

# Kurt Weill

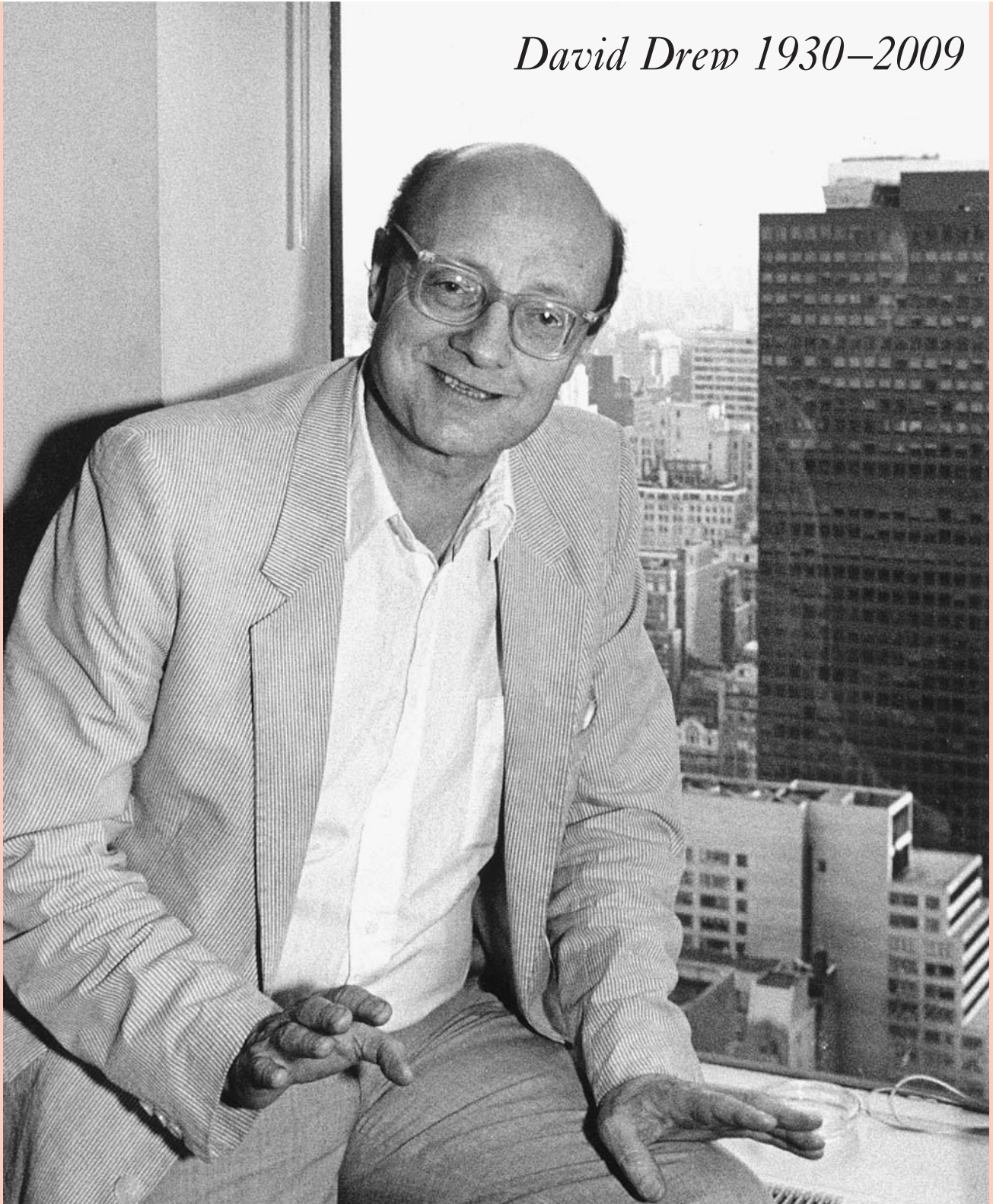
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Fall 2009

*Newsletter*

*David Drew 1930–2009*



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# Kurt Weill

*Newsletter*

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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: David Drew in New York City, late 1980s.  
Courtesy of Judith Drew.

## Letters

I avidly read each Newsletter—have for years. The last issue's chief coverage was the Lenya Competition. Michael Lasser wrote a wonderful—I might even say, to me, an “inspiring” article on it. He told of the Weill/Lenya championing of vocalists who are powerful and truthful actors. That this article ran along with a review of our recent *Lost in the Stars* production seemed especially pertinent to me.

It takes nothing away from my deep admiration of Weill's score for *Lost in the Stars* to acknowledge the overlooked brilliance of Maxwell Anderson's dramatic version of the novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Most of the scenes in *Lost in the Stars* are two- and three-character scenes, which in our intimate house (250 seats), it is fair to say, electrified the audiences. The singing, though unamplified, was in its own way electrifying, too. (Despite impressive advances of sound engineering, nothing is more thrilling to me than the “natural” voice.)

*Lost in the Stars* should be produced more often, and I suspect that the incorrect presumption of many would-be producers is that it must be done on an operatic scale. I recognize my bias here, but the evocative unit set we used allowed a cinematic flow to the story that served the action without elaborate set shifts.

Perhaps I should write something up for Rodgers & Hammerstein touting the producibility of *Lost in the Stars* based on our most satisfying experience with the show and the acclaim it brought the excellent members of the company. I've been doing theater a long time (and listening to Weill for a long time and producing Weill shows, too). *Lost in the Stars* truly gave me one of my very best experiences, and, I'm most happy to say, gave critics and audiences something deeply memorable.

Yours truly,

JAC ALDER

Executive Producer-Director, Theatre Three / Dallas

## Note from the Editor

When the sad news of David Drew's death on 25 July 2009 reached our offices, all of us knew that an era had come to an end. It is still impossible to fathom the impact of this tragic loss, for Drew had almost single-handedly put Weill back on the map of twentieth-century music and musical historiography. As Weill's posthumous cataloger, editor, and advocate, his importance reminds me of the role that the eminent music critic Alfred Einstein played for Mozart, but any such comparison will necessarily fall short of the truth.

Exactly four years ago, Drew reflected in these pages about his work on Weill; at that time (Fall 2005) it had amounted to fifty years—precisely the composer's life span. As we prepared the present tribute issue, many documents passed through our hands that represented key moments in Drew's career, and we agonized over which ones to reprint. We finally decided to publish his first letter to Lenya (see p. 5), written at the age of 26, in which he explored the possibility of writing a critical biography—not a popular one—of Weill, and even offered a first outline. Alas, a book in this form never appeared, but a small nugget lifted from Drew's unpublished writings, where he considers the libretto of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, offers a tantalizing glimpse of how such a book might have turned out (pp. 6–9). A similarly striking example of Drew's eloquent and visionary writing is a letter to Lys Symonette in 1970 (see p. 9), in which he—now in his role as General Administrator of the European Office of Weill's estate—pondered the practical aspects of staging *Mahagonny* in light of a highly problematic and controversial production in New York City.

Given that a thousand and more pages of Drew's unpublished writings exist, one can only hope that more of it will become available before long. Even though his warm and engaging presence is gone, his writings will always continue to inspire.

Elmar Juchem

### Postscript to vol. 27, no. 1 (Spring 2009)

The spring issue of the Newsletter failed to provide biographical information on the issue's chief contributor, Michael Lasser. Most readers in the U.S. will know him as host of the nationally syndicated public radio show, *Fascinatin' Rhythm* (Peabody Award winner in 1994). In addition, Lasser works as a lecturer, writer, critic, and teacher. His most recent book, co-authored with Philip Furia, is *America's Songs: The Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Routledge, 2006; pbk. 2008).



Lenya and David Drew at Brook House (Weill and Lenya's home in upstate New York), late 1950s. Photo: S. Neil Fujita



# David Drew: An Obituary

By Alexander Goehr

No job description, whether musicologist, critic, cultural historian, publisher or editor quite fits David Drew, who has died aged 78. He was successively and simultaneously all these things. But most remarkable, even unique, is the way all these activities relate to a single ambitious undertaking: he wished to diagnose and correct the received opinions and sloppy judgments about the classical music of the 20th century and its makers that came from both commercial and political pressure.

Naturally, such an aspiration did not form itself in one lightning vision, but was cumulative, resulting from his studies and first musical enthusiasms. Its principal beneficiary came to be the composer Kurt Weill.

David, who was my friend for more than half a century, was born in Putney, south-west London. His parents, Reginald and Mary Hicklin, divorced in 1932, and the following year his mother, whose maiden name of Drew he took, married a Scottish solicitor. Thus he was brought up in Campbeltown, Argyll, till he went to Aysgarth prep school, north Yorkshire (1938–43); Harrow school, north-west London (1943–48); and Peterhouse, Cambridge (1950–53), to study English and history.

There he fell under the influence of FR Leavis and his journal *Scrutiny*, and particularly of its music critic, Wilfrid Mellers, and of the Catalan composer Roberto Gerhard, who had come to Cambridge as a refugee from the Spanish civil war. From Leavis he learned close reading of a text and the relating of it to its contemporary culture; from Gerhard, pupil of Felipe Pedrell and Arnold Schoenberg, in the broadest sense the spirit and techniques of modern music.

David's first interests lay in 20th-century French music, and his first major writing was at the time, 1955, the most detailed study of the work of Olivier Messiaen. It was published in the *Score*, the highly influential journal edited by William Glock, which laid out the agenda for the reinvigoration of musical taste in Britain that took place when Glock became controller of music at the BBC. A further study of French music followed in 1957, published in *European Music in the Twentieth Century*.

Glock's appointment came in 1959, and from that year till 1967—with a brief spell as a BBC staff producer in 1960—David was the music critic of the *New Statesman*, in its great period under Kingsley Martin and Walter Allen. As a weekly writer, he was his own man. Frequently and characteristically, he ignored the “big” events in favor of some concert in a small venue which he believed should be noticed. To “get” his writing, you had not only to read between the lines, but also register what had not been discussed.

As a young man, David traveled widely in Europe and the United States, becoming interested in and friendly with many of the leading composers of the time: Igor Stravinsky (he provided the introduction to the Penguin edition of his *Conversations with Robert Craft*), Luigi Dallapiccola, Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, and Stefan Wolpe, as well as, of course, Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett, Elisabeth Lutyens, and the younger British composers.

But his most important decision, in 1956, and the one which determined the course of his life, was to write about Weill.

The composer of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) emigrated to New York, where he had a second career on Broadway. But he died early, in 1950, and his work was largely forgotten; he was merely part of Brecht-Weill. David's decision to research his oeuvre brought him into contact with Lotte Lenya, the great singer and Weill's widow, as well as the designer Caspar Neher and a number of other eminent figures of the Brecht and Weill world.

He soon discovered that Weill, a former pupil of pianist-composer Ferruccio Busoni, had been the composer of a considerable repertoire of stage and orchestral works as well as songs and choruses, most of which had to be relocated, sorted and even re-edited from incomplete scores and sketches. He understood that before he could write a study of the work, much of which came after his last theatre piece intended for a principally German audience, the sung ballet *Die sieben Todsünden* of 1933, it had to be performed and heard again. In his *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (1987), he wrote: “The fact that Weill was not a ‘great’ composer in Schoenberg's sense (or for that matter in Stravinsky's rather different one) did not persuade me . . . that he was necessarily of minor or peripheral significance.” To this end, he prepared scores, traveled Europe and America promoting the works, was instrumental in forming the Weill Foundation (1962) and not only changed, if not created, the public perception of the composer, but contributed to a sea-change in the development of composition in the second half of the 20th century.

All this time, he worked on a major study of Weill's work, concentrating less on personal biography than on the composer's role in an important chapter of the cultural history of the Weimar Republic, far removed from the still too prevalent nostalgia of the popular culture industry. The fate of this constantly reworked and consequently, to this day, unpublished torso is repeated in much of his later writing. His essays and monographs had a habit of taking on a life of their own.

Carrying on from his work on Weill, he wrote about German composers whose work and reception was affected and distorted, not only by Nazi ideology but by the difficulties of the postwar period. At various times he intended to or actually did work on Hanns Eisler, Boris Blacher (his lengthy study was published in 2004), Rudolf Wagner-Régeny and Walter Leigh (the English composer, killed in action in the Second World War), always well aware that they were not “great,” but believing that they were not of marginal importance.

In 1971, David became the editor of *Tempo* magazine, and in 1976 was appointed director of publications at the leading music publisher Boosey and Hawkes. As a record producer he was responsible first for the Gulbenkian project (1961–76), facilitating the release of 20th-century music on the EMI and Argo labels, and later he was artistic director of Largo Records, Cologne (1993–98).

At Boosey and Hawkes, he quickly put his own stamp on the cat-

ologue. Some well-known names vanished, to be replaced by others—HK Gruber, Robin Holloway, Henryk Górecki, Igor Markevitch, Berthold Goldschmidt, Kurt Schwertsik—whose work, like a caring gardener, he cherished, advised upon and promoted as he had done that of Weill, and often with good results.

All this leaves the impression of an extremely active, continuously moving workaholic—his website [www.singscript.plus.com](http://www.singscript.plus.com) not only gives a full picture of a life of triumphs and disasters, but evidences the importance David attached to chronicles, dates and factual records.

There was no ostentation, over-emphasis or false claim in David's style of writing—only a concern with accuracy by continuous qualification. By its own momentum this leads to ellipsis and a process of fragmentation: his concern for truth frequently brings about complexity. His life's work, much of it uncatalogued and unpublished, will in the future (and here I am reminded of Walter Benjamin) demand the kind of attention he himself lavished on Weill; only then will his unique contribution be appreciated.

