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SYMPHONY No. 2

Kurt Weill
1900–1950

(*First public performance in Great Britain*)

Sostenuto—Allegro molto
Largo
Allegro vivace—Presto

THIS symphony was begun in Berlin in January 1933—that is, a few weeks before Germany became a dictatorship and Weill emigrated. After several interruptions—including the composition of *The Seven Deadly Sins*—Weill completed the symphony in February 1934. Its first performance was given in Amsterdam the following October by the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Bruno Walter. The press reactions were devastating. Walter's 1937 performance with the Vienna Philharmonic was the first to gain a measure of critical approval for the work; but Weill had already left Europe, and there were no more performances during his lifetime. The score remained unpublished until 1966—33 years after its composition and 16 years after the death of its composer.

Weill had been proud of the symphony, and with good reason, but the derisive notices it had received were perhaps more than even he—used as he was to derision—could bear at a time when he was separated from most of his serious admirers, cut off from his German audience, and stranded in a world that knew him only as the composer of *The Threepenny Opera*—a work he had left far behind. After the humiliating Amsterdam première, he wrote nothing more for the concert hall; and in 1940 he virtually renounced his claims on the world of 'serious' music. If the premature burial of the symphony was one of the preliminaries to his personal tragedy, the work's recent revival, and the new understanding it has found (not least in the country where it was first dismissed), has certainly contributed to his posthumous rehabilitation.

Hearing the work today, we may wonder that it should ever have encountered such resistance, or been so misunderstood. Yet something can be learnt from those early reactions. The music is by no means as simple as it seems, or as traditional as it sounds (to ears that hear the common chords but not their uncommon associations). Because it seems simple, we may miss the turnings in a form that is, in some respects, highly sophisticated; and because it sounds so unlike 'modern' music, we may overlook its intensely personal yet typically modern relationship to the great tradition that had been transformed by Schoenberg—whose historic role Weill recognised and admired from afar.

Perhaps the most unsettling thing about this music is what might be called its suppressionism. Sentiments akin to those we immediately recognise in, say, Stravinsky's 1945 symphony or Schoenberg's Piano Concerto are here partly disguised by the soft-voiced, friendly, almost conversational utterance. (Schoenberg's notes on his concerto are a comparable understatement: 'Life was so easy—suddenly hatred broke out (*Presto*)—a grave situation was created (*Adagio*)—but life goes on (*Rondo*)'.) The disguising tone is, in the symphony, a deliberate rhetorical device. It creates an expectation of that moment when the whole, unmitigated truth shall be proclaimed. That culmination is reached in the later stages of the *Largo*, and it is, if we have followed the thread, profoundly moving.

Since Weill maintained that the work had no extra-musical programme, it would be impertinent to provide one, especially as the musical argument is self-sufficient. Yet the implications of that argument are such that it is impossible to dissociate the work from its 20th-century context. The battle that is fought and lost in the first movement, and then—after the massive funeral march of the *Largo*—resumed on other ground and with different weapons in the rondo finale, is one we have read of, one we may have lived through, and one that perhaps will always be with us. The finale is inspiriting but hardly optimistic, at least in the Soviet Russian sense. It is not a victory that is being celebrated in the dancing, Italian-style coda, but simply the will to survive, somewhere, somehow, whatever the odds. 'Life goes on' . . .

But of all that, Weill probably had no conscious thought while composing. What he did think of was his place in the Austro-German tradition. And what he looked at—having no need to remind himself of Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Mahler—was Haydn (including, one suspects, those darkly dramatic symphonies of the early 1770s). It was surely through him that he found, for instance, his way to one of the formal inspirations in the first movement—the 'false reprise' (tonal, not thematic) that initiates the second development. Haydnesque, too, is the motival incisiveness, which is already established as a guiding principle in the extraordinarily tense *sostenuto* introduction. From that introduction the whole work stems.

D.D.