

Kurt Weill Newsletter

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Counting Down: New Translation, New Production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* in Aix-en-Provence



David Savran Looks at *Lady in the Dark*
in the 21st Century



HK Gruber on Weill's Symphonies

Wrapping Up: LENYA@25



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Cover photos, clockwise from top left: Maxime Pascal rehearses *Lopéra de quat'sous* with vocalist Clàina Clavaron and l'Orchestre Le Balcon (photo: Le Balcon); a scene from the Glamour Dream in Opera Zuid's production of *Lady in the Dark* (photo: Bjorn Frins); the five prizewinners from the 2023 Lenya Competition (photo: Kurt Weill Foundation); HK Gruber rehearses with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra (photo: Örebro Concert Hall).

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© 2023 Kurt Weill Foundation for Music
7 East 20th Street
New York, NY 10003-1106
newsletter@kwf.org

ISSN 0899-6407
tel (212) 505-5240
fax (212) 353-9663
kwfinfo@kwf.org

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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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Happy 85th Birthday, Teresa Stratas!

At the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Lenya Competition in April, Stratas was very much present, though sadly not in person. When she judged the very first Competition in 1998, she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Rochester, as well as the Kurt Weill Lifetime Distinguished Achievement Award. She was elected an honorary trustee of the Foundation in 2005. The repertoire she recorded on *The Unknown Kurt Weill* and *Stratas Sings Weill* have long been mainstays of the Competition. It remains the only such competition Stratas has judged, including the first six and a total of ten. She has inspired a generation of singers who hope to emulate her mastery of "doing it all." Lenya was right when she declared, "You are the one, Teresa!"

--Kim H. Kowalke

EDITOR'S NOTE

There is much to celebrate in the world of Weill. Prospectively, we look forward to an entirely new *Threepenny Opera* premiering at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence this summer, then moving into repertory at the Comédie-Française for the 2023–24 season. Boasting a new French translation, a big-name director (Thomas Ostermeier) and conductor (Maxime Pascal), and a cast drawn from Paris's legendary acting company, the new production is the biggest Weill event in France in years. Retrospectively, the 25th anniversary Lenya Competition is in the books after a bracing celebration in Rochester. We offer full coverage of the main events, including the extraordinary final round.

Tom Sawyer Takes the Stage

Ever popular in Germany, Mark Twain continues to inspire 21st-century theater. Berlin's Komische Oper has premiered a new work descended from his classic tales of youth, with help from Weill, Maxwell Anderson, librettist John von Düffel, and arranger/conductor Kai Tietje. The musical version of *Tom Sawyer* incorporates the five songs drafted in 1950 by Weill shortly before he died, intended to form part of a musical version of *Huckleberry Finn* with book and lyrics by Anderson. That work never saw the light of day. In 2014, the premiere of von Düffel's *Tom Sawyer und Huckleberry Finn* in Göttingen drew substantial praise, and history repeated itself during several subsequent productions. In addition to the five songs intended for the original musical version, the German adaptation incorporated a full slate of Weill's Broadway songs. At the request of Komische Oper, von Düffel has rewritten the book, complemented by a revised group of songs arranged by Tietje, in order to create a work suitable for opera houses. The required forces are flexible; the larger version requires forty-three orchestra musicians and twelve vocal soloists, while the smaller version calls for nineteen and seven, respectively. (A children's choir appears in both.)

The world premiere took place in Berlin on 18 February 2023, directed by Tobias Ribitzki, with Tietje conducting. Once again, critical reaction poured in, swift and favorable:

"The opera house makes bold use of its traditional strengths. Ribitzki needs no animal costumes, confetti, or interpolated pantomimes. He has mastered perfectly Weill's own sense of dramatic tempo and builds on that. Weill remains as unique a figure in American musical history as in European; here his music shines forth against the muted gray and ochre backdrops of Stefan Rieckhoff, who evokes the pioneer days unobtrusively yet enchantingly. The total experience of the show never seems to be forced on the audience by the creators; perhaps that is why it is so powerful."

Matthias Nöther, *Berliner Morgenpost*, 19 February 2023

Meanwhile, one of Weill's most vital exponents, composer-conductor HK Gruber, continues to enrich the discography; BIS recently issued his world premiere recording of the new critical editions of Weill's symphonies, and others are in the works, including the rarely performed *Der neue Orpheus*. No one has more wisdom about Weill's instrumental music to relate than he, and we invited him to do so in this issue. Acute Weill observer David Savran mulls over a recent surge in European productions of that endlessly fascinating show, *Lady in the Dark*. Come one, come all!

Dave Stein

"Kai Tietje has arranged Kurt Weill's music for large orchestra—and fabulously so: in a luxurious, supple Broadway style, entertaining in the shifting instrumental colors (a banjo and an out-of-tune piano both make appearances, rousing in the flow of string cantilenas). As the conductor of the performance, Tietje himself takes care of the realization of his arrangement. . . . Von Düffel's libretto is strong overall: funny without pandering, fast-paced without rushing, constructed so that both young and old get their money's worth. There is no reason to limit the new work by calling it a "children's musical." Judging from the audience's jubilant reaction, it appeals to all age groups—in the best tradition of Mark Twain."

Clemens Hausteil, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 February 2023



An iconic scene from *Tom Sawyer*, with Tom Schimon in the title role

PHOTO: BARBARA BRAUN

"Tom Schimon [LLC Carolyn Weber Award, 2016] brought mischief and swagger to Tom, and Michael Heller played Huckleberry as a charming bum, a prototype of the Dude. Josefine Mindus, a member of the Komische's opera studio, was a sassy Becky Thatcher. . . . it was moving to see this large, beautifully prepared children's choir sing, for what was very possibly the first time, the music of Kurt Weill, an epochal Berlin composer whose post-exilic works are still not taken seriously enough in this country."

A.J. Goldmann, *Opera News*, May 2023

2023 Grant Recipients

Professional Performance

Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. Nine concerts featuring works by Weill, including *The Seven Deadly Sins*, *Symphonie in einem Satz*, *Fantaisie symphonique*, *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik*, and *Four Walt Whitman Songs*. Arcola Theater, London, UK. *No for an Answer* (Blitzstein). Orchestra Miami, Miami, FL. *Road of Promise*. Teatr Studio, Warsaw, Poland. *Mahagonny Songspiel*. Vienna Volksoper, Vienna, Austria. *Lady in the Dark*.

