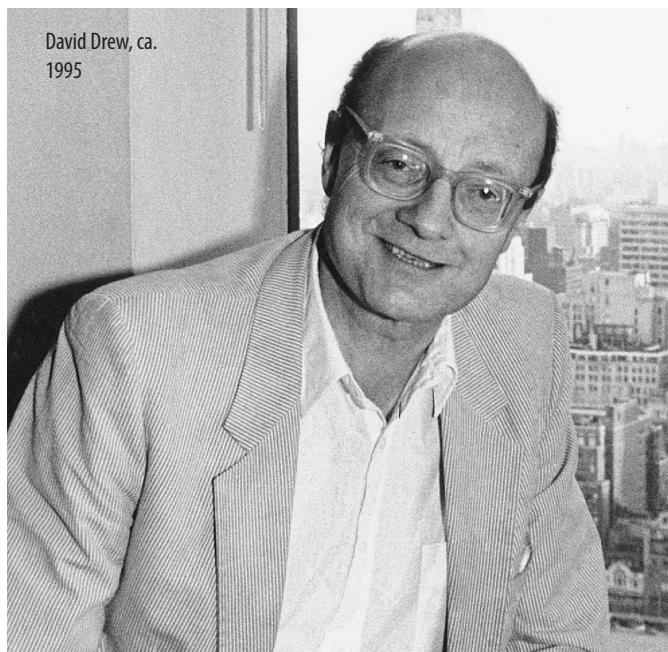


The text of this previously unpublished essay by the supremely influential Weill scholar David Drew stems from two sources. The primary source, a corrected proof of an article intended for *Opera News* in 1979 (coinciding with the premiere of *Mahagonny* at the Met) and subsequently rejected without explanation, was discovered in the fall of 2023 among Drew's papers at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. In the 1990s, Drew revisited the text and recorded a number of revisions in a proposed book on Weill's works; that revised version was shared with Foundation President Kim H. Kowalke and deposited in the Weill-Lenya Research Center. To arrive at the version printed below, we have carefully compared the two versions and incorporated a number of Drew's own changes that modify or elaborate his earlier conclusions. The text is published with the kind permission of the Estate of David Drew.

This year we observe the fifteenth anniversary of Drew's passing. The Foundation honors the occasion by renewing our commitment to make Drew's extensive Weill-related writings generally available. Much of the work published during his lifetime has been posted on kwf.org, but a great deal of unpublished work remains. Another excerpt from Drew's commentaries, "Struggling for Supremacy: The Libretto of Mahagonny" appeared in the Fall 2009 *Newsletter*. We are delighted to have the opportunity to present another portion of Drew's remarkable corpus and to shed more light on what he considered one of Weill's most challenging works.

Mahagonny's Musical Roots

by David Drew



David Drew, ca.
1995

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I. Mahagonny and "popular" idioms

If the strengths of *Mahagonny* have generally been underestimated, and its weaknesses overlooked or wrongly defined, it is because of the notion that music lacking technical complexities of the kind manifest in the work of Weill's modernist contemporaries is probably of minor importance and certainly not of a sort that requires the listener's sustained attention. Brecht himself encouraged that notion and pandered to his literary followers by describing the opera as "Spas" (fun, amusement). Its early opponents no less persuasively labeled it a "jazz opera."

The nearest Weill actually comes to a jazz idiom is in the two brief episodes associated with Trinity Moses' interventions,

at once diabolic, manipulative, and obscene, in the brothel scene. While it would be wrong to read a comparable critique into more extensive passages where the texture and syncopated accompaniment figures owe something to dance band and revue orchestra styles of the day, such passages are invariably placed at a critical angle to the text, the action, or both. Not for one moment—not even for the final "blue" cadence of No. 5 ("Wenn man an einem fremden Strand kommt")—does Weill embrace jazz idioms with anything akin to the naïve and trustful ardor characteristic of the jazz adventures of such contemporaries as Milhaud and Martinů, Krenek and Tansman.

In 1929 Weill published in *Anbruch* a short note about jazz and its influence. He concluded by suggesting that the influence jazz had exerted on the rhythms, harmonies and forms of serious music—even on the recent trend towards greater "simplicity and comprehensibility"—was less important than the lessons yet to be learned from jazz *players*, whose example he believed might help banish the rigidities and overspecialization of academically trained instrumentalists.