He is survived by his wife, Judith, whom he married in 1960, two daughters and a son.

[The obituary originally appeared in the *Guardian*, 3 August 2009.]



At the Darmstadt Festival for New Music in July 1954, left to right: Alexander Goehr, Gino Bonino, Ian Kemp, David Drew.

London, 3 November 1956

Dear Mrs. Weill-Davis,

Universal Edition of London have kindly given me your address, as I wish to consult with you about a book on Kurt Weill which one of our foremost publishers, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, are most eager to publish. I have wished to write such a book since I first came across Kurt Weill's music seven or eight years ago, but until recently I have always considered this an unrealizable dream. But the great success of the London production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (I find it difficult to think of it under any other title!) some months ago has quite changed this; and since Routledge appeared to like something else of mine which they are publishing, I approached them with this idea. They were very enthusiastic.

However, I explained that I did not wish to go ahead with the project until I had obtained your approval. Allied to this was the important question of whether anyone else is at present engaged upon similar work: this is something which I am sure you would know about. (Universal Edition are unable to give me any information.) When I say "similar work" I do mean this very literally. I am aware that there is scope for a "popular" biography of Kurt Weill, together with an un-technical general survey of the music. This would undoubtedly sell better than what I have in mind—at least over a short period—but I really don't feel myself capable of doing it, even if I wanted to. What I would like to try to do is to demonstrate, on purely musical grounds, the reasons why I feel Kurt Weill to be one of the very few genuinely original composers of our day, and a composer who should, moreover, take a place in the general hierarchy of music that is at least equal to the position occupied by, say, Hugo Wolf. This argument will of course require a considerable amount of musical analysis and illustration; but I wish to set it against a detailed consideration of the musical, artistic, social and political life of Germany in the inter-war years; "detailed," that is to say, so far as is consistent with the main framework of a biographical section on Kurt Weill himself. At present I do not think I shall cover "The Broadway

Years" in quite the same way, but I shall of course devote quite a lot of space to it. I enclose a very rough plan of the form which, at the moment, I would like the book to take.

All this, I know, sounds pretty dry and academic on paper, and I cannot at this stage hope to convey to you the intense excitement with which I look forward to this project. Although I should be writing very much as a member of the younger generation, for whom those inter-war years are in one sense only a part of history, (for I was still at school during the war), I feel extraordinarily close to it all, perhaps because the first thing that I ever grasped about the world outside my home and school was the fact that Europe was about to be involved in a major catastrophe. The complete, and at times frightening, sympathy with Kurt Weill's music which I often feel is something that I find hard to explain. I find it so easy to involve myself in the hopes and doubts underlying the music that I can hardly persuade myself that I did not grow up with it. When I was a few months old my mother took me to Berlin for a short while, and I amuse myself by thinking, rather sentimentally, that I may have heard from my cradle some errand boy whistling the "Moritat" or the "Zuhälterballade."

You will, then, imagine with what feelings I await your reply. If you agree to my proposal, I shall start work immediately. Before long I should try – heaven knows how! – to come over to the United States for a month or two, in which case I hope that I might have the honour and pleasure of meeting you. In any case, I will have to set about trying to obtain some of the music that is not generally available. For instance, Universal Edition do not even seem to be aware of the existence of *Die sieben Todsünden*, of which I recently discovered a short extract reproduced in a pre-war French periodical.

May I say in conclusion how deeply moved I was by your recording of the Berlin Theatre Songs on American Columbia which I obtained a few weeks ago. I think it is a supreme achievement of interpretation on your part, and I shall always treasure it.

Yours sincerely,  
David Drew

# Struggling for Supremacy: The Libretto of *Mahagonny*

By David Drew

When news of the Weill-Brecht collaboration reached his publisher in Vienna, Emil Hertzka's first response was to warn Weill of the risks entailed in working with so individual a writer. The draft scenario of *Mahagonny*, which Weill sent him in December 1927, only confirmed his view. Hertzka told Weill that the material did not seem truly operatic. "I can set your mind at rest," replied Weill on 27 December, "if you're afraid that the piece derives in any way from the spoken theater."

After much effort, I've been so successful with Brecht that he's quite fascinated by the idea of writing a text for musical purposes. Day by day for three solid months I've worked with him on this libretto . . . and I've examined every word in terms of operatic requirements. Not for many years has there been a libretto so rigorously designed for music—and, what's more, for *my* music.<sup>1</sup>

Weill's two published references to his literary collaboration with Brecht on *Mahagonny* were (until the mid-1980s) studiously ignored by Brecht scholars, to whom the very idea that the libretto should be a joint work seems never to have occurred.<sup>2</sup> In the Brecht literature, and consequently in the more sophisticated sectors of the theatrical press until the late 1980s, there was a tendency to describe the libretto as a "play." Not surprisingly, it has, as such, been held in low repute: from an orthodox Brechtian point of view it was better to dismiss the "play" as one of Homer's nods than to hold Weill at least equally responsible for its shortcomings and hence to suggest that the master had stooped to collaborating on a mere libretto for so questionable a composer.

After Brecht's death and the subsequent revival and recording of the opera, there were rumors that the play was about to be rescued from the poisonously bourgeois charms of its score. Sure enough, a 50-minute "stage-version" was produced in 1963 by Brecht's Berliner Ensemble and widely applauded. Although entitled "Das kleine Mahagonny—nach dem Songspiel von 1927," it was a play, or rather a burlesque based on the opera libretto, but closing with a homily by Brecht dating from 1955 and contrasting the unending fight of "all against all" under capitalism with the fight of "all for all" which had helped certain peoples to establish "a socialist economy" abundantly favorable to the cause of peace—in short, a system that would replace "horror and fear" by "joy and hope."

In that worthy cause, the Ensemble music-directors dished up a few morsels from the *Songspiel* and the opera. Doused with ketchup and stripped of any intelligent nourishment, imaginative character, or structural purpose, these fragments happily sustained the production's view of Western consumerism and capitalist prostitution, while at the same time confirming the autarchy of the spoken text.

Paradoxically, the culinary nature of the enterprise and the amount of hard work it entailed served among other things to emphasize that the untouched libretto was literally unstageable as a spoken play. In that respect at least Brecht and Weill were no match

for Brecht's early admirer Hugo von Hofmannsthal: with express permission of Strauss's heirs, *Der Rosenkavalier* has in fact been staged, intact, as a spoken play.

A "great" libretto is a contradiction in terms. Good or bad, the indispensable ones are those that have made great operas possible: whether imaginative or mechanical, poetic or prosaic, they are at least sound enough to bear the weight of the composer's musico-dramatic invention. But there are others so defective in structure, sense, or style that a Beethoven—let alone a Weber—would be powerless to save them.

The *Mahagonny* libretto is neither good nor bad, but it is inspired. Like Begbick's lorry it has lost its shock-absorbers during its long and arduous retreat from the world of law and order. Backfiring vociferously, this ramshackle vehicle leaves the Girl of the Golden West far behind and arrives in a desert where no libretto and no opera has been before. First the engine boils over, then the brakes fail and finally the tank runs dry. There in the middle of a desert, it ends its journey, and yet, risible as it appears to be and useless as it certainly would be to any future explorer of the same region, it becomes the means whereby a city of a kind, and an opera of a kind, were built.

No libretto in the history of opera is more distinctive in tone and diction. Brecht alone was responsible for that and also, of course, for the few passages of pure poetry, some of which—like some of the less sophisticated lyrics—were written before the opera was thought of.

Everything that came direct from Brecht was flammable, and in Weill's musical imagination it ignited instantly. But this internal combustion was not on its own sufficient to make an opera. The work progresses because of the motor functions of its dramatic and moral content. How much of that came from Brecht and how much from Weill cannot be exactly determined. But there is no reason to suppose that Weill was exaggerating when he told Hertzka that apart from purely musical questions his main concern during the first three months of his work with Brecht was "to make the dramatic action (*Handlung*) as consistent, direct, and easily understandable as possible."<sup>3</sup> He succeeded only as far as the final scenario is concerned. The basic idea—the "City of Nets"—is strong, and the main line of development is worthy of it. Few opera librettos read better in synopsis form. But the execution of the libretto itself is often haphazard. While Weill deserves a share of the credit for the libretto's merits, he alone must be held ultimately responsible for its defects. He was under no obligation to accept the libretto as it stood, and there was ample time for him to have demanded or made many more revisions than he did.

Yet some measure of failure was inevitable. Brecht was not interested in conventional linear development and, in fact, had never mastered it. In that sense, the theory and practice of the Epic Theatre made a virtue of necessity. In 1936 he told Mordecai Gorelik that an Epic play must avoid being "well made" and that it must be "discursive, not incisive, in form—so much that the sequence of scenes could be rearranged without affecting the devel-

### A NOTE ON THIS ESSAY

No words can convey more persuasively or eloquently the extent of the loss that the death of David Drew means to Weill studies than his own. This previously unpublished essay comprises but a small section of a 165-page typescript chapter about *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, originally intended to be part of one of the “works” volumes in Drew’s mammoth “Kurt Weill: A Life and Works,” the length of which he once estimated at 950,000 words. Extensive annotations in his precise but sometimes almost indecipherable hand evince several layers of revision. Dated at its head, “1965/70. Minor subsequent revisions. Reread 20 Nov. 1994,” the draft documents its author’s attempt in the mid-1990s to salvage, in the wake of the impact of *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (1987), some of the “works” chapters as stand-alone critical volumes entitled “Kurt Weill at Work.” Drew had submitted this one, “1927-1933,” to the University of California Press for outside review. Though the two readers’ reports recommended acceptance for publication, both noted lacunae and the need for substantial revision and reorganization, thereby inadvertently encouraging Drew not to proceed along those lines but rather ultimately to abandon the endeavor yet again. Copying me on his response of 12 June 1995 to the press’s music editor (he had also sent me a copy of the submitted typescript), Drew answered one of the readers with characteristic, yet no less dismissive, diplomacy:

Helpful as your reader’s report has surely been to the California Press, its time has yet to come as far as I’m concerned. That time will be when I’ve finished the specific tasks I’ve set myself. Until then, a report recommending quite other tasks would only be a

distraction. It will therefore be filed under “Weill: future projects.” . . . In no sense am I trying to produce a “new” book – only a new edition of an old book which happens not to have been published. Even were the same fate to be in store for this version, I would finish it, and could only finish it, according to the original premises. However well-meaning, calls for this or that kind of restructuring will only be recorded, so to speak, on the long-term cassette of my answer-machine. Incidentally, the last time a manuscript of mine prompted a request for something more “tightly organized,” the result was a manuscript of nearly twice the length which I happily placed elsewhere. Rest assured, there will be no such rewriting of this volume or of its successors!

Indeed, in 1998 the project came down from the shelf yet again, this time in anticipation of the worldwide celebration of Weill’s centenary. Now reconceived non-chronologically, the new series was to begin with “Weill at 25,” continue with three volumes of “Kurt Weill and the Cities of the Plain,” and culminate in “Weill at 50.” My last late-night conversation with David in June focused on the necessity/feasibility of their completion.

We are deeply grateful to Judith Drew for her kind permission to publish this pearl, demonstrating how essential a task remains for his literal and intellectual heirs to ensure that David’s profound knowledge and insights are not buried with him. To that end, I have pledged both personal and institutional assistance in making sure that his literary work about Weill is preserved and made available, as appropriate, for future generations of performers, listeners, and scholars.

— Kim H. Kowalke

opment of the action.” The important thing, he continued, “was not the straining towards a climax but the cumulative effect of the scenes.”<sup>4</sup>

The form of the *Mahagonny* libretto is in some respects far removed from Brecht’s ideas about Epic Theatre and particularly from those he mentioned to Gorelik. The climaxes towards which it “strains” are conventionally placed according to the linear conventions of three-act structures. But this dramatic form—which successfully incorporates choric commentaries and the almost self-contained Epic form of the first three “tableaux” in Act II—is interrupted by the elements imported from the *Songspiel*. These are arbitrary in the literal sense that they represent the local victories of Brecht’s will in its conscious or unconscious struggle against the composer’s. They were part of the price Weill had to pay for Brecht’s collaboration and specifically for his acquiescence in a basic plot-structure that “involves the spectator.”

The second act, being more Epic than Dramatic in conception, was crucial for Brecht (as he implies in his notes). Had he been writing a play rather than a libretto, the sequence of the first three tableaux could indeed have been “rearranged without affecting the development of the action.” But once Weill had composed the sequence, its form was unalterable. Music, by its very nature, “strains towards a climax.” It begins to do so from the moment one note succeeds another. The larger and more continuous its formal spans, the more imperious become its formal demands.

The libretto owes its existence to a confidence trick that Weill played on his librettist with only partial success. Brecht had a life-long respect for intelligent professionals, particularly in disciplines other than his own, and Weill was the first notable musician he had encountered. It is easy to imagine his growing enthusiasm as he listened—for he was a good listener, and Weill, after years in the Busoni circle, may in this instance have been a persuasive talker—

to enthusiastic prophecies of what might be achieved in the musical theatre were the leading poet-dramatist of his generation to devote his talents to the task Weill had begun with “the great gentleman” Kaiser (who was scarcely a poet) and with Goll (who was scarcely a dramatist). Weill was quite clever enough to impress Brecht with unfamiliar ideas (some of which were Busoni’s) and cunning enough to flatter him into accepting them, at least for a while. Only thus could such a scenario have been agreed upon; and only thus could the text of Act I have taken the form it did. It was wholly to Weill’s advantage that Brecht began at a disadvantage. But as the novelty and the fascination began to wear off, Brecht must have become increasingly aware that he was working for Weill rather than Weill for him. His growing disillusionment is reflected in the very structure. While the first act is faithful to the principles of Dramatic Theatre and the second is a workable compromise between Dramatic and Epic forms, the third is a mere improvisation that lacks any controlling impulse.