College/University and Amateur Performance

Atelier Armonico, Leeds, UK. *Zaubernacht*. Bronx Opera Company, Bronx, NY. *Lady in the Dark*. Denison University, Granville, OH. *The Threepenny Opera*. Wageningen Symphonic Orchestra and The Other Choir, Wageningen, Netherlands. *Der Lindberghflug*.

A Voice for the Oppressed

An Interview with Maxime Pascal

The stars align this summer for a new production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* at Festival Aix-en-Provence in southern France, exactly five years after Ivo van Hove's production of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* bowed there (see p. 17). A new French translation by Alexandre Pateau, published by L'Arche, will have its maiden voyage. Thomas Ostermeier directs; Maxime Pascal conducts l'Orchestre Le Balcon. In an interview with the *Newsletter*, Maestro Pascal relays his thoughts on the new translation, preparations for the opening, and the significance of this monument of musical theater by Weill, Brecht, and Elisabeth Hauptmann.

KWN: How do you approach the music of *The Threepenny Opera*? Does it strike you as unique, or do you relate it to other music that you've conducted?

MP: At first I knew the piece only by ear and never got deep inside the music. When I read the score, I realized that there are a couple of misconceptions about Weill: One is the influence of jazz; another is that his music has a humorous or cheerful character. American jazz is not so important to Weill. He writes for saxophone in a European style, not the way jazz musicians use it. The same goes for the percussion. It's not a jazz drum part; it's more like Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*. That "jazz influence" reminds me of Debussy, who was deeply inspired by music from Asia, though he had never been there.

Something that struck me very strongly was the influence of popular music, from Central Europe in particular. Mahler also drew on that, and there are a lot of links between Weill and Mahler. When I read the score and listened to it, the first thing I said was "Wow, I feel the music is weeping." The harmony is always very expressive. And *inside* the dance form, the *Kabarett* form, the song form, because we have the songs with dance structures—the foxtrot, the blues, the Boston waltz—inside those structures, we feel that the melodies and harmonies really are crying, as in Mahler's music. These roots are not brought out often when we perform Kurt Weill. I had the same feeling many years ago when I dove into the music of Erik Satie. There is this sense of Satie's reputation; I don't know how to say it in English—

KWN: A little shallow?

MP: Yeah, not serious, derivative, more for pleasure or the salon—but there is something so deep about Satie, in a minimalist way. For Weill, maybe we say it's *Kabarett* music, music for the masses. Maybe that understated approach throws us at first, but it is so deeply human. Especially in the *Dreigroschenoper*, the foundation of the music is tragic.

KWN: Now we'd like to get a little more specific about two aspects of the music in particular, which are tempo and articulation. How have you approached those questions yourself?

MP: About the tempo: The first thing I did was start from scratch, because this music has been played in so many different ways.



PHOTO: ENRICO FEMIA

I'm still working on it, but there are two things that help me find the right tempo. First, Weill's own notations in the score. Then, the rhythm of the language and the narrative inside each song. If you listen carefully to the narrative and the words, the *tempo giusto* becomes so clear. For example, Macheath's number at the end when he asks for forgiveness. We have a kind of plainchant, quasi-liturgical setting, and with the bells! The evocative force of the music gives you a very clear tempo.

That's linked to the second point about articulation. We're using period instruments. Our piano dates from 1930. All the percussion instruments were made in the 1920s, and the trumpets are from that period

as well. We do use a modern saxophone, but we play with older reeds. When you work with older instruments, that has an effect on articulation because these instruments have a particular sound that's a bit lighter, closer to what Weill would have heard. Another important point—most of the time, the instruments are playing lines that are also sung, and the way it's sung indicates the articulation most of the time. With French lyrics, the interaction of music and text does change a bit, and that affects the articulation or phrasing sometimes. The music doesn't change, of course.

KWN: What do you think about Weill's orchestration in the context of the whole work? Also, how well does it match up with l'Orchestre le Balcon? Does it present any challenges for the ensemble?

MP: The orchestration is very spare and precise. The original score is unique because of all the doublings, one musician playing many instruments. The trombonist plays bass; the percussionist plays second trumpet. Nowadays we are very specialized, so if you want to perform the work as written at a high level, you have to bring in twenty-three orchestra musicians, which is really not in the right spirit. In Le Balcon, we have people who can play many instruments, but not the exact combinations in this score. So we've tried to adapt the original idea a bit, especially with the guitars—the guitarist plays several guitars, plus banjo. We want to get the right orchestral color from that period, and emphasize typical gestures from Central European music, like when the bass or the trombone play on strong beats. That sounds really natural if the bass is playing pizzicato. The trombone takes the place of

the tenor horn from popular music, so it has to provide that special color. The main point is that it's popular music and should always have a popular sound; the older instruments make an essential contribution to that. We play everything as written in the score and distribute the instruments according to our possibilities. That's basically what Weill did in 1928.

KWN: We'd like to shift gears a bit and ask you about how the rehearsals are going and what it's like working with the cast. Has that been enjoyable?

MP: Yes, of course. It's a very special project because we don't do it with singers, but with actors who sing, which is the way to the heart of this work. We've been working hard for over a year now. We have chosen the actors and determined who can sing what. My job is to unify the entire show by designing a single acoustic object. Whether it's spoken, sung, or played, it's part of the same acoustic object; it has to be coherent, and it takes careful sound design. It's not just about working on the songs. The core of our work with the actors is to find the right point between declamation—that's very important in French—and song. There is a very strong tradition of *parler-chanter* [talk-singing] in France, and that is linked to German cabaret, and to the Schoenberg of *Pierrot lunaire*, and to Berg, who defined six different levels from the speaking voice to the singing voice. We've been working on that aspect for *Dreigroschenoper* also.

The actors have microphones and the instruments are amplified. That ties in with Weill's writings about the beginnings of radio and recording; it was a new world for him, and he was passionate about it. Weill and Brecht wanted to give a voice to poor people, those who cannot speak for themselves. Antonin Artaud said, "J'écris pour les analphabètes" [I write for illiterates]. It sounds absurd, but he means, "I'm standing in for people who are unable to write. They can't, so I will do it for them." That's what Weill and Brecht are doing for people who can't afford to go to the opera, who don't belong to conventional social institutions. For Weill, radio and sound reproduction could give the people a voice. We can see that in jazz, then in punk, then in hip-hop, how amplification has given a voice to the people from the street, the oppressed. The *Dreigroschenoper* did that, too.

KWN: Can you comment on the new translation?