If, after forty years or more, most listeners would agree that the *Mahagonny* score is thoroughly un-"American" in sound, it is perhaps because they would also agree, with less justification, that it is the musical incarnation of pre-Hitler Berlin. The *Dreigroschenoper* mystique has been transferred to *Mahagonny*, despite the marked dissimilarity of the two scores. The confusion may be traced back to the 1931 Berlin production of *Mahagonny*, which was partly designed and largely promoted on the strength of the *Dreigroschenoper*'s box-office success. For various reasons, particularly because of the casting of Lotte Lenya in the role of Jenny—which in consequence became a star role at the expense of Begbick's more central one—that production became part of the post-1945 mythology of pre-1933 Berlin. It has also lent support to the idea that *Mahagonny*, if not a jazz opera, is at least a cabaret opera.

In this sense, the "Alabama-Song" and Jenny's version of

“Denn wie man sich bettet” emerge once again in their guise as *the* representative numbers. The cabaret formulas latent in the patterned routines of “Auf nach Mahagonny” and in the ironic contrasts of the “Benares-Song” are here openly acknowledged. But unless extensively rearranged and virtually homogenized, both songs are as unsuitable for cabaret singers as the rest of Jenny’s music (the recitatives, the “Kraniche-Duett,” and a few briefer interventions). The “Alabama-Song” calls for a rare combination of sharp attack and sustained tone, and its final coloratura extravaganza makes sense only if performed with supercilious ease. “Denn wie man sich bettet” poses various problems of intonation: the singer is melodically unsupported throughout the tortuous chromaticism of the introduction, and the structural cornerstone is a high A that must be firmly sustained and sensitively phrased if the formal coherence of the song’s two sections is to be preserved. Weill would not have been the practical musician he was had he imagined that a cabaret singer could do full justice to either of these songs. When he came to write the Lenya version of “Ach bedenken Sie, Herr Jacob Schmidt,” he was less demanding, yet he conceded only the bare minimum that was practically necessary. The song was not meant to sound easy, and its comparative simplicity is balanced by a free form owing nothing to cabaret conventions or to contemporary popular idioms.

Those *Mahagonny* idioms that *are* directly related to popular (though rarely contemporary) songs are representative of the Berlin of the 1920s only in the sense that they are thoroughly cosmopolitan. Even if the *Threepenny Opera* established a Berlin type, there are no songs of that type in *Mahagonny*. The zither waltz in the Act II eating tableau would be pure Vienna but for the fact that its Straussian suspensions and anticipations owe as much to Richard as to Johann the Younger, thus taking note of traditional Bavarian appetites. Those who hear nothing but the surface humor of the music misinterpret even that humor.

The Act III trial scene ranges even farther from Berlin. Though there are incidental suggestions of an Italianate tarantella rhythm, the main rhythmic character is Spanish. The music seems to draw comparisons between the atmosphere of the trial and that of some disreputable fairground bullfight. Just as Begbick’s picadors use poisoned barbs, so does the bandmaster inject a shot of commercial “pop” into the bucolic idiom: the trial scene’s orchestral ritornello is in general character reminiscent of José Padilla’s “Valencia,” a *pasodoble* that swept the world of light music after its publication in Paris in 1925 and was still going the rounds forty years later. In a provocatively *frech*, anti-elitist and “un-German” reply to a request from the magazine *Uhu* for a list of his six favorite tunes, Weill placed “Valencia” third on the list and (“you will laugh,” he wrote) the “Alabama-Song” last. With Weill, irony and affection are interlocked.

Neither melodically nor harmonically, however, is there any direct allusion to “Valencia.” Of exact quotation from popular tunes, in the tradition of Bizet’s quotations from salon music by Yradier and others in *Carmen*, there are two famous examples in *Mahagonny*—“The Maiden’s Prayer” and “Asleep in the Deep.” Both are relics of nineteenth-century petit bourgeois romanticism, and neither has anything to do with Berlin, though Weill seems to have imagined that “Asleep in the Deep” (as “Stürmisch die Nacht”) was a traditional German sea song.