In human terms, a collaboration that had begun with Weill asserting his rightful authority broke down because Brecht finally withdrew the steering-aids his partner needed. His withdrawal expressed itself in another form after the completion of the libretto early in 1928. During the two years that elapsed before the Leipzig premiere, Brecht showed little concern for the results of his labors. It was Weill who submitted to Universal Edition the final typescript libretto, which is corrected in his hand and appears to have been typed by him. It was Weill who handled the correspondence and negotiations. It was Weill who wrote the three introductory articles published before the premiere. Decisively, it was Weill who collaborated with Neher on the booklet of stage directions, briefed the Leipzig director, and supervised the rehearsals. No doubt Brecht was glad to be relieved of the chores and content to leave them in Weill’s more experienced hands. But that alone would not explain



why so possessive and exigent an artist should virtually have renounced responsibility for the production of a work that was partly his. If Brecht was inwardly preparing to dissociate himself from the work altogether, his experiences at Leipzig put an end to any such ideas.

In few respects can they have been welcome experiences. The atmosphere of an old provincial opera house, the semi-dictatorial powers granted to the *Generalmusikdirektor*, the primitive histrionics, the sheer weight of the operatic machinery—all this was alien to one who had been brought up in the modern *Kammerspiele* world. The revelation of the work he had helped create can hardly have reconciled him to such conditions. Any impressions he might have formed as Weill played and sang the score to him would have been almost as misleading as his memories—probably somewhat faded after three years—of the Baden-Baden *Songspiel* performances. Misleading, but also much more congenial than what he heard in Leipzig.

The combined effect of an operatic cast in full voice and of an orchestra very much larger than the bands he remembered from the *Songspiel*, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, and *Happy End* must have distressed him as much as the discovery that an extra dimension had been added to the music by the very nature of its scoring.

Brecht emerged from the premiere with little to be thankful for. True, the libretto had, after all, attracted more attention than the music; but that was customary, and in any case, the music alone had earned the work what little respect was accorded it. Even the scandal was of questionable value from the Marxist standpoint that Brecht had made his own in the two years since the completion of the libretto. While the merely outraged reactions of the “bourgeois” press and public were wholly to his present advantage, some of the more serious objections raised by the “liberal” critics were embarrassing, and all the Marxist ones gravely so.

To answer those who had accused him of frivolity and incompetence by disowning the work—as he had done with *Happy End* in anticipation of similar charges—would not have been inconsistent with his attitude toward the opera during the two years preceding the Leipzig premiere. But to answer them by providing a fashionably radical explanation for the libretto’s undeniable follies and to formulate that explanation in such a way as to make Weill appear the merest accessory to some purely experimental (and in no way artistic) purpose of his own—that was an altogether irresistible alternative. The result was the famous “Anmerkungen zur Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” which Brecht wrote with his friend Peter Suhrkamp and first published in August 1930, shortly before the important Frankfurt production of the work.<sup>5</sup>

Brecht ended the first section of his “Notes about the Opera” with the remark that “even if one wanted to start a discussion of opera—and of its function!—one would have to write an actual opera.” Such, the reader is then led to believe, was the origin of *Mahagonny*. Being an opera and therefore having to be sold for “evening entertainment,” the work is outwardly “as culinary as ever” and “just as culinary as an opera ought to be.” Yet it contains certain elements which put the spectator in a “moralizing frame of mind.” It thus opens up a discussion of the whole culinary principle, and attacks the society that needs such operas:

It still perches splendidly on the old bough, but at least it has started (out of absentmindedness or bad conscience) to saw it through. That’s what the innovations have achieved with their singing. Real innovations attack the roots.

Apart from a brief postscript (“For Innovations—Against Renovations!”) in which Brecht explains that *Mahagonny* was written two years before and that his subsequent works were more didactic and less culinary, the notes end with that unintentionally revealing image of the saw. A memory of his “absent-minded” agreement with Weill is contributing to his present bad conscience and adding zest to his work, as he now, and only now, begins to saw through the bough on which Weill had once made him sit and on which, as he well knew, Weill was still happily standing.

In the course of these lengthy notes, Weill’s name is mentioned only once, and then in passing. The snub was a purely incidental though doubtless gratifying consequence of Brecht’s main strategy. Brecht could not overtly refer to the views Weill had already published about opera in general and *Mahagonny* in particular without exposing everything his pretense of objectivity was designed to conceal. In order to regain “control” of the alienated product, he was compelled to attribute to its production certain attitudes and intentions that were exclusively his own. These Brecht could only invent, since the attitudes and intentions already defined by Weill were ones which he—however absent-mindedly—had once shared. Weill had made out that *Mahagonny* was a constructively innovative opera, indeed, a work of art, and a serious one. And so—even at the cost of denying himself credit for his own valuable contributions—Brecht depicted a *Mahagonny* that was unserious, inartistic, and deliberately destructive. Thereby he also accommodated past criticisms of the libretto and discouraged the kind of future investigations that might reveal his picture as the calculated falsification it was. In his notes he repeatedly insists that *Mahagonny* is “entertainment,” that it is just a “bit of fun” (with provocative implications). “Why is *Mahagonny* an opera?” he asks:

Because its basic attitude is that of an opera, namely culinary . . . (However) a certain irrationality, unreality and lack of seriousness was introduced at the right moment in order to strike with a double meaning.

A footnote to the latter sentence proves to be a diversionary irrelevance; the continuation of the main text sheds no light on the kind of double-meaning Brecht had in mind; and the question of how the “right” moment is determined in so chancy a context is shamelessly begged:

The irrationality which thus makes its appearance is only suitable for the occasion of which it appears. Such an attitude is purely hedonistic (*schlechtweg genießerisch*).

Criticism of the “genießerisch” attitudes of opera composers and audiences in previous eras had been one of the features of an important article Weill had published in 1929; following his teacher Busoni, he had expressly identified his own operatic output with the intellectual and moral reaction against such attitudes.

Had Brecht been rash enough to enter into a public controversy with his composer, he would have lost everything he hoped to gain with his “Notes.” Ironically enough, the “free discussion” of content and function which Brecht claimed was “completely excluded in the old operas” is excluded no less completely by his own notes, and for a reason similar to the one he gives. To gratify himself and reassure his doubting audience, to cast a spell and promote illusions—that is the very essence of his pseudo-didactic enterprise. His notes are as cooked-up, as culinary, as could be. They are designed to inhibit free discussion because such a discussion could



easily lead to the discovery that their *real* content is wounded pride and their real function is to discredit if not demolish Weill's work.

It may seem strange that an act of sabotage unparalleled in the history of operatic collaboration went undetected at the time. But Brecht's success was the result of superb planning based on two probabilities; first, that the credence given to an author's pronouncements will increase in proportion to the apparent modesty of his claims (e.g., "just a bit of fun"); secondly, that his readers, finding no sign of discord, would assume that he was speaking on Weill's behalf and would therefore not trouble to check on what Weill had previously written (even if they knew where to look for it). It was a shrewd gamble, and for many years it paid off. Since his death Brecht's Notes have been quoted or alluded to in innumerable books, articles, and program notes. For at least twenty-five years it was almost universally assumed that Weill was either at one with them, or that his own views were unworthy of mention.

London, 8 May 1970

Dear Lys,

thank you so much for your kind and full letter of 30 April. Although I'd guessed that Lenya was enmeshed in the *Mahagonny* affair, I was getting increasingly worried, so it's been a great relief to receive news and to know that at least a decision has been reached by the arbitration board. It must have been *hell* for you both.

Until now, I've seen nothing of the press reports, though I've heard of them from the composer Alexander Goehr, who's been teaching in the States and came back here for a premiere. It was he who "conducted" our production of the *Mahagonny-Songspiel* and so, for that reason and also because his father knew and admired Weill, he was particularly interested and concerned. "I just can't understand," he said, "why it's only poor Weill who gets treated in this way. No one would dare to treat much lesser composers with such disrespect; and if they dared lay so much as a finger on Stravinsky or Berg's texts, they'd rightly be lynched. Why does it happen?" Oddly enough, Lenya had posed that very question in one of her last letters to me, and I'd already discussed it with Christopher Shaw, who is one of the most scrupulous musicians and human-beings I know. Our main conclusion stemmed from the fact that because of the special importance Weill attached to his librettos, his works tend to fall into the hands of people who are more interested in theatre, drama, or literature, than in music. By definition, none of these enthusiasts are particularly musical—which isn't their fault!—and many of them are downright unmusical. Consequently, all they can really *hear* are Weill's tunes (that is, the more obviously popular ones); and since these tunes—unlike Stravinsky's, let alone Berg's—have certain resemblances to old-time Pop, those who hear them simply *as* tunes cannot understand why the tunes shouldn't be arranged, pulled about, or even obliterated just as Pop tunes are. Form, harmony and orchestration being beyond their ken, they don't recognize the difference between a tune and a composition, they can't see Weill's work as an integral whole, and they have neither the instinct nor the training that would tell them that fidelity to the intentions of a real composer (rather than a mere song-writer) is the interpreter's highest duty.

Wretched as this whole affair has been for you, I believe that

## Notes

[1.] Reprinted in Kurt Weill, *Briefwechsel mit der Universal Edition*, ed. N. Grosch (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2002), 98.

2. "Aktuelles Theater" (*Melos* 8, no. 12 [August 1929], 524–27; reprinted in Kurt Weill, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. D. Drew [Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1975], 45–49), and "Anmerkungen zu meiner Oper *Mahagonny*" (*Die Musik* 12, no. 6 [March 1930], 440–41; reprinted in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, 56–57). This claim is borne out by the authors' publishing contract with Universal Edition, according to which Brecht received two-thirds and Weill one-third of authors' royalties from libretto sales. No share was allotted either to Elisabeth Hauptmann or to Caspar Neher, who in Brecht's *Versuche* edition are listed together with Weill as "Mitarbeiter" for the libretto.

[3.] Weill, letter to Hertzka, 27 December 1927 (see note 1).

[4.] As recalled by Gorelik in his article "Brecht: 'I Am the Einstein of the New Stage Form . . .'" *Theatre Arts* 41, no. 3 (March 1957), 86.

[5.] Originally published as "Zur Soziologie der Oper—Anmerkungen zu *Mahagonny*," *Musik und Gesellschaft* 1, no. 4 (August 1930), 105–12.

some good may come of it. If the producers had got away with their "crime," as you call it, if, in other words, their production had been successful or, worse still, a "hit" in its own terms, it would indeed have been a disaster for the work and for Weill. But in the present circumstances, a natural and healthy reaction to the outrage seems bound to follow. A clean start becomes possible.

In that sense, I was much interested by your news that Kurt Adler was present. Some months ago, Gunther Schuller wrote to me saying that he and Adler were passionately keen to do *Mahagonny* at the San Francisco Opera, and asking whether the rights were free. I told him about the planned NY production, and replied that as far as I knew, all rights were tied up. Presumably they will remain so until the Capalbo production packs up. But then?

If Adler was as incensed as you by the NY production, he must surely be aware that to mount an authentic production on the highest artistic level would be a major *coup* for his company. Such a production could then lead to many others throughout the States. Since the work doesn't require very large forces or a complicated staging—Weill even said that it could be done on a bare stage with a few props and the projections—there should be numerous organisations in the States that could cope with it. In the long run, the income from such productions could be substantial. But lasting success of that kind would, I think, depend on the licensing conditions for each and every production. I'm a great believer in the adage "Give an inch and they'll take a mile"; and obviously that now applies to *Mahagonny* with peculiar force. The NY experience suggests that the only way of assuring a minimum standard is to impose the same conditions as apply to the performance of any major copyright opera. That's to say, *Mahagonny* should be performed only by those organisations that have *all* the resources required by the composer. Although in theory one could get more productions if one was less strict, in practice a series of sub-standard productions would be self-defeating, because the work's reputation would be degraded and reputable organisations could lose interest. At any rate, that's my feeling. If I'm right, such a policy—however annoying to "enthusiastic" amateur and *ad hoc* companies—would be as much in Stefan Brecht's interests as Lenya's. [. . .]

Yours ever, David



David Drew and Kim Kowalke  
in London, 12 June 2009.  
Photo: Benjamin Newing

## David Drew: Für Weill!

*By Kim H. Kowalke*

We first met in July 1974. I had passed my qualifying exams the previous fall but was still casting about for a dissertation topic. The Yale Repertory Theatre's productions of the *Mahagonny Songspiel*, *Seven Deadly Sins*, and *Happy End* (in new translations by Michael Feingold) had hooked me on Weill already in my first year in New Haven. And during the 1973/74 season I had spent far too much time on the fringes of the Rep's quite wonderful full-length *Mahagonny*, as well as poolside for Sondheim's *Frogs*. I think it was Feingold who advised that if I were serious about a thesis on Weill, I should contact David Drew, who reportedly had been working on a "life and works" for a long time already. I can't recall how I managed to contact him, but his response of 23 June stated that my letter of 7 May had just then reached him. Written on stationery identifying him as the "General Administrator of the European Office of The Estate of Kurt Weill," his letter suggested that we meet during his upcoming trip to New York. Following his instructions, at the appointed hour I rang the doorbell of an apartment on East 55th Street, whose occupant was listed as Karoline Detwiler. I was totally unprepared for Lenya to open the door herself. "You must be Mr. Kowalke. What kind of ice cream do you like? I go get some while you and David talk." She did, and we did—for more than four hours. Actually, David talked, I listened intently, Lenya popped in and out. After a tour de force summary of Weill reception and historiography, including the status of his own work, he suggested that a dissertation on Weill's harmonic language would be extremely valuable and cited a daunting list of works to be studied, many of

which I had never heard of, much less heard. He volunteered to make sure that I would have access to scores, but I remember going back to New Haven utterly depressed. I told my girlfriend (now wife, Liz) that I was giving up on Weill. There was no point. I know nothing; he knows everything.

