palace*, Berliner Staatsoper, 5 March 1927

Photocopied program, *Marie Galante*, dress rehearsal, 1934

Playbills and a flyer from the tour of *Knickerbocker Holiday*, 1939

Original playbill, *Candle in the Wind*, week of 5 January 1942 (closing week)

Original playbill, *The Firebrand of Florence*, week of 22 March 1945 (opening week)

Original playbill, *The Firebrand of Florence*, week of 8 April 1945

Posters

Poster for *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, Nuremberg, 1965

Lobby card for re-release of *From Russia with Love*, 1970

Poster for *One Touch of Venus*, Opera North, Sadler’s Wells, 2005

Poster for *Arms and the Cow*, Opera North, 2006

Lobby card for *The Threepenny Opera*, Roundabout Theatre, 2006

Film and Video

3-minute trailer for *Lady in the Dark* (Paramount, 1944) on 16 mm. film

“Girl of the Week” feature on Marion Bell, 1948 (includes footage of Bell rehearsing “Somehow I Never Could Believe” from *Street Scene*)

News report on the “Großer Zapfenstreich” upon Chancellor Gerhard Schröder’s leaving office, November 2005 (Schröder asked that the “Moritat” be played during the ceremony)

Arms and the Cow, Opera North, complete archival recording of dress rehearsal, March 2006

Books

Libretto im Progress: Brechts und Weills "Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny" aus textgeschichtlicher Sicht

Esbjörn Nyström

Bern: Peter Lang, 2005 (Arbeiten zur Editionswissenschaft, 6), 709 pp.
ISBN: 3-03910-479-9

There was a time when the genesis of the Weill/Brecht works could be presented rather innocently. Such an account would have read: In 1927 *Mahagonny: Ein Songspiel* was created, in 1928 *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and in 1928–29 the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*. This chronology also implies a qualitative judgment of their collaboration. The *Songspiel* served as a “study in style,” a first step towards something bigger, and three years later the magnum opus came along in the form of an opera. This notion of a linear development of text and music in perfect synchrony has long been championed by researchers of Brecht and Weill, especially Brecht scholars. The latest example is the *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* of Brecht’s works, completed in 2000. While the editorial principles state that the texts, classified by genre, are presented “in the order of their genesis” (GBA vol. 1, p. [613]), this principle is glaringly violated when *Dreigroschenoper* appears before both *Songspiel* and *Aufstieg*. And the general policy of printing “first editions” (if available) is abandoned too: the version of *Aufstieg* that appears in GBA vol. 2, taken from Brecht’s publication of *Versuche* in December 1930, is not the first printing; that honor goes to the Universal Edition libretto published in November 1929. The editorial guidelines become even more murky when volume editor Jürgen Schebera correctly identifies UE’s 1929 edition as the “first printing” (GBA 2, p. 456), but nevertheless decides not to publish it. Because of these obvious flaws and inevitable criticism of such editorial practices, scholars are now calling for two different histories, that of the text and that of the music.

Esbjörn Nyström, a Swedish scholar of German literature, has undertaken the project of analyzing and establishing the history of the opera’s text in his German-language dissertation at the University of Göteborg. He focuses strictly on the text, providing an account of the complex evolution of this libretto, which underwent several revisions. This is the first study to succeed in considering and systematizing all of the opera’s known textual sources.

Previous studies of the opera had confined themselves to a relatively small collection of materials held by the Bertolt Brecht Archiv in Berlin, presuming that many sources have been lost. Nyström, on the other hand, states: “Due to the [work’s] collaborative nature, a large body of materials, which have been neglected or almost neglected so far, exists outside the Brecht Archiv. As part of a contract between Weill and Universal Edition, all holograph full scores of Weill’s works became the property of the publisher, and other important text sources besides the full score were in the possession of the publisher early on” (p. 16f.). This refers to materials now held by the Sibley Music Library at the University of Rochester, N.Y., and the Weill-Lenya Research Center in New York

City. Some recently discovered documents among the Elisabeth Hauptmann papers, housed in the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, fill “some central gaps in the text’s history” (p. 633). By scrutinizing, analyzing, and comparing these and additional sources, he offers a comprehensive picture of the existing text sources and their interrelations. The analyses reveal hitherto unknown relationships between text sources, and Nyström offers a new system of defining various stages and branches, which he fortunately presents in form of a stemma. Furthermore, he provides a diagram to show which quotations Brecht borrowed from his own works. Thus, Nyström makes a substantial contribution to illuminating the genesis of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*.

His study is divided into eight chapters. While the first two chapters discuss the basis for research, provide a brief survey of the inherent problems, and address aspects of methodology and history, chapters 3–5 provide a description and systematization of the textual material. Chapters 6 and 7 contain analyses and interpretations of selected parts of the libretto, followed by a conclusion in chapter 8 that also offers a prospect for future scholarship.

Nyström shows how the various kinds of text diverge into several branches of transmission. For instance, he identifies the texts that appear in music scores, making the distinction between A (full scores) and B (piano-vocal scores / chorus parts). The first literary text is obtained by extracting the text from the full score, resulting in the first printed libretto published by UE. Branch D signals the beginning of a “reliterarization” (p. 634) of the libretto which—through several steps—leads to a *Lesedrama* (“play for reading”) that Brecht publishes in his *Versuche* series at the end of 1930. Finally, branch E lists the “Suggestions for Staging” by Caspar Neher and Weill.

In chapter 6 Nyström sets out to analyze “Benares Song.” Here he is able to establish a hitherto unknown connection between a line in the refrain, “Let’s go to Benares,” and Rudyard Kipling’s celebrated novel, *Kim* (1901; German translation, 1908), which Brecht supposedly read before 1923. Here we find the line, “Let us go to Benares,” and, three lines later, the sentence “But there is no place to sleep” (p. 449). The “God in Mahagonny” scene presents another previously unknown case of intertextuality: the image of Hell on earth. Nyström connects it to Oscar Wilde’s prose poem, “The House of Judgment,” where a man, threatened by God with Hell, replies that he is unimpressed as he already lives in Hell (p. 476). These and other insights shed new light on the libretto’s ambiguity and intertextuality.

Nyström also devotes attention to the division of labor during the creation of the libretto: “Even though David Drew, for instance, lists Weill as a co-author of the libretto, no one has thoroughly investigated who was responsible for which share of the work on the literary text and how this literary collaboration worked in detail” (p. 19). Nyström ascertains that several manuscripts and typescripts are exclusively in Weill’s hand or contain his emendations and additions, so that Weill and Brecht need to be regarded “as equal coauthors of the libretto” (p. 155).