“Das ist die ewige Kunst” (That’s eternal art), murmurs Jack in response to the first set of variations on “The Maiden’s Prayer.” The more we laugh at his naïveté, the more the joke’s on us. With just such a trap did Shakespeare in the play scene of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* catch his stage audience—perhaps his theater audience too—in the act of congratulating itself on its superior culture. But Jack, like Bottom and his friends, has stumbled on an elusive truth. It has been said of Weill’s treatment of “The Maiden’s Prayer” that “While one smiles ... one is also oddly and perhaps disturbingly touched.” As early as the second sentence of the theme, Weill has elaborated Thekla Badarzewska’s routine harmony and introduced a plangency of his own. The “vulgar tavern musick which makes one man merry and another mad” may, as Sir Thomas Browne remarks, strike others “with a deep devotion.” That Weill was in some sense devoted to “The Maiden’s Prayer” would be evident from the fifth bar onward even without the testimony he provided, in quite another connection, some eighteen years later, when he wrote, “The pianist in the early movie theaters ... has become a part of history, often quoted, imitated, laughed at, and parodied. To most people of my age, the sound of the piano in the nickelodeons is a cherished childhood memory, and many times when we see one of those standard situations in a movie—the villain triumphing over his innocent victim; the daughter being expelled from her father’s house; the mother being separated from her child—we are longing to hear again that

tinny old worn-out piano playing ‘The March of the Gladiators,’ ‘The Maiden’s Prayer’ or the *William Tell* overture” (“Music in the Movies,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, September 1946, p. 398).

There is a certain longing implicit in everything Weill has introduced to Badarzewska’s music. It is in no way a sentimentalization of his childhood memory. On the contrary, the irrelevance to adult experience is clearly registered. On one level the music is shown to be a regressive fantasy, whose attractions are analogous to those of Begbick’s spurious haven. Yet there is another level: the artistic reality of the paraphrase begins as an objective disclosure of the model’s unreality but continues as an expression of subjective feeling. So far from mocking Badarzewska, Weill pays her childlike artlessness the tribute of his own art, and through the dis-



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE WEILL-LENYA RESEARCH CENTER

The opening measures of Badarzewska's "moonstruck tune" from Schott's facsimile edition



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE WEILL-LEIVA RESEARCH CENTER

covery of precisely what is genuine but hitherto latent in the music's hopeful *espressivo*, lends substance to Jack's reaction.

If we, whose ears are not Jack's, are disturbed as well as touched by the music, it is perhaps because of the pianist's virtuosity and the uncertainty as to whether Jack is admiring that or the moonstruck tune. The pianist is part of Begbick's sales drive, and there is something appropriately devilish about his Lisztian cascades. Jim interrupts the variations with music of such frank and rough-hewn simplicity that the pianist cannot resume his task without seeming more of a trickster than ever.

It is there, rather than in the quotation of Badarzewska's guileless tune, that the musical humor lies. Music in which technique is unrelated to the solution of compositional problems was not a part of Weill's creative world. In this instance and in his psychology, it initiates a symbolic unfrocking of the Abbé Liszt, who (through Busoni) was his musical grandfather. But the ceremony is not concluded. Despite himself, and despite all that nineteenth-century individualism had come to represent for his generation, Weill still cared enough for Liszt to forgive him everything. In the darling of the salons he saw a strange premonition of the nickel-odeon pianist, and once again his cherished childhood memory came to the rescue. The keyboard embellishments would not be nearly so funny or at all disturbing if they did not achieve the elegance Badarzewska yearns for.

Petrie's "Asleep in the Deep" is likewise rescued from the nineteenth-century parlors, but in this case there is no implied criticism. Where the transformation of "The Maiden's Prayer" is complete and artistic—it becomes an integral part of the ensemble—the quotation of "Asleep in the Deep" is exact and realistic: the drunken singers recall, as such singers are wont to do, a vulgar and merry tune. Since the merriment comes from the bottle rather than the heart, it is short-lived. Even had it been spontaneous, it could not have survived long in Mahagonny, where the happy songs are the forbidden songs. In *Mahagonny*, the music that looks as if it is light turns out to have the same specific gravity as the music that manifestly is not.