David and I last met in June of this year, only a fortnight short of thirty-five years from the date of his first letter. This time he had requested the meeting: could I come to London to attend the all-star concert *Dreigroschenoper* at the Barbican conducted by his discovery and our now mutual friend Nali Gruber: "I so much hope that you can somehow manage to be here in June. Privately as well as officially." I sensed some urgency in David's invitation, so I made the trip. I arrived to learn that his wife Judy had just broken both wrists in a terrible fall and was in hospital. Nevertheless, he declared, obviously under considerable strain, we would grab every available minute. And we did, at dinner one night with Nali (fretting over the dramaturgy of the sequencing of the anticipated encores), and over too many glasses of good cabernet into the wee hours each night at Favart Road.

Little had changed in thirty-five years. He still sometimes stopped mid-sentence to retreat unaware into his own internal arena or paused to scribble something into the pocket notebook he always carried. When his thoughts got especially conflicted or complicated, the glasses came off, he rubbed his eyes far too energetically, and groaned or sighed a prolonged vowel, ending in a sustained "Well . . ." or "Ha!" that was invariably followed by a sardonic climactic

chuckle. I may have contributed a bit more to the conversation in 2009 than in 1974, asked more informed questions, better appreciated the concealed connections he alone could uncover. But mostly I just listened in awe and learned, as I always did from David's impromptu tutorials. He confided his worry that his rapidly deteriorating eyesight (glaucoma) would prevent him from finishing his work—not just the continuously morphing Weill volumes but the nearly completed monographs on Wagner-Régeny (“so crucial for imagining how German music might have developed with Weill and without Hitler”) and Walter Leigh (“though Weill is never mentioned, it's all about him”). David admitted that he was having a terrible time writing—a month without a sentence worth keeping (one that met his high standard of both sense and rhythm), he said without a trace of self-pity. I recall our final embrace before I got into the cab, as well as my thoughts as I returned to the hotel: David is the most prodigious intellect I've ever encountered. He still knows everything (and everybody), and he is still my mentor. Even better, over the years he had also become my friend.

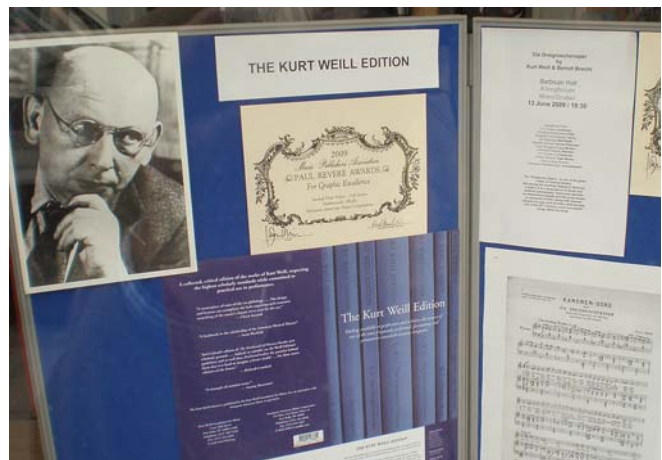
That development came neither quickly nor easily, as the trust and respect required for such a friendship had to be earned. In the late '70s, after his ouster from the Foundation's board, Lenya's alleged reservations about the “life” section of the critical biography, and the entry of Margo Harris and Gottfried Wagner into her inner circle, David's resentment, suspicions, and sense of betrayal understandably put him on guard. As late as 1986, his doubts about my own role in those events disappeared from the draft of the preface to his *Handbook* only after I protested gingerly and showed him evidence that I was not involved. Bringing him back into the Foundation fold necessitated a lengthy, escalating process, first as my unofficial advisor, then as a grants evaluator, member of the International Advisory Council and the Editorial Board of the Kurt Weill Edition, and finally as one of just two honorary trustees. Even if their chairs couldn't be placed next to one another, succeeding in having seats labeled Symonette and Drew at the Weillian table must count as one of the diplomatic achievements of my presidency.

Though invariably polite and kindly to a fault, privately David did not suffer fools gladly, and he reserved special disdain for charlatans and ideologues. I recall my first visit to his office at Boosey & Hawkes in 1983, when he played a recording of Gruber's *Frankenstein!!* and casually asked what I thought of it. I had no idea that this was one of his standard litmus tests determining eligibility for one of the categories above. I must have passed. Subsequently he did not confine my education to matters Weill: I was his guest in Vienna for lunch with Gottfried von Einem and Kurt Schwertsik, in Cologne for the premiere of Steve Reich's *Desert Music*, in London for the Eisler festival that he had masterminded, at the Red House in Aldeburgh for a weekend of Britten. I count among my fondest memories our afternoon retreats to sidetrack kellers along the Rhine, long strategic conversations as we walked the countryside of Mülheim, and the inevitable event post-mortems that always lasted far into the night.

To say that I admired David's critical acumen and vast knowledge would be an understatement, but what most impressed me was his prodigious musicality and inner ear, which enabled him to grasp in an armchair the most complex new score but also prevented him from enjoying most performances or recordings, as they rarely lived up to the idealized one only he could imagine. The challenge of gaining his approval acquired the outsized *Doktorvater* dimensions so eloquently articulated by Richard Taruskin in his review of the *Handbook* in these pages: Drew's ability to “open up vistas of musical and cultural history, to cope unerringly with aesthetic questions

others fumble or evade, to bring the composer's personality vividly into focus, and to keep the reader at all times entranced with prose that for grace, wit and lucidity is (or ought to be) the despair of his colleagues and rivals.” Yet I surely never presumed to think of myself as his rival, and I invariably read David's prose with delight, not despair. In fact, I don't think I managed to declare my own scholarly independence until the mid-'90s, when I dedicated to him, for his 65th birthday, an article about *Street Scene* and the “two Weills”: “Although in its writing I could always hear your subtle and gentle admonitions of the dangers and traps that lurk along the trail I'm pursuing, and, as you will see, your influence stands behind every line, most especially when I dare to disagree, I hope that it finally lives up to the expectations of a model and mentor I respect and value above all others.” The tone and content of David's prompt note of acknowledgment was characteristic: “You deserve to be congratulated as much by those who disagree with you here and there as by those who don't. (As for your disagreements with me, they are nothing compared to my own disagreements with myself.)” As always, what David didn't say spoke volumes.

Although we Weillians have lost our Dean and I my friend and mentor, I take comfort in having had the privilege of working with David for the last thirty-five years in our shared commitment “für Weill!” Of the many memories of implementing that imperative, one of my favorites occurred during our last visit. I had invited David to join my meeting with Ben Newing and colleagues at Universal Edition. When he arrived late morning, I noted that David could barely contain his delight, and during a brief hiatus in our meeting he quietly inquired whether I had seen the shop window display when I entered the building. I told him that I'd only glanced at the impressive array of Weilliana before being buzzed upstairs. “Why?” I inquired. “You'll see,” he responded cryptically. We adjourned for lunch shortly thereafter, and on our exit we all stopped to admire the window: the newest volumes of the Edition, the facsimile and critical edition of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, the latest Paul Revere Award certificates for graphic and design excellence, a recent *Newsletter* with a particularly benign picture of Weill on its cover. But only now did I notice that scowling from its position at the display's left center was a photograph not of Weill, but another “Brecht composer”—Hanns Eisler. In that instant of supreme Drewian irony, David and I convulsed in spasms of laughter, which Ben captured on camera. It would be our final photograph together. I will treasure that last precious moment of shared glee—a reminder both of what David achieved and what remains to be done “for Weill” to do honor to his memory.





## Recordings

### *Street Scene*

Hollywood Bowl concert performance  
Izler Solomon, conductor

Naxos 8.120885

In the sixty-two years since *Street Scene* ended its disappointingly short run at the Adelphi Theatre in New York, much has been written about this ultimate flowering of Weill's American dreams. For many Eurocentric critics and musicologists, *Street Scene* was a curiosity and perhaps something of an embarrassment. Despite the steadfast commitment to the work shown by Julius Rudel and the New York City Opera, other hands created performing versions that eliminated the Broadway-pop music, for example, as a kind of favor to this great and humane composer. Articles in the most prestigious journals referred slightly to Weill's attempts to be American, to be accepted, to be "cool."

Lenya once told me about the powerful impact of hearing the dress rehearsal of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* when she and Weill arrived in New York City. (Who could have arranged such a perfect happenstance?) That certainly proved a point to Weill—one he had been pursuing from the moment he left behind the harmonically ambiguous and barely recognizable-as-Weill works, like *Der Protagonist*. Each new American work would use longer and more complex musical numbers until Weill and his audience were ready for an opera.

In spite of the initial commercial failure of *Porgy and Bess*, many composers took the hint and either expanded their musical language or wrote operas intended for performance in a Broadway theater (which is still a good idea). Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* had its American premiere in a Broadway theater. Menotti was writing operas specifically for Broadway houses. Stravinsky, it is said, hoped his *Rake's Progress* would premiere at the Martin Beck Theatre (where, later in the 1950s, *Candide*—a brilliant and subconscious homage—did play). Even Broadway composers tried it out, like Frank Loesser's *Most Happy Fella*, or Rodgers and Hammerstein pushing their envelope about as far as it could go with *Carousel*, just two

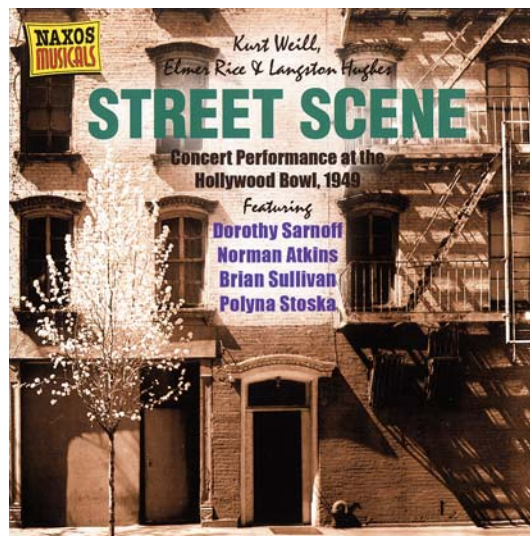
years before *Street Scene* opened on 9 January 1947.

Lenya recalled the rhapsodic reaction of the critics and the public to *Finian's Rainbow*, which opened the same week as *Street Scene*. "That's when we knew we were sunk," she said. She was right, of course. If Weill had written *Street Scene* when he first wanted to, a decade earlier, or it had appeared for the first time in the mid-1950s, when *West Side Story* was capturing a darker view of urban life, the public reaction might have been quite different.

Weill adapted *Street Scene*'s score for the original cast album on Columbia Records. He prided himself on having created a recorded continuity of his score, though he was forced to leave more than half of it on the cutting room floor. Later, there would be concert adaptations, usually lasting about an hour, heard at New York's YMHA, then Lewisohn Stadium and, on 20 August 1949, at the Hollywood Bowl.

Naxos has edited and released the Bowl performance, which was broadcast on American Armed Forces Radio and preserved on 16-inch transcription disks. Two members of the original cast, Polyna Stoska (Anna Maurant) and Brian Sullivan (Sam) are joined by Dorothy Sarnoff (Rose), Norman Atkins (Frank) and an ensemble of singers who play various roles and act as a chorus. The unnamed orchestra (probably members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and others) is conducted by Izler Solomon.

I would like to praise this release, but its pleasures are few and far between. Most of the music can be heard on the Broadway cast recording, and the perfect tempos of Maurice Abravanel and the excellent playing of his orchestra are on an entirely different level from the Bowl performance. Solomon cannot find the right tempo for the elevated train music in the prelude. Occasionally he is unable to control and/or accompany his singers, who rush or slow down in alarming ways. I can certainly sympathize with the difficulties of performing at the great outdoor amphitheater, where rehearsal time is minimal, the night air chills the vocal cords, and it can be difficult for everyone to hear each other. Nonetheless, the listener will be disappointed to find the vocal ensemble off-mike at the start of several sections because the engineers were not following the score and turned the microphones on too late.



Dorothy Sarnoff sounds beautiful, but she either forgets the vocal line or rewrites it when it doesn't suit her. Words are changed, like "A sprig with its flower *me* break" instead of Whitman's "A sprig with its flower I break." And worst of all, the dialogue that precedes the great Act Two trio ("Pop. There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about") is spoken over the peppy music at the end of the prelude to Act Two, where the policeman and the milkman share a jolly morning greeting.

Are there pleasures to be found? Well, yes. Sullivan is in great, stentorian voice. Stoska sings a magnificent "A Boy Like You." Sarnoff is lovely and Atkins is impressive. But when the crash cymbal player comes in too early in the finale when he hears the first "Don't know what I'm gonna CRASH! do-oo-oo" followed by "Don't know what I'm gonna do CRASH!", one concludes that this is a historic performance that might best have remained in an archive.

**John Mauceri**  
New York City

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John Mauceri is the Chancellor of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and Founding Conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra. He has conducted major productions of many Weill works, including *Der Weg der Verheißung*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Der Protagonist*, and seven productions of *Street Scene*, including its first complete recording and its staged premieres in the UK, Italy, and Portugal.