Nyström’s book is a published dissertation. Since readers will have to dig through seven hundred pages of prose which is sometimes awkward or redundant, it requires a lot of patience. Thorough editing and some passages tightened here and there would have been beneficial. Nevertheless, this study will be a substantial contribution to the work on a critical edition of the *Mahagonny* complex.

Joachim Lucchesi
Karlsruhe

Performances

Die Dreigroschenoper

Roundabout Theatre Company
New York City

Premiere: 20 April 2006

When last seen on a Broadway stage, in 1989, in a short-lived production by John Dexter at the Lunt-Fontanne Theater, *3 Penny Opera* (as it was called) prompted earnest soul-searching among theatrical types. Was it possible to communicate the subversive messages of Weill and Brecht in a vast auditorium, before a well-heeled audience that paid considerably more than three cents for the privilege?

Years later, the question has grown thornier. Broadway has turned into a tourist trap, where real New Yorkers seldom set foot. Interchangeable casts march through multi-million-dollar amusement-park attractions designed to run like perpetual-motion machines: one sees precisely the same show the neighbors saw on their vacation five years ago. Brecht's alienation

effect has been turned on its head: now it's the aim of producers *never* to remind audiences that they are *not* watching an animated cartoon. Meanwhile, media-saturated Americans are exposed ceaselessly to pornography and to images of violence and poverty, as well as to outrageous political views (albeit more frequently from conservative talk-radio hosts than from street-corner Socialists). In this environment, how can *Threepenny* possibly pack the wallop it did in Berlin in 1928, and Off-Broadway in 1954?

The Roundabout Theatre's production bravely took up the challenge, with mixed results. The venue was Studio 54, the fabled 1970s discotheque latterly converted back into a theater, where the company has revived two other works indebted to Weill/Brecht, Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* and Sondheim's *Assassins*. Translating a German text, the naughtiest word of which is *Sau*, Wallace Shawn resorted to the full lexicon of four-letter words. Stage director Scott Elliott added drug use and graphic depictions of pansexuality in his attempt to jolt spectators out of their complacency. But, as they say in another famous tourist trap, *etwas fehlt*.

Sex is the core of Elliott's staging, and of his downfall. His Macheath, Alan Cumming, groped almost every member (and I do mean member) of the cast in this

staging, and stuck his tongue down several throats. Fair enough, perhaps: Macheath is a voracious sexual animal. But we've seen Cumming exult in his polymorphous perversity many times before, notably as *Cabaret's* Master of Ceremonies, in this very theater, but also in television appearances, at charitable events, perhaps even at the corner deli. Since the Roundabout is a subscriber-driven repertory company, it's reasonable to assume that a fair percentage of its audience had seen him ply this particular shtick already—and they wouldn't be shocked by it now. Really it would be more shocking to see Cumming in a show in which he didn't offer himself to all comers.

The sense of déjà-vu persisted, while Elliott relentlessly set his cast in hip-grinding motion. The entire personnel of Jenny's brothel was united for a five-bed orgy, yet this concept started to get tired shortly after Bob Fosse filmed the "Air Otica" sequence in *All That Jazz* (1981). Lucy Brown was portrayed by a man in drag, singing falsetto, but the Broadway revival of Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* has been playing non-stop since 1996, and though that show's Mary Sunshine merely rips off his wig (rather than flashing his penis, as Lucy did), the thrill has been exploited pretty thoroughly. Elliott also succumbed to the temptation to depict Tiger Brown as



From left: Mr. Peachum (Jim Dale), Mrs. Peachum (Ana Gasteyer), Macheath (Alan Cumming), Polly (Nellie McKay), and Jenny (Cyndi Lauper). Photo: Joan Marcus

Macheath's only true love: it's a distortion of the text, though it's become quite commonplace.

True, there's a lot of sex in *Dreigroschenoper*, but it isn't the principal target of Brecht's satire. The case could be made that society is as hypocritical about sex as it is about money, and that we are jammed into rigid hierarchies of sexual class that determine our place in the world; *Threepenny* might even support such additional interpretations. But Elliott never found the means to draw out these ideas or to tie them to the existing work. Meanwhile, he alternately ignored or paid lip service to the play's original purpose, with the result that it was never clear he really understood it.

Dance could have added sizzle to the sex here, and a choreographer, Azure Barton, was credited; a *New Yorker* article recorded her ostensibly ingenious craftsmanship. (One cited example: Macheath points to his crotch when he sings of "the happy life.") But there was no tango in the "Tango-Ballade," and elsewhere in the show, the cast did little more than the swaying you see in any bar with a good jukebox. *Threepenny* isn't a dance show as such, yet dance is as significant to this piece as it is to *The Merry Widow*, which in its once-scandalous candor and global popularity was *Dreigroschenoper*'s godmother. These days it's rare to see a *Merry Widow* in which the Hanna and Danilo can muster a presentable waltz, and perhaps *Threepenny* is destined



Jenny (Cyndi Lauper) sees imminent betrayal in Mac's (Alan Cumming) palm and the ominous letter "J."

Photo: Joan Marcus

to share that fate. But *Merry Widow* is by now a museum piece, and I'm not ready to throw in the towel on *Threepenny*, especially on Broadway. Maybe opera singers can't dance, but Broadway actors can.

The hell of it is, Kurt Weill was right. He sought a venue where his artistic goals would know no limits, and he found it not in the opera house but on Broadway, where stars and chorines alike sing, dance, and play comedy or drama with equal skill. Despite the changes Broadway has seen since Weill's death, these talents endure in

near-universal abundance on the Great White Way. In this sense, if the challenges of *Threepenny* can be met, if the piece can thrive anywhere at all, then it ought to be on Broadway. The resources are there, and the solutions must be at hand for any director with imagination and a clear vision. Elliott, despite a handsome résumé, had never directed musical theater before.

Tellingly, the cast was the strongest component of this production. I attended a preview, when several actors were still discovering their characters and struggling with their lines, and I must assume they improved by opening night. But in each performance there was already something to admire.

By adding a strut and a snarl to his patented slink and smirk, Cumming made a credible gang leader, and he held the stage with the authority of a genuine star. Ana Gasteyer, a distinguished alumna of television's *Saturday Night Live*, brought wit and full-throated vocalizing to Mrs. Peachum's numbers. Jim Dale, a Broadway powerhouse, played Peachum, most of whose music lies too low for him; he gained in assurance as the play continued. Christopher Innvar invested Tiger Brown with dignity, but he hadn't yet mastered the police chief's conflicted character.