MP: If a translation is done by a writer who is not a musician, the lyrics don't fit the music. We worked on the new French text together with the translator, Alexandre Pateau. So we were always thinking about the music, the prosody, and the poetry. It was a long process. Not only me and the translator, but a lot of other people were involved. Now each lyric fits the music. That was not true of the previous French text [by Jean-Claude Hémerly]. That was a problem because each time *Dreigroschenoper* was done in French, people would change things in rehearsal because the text didn't work so well. The results tended to be disorganized and unprofessional, and it got worse through the rehearsal process. We won't have that problem.

KWN: Do you have any final thoughts?

MP: This music has been played in a thousand different ways in its history. Only quite recently have we had materials that allow us to work on the text in a critical, scholarly way, thanks to the Kurt Weill Edition, which provides a lot of answers. For us interpreters, it's very important to be close to the text, to the sources,

and to be excited and inspired by the message of the people who wrote the work. Their text should be preserved and studied. What the Foundation has done for this work is wonderful.

From the published edition

Bertolt Brecht, *L'opéra de quat'sous, suivi de Le film de quat'sous [et] Le procès de quat'sous*.
Édition et traduction d'Alexandre Pateau.
Montreuil: L'Arche, ©2023.
ISBN: 978-2-38198-054-6.

The following excerpts from editorial notes for the new edition are reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

Our translation is based on the first printed and bound libretto of *Die Dreigroschenoper* ... Published in October 1928, less than two months after the sensational world premiere, and sold both by Brecht's publisher, Felix Bloch Erben, and Weill's, Universal Edition, this manuscript "printed for theater use only" is the first published manifestation of the work, and remains without a doubt the most faithful record of *Die Dreigroschenoper* as originally conceived by its authors—but we will see that the very idea of fidelity takes a very tricky turn indeed when it comes to this "anti-opera." (p. 99)

In the original libretto of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, each song or piece of stage music is numbered according to its place in the work as presented at the world premiere and in the months thereafter. In his 1931 [*Versuche*] revised edition, Brecht abandoned not only the numbering scheme, retaining only titles of certain songs, but also the essential role of "incidental music," in a work that has as much to do with opera as with theater.

These brief orchestral passages served two purposes: they entertained the audience during scene changes, but more importantly, they took on the character of leitmotifs—in the operatic sense—whether during a transition between one scene and the next or even during scenes. These purely orchestral passages, probably improvised by musicians during rehearsals, then notated and placed in the score by Weill himself, are essential to the original character of the work. (p. 17)

This new French edition does not pretend to redress a wrong by elevating the original 1928 version to its rightful place. To the contrary, we aim to present the work to readers and actors in all its complexity, so that they can form their own ideas about it—and, as we hope, to revive the power of a work that has remained unique in our time within the realms of theater and music. (p. 111–112)

Marie Oppert, Kurt Weill/Lotte Lenya Artist at Aix, Reflects on the Forthcoming Production

We have just finished an intense first week of rehearsals for *L'opéra de quat'sous*. Even at this early point in the creative process, I realize how lucky I am to be part of a production that gathers together so many exceptional elements in order to build a unique theatrical event. Our work represents the first-ever collaboration between the prestigious Festival d'Aix-en-Provence and the Comédie-Française. In June, we travel to Aix in order to continue our rehearsals and give the premiere of the show in this extraordinary setting. I hope the occasion will help bring together the operatic and the theatrical audiences for this celebration at the Festival!

The project marks the first encounter between Thomas Ostermeier and musical theater; he will bring all his expertise and deep knowledge of Brecht's repertoire to this play with music. That means of course another encounter—between the actors and our singing voices. We began working with Maxime Pascal and l'Orchestre Le Balcon several months ago to prepare new French versions of the songs. That has led to yet another exceptional encounter with translator Alexandre Pateau, who has created a new translation of the book and lyrics specifically for this production. What a gift to be able to work directly with him and discuss his choices of words in our mother tongue!

PHOTO: MARIE OPPERT



From my own perspective, the production represents a life-changing encounter with the Comédie-Française, which I have joined for this occasion. I have already acted in several plays with this troupe over the past year. Working with the same actors who have inspired me since I was a child growing up in Paris is a precious and enriching experience. Working with them on *L'opéra de quat'sous* reminds me of another encounter: my discovery of Weill's *oeuvre* thanks to the Lenya Competition and the Foundation. Ever since, playing the role of Polly Peachum has been a dream of mine!

We often say that it is the encounters along the way that shape an artist's journey. That's why this project represents a huge step in my career. It represents my idea of artistic heaven, where the theatrical and musical worlds align and work together creatively as a single unit with the goal of changing the world!



L'opéra de quat'sous

Performance Schedule:

Théâtre de l'Archevêché, Aix-en-Provence, France
4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14, 18, 20, 22, 24 July 2023

Musical director: Maxime Pascal

Director: Thomas Ostermeier

Translator: Alexandre Pateau

Choreography: Johanna Lemke

Set design: Magda Willi

Costume design: Florence von Gerkan

Dramaturgy: Elisa Leroy, Christian Longchamp

Cast: From the Troupe de la Comédie-Française
Orchestre Le Balcon

The production includes the song "Pau' Madame Peachum," which Weill composed in 1937 (text by Yvette Guilbert) for a Paris production of *L'opéra de quat'sous*.

In a related program on 7 July, at the Hôtel Maynier d'Oppède, the festival's Chamber Music Mentor, pianist Kirill Gerstein, collaborates with HK Gruber, as chansonnier, in a program of songs by Weill and Hanns Eisler. The concert, billed as a "cabaret in the wake of the dark expressionism of *The Threepenny Opera*," opens with Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Ein Lichtstrahl* [A Ray of Light], a "mimodrama" featuring Gerstein and actors Emily Wilson, Fiamma Bennett, and Guy-Loup Boisneau.

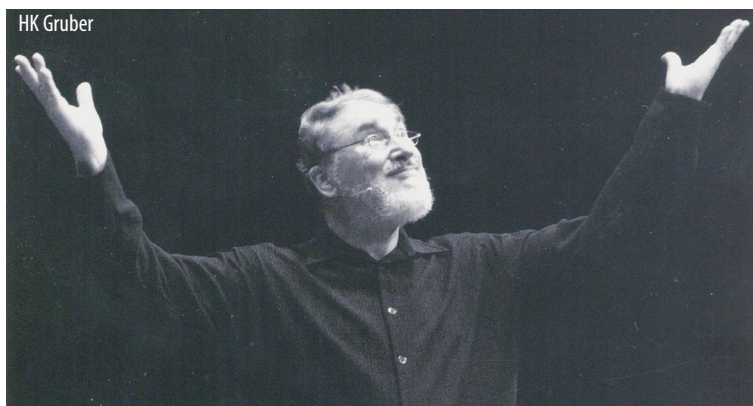


PHOTO: PRISKA KETTERER

What the Music Wants

by HK Gruber

A new recording of Weill's *Symphonie in einem Satz* (Symphony no. 1) and *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2) offers listeners the opportunity to absorb HK Gruber's renderings of these two pillars of Weill's orchestral music. Gruber has conducted Weill's music for over thirty years, and he knows its full range as well as anyone in the world. The *Newsletter* seized the occasion of the new recording, not to mention Gruber's eightieth birthday on 3 January, to discuss Weill's symphonies as well as broader issues of performance practice and interpretation; the complete interview is posted at <https://vimeo.com/830272507>. This article is distilled from his responses. Musical passages are indicated with track numbers and timings within the track on the recording (available on Spotify and iTunes), with timings from the interview appended in red.