## Recordings

### *The Threepenny Opera*

1976 Public Theatre cast recording

*Sony Masterworks Broadway 51520*

Like most of the more than 750,000 theatergoers who saw Marc Blitzstein's adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* during its record-breaking run at the Theater de Lys from 1955–1961, Joseph Papp, producer of the New York Shakespeare Festival, was enthralled. "It was one of the moving theatrical experiences of my life," he recalled. In the late 1960s, after he had produced *Hair*, he was determined to present a new version of *Threepenny*. He undertook what became a long and frustrating negotiation with Lotte Lenya and Brecht's son Stefan to obtain the rights; Stefan finally agreed on one condition: Richard Foreman, the head of the experimental Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, would direct.

Using a translation by Ralph Manheim and John Willett that is more down-and-dirty than Blitzstein's, Papp's production of *Threepenny Opera* opened uptown at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center on 1 May 1976, and ran for 306 performances. Sony has recently reissued the shipshape original cast recording, which brings out the distinctive Weill-Brecht flavor far better than Foreman's misconceived production. No doubt following Papp's perception about *Threepenny Opera*, "a horrendous reminder of the days and the climate that brought [Hitler] to power," Foreman transformed the satirical, frolic-

some 1928 original—the collaboration of two sly young men eager to debunk the pieties of their elders—into a portentous doomsday allegory. He placed the work's buoyant, vital characters in an end-of-days mise-en-scène; apocalypse was the production's visual leitmotif. He had the actors move like robots and made them up to look like ghostly, hollow-eyed figures from a nightmarish German Expressionist painting. "They ruined it," Lenya said. "It was humorless—no charm, no naughtiness, no sex."

The production betrayed the show in another way: the Beaumont Theatre itself, with its vast stage and the modern severity of its architecture, was an inappropriate setting for Weill's and Brecht's beggar's opera, which was far more at home downtown on Christopher Street on the cramped stage of the style-free Theater de Lys. Original cast recordings measure the difference between the two productions. In the legendary 1954 recording, Samuel Matlowky led an eight-piece band (increased from the original seven in 1928) with musicians playing a variety of instruments. The performance is modest, homemade, spiky yet somehow innocent, and filled with all the wrong and sour notes, the sudden rhythmic changes and interruptions that Weill intended. And for the most part the singing, as Weill also intended, is appealingly amateurish, performed by actors who can sing only a little bit and are no better than they need to be. Nobody pushes, nobody performs as if they are presenting a world classic.

With fourteen musicians (increased from eleven in the production) playing 23 instruments under the direction of Stanley Silverman, the 1976 cast recording has a richer, more full-bodied sound. And at times, especially in the show's three operetta finales, performed with an augmented chorus, the recording attains an aura of genuine opera as opposed to subversive anti-opera. Yet the recording reveals something important about the performances at the Beaumont. Once the actors began to sing Weill's vibrant, jaunty, sarcastic music and Brecht's rude lyrics, the score itself pushed Foreman's solemn directorial impositions into the wings. And so the production added another level to the separation of elements that Brecht and Weill had built into their work: Foreman's staging and his handling of spoken language were alienated from the musical performance in ways the creators had not accounted for.

Raul Julia acted Macheath as a burnt-out case sexually and emotionally, a zombie. But when he sings, whether in sly comic numbers or in the straight, no-joking songs in Act III, where Weill's musical signature changes from parody to pathos, the traces of his misguided performance are banished. When he attacks the sudden lurches from rage to repentance in "Ballad in which Macheath Begs All Men for Forgiveness," he's thrilling. Julia has a too-polished, pitch-perfect voice with an irresistible Broadway vibrato, but only a curmudgeon could complain. In the 1954 recording Lotte Lenya as Jenny inhabited her songs, whereas Ellen Greene in 1976 performs them—powerfully, in a strong voice that nonetheless doesn't (how could it?) have Lenya's sandpapery tones or her trademark insouciance, the equivalent of today's "whatever." Greene works hard and capably to pump dark meanings into "Pirate Jenny," the show's momentous revenge aria. And she ends both "Pirate Jenny" and the ineffably sardonic "Solomon Song" in mid-air, as Weill intended, so that both meaning and melody linger insinuatingly. She and Julia perform the sprightly, sadomasochistic "Ballad of Immoral Earnings" with a raunchiness that is true to Weill and Brecht's bad-boy high spirits rather than Foreman's stifling grimness.

Despite Manheim and Willett's profane lyrics, the "Jealousy Duet" in 1976 as sung by Caroline Kava and Blair Brown has less punch than in 1954, when Beatrice Arthur's near-baritone rubbed caustically against Jo Sullivan's lyric soprano. "Wedding Song for the Less Well-Off" also lacks the bite of the gruff, insulting 1954 version.

Nonetheless, in essential ways the 1976 cast album keeps faith with the creators. The startling instrumentation, the play between the spoken and the sung word, the clipped rhythms, the broken phrases, the lancing yet annealing wit of music and lyrics—all are handled crisply, authoritatively, with deep respect and affection. Released from an overzealous production, the score on its own sails, and Weill and Brecht claim the last hurrah.

**Foster Hirsch**  
New York



Foster Hirsch is the author of *Kurt Weill on Stage: From Berlin to Broadway*.

## Books

### *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations*

Steven Suskin

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, viii, 664 pp.  
ISBN: 978-0-19-530947-8

The single most confounding yet enduring myth about Broadway musicals is that their music is composed by the person credited on the playbill. “Music by” almost invariably means that only the barest outlines of the song tunes, and perhaps a little of their harmony, were written by the credited “composer.” Many sophisticated theatergoers have no real grasp of the extent to which the scores of musicals are manufactured by a team of arrangers and orchestrators working from a thin filament of lead sheets or sketchy demo tapes, and only occasionally from a fully textured piano score.

Even Broadway’s most celebrated tunesmiths have been in denial when this imposture is exposed. Richard Rodgers’s only original composition lasting half an hour, the 1939 ballet *Ghost Town* (commissioned by the Ballet Russe), was dismissed by esteemed dance critic John Martin as a “musical comedy without singing.” Indeed, heard today, about all that strikes the ear about *Ghost Town* is the very colorful orchestration by Hans Spialek, who worked mightily to enhance what sound like tunes for a cartoon soundtrack. Yet Rodgers was so annoyed when some newspaper critics took note of the orchestration that he never hired Spialek again.

Steven Suskin has intrepidly stepped into this breach to tell the world the real story of how Broadway’s music was created during Broadway’s golden age from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s. Suskin’s book is a tour de force of investigatory *sitzfleisch*. He scrutinized 550 orchestral scores, interviewed surviving musical luminaries, and searched out both published and unpublished writings by the orchestrators. His book has remarkably detailed mini-biographies of dozens of the most important orchestrators and arrangers. Suskin lists full musical staff credits for almost every show during the period, with the orchestrator identified not only for each song but sometimes for each section of a song; frequently he also lists the exact instrumentation of the pit band (hallelujah!). He enlivens these listings with consistently informative, often wickedly funny backstage anecdotes, and successfully conveys the difficulties orchestrators faced: “Don [Walker] and Red [Ginzler] . . . could sit down at 5 a.m. in a hotel room, with pen and ink, on a makeshift desk, with no piano, and write” (pp. 77–78). He also gamely tries to explain the whole process from song to arrangement to orchestration in layman’s terms, but I found this section slightly less rewarding.

Suskin says German-born arranger-turned-music publisher Max Dreyfus (1874–1964) “set the blueprint for the business of Broadway orchestration” (p. 11). Through Dreyfus’s practice of advancing producers the costs of orchestration and copying, and signing orchestrators to exclusive contracts, T. B. Harms (Dreyfus’s company) by the early 1930s became, in the words of orchestrator

Don Walker, “a musical factory with a production line” (p. 15) and essentially cornered the market on Broadway orchestration until the 1950s. When composers Vincent Youmans and Vernon Duke rebelled against the Dreyfus operation, their Broadway careers floundered. And a production line it was, much like composing and orchestrating Hollywood soundtracks: according to Suskin’s research, only about ten percent of Broadway musicals were orchestrated even primarily by the orchestrator credited on the playbill. Ninety percent of the time, multiple ghost composers divided the labor of a show’s orchestration. *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) had ten orchestrators; *A Chorus Line* (1975) had nine. In some shows as many as five orchestrations of the same song were written, paid for, and thrown out. More often than not, individual numbers are the patchwork of several orchestrators, even from bar to bar. Of all the scores Suskin studied, he found that only fourteen were copied out in a single hand. Between *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), he found only two shows orchestrated by a single person: *The Sound of Music* (1959, Robert Russell Bennett) and *Tenderloin* (1961, Irwin Kostal).

Suskin amply demonstrates the mutability of the orchestration for most shows, noting that while the revised partitur at the end of a show’s run often gets preserved, it is frequently different from the partitur used at the show’s opening. (He uses “partitur,” an unnecessarily fancy word, to mean “the complete vocal/orchestra score.”) Frequently, full scores were reconfigured after the Broadway opening for national tours because musicians in other towns couldn’t double on as many instruments; revivals tend to use these charts. Likewise, “it was not uncommon to prepare special charts for the recording session. . . . The version of ‘I’ll Know’ heard on the 1950 [*Guys and Dolls*] album is totally different from the partitur (and the published vocal score). It is guessed that [George] Bassman’s chart was replaced shortly after the post-opening recording with a new one by [Ted] Royal” (p. 411). Suskin even reproduces a letter from Don Walker reporting that the arrangement of “Zip!” on the September 1950 album of *Pal Joey* conducted by Lehman Engel was by neither Spialek nor Walker, but was jammed live by the players! Perhaps these practices explain two transposition anomalies on original cast recordings of Weill shows: on *Street Scene*, Anne Jeffreys sings (and the orchestra plays) “What Good Would the Moon Be?” in D-flat, a whole step lower than the published vocal score’s E-flat key; on *Lost in the Stars*, Todd Duncan sings, and the orchestra plays, “Thousands of Miles” in D-flat, a half-step higher than the partitur’s C major.

Suskin’s book particularly celebrates Broadway orchestrators who came out of jazz and swing band writing. Thus *West Side Story* (Irwin Kostal and Sid Ramin, supervised by Bernstein) and *Gypsy* (Ramin and Red Ginzler) are the two scores whose orchestration Suskin examines the most thoroughly. But not every show he cites with fabulous big band-style charts is invariably a show of artistic distinction. Still, Don Walker, a great reed-and-brass arranger who could do any style, emerges as the hero of the book more than Russell Bennett, whom Suskin types as a strings-legit orchestrator. Yet Bennett’s own orchestration of “The Saga of Jenny” (for his 1949 Symphonic Nocturne compiled from *Lady in the Dark*) manages to be bluesy without saxes and ingeniously discovers new colors in a tune that is not Weill’s best. (In 1979, looking at a mess of a band chart I had created as a student, Jack Elliott, a sometime Broadway arranger who worked mostly in TV and films, strongly urged me to travel to Pennsylvania to study with Walker.)

Similarly, Suskin suggests that Hugh Martin (alive at this writing at 95) invented Broadway vocal arranging with his Boswell



Sisters-style jazzing of the vocal trio “Sing For Your Supper” in *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938). But what about Irving Berlin’s uptempo quodlibet song “Play a Simple Melody” from his 1914 show *Watch Your Step* or the Gershwin’s jazzy quodlibet “Mine” from the 1933 *Let ‘Em Eat Cake*, among other antecedents? What about the fact that, before original cast albums existed, the Victor Light Opera Company recorded show music wholly in vocal arrangement in the 1910s? Suskin seems to regard all non-jazz multi-part choral writing as operetta-ish and thus not vocal arranging. And Irwin Kostal, a marvelous orchestrator (have you ever heard the overture to *Tenderloin?*), recalled deliberately avoiding writing harmony parts for a dancing vocal ensemble. On the other hand, every one of Weill’s eight Broadway shows has elaborate vocal arrangements by the composer that are not merely decorative but dramatize the book. He rarely set his Broadway vocal ensembles in unison and only infrequently arranged the voices in block harmony. Usually he had the voices going in some kind of polyphony, but it didn’t sound like operetta (check out the Wedding Dream from *Lady in the Dark*, for instance).

Since Weill did nearly all of his own orchestrating, Suskin has little to say about him, but his case is surely worth considering. We already knew that Weill used Ted Royal to help finish the orchestrations for *The Firebrand of Florence*, and for a couple of numbers in *Lady in the Dark* and *Street Scene*, and that Irving Schlein handled a few numbers for *Love Life* and one for *Lost in the Stars*, but Suskin also claims to have found evidence that Agnes de Mille brought in Russell Bennett to touch up a few bars for *One Touch of Venus*. Suskin dutifully notes that the reason Leonard Bernstein, Marc Blitzstein, and a few others fully capable of orchestration entrusted it to others was that they didn’t have time to do the necessary rewriting and reorchestrating during rehearsals. But that doesn’t account for the true extent of Weill’s labors. Weill composed all the tunes; composed all the incidental material normally supplied by arrangers and orchestrators, including underscoring, scene changes, and ballets; was entirely his own vocal arranger (another function almost always farmed out, as Suskin notes); orchestrated virtually everything himself; and single-handedly reorchestrated every transposition necessitated by rehearsal changes. (Weill orchestrated rapidly and occasionally little things slipped by him: in *Firebrand* at bar 240 of the song “You Have to Do What You Do Do,” flute 1 changes to piccolo in a single quarter-note rest.) Nobody else has ever done all that for fourteen straight years and eight musicals on Broadway. Victor Herbert came close, but he was assisted by orchestrators Otto Langey and Harold Sanford. One wonders if part of the reason may have been financial: the orchestrator’s fee may have functioned as a kind of salary for Weill while he was preparing a show. Suskin quotes Irwin Kostal saying he made as much as \$1,500 in a twelve-hour time span ghosting for Don Walker in the 1950s, “usually from ten at night to ten the next morning” (\$1,500 in 1955 would be about \$12,000 today). Walker was paid \$21,371 in 1956 (\$167,483.71 in 2009 dollars) to orchestrate Frank Loesser’s music-heavy *The Most Happy Fella*, which gives us some idea of what Weill might have earned over and above his share as composer.