Making her stage debut as Jenny was Cyndi Lauper, a sometime rock superstar. She's an excellent musician, with a wide vocal range, mas-



Polly (Nellie McKay) is about to sing the "Barbara Song," informing her parents (Ana Gasteyer, Jim Dale) that she has married Macheath. Photo: Joan Marcus

tery of several pop styles, and genuine feeling for character and situation. Though she clearly wasn't getting the guidance a debutant actor needs from her director, she lent a husky alto to a couple of stanzas of "Mack the Knife" and to Jenny's numbers, offering an especially affecting "Solomon Song."

Nellie McKay, another pop singer, was also making a Broadway debut, and her Polly was a warbling delight. Though she didn't quite navigate the ironic shoals of "Pirate Jenny," she mingled sunniness that looked like innocence with obstinacy that looked like an armored division. She found a worthy adversary in Brian Charles Rooney's lissome Lucy Brown. Rooney possesses all the notes his role demands, with admirable falsetto agility, and his flabbergasted fury proved very funny.

Elliott and his costume designer, the couturier Isaac Mizrahi, made few distinctions in character or social station, dressing most of the cast like club kids out for a night on the town. The gloveless Macheath sported tight black trousers and shirt, with a cross around his neck; his gang and Peachum's beggars wore Goth drag or fetish gear. Jenny and the whores wore similar stuff, but less of it. A sailor blouse embraced Lucy's feigned demureness, but Tiger's army uniform contradicted his résumé: he's chief of police now, a career move that's hardly irrelevant. Doubling as the Mounted Messenger, Innvar emerged in gold-lamé hot pants that flaunted his gym-toned body—but what did it mean?

Commentary on class was reserved for the Peachums, though even here the message was muddled. Mr. Peachum wore a pale blue polyester suit that any used-car salesman would shun; he didn't much resemble the play's prosperous manipulator of appearances. Mrs. Peachum's too-tight faux-Chanel suit worked better, and it enabled Gasteyer to mine a vein of physical humor. Both Polly's bridal gown and her widow's weeds simultaneously suggested a Victorian engraving and yet another Goth club kid; in these surroundings, that seemed insightful.

Derek McLane's sparsely decorated set, lit by Jason Lyons, offered neon signs and a message board to identify scenes and songs—an elegant update of Caspar Neher's 1928 *Projektionstafeln*. Beds, chairs, and groups of actors were trundled

on- and offstage on sliding platforms; the Messenger's Mount was a flying neon horse. Music director Kevin Stites rose to the challenge of coordinating an orchestra ensconced in the audience, in two boxes on opposite sides of the house. Miraculously, he led a bright, well-knit reading of the score.

The music was in good hands, but the words were another story. Wallace Shawn is a valued playwright, screenwriter, and actor. Hitherto, he's given scant evidence of being a translator or poet, or of possessing musical gifts. He was an odd choice for this assignment, though his brother is a composer, and this season saw their quasi-operatic collaboration, *The Music Teacher*, off-Broadway.

One often had the feeling that Shawn



Lucy (Brian Charles Rooney) prepares for her aria.

Photo: Joan Marcus

was struggling to hit upon any solution that previous translators hadn't used already. Brecht's pithiness eludes Shawn altogether, and his belabored English dialogue leaves actors unable to elicit what used to be sure-fire laughs. His lyrics are worse. The opening stanza of Shawn's "Mack the Knife" is neither faithful to the original nor clever in its own right:

Have you heard, friends, that the great
[shark]
Often smiles and shows its teeth?
Mack the Knife is much less friendly.
Mackie's blade stays in a sheath.

Set aside that a shark *always* shows its teeth. Shawn introduces the idea of friendliness, which complicates matters, since a *less* friendly fellow might be expected to draw his knife *out* of its sheath. Indeed, Brecht (like several of his translators) tries to convey that Macheath is just as deadly as a shark, but stealthier: he draws his knife quite a lot, though you don't see it. Moreover, Shawn's translation begins at the beginning, with a direct address to the audience, whereas Brecht begins *in medias res* ("Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne"), raising the possibility of previous, unheard verses in an ongoing song.

Forget about making sense; Shawn struggles just to rhyme. The First Finale offers this: "Dear chickens, they will pluck you. / They're only out to fuck you." Call me sheltered, but I don't know many people who fuck chickens, even after plucking. Mrs. Peachum informs us that "When great waves come, all sailors hit the decks. / This is the overwhelming power of sex." Maybe the power of sex is like a great wave, but isn't Mrs. Peachum really saying that men dive into it? In "Kanonen-Song," where Brecht makes a simple reference to "Beefsteak Tartar," Shawn gives us a whole recipe: "We kill them, slice them, eat them—it's called 'Natives Tartare.'" Where's the Cuisinart?

Shawn's lyrics are seldom singable; at times, they're barely speakable. This is a problem, because if the words can't be pronounced, they can't be understood and they won't be remembered. Most of the lyrics of this production sailed right over my head, and I can't help but wonder what impression they made on listeners who didn't already know *Threepenny* and to whom Brecht's satire would be fresh and revelatory.

A famous New York critic used to end his reviews with the plea, "Bring back *Threepenny Opera*!" Alas, we're still waiting.

William V. Madison
Paris

Performances

Der Kuhhandel (Arms and the Cow)

Opera North
Alhambra, Bradford

Premiere: 30 March 2006

The trouble with *Der Kuhhandel*, like Hamlet, is that one is frequently distracted by all the quotations. In every scene there is a theme or melody that Weill later used for something else, whether it is the most famous instance, Juan's "Seit ich in diese Stadt gekommen bin" which became the head-motive of "September Song" in *Knickerbocker Holiday*, or the waltz tune in the Act 1 finale that was transformed into "She gave him the best years of her life" in *Lady in the Dark*. It is hard to imagine that once in the U.S. Weill ever considered the possibility of a production of *Der Kuhhandel*, which after all he had never completed, or indeed of *A Kingdom for a Cow*, the London failure of which had come as such a bitter blow in 1935. No wonder then that he felt ready to recycle so much of the score. There is one fine song, though, that he seems to have left intact and untouched. It was the revelation of this production, in its spirited and beautiful

rendition by Mary Plazas as Juanita: "When the wind blows," part of the great build-up in the finale of Act 2. This musical sequence (nearly 24 minutes—longer than the Act 2 finale of *Figaro!*) brings the story to its conclusion, when the weapons that have bankrupted the tiny republic of Santa Maria are found to be useless, so that the hero Juan isn't executed after all. While pleading with the corrupt General Conchas, Juanita sings this "Ballad of Esteban the Robber." Plazas, who came to Opera North fresh from a triumph in a new production of *Madama Butterfly* in London, gave this such gravitas that it became for me the highlight of the whole evening. Next time some chanteuse is putting together an evening of Weill favorites, she should take a hard look at this number; it is just awaiting its moment to join "Surabaya Johnny," "Speak Low" and the rest.