Warming Up

Before I rehearse a Weill symphony, I study the structure to learn what the music needs in terms of tempo, and how to make the music speak for itself. Look at the inner voices that from time to time are more important than the *Hauptstimmen*. Study the patterns, because Weill works constantly with pulse and patterns. Then I go before the orchestra and listen. When the score begins to sing and find its own voice, I find occasionally that I have to change the tempo. In the moment the orchestra plays, you know what you have to do.

Weill is one of the old masters who didn't put a dynamic marking under every note. After 1945, musicians were trained to play exactly what they see. The conductor asks, "Can you give us a *mezzo-forte* here?" and the musician says, "But it's not printed." When I rehearse Weill with an orchestra, the first thing I tell them is, "Please make music. If you have ideas about dynamics or phrasing, do it. If you go too far I will tell you." Play it as a musician and *listen*.

We are trying to figure out what the music wants, not what the composer wants. Weill himself from time to time noted a tempo marking that is too slow, especially in *Mahagonny*, even in the *Dreigroschenoper*.

Fantaisie symphonique

In the second symphony, you have a pattern in each movement that runs all the way through. It is not minimalism, but a technique from Schubert. In each Schubert song you have certain rhythmic patterns that never change; they guarantee that the piece always has a backbone. As conductor, I have to make sure that the patterns and melodies mesh precisely. In the first movement, you have (track 6, 1:39; 24:02 in the interview). You also have this melody (track 6, 1:47; 23:52) that wants to sing. But the pattern requires precision. You have to find the happy medium between singing and precise patterns. I like to call the second movement a funeral tango. Here you have (track 7, 0:00; 24:19) in the bass instruments. Even when the strings are singing, you have to hear that heartbeat. And in the third movement, again this game between patterns (track 8, 2:35; 25:07) and melody (track 8, 0:00; 25:04). I keep working until those relations are exact and we have absolute transparency. That's why the first thing I do with the orchestra is to go over the patterns, so the musicians hear that the patterns will not automatically provide space for the singing instruments. We have to give them space, but without placing a foot on the brake.

There are a few *rallentandi* in the second symphony, but ev-

eryone has to stay together. A pattern is not a machine. A pattern also has a lung, and it can breathe. The musicians have to breathe together in order to support the total effect. There are several passages where the orchestra wants to go slow, especially extended melodies in the strings. When the strings have that long passage in the second movement (track 7, 6:33; 6:36), I want them to play on the border of silence and *not slow down*. When the next theme (track 7, 7:18; 6:50) enters, it must already be in the right tempo. This movement is so well-structured, you must find a steady tempo and never change it; otherwise it becomes a pot-pourri.

Why do I hear a tango in the slow movement of the second symphony? Because the music is sexy. All of Weill's music—even the marches—is sexy because he uses sexy patterns. Weill loves to use the march and the shimmy rhythms. Marc Blitzstein said of *The Threepenny Opera* that it was not jazz; it is march music with syncopation. That's the source of those sexy march rhythms. And another thing: all these dotted rhythms in Weill must never be weakened to triplets. The sixteenth note following the dotted eighth has to be precise. These are the teeth of the shark; if you make triplets, the shark has no teeth.

The last movement is very nervous. The clarinet solo is a parody of a Nazi marching band (track 8, 3:20; 26:05), and I asked the clarinet to play bell-up to sound very rude and violent. Yet at the end of the second symphony, we have a tarantella (track 8, 5:37; 25:31), a very Italian gesture. Is the ending optimistic? Weill had already fled Germany, and he did not have much reason for optimism. But on the other hand, he had saved his life, and he hoped that the Nazis would not last long. That final gesture says we have to survive; we have no chance unless we assert ourselves against these murderers.

I hesitate to say it's a neoclassical symphony, but it uses neoclassical gestures; it has similarities with Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, which came later (1945). The second symphony is the sister of *Die sieben Todsünden*, in a way. In both works, Weill demands more from the strings than he had previously, and they have an important function. You might put it like this: In the *Sins* the strings are producing the tears. I hesitate to speak about emotion, because this is a private experience. Instead of saying "emotion," I would say "noble sound." Produce absolute transparency, even with a large string section.

Symphonie in einem Satz

This is a baby symphony by a very young, gifted revolutionary, who had just entered Busoni's master class. The complications in the first symphony are similar to Schoenberg's *Chamber Sym-*

phony, op. 9, except the tonality in Weill's symphony is more daring and complex. He shows a real gift for organizing dissonant passages and flirts with the edges of tonality, though he never leaves it. The opening chords could be early Messiaen; I can't find another composer from the time who created such chords. The intonation gets very complicated. If the chords are wrong, you get this "sauerkraut" sound—murky, dull, out of tune—which I hate.

Many sections of the score have elaborate headings, a vestige of Weill's original idea to compose incidental music for a play by Johannes R. Becher, which is why the symphony has a funny subtitle: "Arbeiter Bauern Soldaten. Die Aufbruch eines Volks zu Gott" [Laborers Peasants Soldiers. The Awakening of a People to God]. The title is full of pathos, but in the music the pathos is very hidden, thank God. The passage beginning at m. 202 is marked "Sehr pathetisch." When I conducted, I made sure the music was on the border of pathos, but never pathetic. And if you make it pathetic, then the whole symphony loses cohesion and becomes a potpourri, especially during transitions from one section to the next. I've heard that Busoni himself said the symphony falls apart into pieces. I don't know if that's true, but he certainly would have seen right away how dangerous it would be to perform this piece without a clear tempo concept, and there are no metronome markings. You have to set a tempo for one section and relate everything else to it. I found the kernel of the work in the central fugato, "Larghetto. Ruhig, ohne Leidenschaft [Quiet, without passion]" (track 5, 11:59; 14:41). Why did I select that passage? It's a foreshadowing of the same gesture in no. 11 in *Mahagonny* as they are waiting for the hurricane (15:12), and I took the tempo from there. The section just after it is marked "Wie ein Choral" (track 5, 12:42; 34:37). If you make it slow, it doesn't sound like the later Weill. That told me it shouldn't sound like a Bach chorale—too much pathos. There's yet another spot in *Mahagonny*, the beginning of the trial scene (16:29), that gives us the fast tempo of the first symphony.