Each crisis or moment of extreme intensity in the opera, without exception, is preceded by some allusion to the idioms of popular entertainment music. As the opera progresses, the fatal character of the allusions becomes even more apparent. From *Don Giovanni*, particularly from its final scene, Weill has learned something appropriate to his purpose. A hedonist to the last, the Don calls for his favorite tunes, and to their equivocally merry accompaniment enjoys his last meal. Like the Don's tunes, the two hits from which Weill quotes, plus the other two he has composed himself, are in the major mode. So are the equally fateful zither waltz and the Alaska duet. Apart from them, there is no major-key music in *Mahagonny*. These tunes, refugees from

lands that no longer exist or wishful emigrants to a never-never land, have no rights and no franchise in a territory ruled with an iron fist by the minor mode. Behind their smiling masks are the lineaments of fear.

Please see the next page for the continuation of "Mahagonny's Musical Roots."

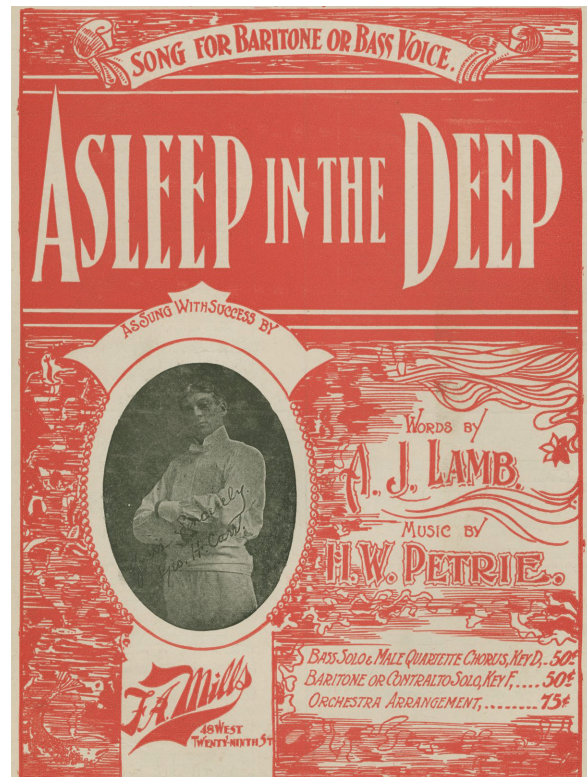


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II. Mahagonny and Tradition

In style and substance *Mahagonny* is far removed from the music of the modernist masters and their followers. There is no vestige of Weill's earlier regard for Schoenberg, and scarcely a hint of *Wozzeck*; the last trace of Bartók was removed when the "verses" of the "Alabama-Song" acquired their new harmonization [in the opera]; and with Hindemith, who was a formidable rival if not a master, there is only a fleeting encounter amid the *Cardillac*-like turmoil of the orchestral prelude. The one modern master to whom Weill pays significant respects is Stravinsky. His, rather than Busoni's, neoclassical manner is evoked, distantly and in different harmonic terms, by the hurricane fugato. A subterranean tremor from *The Rite of Spring* is felt in the boxing scene; the buffo style of *Mavra*, with its syncopations and vamp-till-surprised accompaniments, is recalled at various points.

Yet such moments are not Stravinskian in the sense that certain passages in the Violin Concerto or the first *Protagonist* pantomime are. By now, all influences, including the popular ones, have been thoroughly digested. Stravinsky is a useful reference point only because of the kindred problems arising from his anachronistic and supra-national eclecticism. Like Stravinsky up to the time of *The Rake's Progress*, the Weill of *Mahagonny* (and of later works) is never more strikingly an artist of the twentieth century than in his recreation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conventions. For many German critics since 1945, the retrospective aspects of *The Rake* and *Mahagonny* are, on their different levels, justifiable only in terms of their allegedly parodistic intent. Stravinsky's disclaimers are hardly necessary, since there is no musical excuse for misreading his intentions in *The Rake*. *Mavra* is another matter (and an underrated one), *Mahagonny* yet another. Musicians and commentators with fixed ideas about "serious" music may well be misled by some of Weill's retroactive popular references. But there are others who, with less excuse than non-musicians, are gulled by Brecht's remarks about the "senselessness" of opera. That Weill did not share Brecht's view of opera is well-documented but in any case self-evident. The operatic forms and conventions of which he avails himself are in no sense held up to mockery. Even the comically opportunistic coloratura part in the "Alabama-Song" is a characterizing device that tells us something about Jenny and the girls but nothing about Weill's attitude toward coloratura.