Larry Lash wrote at length about David Pountney's production in the Fall 2004 issue of the Newsletter. Its many Teutonic references probably seemed much funnier in Bregenz than they did in Bradford. Here it was merely bewildering that the Caribbean villagers should be dressed in Austrian-style Lederhosen, and the cabaret dancers in Madame Odette's "hotel" in Act 2, although they performed with enormous energy, seemed to hail from the Reeperbahn. Why is it that whenever people, in this case the choreographer Craig Revel Horwood, put whores and/or drag queens on stage they always give them the identical steps and squeals? The chance to

use authentic 1930s Cuban-inspired dances was missed. Duncan Hayler's sets and costumes are colorful and the life-size cardboard cow, complete with flies buzzing around it, made dignified entrances and exits. I am sorry to have to report that the biggest laughs of the evening came when it defecated over the tax-collector.

The translation and adaptation by Jeremy Sams and David Pountney, some of which was first heard in the concert version presented at the Barbican in London in 2000, is certainly racy, and peppered with four-letter words. The story becomes obscure in places, and Act 1 could easily be shortened a little. The attempts at making topical allusions to the current controversies surrounding the torture of political prisoners seemed to me both half-hearted and tasteless. Written and composed in 1934, neither Weill nor Robert Vambery can have really anticipated the full horror of the regimes they were setting out to make fun of.

Leonardo Capalbo made a very convincing Juan, sincere and youthful. His voice is fairly light, but it blended well with that of Mary Plazas in their duets. As the arms-dealer, Jones, Adrian Clarke was suitably sinister, and carried off his exit with aplomb. Borne aloft on a steel rope, he is air-lifted out to head for another assignment, shouting "Next stop—Baghdad!" Beverley Klein brought all her considerable experience to the roles of the Mother and Madame Odette—a pity that this character doesn't have a bit more to sing. As the President, Jeffrey Lawton survived having to pretend to be asleep most of the evening, lying on a sofa suspended in mid-air. The outstanding performance came from Donald Maxwell as General Garcia Conchas. Every word was made to tell, and even with grotesque makeup and all the bombastic music, he created a character, frightening and attractive at the same time.

James Holmes and the Opera North orchestra dealt efficiently with the many shifts of mood and tempo in this odd score. I just wonder, had Weill chosen to finish it, whether he would have resorted to so many reprises of the big tunes, which amount to Broadway-style "song-plugging"?

Patrick O'Connor
London



Juan (Leonardo Capalbo) meets the firing squad in Act 2. Photo: Richard Moran

Performances

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Saarländisches Staatstheater
Saarbrücken

Premiere: 12 November 2005

“Lied to, cheated, and betrayed.” That’s how Kurt Josef Schildknecht, the Staatstheater’s general manager, felt late in 2004 when state legislators announced—out of the blue, as it were, and breaking earlier promises—that the theater’s budget had to be slashed by 25 percent over the next five years. Because of the state’s enormous deficits, the house would have to operate with a mere 18 million Euros annually instead of the current 24 million—not an easy task for a house which maintains the classic triple: an opera, a theater, and a ballet company. The announcement caused an uproar in Saarland and reverberated in theatrical circles throughout the country. Soon there was talk of the “dismantling” of the Saarbrücken theater.

Doesn’t it seem like a bizarre parallel when in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* Paul Ackermann (a.k.a. Jim Mahoney) is sentenced to death “because of the lack of money, which is the worst of

all crimes on this planet”? But the parallel arises only by chance, not by intent, since the opera’s production was scheduled before the political, and personal, conflicts between the representatives of the state legislature and the Intendant—who also staged this production. As it turns out, it will be his last opera as stage director: after much ado and many ruffled feathers, Schildknecht announced that he would leave his post in 2006, before the end of his contract. And yet his staging does not make any topical references, either to the politics swirling around his house or to ever-expanding “cut-throat” capitalism.

With a set by Rudolf Rischer and costumes by Renate Schmitzer, he stages the opera in a thoroughly artificial world, with culinary touches ranging from short-skirted hookers to strap-on bellies for Jakob and his fellows during the eat-till-you-drop scene. These images are familiar, and they indicate that Schildknecht has done his Brecht homework. But he is in danger of becoming “teacher’s pet” when he adheres too diligently to the libretto’s staging remarks. The script calls for a “desert” and “a truck in bad shape,” and so we get a beat-up Jeep of sorts on an empty stage. And even in one of the key scenes, when the hurricane approaches Mahagonny, we see a silly little neon arrow tracking the storm’s path. At least we are spared unimaginative projections.

The opera’s biting criticism of the “conditions,” which today again (or still?) seems so topical, is conveyed almost exclusively through means created seventy years ago, and it’s deeply alarming that they still

work. A very fine performance by most of the cast makes the whole thing quite lively. Oxana Arkaeva’s Jenny deserves special praise. Dressed as a Playboy Bunny, she sings “Denn wie man sich bettet” to a group of people who consider her a commodity. It’s the evening’s high point: nowhere else does the contradiction of text and music become so evident, nowhere else do we feel a choking, almost physical effect from the performance. Dubravka Mušovic as Begbick offers a big voice and terrific acting when she directs the city’s fate with cold-blooded business acumen. Equally striking is Stefan Vinke as Jimmy, who convinces us that “he doesn’t want to be a human being.” Kudos also to the choristers for their true intonation and believable performance (rehearsed by Andrew Ollivant and Pablo Assante). Leonid Grin, the general music director who is also bidding farewell to the Staatstheater, tends to indulge in slower tempos (e.g., “Alabama Song”), but for the most part he inspires the orchestra to explore and communicate engagingly the musical depth of Weill’s score.

In the end it’s nice to see that a small state on Germany’s periphery can still come up with a production on such a high artistic level. But for how long? Thus I would have preferred that this staging of *Aufstieg*, both an opera about politics and an opera about opera, were more than just a colorful and entertaining evening. I would like to have seen a more pointed approach from this faithful production that would have extended beyond the work into today’s reality. Some of Jimmy’s lines seem to beg for it: “Look now, this is your world: Peace and contentment, they don’t exist but of hurricanes we got plenty. Not to mention typhoons and waterspouts. And it’s just the same way with man: he will destroy what’s around him.” This is not to say that all-out *Regietheater* would have been the magic remedy here, but a touch or two surely would have given a boost to this case of uninspired *Werktreue*.