Weill, of course, transposed in his head and with his pen. Today all arranging and copying is computerized. Today’s New York copyists don’t even have to transpose, because the arranger/orchestrator writes a transposed pitch score. (The first question Victor Herbert asked a young Hans Spialek in 1924 was, “Do you copy?” The second question: “Do you transpose?” [p. 90].) But computerized transposition is useful if an understudy, say, has to sing a song

down a third and the copyist only needs to push a button. Today music notation software does that for the Broadway copyist. No pushbuttons existed for Bennett or Weill in the 1940s.

I have a few minor quibbles. Suskin doesn’t emphasize sufficiently that the orchestrator usually had to arrange (i.e., harmonize, devise countermelodies, etc.) primitive lead sheets even before they could be orchestrated. The author repeatedly uses terms of the orchestrator’s trade he never properly defines, leaving the reader to deduce the meaning from context. But what, *exactly*, are incidentals and routing? He does define stock arrangements, and makes clear what utilities were (arrangements of each chorus of a song in which each orchestral choir was self-sufficient and could be extracted at will), but then muddies the waters by stating utilities were “arrangements devised to be plugged in for scene changes, incidentals, and other gaps calling for musical accompaniment” (p. 204)—what gaps?—and on page 306 confusingly implies that a conductor’s full score and the partitur are not synonymous. The index is arranged by proper name only, leaving the reader at sea if he’s trying to look up generic terms like utilities, incidentals, routing, or stock arrangements. He writes, “Trained composers like Styne or Loewe were more likely to be interested in the overture than people like Meredith Willson or Jerry Herman, who were glad to leave it in an arranger’s hands” (p. 210), but Willson was both a legit composer (of two symphonies) and a skilled dance band arranger (for the Burns and Allen Show on radio in the 1940s). Suskin neglects to mention Blitzstein’s orchestrations for *The Cradle Will Rock*, or the fascinating 1948 *Ballet Ballads*, scored by its composer Jerome Moross, a seasoned Hollywood orchestrator; although the original productions of both were performed with piano, revivals used the composers’ orchestrations. He also fails to put Raymond Scott’s 1946 *Lute Song* in the category of single-handedly orchestrated shows, and he could say more about Leroy Anderson’s charts for his own *Goldilocks* or mention that Anderson had written an entire score for *Wonderful Town* that its producers chucked. He also could have said more about the important roles played by contractors Morris Stonzek and Sol Gusikoff.

My only real beef with Suskin arises from his statement, “with all of the hundreds of musical theatre books on the shelves, nobody had ever delved into the subject of orchestration” (p. 634). Actually, my book *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* has a twenty-page chapter entitled “Orchestrators,” and it also delves into a subject Suskin avoids: sound design (which began in the 1930s) and how it has sometimes sabotaged the carefully wrought efforts of orchestrators. What’s the point of restoring the original charts for the 2003 revival of *Wonderful Town* if the orchestra is placed onstage and so overmiked that the bloom of the original arrangement is lost? Unlike Suskin’s book, my book also covers pre-Dreyfus Broadway orchestration and post-1980 orchestration. But Suskin’s findings have also corrected some of my errors. Don Walker, not Russell Bennett, ghosted the “boom boom boom” in “Shall We Dance,” and Bennett wasn’t the only one who took over the *Annie Get Your Gun* orchestrations in 1946.

*The Sound of Broadway Music* is arguably the most important new book to appear on the Broadway musical theater in years: a highly overdue systematic examination of a woefully underappreciated but critical component of musicals. It’s a monumental achievement. I plan to consult it and reread it frequently in the future.

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## Performances

### *Johnny Johnson* *Lost in the Stars* *Die Dreigroschenoper*

London

June 2009

It was probably just coincidence that in June London heard concert performances of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Johnny Johnson*, and *Lost in the Stars* all within a couple of weeks. Forty-one years ago, I attended the British premiere of Weill's Second Symphony, given as part of the 1968 Promenade Concert season at the Royal Albert Hall. Few people in the UK then knew much of his American music, apart from "September Song." Our perceptions of Weill's work have undergone many changes since then. Quite apart from anything else, in the last twenty years in London we have seen productions, or at least concert readings, of nearly all his American stage works.

*Johnny Johnson* has been staged twice here, in 1986 as part of the Almeida "Not the RSC" season, then in 1996 by Trinity College of Music. This time it was the indefatigable Ian Marshall Fisher, director of the "Discover the Lost Musicals" series, who included it in his 19th season—the series is now firmly settled in the Baylis Theatre at Sadler's Wells. In these concerts the actors are on book, but are usually sufficiently well-rehearsed to provide a convincing semi-staged performance. This was the most complete version of Paul Green's text that I have encountered, and that's where the trouble started. The pace needs to be quicker, for the faux-naïve quality of a lot of the story and dialogue is always in danger of making the whole thing resemble a charade. In particular, the scenes in the trenches, when Johnny captures the youthful German sniper, and the long, long asylum sequence seemed interminable.

A cast of fourteen actors, nearly all of them playing multiple roles, did what they could. Max Gold played Johnny; it's an exhausting part, with little opportunity for song until the final scene. Of course, "Johnny's Song" still made its impact. Ever since I first acquired Burgess Meredith's

recording of this, it has been one of my all-time favorite Weill numbers. The mood of despair, of futility, is so well captured in word and melody. Throughout the piece, Weill's grasp of a new idiom is consistently impressive. The vocal highlights of this performance were Aggie's sewing-machine song, done with amiable eccentricity by Gay Soper, and Private Harwood's "Cowboy Song," given just the right hop-along pace by Fabian Hartwell. Miss Soper began her career in the UK tour of *My Fair Lady*, playing Eliza, and she has been in musicals and plays of every kind. She gamely took on the role of a French Major General in the battle campaign scene, and then played Brother William in the asylum. Mr. Hartwell also took three other parts.

For Weill aficionados, the greatest fascination of *Johnny Johnson* comes from appreciating the composer's adoption of an American style and the way he found of fusing it with borrowings from his European works. I suppose the most obvious example is the "Song of the Goddess," which seems to derive from one of the themes in *Der Kuhhandel*, as well as from

the now so well-known "Youkali." Minnie Belle's waltz-song, "Oh, Heart of Love," is universal in its appeal. It would have fitted into one of the German music-theatre works, or it could have been a cabaret song for Lys Gauty in Paris. And yet, there's no doubt it has a specifically American feel to it—maybe in Europe, Weill would have been tempted to add some sort of ironic twist in the accompaniment, but as it stands it is a ballad of farewell and yearning. Lauren Ward sang it sweetly here. Among the rest of the cast, James Vaughan deserves special praise for undertaking six different roles: The Mayor, Sergeant Jackson, Private Kearns, the Hospital Orderly, Chief of the Allied Forces, and finally Dr. Mahodan, whose "Psychiatry Song," accompanied by tom-tom, he sang for all it's worth. At the piano, Chris Walker provided sterling accompaniments.

In his spoken introduction to the afternoon, Ian Marshall Fisher explained one or two points that might seem obscure to some modern audiences. For instance, the name of the French nurse, Madelon, refers to the celebrated French march, "Quand



Lauren Ward as the Statue of Liberty in the *Lost Musicals* performance of *Johnny Johnson*. Photo: Iain Lanyon

Madelon,” words by Louis Bousquet and music by Camille Robert. This was made popular just before the First World War by the chanteur Bach (Charles-Joseph Pasquier). Taken up by the soldiers at the Front, it became known as “La Marseillaise des tranchées.” Many American veterans of the War would have been familiar with it—Elsie Janis and her Gang used to include it in their shows at the Front.

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The following week, we were over at the South Bank, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall (scene of the series of Weill concerts by the London Sinfonietta, way back in 1977, that introduced us to so much unfamiliar material) for a semi-staged performance by the BBC Concert Orchestra of *Lost in the Stars*. There have been a few productions of this in the UK (one in Brighton in 1991, another at the Battersea Arts Centre in 1999). This was conducted by Charles Hazlewood, for whom it was obviously a special event. Hazlewood has been much involved with music and theatre projects in South Africa, especially with the Cape Town-based company Dimpho Di Kopane (“Combined Talents”), for which he devised the music for several productions, above all the exuberant, unforgettable Yimimangalisa (“The Mysteries”). The orchestra was placed on the left side of the platform; the action took place on the other side and on a raised walkway. The soloists banded together to sing Weill’s all-important choral interludes. Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, on which Maxwell Anderson based the play, created a sensation when it was first published in 1948. Even though the subjects of racial, religious, and political tensions; apartheid; corrupt lawyers; the struggle for freedom; and hopelessness of poverty are inevitably too big to be contained within the framework of a piece of musical theater, *Lost in the Stars* still has the power to move. There were many South African people in the audience, and at the end, in Jude Kelly’s production, when black and white news photographs of events in the country’s later history were projected—including the Sharpeville massacre of 1961—there was a frisson of recognition and anger.

The key roles of Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis were taken by two powerful personalities. As the preacher, Clive Rowe conveyed the gentle compassion of a man facing the horror of his son going to the gallows. As the landowner, Edward

Petherbridge succeeded in showing the unyielding nature of the character, whose bigotry has led to a rift in his own family. “Who’ll Buy?,” the cabaret song in Act 1, was given a tremendous song-and-dance treatment by Josie Benson, while Tsakane Maswanganyi revealed an operatic soprano of considerable power as Irina. Cornelius Macarthy was Absalom, bewildered by the hideous events that trap him, but then noble in his resolve not to lie. Cavin Cornwall was excellent as the wily uncle, John Kumalo. Other cast members included Justin Brett as Arthur Jarvis, Angela Caesar as Grace Kumalo and Khai Shaw as Alex, making the most of “Big Mole.”

What made this evening memorable above all was the sense of commitment and ensemble that Hazlewood achieved with his orchestra and chorus of actors and singers. *Lost in the Stars* will always be a problem piece, not only because of its subject, but because the use of the Greek-style chorus—how innovative this must have seemed in 1949—sits uncomfortably with the realism of much of the dialogue, and because of the sentimentality of the title song. In his program note, Erik Levi wrote that “posterity has dealt somewhat unkindly with *Lost in the Stars*,” and the reasons are easy to understand. Given a performance such as this, however, the vitality and sincerity of the work shine through.

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At the Barbican Concert Hall on 13 June, we had a rare opportunity to hear *Die Dreigroschenoper* in concert. Just the month before I had been in Berlin, where I caught the current Robert Wilson production at the Berliner Ensemble. A riveting, very modern interpretation, it is still drawing packed houses. The contrast between the effect of the work staged in the theater in which it was first performed in 1928 and that of the concert hall was disorienting. It has been a while since there has been a full-scale *Threepenny Opera* in London (the Donmar production back in 1995 was the last, I think) so the new generation of theatergoers has not had much opportunity to get to know it. What we had here was all the music, with surtitles projected, and a narration (a translation of Brecht’s own, written for the 1930 recording), spoken by Christoph Bantzer. With one exception, the cast was a line-up of distinguished opera singers. So the old argument—should we have trained voices or singing actors?—was raised once again. Whether

this particular group would have been able to cope with all the dialogue, I wonder, but they certainly attacked the songs with the requisite energy. The second and third act finales were given lusty choral contributions from the Viennese Chorus sine nomine, chorusmaster Johannes Hiemetsberger. The orchestra was Klangforum Wien, conducted by HK Gruber. In an interview with Christopher Cook, published in the Barbican program, Gruber suggested that “Singing a Schubert Lied is just like singing a Weill song because they have to be presented very simply.” Well, *jein*, as they say in Vienna, yes and no.

The first surprise of the evening was that the Mackie Messer, tenor Ian Bostridge, got to sing the “Moritat.” If he had done it like a Schubert song, it certainly wouldn’t have made much impact. Bostridge might have seemed like an odd choice for the part, but I thought he was extremely effective. For the ballad, he had developed a bit of a Berlin bark, rolling out the r’s, and the contrast between his clean-cut handsome looks and the sense of amoral charm that he conveyed made his Mackie closer to a 1930s Hollywood gangster.

The three rivals for Mackie’s love were Dorothea Röschmann as Polly, Angelika Kirchschrager as Jenny, and Cora Burggraaf as Lucy. In the “Zuhälterballade,” Kirchschrager played with Bostridge’s necktie, winding it around her wrist. Her velvety mezzo voice made an excellent effect, too, in the “Salomonsong.” Burggraaf, although listed as a mezzo, includes Mozart’s Susanna and Tippett’s Bella (*The Midsummer Marriage*) in her repertory, so the send-up of Handelian rage in Lucy’s aria posed no problems for her.

