

In the original production - supervised by author and composer, and directed by Walter Brüggmann (of the Leipzig opera) - a boxing-ring occupied the centre of the stage. At the back was a huge screen on which were projected - from behind - a double series of illustrative or narrative designs by Caspar Neher. In the closing number the singers produced placards on which were written various slogans typical of Mahagonny society: 'For earthly reward!', 'Against civilisation!', 'For natural lewdness!', 'For the mortality of the soul!'

The designs Neher made for the projections have not survived. Some of those he subsequently made - in a different style - for the Mahagonny opera are still extant, but are unsuitable for the Songspiel. Since projections were the dominating element in the conception of the Songspiel's stage-form, the need for them cannot be ignored in any but a straight concert performance; and since Neher was a major artist, that need cannot be easily fulfilled on the same level. In the present performance, the projections are taken from two 'picture novels' by the great Flemish artist Frans Masareel. Both 'novels' were published in Germany in 1926, and at many points state or imply the same 'themes' as the Songspiel. The present selection is determined by what is known of the content of Neher's original projections, and by what is latent or manifest in the Songspiel itself.

Biographical notes

Kurt Weill was born in Dessau in 1900, studied with Humperdinck and Busoni, left Germany in 1933, and became an American citizen in 1943. His works include six operas (notably Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny and Die Bürgschaft), six musical plays (notably Die Dreigroschenoper and Der Silbersee), two symphonies, three cantatas, a dramatic oratorio, two ballets, two operettas, and several shows for Broadway.

Bertolt Brecht - the leading German poet and playwright of his generation - was born in Augsburg in 1898. Like Weill - with whom he worked from 1927 to 1930 - he left Germany in 1933. He returned 16 years later, having spent the war years in America. He died in East Berlin in 1956. Since then, his work and his theories have had an immense influence throughout the world.

Frans Masareel was born in Blankenberghe (Belgium) in 1889, but spent most of his adult life abroad: France, Germany, Russia, America, China, and elsewhere. Alone among important contemporary artists, he has worked chiefly in the medium of woodcuts. His 'picture novels' or 'stories without words' - such as Die Stadt, Die Idee, and Mein Stundenbuch - have been held in the highest regard since the 1920's, when Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse hailed him as a master.