Ricarda Wackers
Saarbrücken



Safe sex in Mahagonny: Begbick (Dubravka Mušovic) hands a condom to one of the girls, with Trinity Moses (Stefan Röttig) looking on. Photo: Bettina Stöb

Performances

Mahagonny Songspiel

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny

Dessau

Kurt Weill Fest

24 February – 5 March 2006

How often does it happen that one can see both the *Songspiel* version of *Mahagonny* and the full-scale opera on one weekend? For the fiftieth anniversary of Brecht's death, the Kurt Weill Fest offered a broad spectrum of works that Weill created in collaboration with the poet/playwright. The church-turned-concert hall Marienkirche served as the venue for the *Songspiel*, which was performed by musikFabrik, a young and skillful ensemble based in Cologne, along with the soloists, and led by the British conductor Stefan Asbury. The performance was semi-staged, and the well-cast male quartet, consisting of Lothar Odinius (Charlie), Andreas Post (Billy), Sebastian Noack (Bobby), and Reinhard Mayr (Jimmy), always stayed together and sang with great expression. Salome Kammer (Jessie), this year's artist in residence, and Ingrid Schmithüsen (Bessie) were clad in evening dresses and high heels and strutted across the stage as whisky- and boy-driven "sharks." In a capricious mood, they explored the complete range of vocal subtleties from *Sprechgesang* to bel canto—including some clever instances of alcohol-slurred speech. The entry of the canon in "Alabama Song" formed the euphoric high point of a promising beginning. By changing to stunned disillusionment in "Benares Song" and puppet-like, terse cynicism in "God in Mahagonny," Kammer and Schmithüsen demonstrated that even the sketch-like *Songspiel* shows an unmistakable development. Since all soloists were exceptionally clear, the use of microphones seemed superfluous (perhaps they offered some reassurance given the church's problematic acoustics).

In the accompaniment passages, Asbury held the orchestra back noticeably but returned to full force during the instrumental interludes. Thus he made clear the

extent to which Weill's score falls stylistically between the polyphonic, late-expressionist language of his early operas and the catchy song style of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and that this contrast is employed consciously. The instrumental interludes propel the (imaginary) story line while their layered melodies form a kind of "Symphony of the City" (reminding me of Walter Ruttmann's film, *Berlin: Sinfonie einer Großstadt* [1927], with music by Edmund Meisel), in which life in Mahagonny unfolds. Occasionally we hear instrumental solos which really stand out and evoke visual associations, in addition to a defamiliarized quotation of "The Internationale." I must confess that I have never heard a performance where the polyphony is so transparent and the expression so carefully calculated—a recording with these performers would be a dream.

But the music was not the only noteworthy aspect of the evening. Equally important in terms of performance were the projections originally designed by Caspar Neher. In 1927, at the world premiere in Baden-Baden, the projections by the set designer, who was friends with both Brecht and Weill, were an integral part of the work. That's when the idea of a "*Gesamtkunstwerk* with division of labor" came up, and the creators used this model again for the full-scale opera. Already in 1929 Weill was expressly attempting a form of theater "where elevated speech, pure music, and autonomous painting can be employed" (quoted from: K. Weill, "Aktuelles Theater," *Melos* 8, no. 12 [December 1929], pp. 524–27). And in the preface to his "Production Book for the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*" he stated unmistakably: "Caspar Neher's projection plates constitute part of the performance materials (and are to be shipped to theaters along with the music)."

These staging instructions have disappeared from the theatrical landscape over the past several decades. The projection plates were lost, the drawings on which the plates were based were scattered throughout the world, and theater scholars have devoted little attention to Neher. But after



The male quartet of *Mahagonny Songspiel* stands to the left; Jessie (Salome Kammer) and Bessie (Ingrid Schmithüsen) stand to the right. Stefan Asbury conducts. Photo: Kai Bienert

the recent discovery of fifteen sketches by Neher in a private collection in Vienna, Universal Edition is able to offer a total of 23 images; a large number of them clearly were used in the early productions of *Mahagonny* and several others would fit in nicely (the images can be viewed at the following URL: <http://www.universaledition.com/neher>). The festival's Intendant, Clemens Birnbaum, made a dramaturgically plausible choice that comes close to David Drew's attempt at reconstructing the projections, as laid out in the prefatory material to the 1963 edition of the piano-vocal score of *Mahagonny Songspiel*. Neher's series of images amplifies the association with Ruttmann's Berlin film. We see the city under construction, the girls dubbed "sharks," the moon of Alabama, God in Mahagonny as an overgrown civilian with a raised index finger, airplanes crossing the city's sky, and a group of demonstrators carrying blank signs.

The projection showing four women, placed in a landscape, talking on their phones, is amazingly topical. Only the size of the receivers and a telephone line in the background place this image in the pre-cell phone era. For the last image, which was left blank by Drew (no. 17 at the beginning of the finale), Birnbaum came up with the following interesting solution: "God in Mahagonny" looks like he is about to get into a car that is ready to pull away, but before doing so he snarls "Oh, this Mahagonny" and angrily kicks a girl sitting on a bench. There are two projections where one can see a hooded hangman, and the motif of the gallows appears twice, which came up in an interview that the *New York Times* conducted with Weill in 1935. At the time Weill replied that the

Songspiel had “reflected the effects of the horrors of war, which we had witnessed, and which we wanted to throw off in a cynical manner.”

While the city of Mahagonny is seen today as a symbol of capitalism, consumerism, corruption, and crisis, the initial conception was informed by the experience of violence during the years from 1914 to 1924, when war was followed by revolution and then by civil warfare in several parts of Germany. Weill and Brecht dealt with these nightmarish experiences explicitly in their *Berliner Requiem*. Its kinship with the Mahagonny complex is strengthened by the fact that the funeral march from *Aufstieg*, “Können einem toten Mann nicht helfen,” was originally part of the *Berliner Requiem* (as was the ballad *Vom Tod im Wald*, op. 23, set near the Mississippi River, which Brecht would have considered the Wild West). And thus it was an obvious idea to add these two works to the evening in the Marienkirche. The program was framed by some numbers from Mauricio Kagel’s *10 Märsche, den Sieg zu verfehlen* (“10 Marches to Miss the Victory”). This series of miniatures, consisting of irregularly mounted clichés, keeps losing the beat in grotesque ways, recalling parts of Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du soldat*, which is also among the artistic influences on the *Mahagonny Songspiel*.

Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny was the new production of the Anhaltisches Theater for this year’s festival. Compared to the *Songspiel* it was a letdown: some of the elements that worked well in the latter didn’t work in the former. For instance,



Jenny (Stefanie Wüst) and Jimmy (Pieter Roux). Photo: Claudia Heysel

Neher’s images provided visual continuity, but the opera’s set designer, Stefan Rieckhoff, did not succeed in creating a convincing visual scheme. Even though the initial idea of symbolizing the city’s growth with a steadily expanding black box and a sprouting palm tree seemed apt, it was soon abandoned. Instead, the set changed to an ordinary terrace at a resort, complete with deck chairs and sunshades. Jack O’Brien gutted his calf in a black peep show that bore the heading “Du darfst,” as the men of Mahagonny watch. But the box soon lost its meaning, and during “Loving,” “Boxing,” and “Drinking” we lost sight of the appeal of such diversions. Stage director Helmut Polixa failed to get the chorus moving (they seemed extremely immobile and the tenors struggled in the upper register). The opera owes much of its visual and episodic structure to the revues of the 1920s; the work is also full of dance rhythms from the popular music of the time; and the music’s drive plays no small part in connecting the three acts. But no chorus line evolved on that night, and it was not at all clear that the music inspired the performers beyond an occasional flare-up.

But the chorus and production team were not the only ones to blame for the lack of drive and clarity, as the soloists also struggled. The most convincing performers were those who formed the outlaw trio: Waltraud Hoffmann-Mucher portrayed a lively Begbick, both vocally and visually attractive. Her wardrobe became more extravagant as the evening progressed, indicating that she’s the uncrowned queen of *Mahagonny* who controls both Fatty (Marian Albert) and Trinity Moses (Nico Wouterse). Stefanie Wüst sang Jenny with a clear soprano, not seedy and twisted but rather youthful and lively, with coloratura flourishes in the “Alabama Song.” She gave Jimmy a friendly greeting. But it’s not clear at all why she didn’t pay his bill at the crucial moment (even though she flashed the money and later paid for the chance to see him one more time before his execution).

We also didn’t learn what connects Jenny and Jimmy. The “Crane Duet” could create a truly poetic

image, but even though the two were seated atop separate floating clouds, they didn’t make eye contact: Jenny looked into the audience and Jimmy stared ahead absent-mindedly. Pieter Roux (Jimmy) lacked not only stage presence but vocal power as well, at least for this performance. His big aria was forced, and he had problems with both pitch and rhythm. We also didn’t see much conviviality among the lumberjacks. Instead a winter wonderland got wheeled in, with a disoriented polar bear thrown in for fun. But rather than bad weather and wild nature, doesn’t Alaska stand for extreme experience? Like the (in-)famous camaraderie on the front lines during World War I? Not until the end did Pavel Safar as Moneybags Bill get an opportunity to stand in the spotlight. But the trial scene lacked both bite and wit, since not even the punch lines were properly played up.

Regrettably the musicians fit right into this general indistinctness. For the most part conductor Golo Berg managed to keep up the artistic standards that have been attained over the past few years, but while the strings played their cantilenas beautifully, many of their phrases went nowhere and the accompaniment figures lacked drive. Next to the incisive brass the woodwinds appeared oddly pale, and the percussion section seemed tired even during solo passages. At least there were times when the music came across as it ought to: sections that clearly had been well rehearsed, moments where the energy jumped from the pit to the stage, acoustic images of irritating and stimulating intensity. And in the end we heard the powerful funeral march, “Können einem toten Mann nicht helfen.” But onstage there were no demonstrators; and while the performers sang of their and our helplessness, the revolving stage with deck chairs and sunshades kept spinning—and with it our lives. One began to have a premonition that Weill and Brecht’s vision of the city’s fall might be outdated. Nowadays Mahagonny does not perish; there’s simply no alternative to Mahagonny. But such a reading was quickly crushed: while the music was still heading towards the final chords, the curtain descended softly and even before we heard the last note, polite applause began.

**Andreas Hauff
Mainz**

Recordings

Symphonies nos. 1 & 2

Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen
 Antony Beaumont, conductor
Chandos CHSA 5046
 [also contains *Quodlibet*, op. 9]

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra
 Marin Alsop, conductor
Naxos 8.557481
 [also contains *Symphonic Nocturne from "Lady in the Dark"*]

Collectors will welcome these new recordings of Weill's two symphonies for a variety of reasons. The most significant aspect of the Chandos recording, perhaps, is that the Kammerphilharmonie played from revised and corrected versions of the scores prepared by Beaumont, who re-examined Weill's autographs. The published scores were edited in 1966 and 1968 by David Drew, who according to Beaumont took a more interventionist role in determining the musical text than is the practice today. In the Symphony no. 1 in particular, Beaumont writes that Drew "amend[ed] what he considered to be the miscalculations of a novice. Markings of dynamic, tempo and expression, phrasing, even pitches: scarcely a bar was published as Weill had written it." Moreover, writes Beaumont, "Drew worked from a transcript of the autograph score that was itself corrupted by errors and omissions."¹ Without a copy of Beaumont's revised score, these changes amount to needles in a haystack; their overall effect seems more incidental than revelatory.

More decisive for how a listener might approach the work is Beaumont's proposal of an extensive program for Symphony no. 1, which he prefers to call a symphonic poem. In 1920, Weill agreed to compose music for Johannes R. Becher's epic play, *Arbeiter Bauern Soldaten*, which described Becher's vision of a paradise to be achieved by a religious-communistic revolution. Weill's sketches from this aborted project do not survive, but Weill apparently penned a quotation from the play on the symphony's title page, which is now lost. Beaumont concludes that Weill must have used the music he sketched for the Becher

project in the symphony, and further suggests, "Many of the themes match Becher's speech-rhythms so closely that it is possible, drawing on the play's words and images, to sketch out a detailed scenario."