The piece is fantastic even though the melodies are not as catchy as in the second symphony. The very first time I did it with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, they fell in love, because the music is so compelling. I also did it with the BBC Philharmonic, and I remember one dress rehearsal in particular. My tempi were much too slow, probably because I could not resist those pathetic passages. A friend of mine who attended said, "It was so boring." Then I decided, without telling the orchestra, that in performance we would do it fast, fast, fast. The musicians followed me, and it worked very well. That was the answer, and that's why the new recording lasts only nineteen minutes.

Recording the symphonies

Since 1996, when I started working with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, I've done recording projects for BIS. I'm so grateful to Robert von Bahr, the boss of BIS, for financing this recording of the symphonies; most labels would have stayed away. But he was not a friend of the first symphony. We wanted to begin the CD with it, and he said, "No, you have to begin with the appealing Weill," so we used songs from *Der Silbersee* instead. He said when listeners try out a new CD, they start at the beginning. The first symphony would scare them away.

After I make a new recording, I don't just go home and let the producer work. I listen to the edited audio, make corrections, and the producer makes a new version. I *always* supervise the editing. I remember, in the days we sent faxes, it would take five

to ten pages to put down all the corrections for those early Weill albums with Ensemble Modern. We went through many versions in order to achieve the most precise results. My very first Weill CD was *Berlin im Licht* (1990), with David Drew. He showed me the pieces and said let's go to Ensemble Modern. Many people said, "Kurt Weill? That's just light music." Working through this so-called light music with a brilliant avant-garde ensemble gave us the chance to show the music as it truly is.

Weill vs. Mozart

Note: Gruber is responding to Weill's statement in an interview published in the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, 20 December 1936: "Composers can be classified into two divisions: those with a sense of theatre and those without it. Mozart, for example, belongs in the former division. Take any symphony of his, and you can write words to it. The climaxes, too, are operatic."

The Mozart reference is very telling, because I always find his music symphonic, even the vocal music. When we speak to each other, we use words, but we are actually singing. It isn't much of a stretch to take a word as a motif in a symphonic work; that's why we feel sometimes that we could add words to a piece of music. Yet I think it's better not to, because it narrows the field of meaning. The more we can make free associations based on the music, the richer we are. Words create a limitation, and music is actually more poetic without them. The possibilities are endless and can go in so many directions.

I understand Weill always as a composer who is producing absolute music, even in the first symphony, which arises from a theatrical work and has all these little symphonic poems in it. Yet I don't see anything theatrical behind it. The music must always be absolutely integral, never misused solely for theatrical effect. Weill is a composer of absolute music, like Stravinsky or Schoenberg. I like his operas; of all twentieth-century operas, *Mahagonny* is my favorite. But the philosophy behind his theater music is like Hindemith's. The music has to meet symphonic standards, and no compromise. Sure, you can make a video clip and make the second symphony the soundtrack, why not? We may add the theatrical elements in association, but the music does not need it.

Weill vs. Wagner

Look at any Weill score, even "Moon of Alabama" or "September Song." Even the "simple" songs are full of surprising, misleading chords, but they are always based on the possibilities offered by tonality. Who made this kind of chromatic harmony before Weill? Wagner. Wagner and Weill are very similar in their use of harmony—not in the gestures, of course. Wagner is flowing, and pulse is not so important. In Weill's world, pulse is absolutely essential; without it, his music doesn't work. Weill brought modern civilization to Wagner's chromatic world, then developed it and made it even more complicated, as Schoenberg did in his own way. You also find harmonic similarities between Weill and Zemlinsky. That doesn't mean Weill stole from Zemlinsky, but the common denominator of Weill, Wagner, Schoenberg—the early Schoenberg, not the twelve-tone Schoenberg—is exploitation of pan-chromatic possibilities. Weill perfected the use of such possibilities, and that makes him a great master.

See p. 9 for more about the recording.

Symphonies and Excerpts from *Der Silbersee* (BIS-2579)

Selections from Reviews

"It's a gripping and engaging release that manages to thread the needle between the various strands of Weill's musical personality: the *enfant terrible* of '20s Weimar Germany, the acerbic theater composer, and the mature symphonist of the '30s. Across all three, a distinctive voice emerges."

Jonathan Blumhofer, artsfuse.org, 31 March 2023

"Gruber captivates with theatrical power, bite, and spiky irony in his rendering of the stage work from the end of the Weimar Republic, *Der Silbersee*. Weill's music charms us straightaway, with its ambiguities derived from beguiling sensuality, expressive power, fashionable dances, and sand in the gears. Every member of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra plays with absolute security of style and pointed interpretations."

Eckhard Weber, concerti.de, 26 March 2023

"The collection is conducted by HK Gruber, a standard-setting interpreter of Weill's music, who has been inspired by the composer in his own works. His account of the first symphony (1921) tightly controls what could easily seem scattered; and he sings in the *Silbersee* excerpts, with the gravelly, unrefined affect of Lotte Lenya ... The second symphony unfurls with an ease that becomes more disturbing as, from behind the wit and tunefulness, emerge flashes of heartbroken nostalgia and martial terror."

Joshua Barone, *New York Times*, 23 February 2023



Trending: #LizaElliott

by David Savran

Although it is purely coincidental that three full-scale productions of *Lady in the Dark* (1941) played in Western European opera houses in 2022, this coincidence raises a number of intriguing questions: Can it be that the most innovative of Weill's Broadway musicals has found a home on the German-language stage? Have the piece's troubling gender politics given it renewed relevance in the #MeToo era? Have its gay subtexts and themes offered it a currency that it lacked in the 1940s?