It was Dorothea Röschmann’s Polly, though, that impressed me the most. Here indeed is a great interpreter of Lieder and opera (most recently Covent Garden’s Pamina and Countess Almaviva), who found exactly the right balance between beauty of tone, firm line, and incisive delivery of the text. Fierce in “Seeräuberjenny,” sweet in the “Liebeslied,” and with a Dietrich-like confidence in the “Barbara Song,” Röschmann seemed to have this music and the style for it in her blood. It will be fascinating to see if she takes this any further. I hope she does; it would be exciting to see and hear what she could achieve in *Mahagonny* or *Die sieben Todsünden*. Hanna Schwarz brought all her Wagnerian experience to bear on Mrs. Peachum, though, as usual, only two of the



three verses of the “Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit” were allowed. Tiger Brown doesn’t have much to do beyond the “Kanonensong” when the work is given in concert form, but Florian Boesch made an impression, as did Christoph Bantzer in his reading of the narration, which inexplicably slipped into German at one point.

A few years ago the Argentine tenor José Cura took part in a concert of operatic arias, in which he sang and conducted at the same time. The effect was bizarre, an impressive stunt, but at the end one found oneself asking, “Why?” I’m afraid my reaction is the same where HK Gruber’s Peachum is concerned. He sang the part from the conductor’s desk, with a face-mike (like Madonna), conducting all the while. When he had to sing alone, it was all right, but in the first-act finale, it seemed to me that things were in danger of falling apart. Rumor had it that a very famous German baritone had been approached to take the part, but once he proved unavailable, Gruber stepped in and double-tasked. In the program he wrote, “The conducting and singing is not so very difficult. You give an upbeat and turn to the audience and if it is necessary you can beat with the right hand.” I would like to pose this problem to a conducting class at any conservatory and see what happens.

The Barbican Hall was packed, the audience was enthusiastic, and we were given encores. I encountered at least one member of the audience who had known Brecht personally. “How he would have laughed,” we agreed, at the polite English audience sitting through the concert and applauding in all the right places. There was one face I was looking out for. For decades, at any Weill concert or theatre event in London, one would look around for David Drew. Sadly, on this occasion, I didn’t see him, although he was there—his last *Dreigroschenoper*. David’s enthusiasm and his lifelong love of Weill’s music made an enormous contribution, and not only in Britain, to a widening knowledge and acceptance of the works. More than twenty years ago David wrote, “It is just possible that some of the shows Weill wrote with little or no thought of tomorrow may find new audiences.” All those years ago, when the Second Symphony was at the Proms, the prospect of such concerts as these (all of them played to full houses) would have seemed unlikely.

**Patrick O’Connor**  
London

## Performances

### *Mahagonny Songspiel* *Die sieben Todsünden*

*Ravinia Festival*  
*Chicago*

4, 8 August 2009

After Weill caught the German premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du soldat* in Frankfurt in 1923, he declared it “the mixed genre most assured of a future,” perhaps “the basis of a certain type of new opera.” He was right, of course, and the wry tone and lean instrumental layout of *L’histoire* greatly influenced *Mahagonny Songspiel*, his first collaboration with playwright Bertolt Brecht, which had its premiere four years later in Baden-Baden, Germany.

So the pairing of these cabaret-style theater-pieces in their Ravinia Festival debuts on 4 August had unassailable musical and historical logic behind it. Performed by the Chicago Chamber Musicians and guest artists under the authoritative hand of James Conlon, they served as a lively kickoff to the Weill mini-festival the festival’s music director presented in honor of the composer.

If the Stravinsky puts a modern spin on the Faust legend, the Weill is a caustic assault on bourgeois values and the conventions of opera itself. A “style study” for the Weill-Brecht opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, the six songs, linked by instrumental interludes, present us with the lowlifes of an imaginary city that may or may not be situated in America. The score conflates popular Berlin dance-hall idioms with close, four-part harmonies and a jazz-based orchestration laced with the dry rattle of snare drum and the sleazy slides of the alto saxophone.

Its most familiar number is the “Alabama Song,” a jaunty paean to the holy trinity of Mahagonny—booze, sex, and dollars—sung by two prostitutes; Amy Justman’s and Rebecca Jo Loeb’s voices blended beautifully here. Both young singers are products of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music’s Lotte Lenya Competition, as were the members of the male vocal quartet, James Benjamin Rodgers, Bray Wilkins, Jonathan Michie and Paul Corona. All six were excellent. Along with Conlon’s crisp instrumental ensemble they gave this pocket *Mahagonny* its in-your-face punch.

*A Soldier’s Tale* comes equipped with a wonderfully tart Stravinsky score we seldom get to hear in full. Written in 1918 when the composer was living in Switzerland, this inventive combination of narration, music, and dancing portrays postwar moral bankruptcy with a lighter touch than the blunt and ribald Weill piece.



Lenya Competition laureates Rebecca Jo Loeb, Amy Justman (front), Paul Corona, Jonathan Michie, James Benjamin Rodgers, and Bray Wilkins (back). James Conlon conducts. Photo: Russell Jenkins

Some of that lightness was bulldozed over in David Lefkovich's rambunctious staging, which Conlon first conducted at the Juilliard School in 2008 with a somewhat different cast. Still, the synergy between the actors, narrator, and ensemble of winds, brass, strings and percussion was so electric that the show carried the audience along to a rousing conclusion. The moral was clear: the Devil always has his due.

The narrator, Christopher Rutherford, had a lot to do and he did it all exceedingly well. Amari Cheatom and Finn Wittrock played to each other's strong acting and physical skills as the naïve soldier and the devil who snatches his soul in a rigged transaction. Dancer Andrea Miller threw herself into her rubbery and jerky movements with wondrous abandon. Among the crack instrumentalists, Joseph Genualdi stood out with his incisive playing of the essential violin solos.

How curious that Conlon's worthy tribute to Weill (part of an ongoing Ravinia series, "Breaking the Silence," that profiles composers whose works were banned by the Nazis) omitted his most popular work, *The Threepenny Opera*. At least the show's greatest hit, "Mack the Knife," turned up as part of Broadway diva Patti LuPone's song selections on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's all-Weill program on 8 August.

Conlon's varied program set the last of Weill's works with Brecht, his 1933 ballet chanté *The Seven Deadly Sins*, alongside eight songs composed for various Broadway shows following his immigration to America in the 1930s.

The tiresome canard that Weill somehow sold his artistic soul to the commercial pressures of his newfound Broadway milieu dies hard. Shall we finally lay it to rest for good? When LuPone curled her smoky voice around such American classics as "I'm a Stranger Here Myself" and the mordant lyrics to "Mack the Knife," the similarities in musical style and tone were far more striking than any dissimilarities. In truth, the Berlin Weill and the American Weill were one, forever taking bad-boy delight in exploding the rigid boundaries between high and popular art.

*The Seven Deadly Sins*, Weill's first work written in exile and his final collaboration with Brecht, is a modern morality play pickled in wry. Two sisters who really are one person—the realistic Anna I and the naïve and romantic Anna II—test each of the sins as they visit various American cities in a quest for money to build a house



Patti LuPone with the Hudson Shad in the background. Photo: Russell Jenkins

for their family on the banks of the Mississippi in Louisiana. The original version calls for a dancing Anna II, but the piece works perfectly well in concert form, as it was done here.

Anna's family is represented by a male vocal quartet—sung at Ravinia by the terrific ensemble Hudson Shad—that mouths Brecht's Marxist homilies and withering attacks on bourgeois materialism and religious piety. Weill's score, with its jaunty foxtrot, waltz, and march rhythms dressed in shimmering orchestrations, provides sweet counterpoint to his collaborator's sour didacticism. Its charm makes the cynicism easier to swallow.

True to precedent established by Lenya, LuPone sang the vocal part to *The Seven Deadly Sins* transposed downward to lie comfortably within her range. With discreet amplification, the voice seemed to be in good shape, a potent mix of flinty toughness and honeyed rue. There were gains and losses. Good as LuPone was, her performance struck me as more echt-Broadway than echt-Weill. I missed the sweet and salty flavor of the original German text, its essence blunted in Auden and Kallman's English translation. Ravinia flashed running text on two large video screens along with close-ups of the Tony-winning chanteuse.

After intermission LuPone treated the fans to favorites from the Weill songbook in their original orchestrations. The material—some of it familiar but much of it not—gave the Broadway baby a chance to cut loose and enjoy herself. The crowd certainly did. Through it all, her care for what the lyrics mean (on the surface and subliminal-

ly) and her ability to cut in an instant from a throaty purr ("It Never Was You," from the 1938 *Knickerbocker Holiday*) to a scalding cry ("Surabaya Johnny," from the 1929 *Happy End*) were much to be admired. I particularly enjoyed the chance to hear such delectable if seldom-performed gems as "Mr. Right" and "Susan's Dream" (both from the 1948 *Love Life*, Weill's two-act vaudeville, with book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner).

Conlon supplied plenty of bite and swing of his own, in the songs, *Seven Deadly Sins* and Robert Russell Bennett's Symphonic Nocturne, a lushly orchestrated suite drawn from the score to the Weill/Ira Gershwin musical *Lady in the Dark* (1941). Following the program proper, the stage was cleared, a piano was wheeled out, and LuPone further delighted the crowd with a post-concert cabaret. Joining her for the Weill songs "Je ne t'aime pas" and "Lost in the Stars" were pianist and Ravinia CEO Welz Kauffman and accordionist Mike Alongi. Great fun on a steamy summer night at Ravinia.

**John von Rhein**  
Chicago

## Performances

### *Die sieben Todsünden*

May Festival  
Cincinnati

22 May 2009

Cincinnati's 88th May Festival opened with Weill and Brecht's *Die sieben Todsünden* and the Mozart Requiem, and closed with Mahler's Eighth Symphony. In between, audiences enjoyed two programs of choral works from Morley to Hindemith and from Handel to Mendelssohn, in addition to a concert performance of Verdi's *Luisa Miller*. Established in 1873 under the directorship of Theodore Thomas, the Festival has grown from a single evening to five concerts spread over two weekends, all sung by the 140-member May Festival Chorus and all but one accompanied by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. James Conlon, who this year celebrated his thirtieth season as the Festival's Music Director, chose Juilliard classmate Patti LuPone to make her Festival debut in the role of Anna I. Fresh from her 332-performance run as Mama Rose in *Gypsy* and quadruple

crown of the 2008 Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, and Drama League awards for Best Actress in a Musical, LuPone's initial outing with the *Sins* gave the impression of a dress rehearsal for a future commanding performance.

In a black pantsuit with rental score in hand, LuPone performed the *Sins* in W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman's English translation and Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg's arrangement, which Lenya recorded in 1956. LuPone sang much of the work from memory but had to check the score frequently. The Family, sung by John Aler, Rodrick Dixon, Jeremy Kelly, and James Creswell, wore barbershop quartet attire with red bow ties and bowler hats, save for Creswell, who impersonated the mother in a wig, print dress, and knee-high stockings with sensible shoes. With her trademark clarinet timbre with a brassy middle register and nasal head voice, LuPone commanded the stage while delivering the "Prologue," sashaying from one side to the other. The male quartet blended nicely for their rendition of "Sloth," while Conlon brought out colorful playing from the orchestra with its burnished brass section. LuPone handled the *Sprechstimme* beautifully in "Pride," while mugging to the audience. Taking a page from Maseppa, Electra, and Tessie Tura's playbook (*Gypsy*'s "You Gotta Get a Gimmick"), LuPone spun around and bumped her derriere a few times to the beat of the music.

The orchestra's woodwind section and muted solo trumpet tended to upstage the vocalists during "Anger." However, the quartet members handled "Gluttony's" *a cappella* sections adroitly, although first tenor Aler could have been stronger. LuPone robbed the following movement ("Lust," with its sinuous harp obbligato) of its dramatic power by turning around with her back to the audience to read some of her lines off the supertitles. Kelly turned in a nice baritone solo during "Covetousness," but Aler's had a pinched timbre with a wide vibrato. The tessitura of "Envy" put LuPone in a strained register, forcing her to stridently declaim the text over gripping orchestral playing. During the Epilogue, LuPone chummed it up with her "mother" while recounting her and her (absent) sister's return to old Louisiana. Despite the unevenness of the performance, the 2,818-member audience gave it a warm

four-minute ovation. For the third curtain call, LuPone's solo bow prompted a few audience members to stand. She shook her head and motioned with her hands for them to sit, publicly acknowledging her rehearsal-quality performance.

In contrast, the May Festival Chorus sang the Mozart Requiem with assured musicality, and Conlon conducted the work (in Süssmayr's completion) from memory. With her dark covered tone, soprano soloist Rebekah Camm blended well with the Chorus in the opening Requiem aeternam, but there were some balance problems with the violin section. The Chorus clearly delineated the fugal entries in the Kyrie, demonstrating their rigorous training under Robert Porco, the Festival's Director of Choruses. In the "Tuba mirum," soloist Kristinn Sigmundsson's wonderfully resonant bass voice heralded the final trumpet. The Chorus's "Hostias" section during the Offertorium provided the evening's high-point. With excellent diction and glorious phrasing, the Chorus produced a luminous and memorable reading. The Requiem's low point had to be the Offertorium's "Domine Jesus Christe." The four soloists initially took a broad nineteenth-century tempo in spite of Conlon's choice of a spirited eighteenth-century one. Despite such brisk tempos, Conlon still allowed the music to breathe throughout and turned in a dramatic and artistically satisfying performance. The audience reacted with an immediate and prolonged standing ovation.

One might be tempted to conclude that the opening night Festival audience rewarded a performance of a choral warhorse over one of a twentieth-century *ballet chanté* with which they were less familiar. However, Weill is no stranger in Cincinnati. In 1999 the May Festival gave the U.S. premiere of *Propheten*, David Drew's arrangement of Act IV of *Der Weg der Verheißung*, and that audience responded with a similarly enthusiastic ovation.

bruce d. mcclung  
University of Cincinnati



Advertisement for 1959 production of *Die sieben Todsünden* at New York City Ballet, featuring Allogra Kent and Lotte Lenya.