With the new program in hand, the work's meaning comes into much sharper focus. The crashing dissonances of the opening quartal harmonies now represent "The Sixfold Discord," apparently a concept from Becher, and when these harmonies are later transformed, it represents "the swords of Discord beaten into the ploughshares of Concord." Beaumont is able to fit the chorale tune beginning in m. 302 exactly to Becher's words ("Komm Hirt der Wandlung! Schon füllt deine Nähe! Dein Frieden erwässert die Schlucht unseres Kriegs!"), and all of the syllables line up with the chorale's rhythm. Still, there are sections where more seems to be happening in the music than is described in the program. One questionable place is the section at mm. 202–207, which Beaumont associates with "fleeting vision of the Promised Land, allusion to *The Star-Spangled Banner*." While I can see some resemblance, the tune is indeed fleeting, covered as it is by completely different melodies in the winds. But even if Weill might reject some of Beaumont's specific connections with Becher's play, it seems highly likely that had Busoni been more receptive to the work, Weill might have published it under the title, *Arbeiter Bauern Soldaten: Symphonische Dichtung*.

Along with the revised score and the new program, Beaumont uses a smaller string section than on other recordings. In the published score, Drew called for a string section of at least 50 to balance the winds, but Beaumont believes that Weill had a much smaller ensemble in mind, and accordingly uses just 27 strings. The Naxos recording with Marin Alsop and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra does not list individual players, but the orchestra has 47 strings on the roster. Despite Beaumont's claim that a larger group can sound "opaque," the Alsop recording is admirably transparent, even when the cellos and basses divide into three parts in mm. 67–70. Still, in the Beaumont recording the individual parts are highly present and readily identifiable; the sound is that of a studio with instruments or sections miked separately. The Naxos sound is slightly more distant, placing the listener in a hall rather than in the control booth. To my ears both performances are fluid, extremely well-played, and compelling,



though Beaumont's is more dramatic and more committed at times.

If Weill's first symphony represents the social optimism of the beginning of the Weimar period, the second symphony memorializes its end. Weill began the work in late 1932 in Berlin but completed it in France, months after his flight from Germany. From the beginning, this symphony has raised questions of meaning and significance that have had a decisive effect on its reception. Weill secured a premiere of what he called his "Symphony no. 1" (since he had rejected the 1921 work) in Amsterdam with Bruno Walter conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra. Before the premiere, Walter asked Weill for a programmatic title "that would give a pointed expression of your feelings and state of mind during the conception of the work."² Contrary to Walter's hopes, Weill responded with the title "Symphonic Fantasy (Symphony no. 1)," as well as a program note that stated the work was "conceived as pure musical form." Nevertheless, in the program note Weill identified the second movement as a "Cortège" and suggested that perhaps a friend's comment that the work was "the opposite of Pastorale" might be correct. For a performance of the work with the New York Philharmonic in

December, 1934, the program read “Three Night Scenes, Symphonic Fantasy,” a title that Walter suggested,³ but in 1937, when Walter conducted the last performance of the work during Weill’s lifetime, the title reverted to “Symphonic Fantasy” (Kuhnt, p. 319).

The issue of the title and Weill’s programmatic intentions is heightened by Weill’s political and theatrical orientation as a composer, and because parts of the “Symphonic Fantasy” lend themselves to a programmatic interpretation. This is especially true of the second movement, the “Cortège,” which has all of the hallmarks of a funeral march—slow tempo, dragging dotted rhythms, portentous brass figures including a trombone solo, and a lyrical second theme. When I first heard the work, it also seemed obvious to me that the opening motive parodies the first four notes of the *Dies irae*, and I was surprised to discover that apparently no one else hears that connection. True, Weill’s motive ends with a major third instead of a minor third, but in some harmonizations a minor third is also prominent (as in the upper voice of the flutes in m. 9). Christian Kuhnt has suggested that the motive quotes the “Kanonensong” from the *Dreigroschenoper*, a parallel that admittedly lies closer to home than the *Dies irae*, but only clouds the movement’s meaning (Kuhnt, p. 326).

The “Cortège” is the longest of the three movements, and it leaves the strongest impression. Given the Nazi takeover of Germany and the dire situation for Jews, Communists, and composers of modern music, the obvious direction is to interpret the “Cortège” as a funeral march for the Germany Weill had left behind. Of course a slow-movement funeral march calls to mind Beethoven’s “Eroica” symphony and several symphonies by Mahler, and in a sense these links cast it as a memorial for the cultural “death” brought about by the Nazis. Whether Weill had any of this in mind or not, these ideas have inevitably surrounded the work since its rediscovery, and provide the most compelling context within which a modern audience can make sense of it.

The rather divergent readings of the “Cortège” by Alsop and Beaumont most clearly illustrate the differences between their approaches to the symphony. Alsop’s reading clocks in at 13:08, nearly three minutes longer than Beaumont’s (10:12). Since they both start at essentially the same tempo, the difference is that Alsop uses rubato more liberally and frequently drags

the tempo almost imperceptibly, to great effect. I was particularly taken with her pacing of the tempo and dynamics before the climax of the first section of the movement after rehearsal 46. Her goal seems to be to give the movement the scale of a grander, more Romantic symphony, and she emphasizes its emotional effect; her reading is far *sadder* than Beaumont’s and perhaps more persuasive for the typical symphony audience.

In contrast, Beaumont keeps the same somewhat brisk (for Largo) tempo throughout, lingering less on the big expressive moments. As he points out in the liner notes, the main motive “recall(s) the devil-may-care spirit of the *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*,” and he seems to want to keep the movement from falling back into the nineteenth century. Beaumont also decided to perform the parts for triangle, military drum, tenor drum, cymbals, bass drum and gong that Weill added after he finished the autograph. Drew argued that Weill grudgingly added the parts at Bruno Walter’s request, but that Walter returned to the original version for the premiere; for this reason Drew omitted them from the score. In contrast, Beaumont points out that Weill expressed to Lotte Lenya his complete satisfaction with the work after the final rehearsal, when the percussion parts were still in place. In the Beaumont recording the snare drum rolls and cymbal crashes of the added percussion parts almost push the funeral tone into parody, which may lie closer to the movement’s intent.

The third movement proved difficult for critics of the first performances, who thought it banal. The conservative critic Olin Downes said Weill’s “Three Night Pieces” “end with speed and noise, and some accept these qualities as wit and esprit” (*New York Times*, 14 December 1934). I would suggest that listeners are ultimately unsure whether to hear the piece as a high-spirited rondo à la Haydn, or a strutting, parodic march-finale à la Shostakovich. In his liner notes, Beaumont remarks on this conundrum:

Is the “march for winds” a parody of goose-stepping Nazis, as some commentators see it, or a bumptious echo of the self-righteous Salvationists in *Happy End*? Does the Mediterranean gesture of the tarantella transport us to some place “where the sun is shining”? Or has that place, like Brecht’s Benares, “been perished in an earthquake”?