The short answer to all these questions is: Yes. In December 2021, the Vienna Volksoper brought out its first-ever staging of *Lady in the Dark*, directed by Matthias Davids and conducted by James Holmes. Less than a year later, Opera Zuid launched a touring production in Maastricht, the Netherlands, directed by Anna Pool and conducted by David Stern, and Theater Basel premiered a new version directed by Martin G. Berger and conducted by Thomas Wise. In Vienna and Basel, *Lady* was performed in German while Opera Zuid opted for the English original. The theaters adopted widely varying strategies for updating the work, demonstrating three distinct ways of producing Broadway classics in the German-speaking world. (Maastricht is wedged between Germany and Belgium; its cultural scene is strongly influenced by its German and Flemish neighbors.) Of the three,

the Dutch was by far the most old-fashioned and realistic—the creakiest both theatrically and musically. Vienna's *Lady in the Dark*, helmed by two of the most experienced and expert Weill interpreters, respected the piece's historical framework while bringing it artfully into the 21st century (see review in the Spring 2022 *Newsletter*). The Basel *Lady*, in contrast, radically reimagined the musical, revising and trimming the book substantially while performing the score intact. Of the three productions, the last took the most risks esthetically and theatrically, yet for me it proved the most revelatory. Watching Berger's *Lady in the Dark*, I finally understood why I had always been so deeply stirred by this seductive, troubling, and enigmatic piece of musical theater.

Interweaving dream with reality, and three glittering one-act operettas with an ambitious, weighty, confessional libretto, *Lady in the Dark's* eccentric structure makes it uniquely challenging. Like Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* (1940), its near contemporary, it is a thoroughly adult musical with an experienced, worldly, and frankly sexual woman at its center. Like *Joey*, it includes pastiches of then-popular musical styles, although *Lady* takes these sources more seriously and mines them far more deeply. However, *Lady's* quasi-operatic dream sequences stretch the conventions of Broadway musical comedy to the breaking point. Moreover, its



psychoanalytical framework gives it a gravitas for which *Pal Joey* does not aim. As recent critics often note, the work's portrayal of a woman suffering a career meltdown because of her success is especially problematic in an age in which women dominate the publishing and fashion industries and are no longer expected to abandon a career after motherhood or marriage. In his comprehensive study of the piece, Bruce McClung describes its gender politics as "hopelessly dated." He argues that it is too enmeshed in its period to be completely updated and that the only solution is "to keep it loosely as a period piece, without being slavish to the original." That solution matches the position of the authors' estates, which have never sanctioned a radical rewriting of the musical but approve minor alterations, such as the substitution of a female psychiatrist for the male original. McClung's solution also seems to have pointed the way for Anna Pool, who conceived the Opera Zuid production as a companion to the melodramatic films of the late 1930s and early 1940s, with a surprisingly unsympathetic Liza (very well sung by soprano Maartje Rammello) who seemed a cross between Bette Davis and Betty Grable. But Pool's production did not convince me that melodramatic realism is the way to go with this genre-defying piece.

The onstage conventions and audience expectations in German theaters and opera houses are very different from those that obtain in the Anglophone world (Pool is British). After two decades of regular German theatergoing, I have come to believe that the greatest difference is that almost all German productions of classics modernize the source material, sometimes quite aggressively, addressing audiences in their own vernacular and in the context of their own historical moment. Almost any German production of a classic could be prefaced with words to this effect: "In this space we share tonight, we have something to tell you, so we're going use [title of show] to ventriloquize, to take

On this page: Three different visions of the Glamour Dream in *Lady in the Dark*. Top left: Opera Zuid (Maartje Rammello as Liza). Photo: Bjorn Frins. Center: Vienna Volksoper (Julia Koci). Photo: Barbara Pálffy/Volksoper Wien. Bottom right: Theater Basel (Delia Mayer). Photo: Ingo Hoehn.



as our mouthpiece, medium, and plaything." Whether performed in a small studio or a large state-subsidized house, theater takes direct communication as its *modus operandi*. Some productions address audiences so outspokenly that they become self-reflexive, explicitly foregrounding their current circumstances and the town or even the theater in which they take place.

Because most Broadway musicals are set in the time of their creation, that German imperative can become especially complicated with a musical theater classic. Musical comedy historically has always been up to date, epitomizing the kind of stage work that takes up present-day manners, subjects, and styles. But even period musicals, whether set in a Victorian London pie shop or a settlement in the Oklahoma Territory, have aimed in their first productions to contemporize their subject matter. Thus, they employ up-to-date themes, characters, and musical vernaculars even while retaining more or less period settings. A production of a classic Broadway musical in a state-subsidized German theater finds its allegiances even more conflicted: to the original score and book, to the period in which the piece is set, to the injunctions of estates and copyright holders, to the tastes of local audiences (who may or may not know the piece, no matter how popular it is in the U.S.), and to the pervasive cultural imperative to contemporize. Because musicals are almost always performed in translation, the German language adds another layer of difficulty, particularly when the original (for example, *West Side Story*) is rife with idiolects and colloquialisms, or in the case of composer/lyricists Stephen Sondheim and Cole Porter whose words are inseparably wedded to their music. These complications, however, become especially loaded with *Lady in the Dark*, which may be packed with period detail but whose very subject is fashion, which is to say, being both in vogue and one step ahead of the trend.

Because almost all Broadway musicals performed in Germany are still under copyright protection, most productions do not depart radically from the original, unlike operettas, which are sometimes totally reconceived and rewritten. Director Martin G. Berger is acquiring a reputation for fearlessly updating all-too-fa-



miliar works, reimagining Mozart's *Così fan tutte* as a dangerous social experiment—a sex therapy marathon for two not-so-happy couples—and resetting Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* in the former GDR. Berger's 2019 production of *Follies* at the Staatsoperette Dresden, replete with Soviet-era kitsch, is as radical a reimagining of a Broadway classic as I have seen. He relocates *Follies* to the newly rebuilt Staatsoperette in order to look back at the company's own history, splitting the piece's temporality between 2019 and the 1980s to juxtapose the dour present against an improbably rose-colored Communist past. His updating, however, exactly captured the protagonists' shared predicament, marooned between an unhappy, affluent present and nostalgic dreams of a past that never was. The Loveland sequence, for example, recaptures Sondheim's unique combination of showbiz glitz and despair by placing the young couples singing "You're Gonna Love Tomorrow/Love Will See Us Through" in pastel-colored Trabants (the East German answer to Volkswagens) in front of the firebombed ruins of the famous Frauenkirche, silhouetted against a picture-postcard sunset. The most radical change was Berger's rewriting of the lyric for "I'm Still Here" as a narrative of survival not in Broadway and Hollywood but in the GDR. The production thus uses East Germany as both history and hallucination, a storybook land from which deprivation, autocracy, and the Stasi have been air-brushed out.