## Performances

### *Knickerbocker Holiday*

*Musicals in Mufti*  
 York Theatre  
 New York City

Premiere: 26 June 2009

*Knickerbocker Holiday*, the 1938 musical by Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson, is one of those shows that have fallen down the memory hole. Even musical theater enthusiasts are likely to know it only as the source of “September Song.” Hence, a staged reading, part of the York Theatre Company’s *Musicals in Mufti* series, was inevitably revelatory. As its title indicates, M in M presents forgotten or neglected shows without costumes or sets but with a tight focus on the material itself.

With most musicals of the 1930s the book would hardly be worth discussing. Though they tend to have amusing plots and zippy dialogue, few of them offer anything but pegs to hang good songs on. *Knickerbocker Holiday* was more ambitious. Its playwright, Maxwell Anderson, was far more serious than the average Broadway bookwriter. In 1936 he won the first New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for *Winterset*, his verse drama about the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Anderson wrote some of the dialogue for *Knickerbocker Holiday* in a mock-Dutch accent, since it is set in the early seventeenth century when New York was still New Amsterdam. This is one reason the show is difficult to revive. More important, the plot is strained and complicated—and long. It was a tribute to Michael Unger’s direction that its convolutions were amusing rather than irritating.

What surprised the M in M audience were some passages satirizing Roosevelt and the New Deal. In one exchange, for example, the new governor, Peter Stuyvesant, announces, “Der government vill giff credit.” When someone says there must be a “ketch” in it, Stuyvesant agrees: “There is.

The government will naturally become a partner in any business which it guarantees.” The audience’s hearty laughter in 2009 showed that the 70-year-old exchange remains startlingly topical.

*Knickerbocker Holiday* was only Weill’s third show produced in America, and he really seemed to be adapting quickly to his new homeland. Some of the numbers have the aggressive, slightly strident quality of the music he wrote back in Germany. But in several numbers Weill opted for straightforwardly lyrical settings, a reminder that one of Weill’s teachers was Engelbert Humperdinck. This lyrical quality is quite apparent in a comic song in which Peter Stuyvesant tries to persuade a young man of the advantages of going to jail (which seems a clear antecedent of “Come with Me to Jail” in Rodgers and Hart’s *The Boys from Syracuse* a season later). One of Weill’s best known romantic songs, “It Never Was You,” comes from this score. Another love song, quite elegant, with beautiful two-part writing, is called “We Are Cut in Twain.” Like “It Never Was You,” “Twain” is reprised, suggesting the creators hoped it might gain popular currency. (Even the far more sophisticated “Never” is popular only with connoisseurs.)

What can one say about the score’s greatest treasure, “September Song”? It is so masterly, so much in the tradition of Kern and Youmans and the darker Gershwin that no one would imagine the composer had only been in this country a few years and was just beginning to explore the American “pop” style. Overall, the score’s most notable feature may be a plucky tone that seems very definitely

American—of course, it appears in the memorable “How Can You Tell an American?,” but it’s also unmistakable in a song that reflects Yankee optimism, “There’s Nowhere to Go but Up.”

This was the first time I had attended an M in M presentation. The theater asks critics not to review productions because the rehearsal time is so short—barely a week (they graciously made an exception for this *Newsletter*). Nick Gaswirth, who played the young maverick who challenges the autocrat Peter Stuyvesant, joined the cast only the day before they began public performances. Nothing about his assured, powerful singing suggested such limited rehearsal time. As his romantic opposite, Kelli Barrett sang with warm elegance. She also handled the many, many turns of plot very deftly.

The role of the narrator, author Washington Irving, on whose *Knickerbocker’s History of New York* the plot is roughly based, was taken by the up-and-coming young actor Josh Grisetti, who has an infallible comic sense and great appeal. He put over “How Can You Tell an American?” splendidly. As the villainous Stuyvesant, Martin Vidnovic gamely used the Dutch accent even in “September Song,” which somewhat weakened its effect. But it was a beautifully rounded performance, and he brought a great sardonic quality to the score’s many ironic numbers.

The large, resourceful cast performed the score with a vibrant two-piano arrangement by William Wade and John Bell. *Musicals in Mufti* performed a valuable service in dusting off this remarkable work. The problems in mounting a full-scale production were clear, but the score certainly deserves to be better known.

Howard Kissel  
 New York City



Drawing from the souvenir program for the original Broadway production, 1938.

## Performances

### *Die sieben Todsünden* *Mahagonny Songspiel*

Paris

*Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*

Premiere: 12 September 2009

A small yet loud and persistent band of boos greeted stage director Juliette Deschamps at the curtain call of a double bill of *Mahagonny Songspiel* and *Die sieben Todsünden* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on opening night. Though Deschamps responded nimbly, and her supporters rallied vociferously to her defense, one was left to speculate about what provoked the outburst. Was it her failure to underline the sexual politics or the Marxism in the works? Was it her respect for musical values, or her sense of humor? Or was it merely that—as one Paris-based critic I know insists—local audiences don't believe they've really attended a premiere if nobody boos the production team?

True, Deschamps broke little new ground, but she raised the valuable question of whether she needed to. Do audiences in 2009 need much help in remembering that American excesses can have serious, global consequences? Neither Weill nor Brecht had set foot in America when these works were written; their aim was to hit home—wherever home might be. Thus Deschamps, unhindered by political orthodoxy or undue reverence, rendered these parables simply and wittily. While singing of life in Mahagonny, the Men tossed down dollars like playing cards, which Bessie and Jessie seized in a hold-up in “Benares-Song,” only to see the money scattered by the wind. Point made. Deschamps' no-frills, ready-to-travel production explored both works' theatrical possibilities in (essentially) a concert setting; and by exploiting the singers' physical ease, she made the case for *Todsünden* as *Gesang mit Ballett*, concentrating on artistic and psychological splits instead of danced ones.

Indeed, if the musical interpretation had been more polished, this might have been a textbook illustration of successful Weill-Brecht production. However, con-

ductor Jérémie Rhorer shone only in those passages unadorned by vocal lines; elsewhere, he drowned out most of the singers and botched coordination between stage and pit (which suggested that inadequate rehearsal, rather than musical insensitivity, may have been the culprit). Listening to the *Songspiel* interludes and the *Todsünden* dances, then straining to hear the vocal lines, one almost felt there were two different conductors leading the Ensemble Modern: Jérémie I and Jérémie II, perhaps.

Austrian-born Angelika Kirchschrager has distinguished herself in both standard (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) and contemporary (the world premiere of Nicholas Maw's *Sophie's Choice*) repertory, and she is among the finest interpreters of Mahler today. Her recent forays into Weill's music are exciting, and her theatricality, idiomatic English, and lyric voice whet one's desire to hear her sing more of it. This appearance found her game yet unsure, relying on a portmanteau approach that packed in a sample of every vocal color she's got. We got a bit of barking, but we also got the creamy sensuality that is her greatest asset, both welcome and revelatory here. She caressed Anna's “Epilog” like a lullaby, in which even physical and moral weariness could not defeat tenderness.

Anna II, actress Cécile Ducroq, appeared in film sequences projected on an upstage screen, an interesting technique to convey that the sisters are distinct personalities (Ducroq and Kirchschrager look nothing alike), while simultaneously suggesting that Anna II is a figment of Anna I's imagination. Sometimes Anna II's onscreen adventures explicitly reflected the text: when we're told that Anna II has become a kooch dancer, Ducroq stripped naked. At other times, as in “Zorn,” we saw only vague suggestions of the story's emotional pitch, since in every clip Anna II remained isolated, a lone figure against a white backdrop, the images resembling Godard's early films. Arnaud Homann directed, supplementing Ducroq's scenes with stock footage of American cityscapes and neon signs.

The evening's second standout vocal contribution came from tenor Yves Saelens (Charlie), whose voice rang out over the orchestra and whose “Aber dieses ganze Mahagonny” proved memorably stirring.



Catherine Hunold (Bessie) and Angelika Kirchschrager (Jessie) in *Mahagonny Songspiel*. Photo: Alvaro Yañez

As the Annas' Mother, bass Graeme Broadbent resisted the urge to camp, yet offered a sharp characterization of a dignified *bourgeoise* tempted to stray in any and all directions. Soprano Catherine Hunold seemed to find much of Bessie's music uncomfortably low, and her character remained deferential, a comic sidekick to Kirchschrager. Neither tenor Simeon Esper nor baritone Holger Falk found much opportunity to shine.

Costumer Macha Makeïeff decked the cast in 1950s styles, and assigned each singer a representative color; apart from Broadbent's black dress and knit *cloche*, the cast retained the same costumes in the evening's second half, removing jackets or hats as circumstances required. The only concession to the Weimar era was the Louise Brooks bob, seen in the wigs worn by all three women. Nelson Wilmotte's sets primarily employed stage curtains, benches, and an upstage structure framing the film sequences. This simplicity suggested, as I say, that the production could travel, and other theaters may want to take a close look.

William V. Madison  
Paris

## Performances

### *Die Dreigroschenoper*

Zurich  
Schauspielhaus

Premiere: 14 May 2009

Sometimes you can get lucky with a famous play, as this recent production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in Zurich showed. The work—which, despite stubborn claims to the contrary, isn't an opera at all—was staged by the Swiss director Niklaus Helbling, head of the Zurich troupe Mass & Fieber, who has worked in such prestigious places as the Burgtheater Vienna, the Salzburg Festival, and the leading theaters in Basel, Bochum, and Cologne. From the mostly favorable, even ecstatic, reviews of the production, a common underlying theme begins to emerge—relic of a dated Brecht interpretation—which might be stated: Helbling rescues *Die Dreigroschenoper* from Brecht's thoroughly outmoded intentions, which overload this scintillating theatrical flagship with social criticism, epic theater, and pure didacticism, causing the boat to keel over. Or, phrased differently, it says: Helbling's dulling of Brechtian principles, which borders on criminal intent, aims for easily digestible entertainment that encourages the audience to howl with laughter and slap their thighs. Both interpretations are, of course, two sides of the same coin.

In a refreshing move, Helbling's staging transcends these viewpoints, but not by playing them off against one another; instead he combines them. Sure enough, this production comes off as light, fresh, humorous, and playful, but that's no betrayal of Brechtian aesthetics. For it was Brecht who saw humor, sensuousness, and elegance expressed through acting as indispensable features of any staging; if such characteristics were lacking, he would have viewed it as cheating the paying audience. Helbling charges his staging with a "pile of sensuousness" that doesn't mistreat Brecht's theater: we have a model presentation of epic theater in the wedding scene, where Polly (Fabienne Hadorn) develops "Pirate Jenny" as a play within a play; we have the "announcer" (Ludwig Boettger)

who acts like a marionette, artful and circus-like, as he interrupts and comments on the action. And we also get text projections, not merely as titles flashed on the wall but as elaborate video installations (Elke Auer, Esther Straganz). When the show begins, the audience is immersed in a photo album whose pages turn slowly: historic shots of London cityscapes, murder victims, red light, financial, and commercial districts. As the images peel away, new ones take their place until we see a portrait of a group that slowly gains color and then starts to move: the actors who form the crowd gathered at the Soho market. This enjoyable opening is quite ingenious in its use of media. The sequence of images evokes dark comic strips and Gothic ballads, detective stories and variety shows, colorful entertainment and stinging critique. Helbling's decision to whip up an imaginative concoction, which playfully juggles a variety of media, lends the whole affair an immediacy that a heavy-handed attempt to stage a didactic critique of present-day society would fail to achieve. He also avoids the temptation to milk the much-quoted phrase that compares robbing a bank to founding one (very topical, of course, but all the more unoriginal).

The cast did a respectable job. Not only was the acting light-footed and witty, there was some very fine singing, too. Viola von der Burg, tall and lanky, gave a stunning portrayal of Mrs. Peachum, shifting between protective mother animal, alcoholic, and rebellious wife. Gottfried Breitfuss's Mr. Peachum seemed drawn to middle-class comforts, though as head of the firm "Beggars' Friend" he displayed

business acumen paired with diabolical cynicism. Macheath (Thomas Wodianka), clearly the darling of the women characters, may have extended his appeal beyond the stage; some women in the audience probably pictured him as a perfect future son-in-law—all in all, more than a tad too harmless for the hardened criminal whose lengthy police record Polly recites. In the role of Jenny, the production cast the Swiss dialect *artiste* Sina, who sang her numbers just fine, though she was not overwhelming. Hadorn's Polly came off well; she made the transformation from chubby, tenderhearted mama's girl to matter-of-fact businesswoman believable. Together with Lucy, intelligently played by Miriam Maertens, she performed the often omitted Scene no. 8 (Fight over Property), but, alas, without "Lucy's Aria," which probably exceeded Maertens's vocal abilities. Finally, the musicians (led by Matthias Stötzel at the piano) were the winners of the evening. Seldom have I heard such precise and riveting playing. The ensemble's utterly professional performance did not hide the band members' delight in playing Weill's music, but they also brought out the score's edges and ambiguity.

It is sad to have to add that this production ended on 28 June 2009, due to a change in the theater's general management. (Matthias Hartmann left for Vienna; Barbara Frey is replacing him). I would have gladly recommended this production to potential audiences.

Joachim Lucchesi  
Karlsruhe



Polly (Fabienne Hadorn) and Lucy (Miriam Maertens) vie for Macheath (Thomas Wodianka) in the "Eifersuchtsduett." Photo: Leonard Zubler



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