Idiomatic or conventional references that define character or expose pretense are among the oldest operatic resources. Handel was drawing on them long before Mozart's *Così*. References determined by the composer's musical animosities rather than by his dramatic perceptions are of a quite different order. There are two substantial examples in Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*, composed in 1928–29 to a libretto by Marcellus Schiffer. More important if psychologically less revealing than his parody of Weill's *Dreigroschenoper* manner (in the last act's revue-scene) is the so-called "Kitsch-Duett" in Act I, for this is a parody of Wagner at length and by direct quotation, and of Puccini in passing. Bogus music for bogus lovers—that is the extent of its dramatic justification. The rest is polemics of a kind ideally suited to the *Mahagonny* represented by Brecht's notes, and wholly foreign to the spirit of Weill's score.

In this connection, an article by H.H. Stuckenschmidt, published with the 1957 Columbia-Philips recording of *Mahagonny*, has proved influential. It contains several observations that subsequent writers have tended to take on trust. "Parody and quotation," writes Stuckenschmidt, "are allotted a certain role in the

music. As early as the male quartet 'Auf nach Mahagonny,' the voices, led astray by a similarity of the text, glide into the chorus of the bridesmaids' refrain from Weber's *Freischütz*." In fact there is only a vague resemblance, and even that is momentary.

Weber



Weill



The harmonic and phraseological structures of the two passages have nothing in common, and their formal function is different. If the quartet does evoke the bridesmaids' refrain—and Stuckenschmidt was not the first to feel that it does—then it is only insofar as remote and very general affinities of rhythmic and melodic character can be recognized, despite fundamental structural distinctions. Since the Weber quartet is an expression of an innocence wholly foreign to the bouncy sexuality of the *Mahagonny* quartet, it could be argued that the superficial resemblances were intentional and thus parodistic of what Weill once described as "the most beautiful of the German romantic operas." A more musical conclusion is surely implicit in Stuckenschmidt's remarks about the similarity of *words*. All composers draw on their memories, and most are subject to memory's tricks, especially those who are as sensitive to the *sound* of words as Weill was. Thus in *Die Dreigroschenoper* Peachum's "Nein! sie gestatten's eben nicht" seems to have reminded Weill of Papageno's "Nein, dafür bedank' ich mich" in *Die Zauberflöte*.



Such echoes count for little. In the *Mahagonny* quartet they are merely reminders that Weill shared with Weber a debt to traditional German balladry. For that purpose Stuckenschmidt might more profitably have compared the second act's nautical finale to the chorus "Oh! 'tis pleasant to sail on the sea," which ends the second act of Weber's *Oberon*. The generic relationship is evident, even though Wagner's Dutchman has intervened and Weill's Jim is sailing in his cursed wake.

The only other master cited by Stuckenschmidt is Mozart. “The duet of the two Men in Armor in *Die Zauberflöte*,” he writes, “served as model for the chorale ‘Haltet auf aufrecht.’” He may be right, as far as the admonitory tone and the contrapuntal texture are concerned, but Weill’s chorale is not a traditional Lutheran one, as Mozart’s is, and his decisive idea is not the chorale itself but its juxtaposition and combination with alien material. For that there is no Mozartian precedent, but there are later ones. In Berlioz’s *Damnation de Faust* the Ride to the Abyss contrasts the galloping music of Faust and Méphistophélès with the chorale sung by peasants kneeling at a wayside cross. The dualism implicit in that double image is closer to Weill’s way of thinking than the Masonic unity of Mozart’s duet, and the “figured chorale” resembles Berlioz’s as much as Mozart’s. If Weill thought of Berlioz second, it was only, perhaps, because Berlioz thought of Mozart first.