Although Berger's *Lady in the Dark* similarly updates and reconceives a Broadway original, his work here has even more texture and depth. The primary alteration involves changing the thematic focus so that the primary point of conflict is less gender than age. The celebrated fifty-something Swiss actor Delia Mayer plays Liza as an aging Baby Boomer while the other women and men in the *Allure* office, except photographer Russell Paxton (Stefan Kurt), are Gen Z. Her challenge then is to ensure the future of *Allure* as a fashion trailblazer in an age in which printed magazines are becoming increasingly scarce. In other words, Berger updates a classic that is itself about fashion to reflect on how, in a constantly changing world, a classic must be updated to keep it relevant. The choice between the Easter cover and the circus cover thus becomes a choice between the obsolescent world of feminine beauty in which the golden-haired Liza is mired and a new realm in which allure comes in many shapes, genders, colors, ages, and sizes. Charley Johnson, her employee and rival, as played by the serpentine Gabriel Schneider, is a flashy, perennially slouched, gender-fluid influencer decked out in a sequined shirt and leopard-skin tights, his finger always on the pulse. Thus, in Berger's production, the central issue is not the suitability of a woman as editor but rather the insurgency of a new generation for whom beauty and fashion have become kaleidoscopic and infinitely mutable. Liza and Russell, in contrast, seem outmoded because of the archaic roles to which they are still bound, Liza as severe, satin-suited career woman and Russell as a once-closeted gay man who now sports a tasteful plaid suit.

One may well ask what has happened to Weill, Hart, and Gershwin's central crux, Liza's torturous self-doubts as a woman whose feminine self-image was ruinously damaged in childhood? Berger retains the musical's psychoanalytical through-line and



Liza (Delia Mayer) dances with Randy Curtis (Jan Rekeszus) among the roses

PHOTO: INGOHOEHN

solves the problem of Dr. Brooks's gender by substituting a recording of Liza's own questioning voice urging her to confront her trauma and anxiety. Liza's handy internalization of the analyst, moreover, points to the fact that some 83 years after Freud's death, and decades into the ubiquity of self-help regimens, the psychoanalytic method has become so routine that one no longer needs an analyst to follow it. At the same time, Berger accentuates the gender-based crisis by focusing the Glamour Dream on Liza's fantasy, as revealed in lurid videos played while her coworkers are praising her, of submitting to a plastic surgeon's grotesque, comic-book style hyper-feminization of her body. This wild hyper-femininity is echoed throughout the piece by an explosion of thousands of roses which magically sprout from the floor, are lowered from the flies, and fill the large projected covers of *Allure*. The flowers are integral to Liza's concept for the Easter cover, while also suggesting a dreamy, saccharine, feminine world that is just a little too bright and luscious. At the end of the piece, Liza's recovery is depicted in part by a hallucinatory video that shows the roses bursting into flame.

The turning point of the Glamour Dream, when Liza screams, horrified at the sight of her just-painted "unflattering" portrait, was for me a like a bolt of lightning that illuminated this benighted lady in a new way. In the Basel production, the chorus, which has mobbed around Liza during the painting of the portrait, rapidly retreats; at the unveiling, a terrified Liza is discovered center stage stripped naked. I suspect I am not the only one who has nightmares in which one finds oneself stark naked in public. The shiver of recognition I felt made me remember that although Liza's crisis of self-image is specifically linked to her wounded femininity, sex and gender (however one defines them) are always central to the production of subjectivity. As Freud knew all too well, adulthood is achieved only at the cost of trauma. In Liza's final dream sequence, which is in fact a series of her childhood memories, her parents and contemporaries appear only in pin spots, ghosts marooned in limbo: every person's family, every person's friends. In other words, this production forced me—as no production ever had before—to leap the chasm and identify fully with Liza's psyche. As her memories recede into the darkness, Delia Mayer delivers a "My Ship" which is simultaneously

heartbreaking and radiant (and impeccably sung), the song which channels her—and everybody’s—quiet shock of recognition and acceptance. Her performance reminded me that the song is about more than simply conquering emotional trauma; it is about self-reliance, self-care, and the freedom to experiment with the possibility of happiness.

“My Ship” represents both obstacle and solution for Liza, and Mayer’s rendition, as she stood by the large, illuminated proscenium arch, led me to recall that *Lady in the Dark* is also a musical about the dream world as a theater. Berger and his designers and choreographer put together a production that is at once extravagant and stark, using a huge drop curtain which incorporates an LED screen that projects contrasting mock-ups of potential *Allure* covers. The office itself is nothing more than a small, raised platform with chairs and video screens, leaving the rest of the stage free for Liza’s fantasies. Liza remains, however, always at the center of the action, changing costumes in full view of the audience and observing scenes from the side of the stage, watching herself, as it were, fall apart. She summons the dream sequences into existence, casting them with the men in her life and choristers and dancers wearing vaguely period costumes. But hers is a surrealist stage in which some of the details go wrong, such as the ludicrously oversized hobby-horse and giant bouquets of pink roses in the Wedding Dream, the imaginings of a beleaguered child dwarfed by the adult world.

Despite the Basel *Lady in the Dark*’s focus on generational differences, heterosexual romance remains pivotal. Liza turns down the wedding proposal of Kendall Nesbitt (Martin Hug) with quiet, sad resolve, while heartthrob Randy Curtis (Jan Rekeszus) makes a thrilling entrance from the flies singing “This Is New” as a dashing *deus ex machina*, dressed all in white. In the original, the sexual chemistry and conflict between Liza and Charley is a major plot point which Berger eliminates by making Charley queer and much younger. As a result, the agreement they reach at the end signals not a romantic liaison but an equitable decision to share responsibility. In this production, moreover, the editorial business has fully adapted to the post-pandemic era. Meetings take place electronically as often as live and the paneled screens in Liza’s office neatly double as Zoom rooms. These dislocations suggest that this is a *Lady in the Dark* for an age in which all relationships have been wrenched out of normality, in which what used to pass as normal no longer can, and there is no normal at all any more. Social and emotional distancing have set a new standard. The difficulty of building bridges in this new world between people and generations is perhaps one reason why the ending was so deeply satisfying, when it emerges that Charley is not the only one that knows the words to “My Ship”; so do Russell, Miss Foster, and Miss Stevens. Joining their voices together in song for the final stanza, they demonstrate that the bridges between them were there from the beginning but none of them realized it.

The ingenuities of the Basel production would count for little were it not so well conducted, choreographed, and sung. Thomas Wise’s musical direction was idiomatic and pointed; he knew how to keep orchestra and chorus coordinated and precise for the dance rhythm-driven Glamour and Wedding Dreams. Stefan Kurt’s “Tschaikowsky” shook the rafters while Delia Mayer’s “Saga of Jenny” had real swing. Musically, it was far better than



Liza (Delia Mayer), Charley Johnson (Gabriel Schneider), and the ever-present screens

PHOTO: INGO HOEHN

the Opera Zuid production which sounded heavy and rhythmically earthbound in comparison with both the Basel and Vienna productions.