From a musical perspective, Alsop seems to have the clearer conception of the movement. For one thing, she takes Weill’s indicated tempo of $\text{♩} = 126$, while Beaumont loafs along at $\text{♩} = 116$. At the faster tempo, the polka that breaks out three bars before rehearsal 60 sounds appropriately demented, and the tarantella’s acceleration better motivated. With the extra percussion parts, Beaumont should have the edge on turning the “*alla marcia*” into “a parody of goose-stepping Nazis,” but his version sounds threatening and brutal, less like a parody and more like the real thing, while Alsop comes closer to Shostakovian pained humor. As for the tarantella, the “speed and noise” of the ending is a sure indicator of irony, and in both readings the terminus is not Naples but someplace more sinister.

In the end I found the two recordings equally worthwhile, the Beaumont for its scholarly integrity, new program for Symphony no. 1, and more Weimar-ish sound; the Alsop for its lush musicality and more convincing performance of Symphony no. 2. Each offers a tempting, rare bonus work as well. On the Chandos CD, the *Quodlibet*, op. 9 was Weill’s orchestral standard-bearer in the mid-1920s, and though it probably loses something without the dance-pantomime it was originally written to accompany, Beaumont makes a first-rate performance available here. The Naxos CD offers the “Symphonic Nocturne,” artfully arranged by Robert Russell Bennett from *Lady in the Dark* into a seamless medley beginning with “My Ship” and ending with “The Saga of Jenny.” This gorgeous Broadway souvenir appears for the first time on record and amply demonstrates why *Lady* was such a hit.

Matt Baumer
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Notes

1. Drew’s “Editorial Report” refers only to the “autograph full score,” and makes no mention that he worked from any transcription. See Kurt Weill, *1. Sinfonie (1921)*, ed. David Drew (Mainz: B. Schott’s Söhne, 1968), ix.

2. Christian Kuhnt, “‘Das Gegenteil von Pastorale,’ Anmerkungen zu Kurt Weills 2. Sinfonie,” in *Exilmusik: Komposition während der NS-Zeit*, ed. Friedrich Geiger and Thomas Schäfer (Hamburg: von Bockel Verlag, 1999), 319.

3. “Activities of Musicians Here and Afield; Kurt Weill’s Latest Work to have American Premiere under Walter,” *New York Times* (9 December 1934), X7.

Recordings

Concerto for Violin and Wind Instruments, op. 12

Anthony Marwood, violin and conductor
Academy of St Martin in the Fields

Hyperion CDA67496

Kurt Weill's Violin Concerto, written in 1924, occupies an odd place on the border of the tried-and-true repertoire for the violin. Championed throughout Europe by violinist Stefan Frenkel, it received many performances and widespread praise in its early days. The newest recording, with Anthony Marwood as soloist and conductor with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, is the concerto's nineteenth commercial release, a large number when set beside the number of recent performances of the work. Furthermore, the piece is unknown to surprisingly many distinguished musicians—a circumstance unimaginable for a Berg or Shostakovich concerto. Why then, despite numerous recordings, does Weill's concerto live in the shadow of other works? Part of the answer lies in the fact that most recordings have little general appeal. The concerto is commonly combined with other pieces by Weill, or other twentieth century works, and thus only a specialized audience enjoys it. The new recording on the Hyperion label forms part of this trend. Weill's concerto makes an attractive pairing with Peteris Vasks' Concerto for Violin and String Orchestra ("Distant Light"), because Vasks is a well-known living composer with a growing worldwide reputation. On the other hand, this CD may again be consigned to the collections of violinists, modern music lovers, or twentieth century music scholars and fail to reach a broader audience. For the sake of the performers' brilliance and obvious enthusiasm for both pieces, let's hope not.

Marwood's performance of the concerto is a virtuosic feast and an emotionally gripping rendition. In Weill's own words, his compositional period between 1920 and 1925 was one of artistic experimentation, during which he created works in neither a

tonal nor a strictly atonal language. The violin concerto exhibits lyrical passages over lively and varied accompaniment; a wide range of colors drawn from the unusual combination of solo violin and wind orchestra; dance-like, dotted rhythms that became characteristic of Weill's later style; and a number of excruciatingly fast sections for the solo instrument. Marwood and the excellent musicians of the Academy have impeccable intonation, but the extremely accurate playing does not take away from the spirit of the work. Marwood's sumptuous sound and formidable technique make his playing seem effortless. Well-chosen tempi and precise articulation give the concerto bite and contribute to a tight performance. One should not be fooled by the apparent effortlessness of this rendition; the work poses extreme difficulties for both soloist and orchestra. The playful and charming execution of the sec-



Anthony Marwood. Photo: Gigi Clarke

ond movement, with beautiful solos in all the instruments, and the air of risk-taking everywhere in the work stand out. The musicians dare to put the music first, creating the feeling of breath and breadth of a live performance. The excitement must stem partly from Marwood's double role as soloist and conductor, a difficult task and

executed for only the second time in the recording studio. Considering the outstanding realization of Weill's score, the triangle's last note in the *Serenata* is sorely missed. Each movement ends with a distinctive percussion sound, and it is unfortunate that the triangle is either absent or inaudible at the end of the second movement.

The first quarter of the twentieth century featured a number of pieces for wind orchestra, and Igor Stravinsky's compositions had the most direct influence on Weill. Yet writing a concerto for violin and winds, percussion, and double bass can cause problems for the balance of the solo instrument and orchestra (Stravinsky composed a solo concerto in the same year and with the same orchestral forces, but for piano rather than violin). Weill nonetheless meets the challenge, and while he creates a vast spectrum of colors he does not always give the violin "the upper hand," but lets the orchestral instruments speak equally soloistically. In most concert performances, passages in which the solo instrument is playing *accompagnato* are heard as intended by the composer, while the orchestra has to be careful not to play too loudly. In a modern recording studio the soloist is often amplified far more than necessary, and our ears get used to unrealistic balances that distort our expectations for the concert hall. Luckily, Marwood and the Academy had a first-rate recording engineer who kept an excellent balance, resisting the temptation to promote the solo instrument over the orchestra. Maybe the high-register winds are slightly too present and the double basses are not quite strong enough in the first movement; Marwood's *con sordino* section in the second movement could sound more muted, and the sixteenth notes of the murmuring wind passage in the third movement could be less distinct. But this is nit-picking with score in hand. Marwood's superb direction, everyone's individual playing, and the interpretation as a whole presented on this CD leave the listener with an impression of great skill and profound emotion.

Annegret Klaua
Brandeis University

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