Die Zauberflöte as a whole “is more than an opera,” Weill wrote—“it is the triumph of light over darkness.” For him the work remained the supreme model of an edifying entertainment, of a form that is synthetic because only by bringing together seemingly alien conventions could Mozart impart “a great ethical idea” to his *Singspiel* public. If in Weill’s eyes it was a religious work—“the most beautiful of all affirmations of a faith in divine justice”—it was no less a dramatic one, and for him the drama was most suggestive when it most resembled religious ritual. Typically, he admired the march music that accompanies the ordeals of fire and water yet seems remote from them—seems but is not, for the outwardly glacial flute melody is motivated and inwardly warmed by its recollection of Tamino’s aria, “Dies’ Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön,” a hidden reference of a kind that is as much a part of the *Mahagonny* score as is the distancing formality that hides it.

The main part of the second act of *Mahagonny* is in effect a sequence of orgiastic ordeals. The four friends from Alaska aspire to full membership in Begbick’s “free” society, but Jack is eliminated by the first ordeal and dies of his surfeit. The remaining three survive the second ordeal. Alaska-Wolf Joe is killed in the third, and Jim loses all in the fourth and last. The sole survivor is Bill, and Jenny, a plucked Papagena, is his equivocal reward.

The first theme of the “Lieben” orgy is an appropriately reminiscent incantation:



It summons up from the Act I finale of *Die Zauberflöte* the harrowed ghost of Mozart’s Priest:



“When friendship leads you by the hand, to join the temple’s holy band”—such is the writing on the wall above the graffiti of the *Mahagonny* brothel scene. In this erotic temple, whose Priest is Trinity Moses and whose High Priestess is Begbick, there is neither *Heiligtum* nor *ewigen Band*. And yet, as Blake remarks, “Brothels are built with the bricks of religion.” Stuart Gilbert quoted the epigram apropos the Circe episode in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, remarking that Stephen Dedalus enters the brothel singing

the Introit for Paschal time. Later, the brothel pianist plays “My girl’s a Yorkshire girl” (but might equally well have played “The Maiden’s Prayer”). Finally the liturgical and the profane elements combine in a parody of the sacrament. At the close, the wretched Leopold Bloom murmurs the freemason’s oath of secrecy.

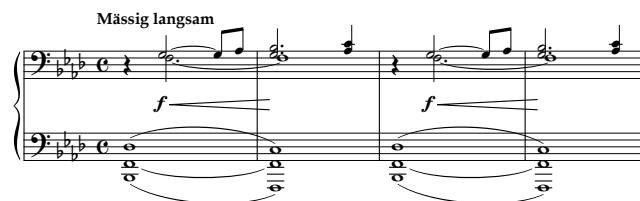
Brecht may well have known, or at least known of, the Circe episode when he and Weill came to write the *Mahagonny* brothel scene. In this brief scene, particularly in the pandemoniac jazz that emerges from the depths whenever Moses appears at the doorway, Weill has discovered for the language of music an equivalent of Joyce’s *Walpurgisnacht* obscenities and half-crazed reminiscences. Through his brothel music, as through Joyce’s, the cries of “Repent ye!” can still be heard, as if from a great distance. The drunken Stephen Dedalus remembers the Introit, Bloom hears the Shema Israel. Weill—who had already included [*ad libitum*] *Armensündglocke* (bells for condemned criminals) in each of the Act II prelude’s pauses—reminds his listeners of Mozart’s priest.

The estranging effect of the *Mahagonny* images whose forebears in *Die Zauberflöte* already sounded strange enough to Mozart’s contemporaries, is complemented by a much more radical transformation of images similarly derived from Wagner. The two motifs in the “blues tempo” introduction to Jenny’s “Denn wie man sich bettet” are particularly noteworthy. The first is a lowly descendant of the Act III prelude from *Tristan und Isolde*:

Weill:



Wagner [ex. 35b]:



The second is harmonized chromatically and developed sequentially in a manner that at last uncovers the Wagnerian ancestry of a leading motif in the score, here marked “X.” Among this motif’s numerous relatives in *Tristan* is the one cited above.

Weill:



Wagner:



Usually known as the Desire motif—its diatonic transformation being our example from the *Tristan* Act III prelude—this derives from the germinal *Tristan* theme (cf. Mässig langsam on preceding page):



Wagner’s initial motif—of sorrow, longing and pain (among many other related ideas, as Ernest Newman remarks)—is the model for another of Weill’s basic motifs, the one that culminates in Jim’s aria “Nur die Nacht,” for which the original stage direction is: “Jim lies in a wood with one foot tied to a tree.” Weill originally composed “Nur die Nacht” for the end of Act II, but the aria did not satisfy him until he had shifted it to the beginning of Act III. He had surely forgotten what his inner memory had stored: after the prelude to Act III of *Tristan*, the wounded Tristan too is discovered “under the shade of a great lime tree.” The phrase with which Wagner leads from the Act III prelude to the garden scene ...



... is echoed in the phrase that leads to the coda of Jim’s aria ...



... and is itself an echo of the “Scene in the Fields” from Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*:



Weill was no more quoting from Wagner than Wagner from Berlioz. He was composing in the full sense of the word—working out and integrating his various obligations to his chosen musical and dramatic material. Musically, his ascending phrase is an augmented sequential variation of the first of our musical examples, Jenny’s introduction. Expressively, it articulates Jim’s awareness that his “forbidden song” has, in Jenny’s rendition in Act II, proved to be a double-edged sword, one that has mortally wounded him. Imaginatively, and with that wound as its figurative center, it further develops the distant, murky background of allusions to the *Tristan* legend. Almost imperceptibly, modern parable merges with ancient myth, and Jim, alone, betrayed and in dread, finds himself beneath a tree as old as man’s knowledge of crime and punishment.

The clue concealed in Weill’s remark about *Tristan* and the *Wesendonck* songs (vis à vis his own opera and the *Songspiel*) was ignored at the time of the *Mahagonny* premiere, and more than thirty years elapsed before any critic mentioned Wagner’s influence on the score. There are musical as well as cultural reasons for the time-lag. Weill’s formal thinking—after his renunciation of through-composed forms—is at the opposite extreme to Wagner’s. Moreover, his colorings are so unlike Wagner’s that resemblances in the substance may go unnoticed. For instance, Jenny’s first recitative, “Jenny Smith aus Oklahoma,” is accompanied by an ensemble of horns, bassoons, saxophones, cellos and double bass which is foreign to, and eerily masks, the Wagnerian provenance of the chromatic harmony:



The semitonally subsiding harmonies, sustained and developed with remarkable subtlety throughout the changing tempo and character of the ensuing music, are post-Wagnerian in more than a general sense. Their direct ancestor is the “Sleep” motif in the *Ring*.

Weill may not have done this consciously, but the instinctive promptings of his memory have not played him false. The recitative’s sudden and gripping revelation of the inner nature of

Jenny owes its effect—an un-Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*—not only to the contrast with the impassive, almost frozen linearity of the original “Ach, bedenken Sie” aria that precedes it, but also to the specific resonances of the allusion. When Wotan awakens Erda—Mother Earth—from her omniscient slumber (*Siegfried*, Act III) the “Sleep” motif is redefined as the Erda motif. The modern equivalent of Erda in the literature to which Weill was sympathetic was Wedekind’s *Erdgeist*, Lulu. It is the Lulu in Jenny that Weill is consciously portraying, but subconsciously and no less creatively he is also fusing Wedekind with Wagner.

Mozart and Weber, Berlioz and Wagner—these are not the only classical and romantic influences. Theodor W. Adorno’s 1930 essay on the work closes with this characteristically perceptive observation: “A strange kind of Mahler, stranger than Mahler himself, runs through the whole opera, in its marches, its ostinatos, its gray major-minor. [Mahler’s presence is already felt in the first two bars—the same five-note motif is prominent in the second movement of Mahler’s fifth symphony.—DD] As in Mahler, the work uses the explosive force of the substratum to destroy the middle strata and conquer the heights. It plunders and takes by storm the images it renders contemporary, not however to go on with them toward the void, but rather to save them as captured emblems of its own action.”

Although Adorno mentioned no composer other than Mahler in this connection, his essay is much concerned with the radically new problems inherent in Weill’s allusiveness. As a pupil of Berg who maintained, with good reason and elaborate argument, that the Schoenberg revolution was a historical necessity and an incontrovertible guarantee of music’s future, [Adorno] was compelled to find intellectual justification for his emotional response to a score that owed nothing to the fruits of that revolution. He found it in the cultural, social, and philosophical backgrounds:

“The surrealistic intentions of *Mahagonny* are conveyed by the music, which from the first note to the last registers the shock induced by the sudden exposure of the ruined bourgeois world. ... This music, made from the wreckage of past music, is entirely contemporary. Its surrealism is radically different from all the “new objectivity” and the neo-classicism. It does not attempt to revive the destroyed bourgeois music ... on the contrary, its contrasts, its montage of the dead, makes the past seem dead and unreal, and the terror that springs from this gives strength to its manifesto.”

So for Adorno every traditional element in *Mahagonny*—its “old” styles, its triads, chromaticisms, progressions, cadences, and symmetrical relationships—is deformed, denatured, and robbed of traditional function. Such extreme fragmentation, he suggests, is not to be found elsewhere in modern music except in “the most progressive” work of the Second Viennese School, whose dialectic, however, is self-generating, whereas Weill’s is

imposed on preexisting ideas and materials. As Adorno sees it, the integrity of *Mahagonny* is not that of a (utopian) synthesis of contradictory elements but that of a consistent, realistic portrayal of disintegration.

In defending Weill’s “style” on the grounds that it exposed the deadness of conventional materials and associations, Adorno anticipated by a quarter of a century his criticism of Stravinsky’s on the ground that it was a “death-mask.” There is, indeed, a real distinction, but the antithesis is illusory. If, as Adorno remarked, Weill had no intention of “reviving the destroyed bourgeois music,” it was only because for [Weill] the bourgeois audience had been or should be replaced by a new and broader one, and for that audience, no less than for his own urge to communicate, a language and syntax with at least some roots in the familiar past, however “bourgeois,” was indispensable. The anarchic language and syntax described by Adorno is not Weill’s, but could almost be an extension of Satie’s or Poulenc’s—the Satie of *Musique d’ameublement* and the Poulenc of *Les biches*, translated into German Dada. For the purposes of an ingenious rationalization, Adorno ignores Weill’s constructive achievement and denies himself, until too late, the benefits of his own spontaneous musical insights. The “strange kind of Mahler” arrives as a witness of Adorno’s better judgment, but the verdict had already been given. Thus his concluding and correct statement that Weill “saves” the images he has collected—rather than throwing them into the “bourgeois” void—comes as a plain contradiction.

A strange kind of conservatism, as well as of Mahler, runs through *Mahagonny*, and Adorno’s reluctance to acknowledge it falsifies the picture he gives of the contemporary or revolutionary side of the work. The shock he rightly notes and loosely, metaphorically, interprets is due to the extreme discrepancy between Weill’s aims, both formal and expressive, and those of his classical, romantic, and popular models, Mahler excepted. In the series of works that led up to *Mahagonny*, the discrepancy becomes more extreme as the aims become more concentrated, while the spiritual bonds with Mahler grow stronger as the musical personality itself becomes strong enough to sustain them.

While Brecht was discarding the past for his own good reasons, Weill was quietly reclaiming it for his. He could no longer do otherwise. His rediscovery, in *Royal Palace* and subsequent works, of the “outmoded” triadic harmony from which he had previously tried to escape, had been an essential part of his self-discovery. Through it he found his way back to the traditions from which he had set out. But because of what he had learned, and what had matured in him, during the years when he had been experimenting, he was now able to achieve an eclecticism that was, on its own level, as personal and peculiar as Stravinsky’s. Thus to have mastered himself and his art was the very condition of his work with Brecht.



PHOTO: CLÄRCHEN & MATTHIAS BAUS

Begbick (Evelyn Herlitzius) and Jenny (Lauren Michelle) on camera in Ivo van Hove’s staging



PHOTO: IKO FRIESE

Jenny (Nadja Mchantaf) stands under harsh lights in Barrie Kosky’s production

Photos from two recent productions of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*: Dutch National Opera (2023) and Komische Oper Berlin (2021)