One question remains from Basel: after all those changes, what of the wishes and dictates of the authors’ estates? As a theater and performance scholar rather than an attorney or stakeholder, I feel strongly that Martin G. Berger’s production truly brings Kurt Weill’s masterpiece into the 2020s. At the performances I attended, the audience was mixed in age and the young theatergoers seemed as enthusiastic as their elders. I attribute that enthusiasm to the ability of this production to speak to people today and would suggest that it represents an inspired example of how to update a classic musical to make it relevant again. Sitting in the theater, I could hear that the score was being performed more or less as written and that the text had been cut. But I did not recognize all the changes to the dialogue until I consulted the printed script, when I realized that there were far more changes than I had thought, most of which, frankly, did not seem necessary. The production’s brilliance lies not in the changes to the text but in its reframing of a “hopelessly dated” musical and the vibrancy, clarity, and inventiveness of its scenic and choreographic realization. Given the huge subsidies afforded government-funded theaters in Switzerland and their unparalleled human resources, a Broadway producer could only dream of mounting *Lady in the Dark* on this scale. But it seems to me that Berger’s reconceptualization offers a template for any director or opera company that wants to stage this masterpiece of the Broadway musical theater and make it live again.

Editor’s note: The Theater Basel production of *Lady in the Dark* incorporated unauthorized changes to the book and lyrics, including situation and characters. The work’s licensing agent in German-speaking territories, Musik und Bühne, reached an agreement with Theater Basel that allowed the performances to continue as scheduled.

Die Dreigroschenoper

Volksooper Wien

Premiere: 27 November 2022

The Vienna Volksooper's gender-swapping version of *Die Dreigroschenoper* proved to be little more than a self-indulgent excuse to mount the work. While veteran Weill interpreter Sona MacDonald, who played the gentleman gangster Macheath, made a compelling case for the idea, young director Maurice Lenhard could muster only desperate attempts to inject contemporary relevance and pathos into the work rather than engage with the principles of Brechtian theater.

The house orchestra made matters worse with sloppy rhythms and often sluggish tempi. To be sure, the last performance on 23 January brought slight improvements under the baton of Manuela Ranno. Crisper brass at the start the overture, a brisker pace for the “Zuhälterballade,” and some momentum for the “II. Dreigroschenfinale” (spearheaded, no doubt, by MacDonald) mitigated a sense that this production was simply a waste of resources. The opening performance under Carlo Goldoni, seen on 6 December, had left no doubt that the young maestro was still learning his way around the score. The program book included his essay, “My first *Dreigroschenoper*,” in which he writes about the history of the work in his hometown of Milan—interesting but ultimately irrelevant.

This new take reinstates the “Arie der Lucy,” a florid number which Weill cut before the original 1928 production because it was too vocally demanding for actress Kate Köhl. The aria was orchestrated by Keren Kagarlitsky, assistant to the Volksooper's current music director, Omer Meir Wellber. Her instrumentation—which assigns the racing accompaniment mainly to trumpet and saxophone—created more opportunities for imprecision in the orchestra and largely failed to blend in with the rest of the score. Perhaps the task could have been assigned to someone with a more intimate knowledge of Weill's music?

Fortunately, the production showcased the many talented members of the Volksooper's ensemble. As Lucy, soprano Julia Koci seemed somewhat insecure on 6 December but gave a standout performance on the final evening, nailing the aria's high notes with a rich tone. Carsten Süß brought the right touch of irony and an attractive tenor voice to the role of Jonathan Peachum, and Ursula Pfitzner as Mrs. Peachum was appropriately sassy at his side. If only their duet in the “Anstatt-Dass-Song” had not been left to drag at a lethargic tempo.

The Polly of Johanna Arrouas was mildly charming on 6 December but rather bland on the final evening; her oddly angelic rendition of “Seeräuberjenny” added stagey and unnecessary vibrato to the end of each phrase. The “Barbara-Song” lacked any sense of dark humor, and making the soprano jump on a trampoline while singing certainly did not help matters. By contrast, tenor Oliver Liebl, MacDonald's counterpart in

the gender exchange underlying the director's concept, brought some edge as the prostitute Jenny, giving a magnetic performance even though he delivered her songs an octave lower than written.

Marco Di Sapia brought a sufficiently satirical touch, though not the clearest diction, to the role of Tiger Brown on the final evening. Due to his illness, the part had previously been divided between Lenhard (alternately delivering dialogue and lip-syncing) and baritone Ben Connor. The production inserted a boy soprano (Camillo Kirchhoff), who performed the “Moritat vom Mackie Messer” at the start of the show only to jump around in an oversized, blanket-like shirt. He also took the stage, with MacDonald, after the “III. Dreigroschenfinale.” The voice was crystal clear, but the final appearance was merely gratuitous.

Lenhard, who will head the Volksooper's new opera studio starting next fall, rarely allows this timeless work to speak for itself, instead decking out the beggars in pillows and blankets in what is intended to be a commentary on the pending energy crisis. Brightly colored wintertime garb for the Peachums (costumes by Christina Geiger) is in keeping with the work's playful irony but clashes glaringly with the dark yellow carpeting that covers the stage in circular tiers (set by Malina Raßfeld). The set evokes Brecht's biting social commentary only once, casting Macheath's favorite brothel as a bourgeois living room.

But it is hard to justify this production's creative vagaries as it attempts to raise awareness of gender inequality and economic scarcity. Although MacDonald emanates authenticity from the moment she walks onstage, effortlessly cutting a swath as a ruthless female gangster, her low-pitched singing was occasionally jarring. If she had been brought together with an experienced conductor and director, this *Dreigroschenoper* might have hit a nerve at a time when the world is reeling from civil unrest and questions of identity. Instead, the production became a vehicle for profligacy and self-serving internal politics, both endemic to state-funded opera houses.

Rebecca Schmid
Vienna



PHOTO: BARBARA PÁLFFY/VOLKSOPERWIEN

One Touch of Venus

Oper Graz

Premiere: 17 December 2022

Since its German-language premiere in Meiningen in 1994, *One Touch of Venus*, Kurt Weill's most successful Broadway musical during his lifetime, has made its way through various translated or half-translated versions on German stages. There has been visible progress over time in both resources committed and results achieved in productions of the show (and musical comedy in general) under conditions quite different from those on Broadway or the West End. Yet in this first Austrian production of *Venus*, director Magdalena Fuchsberger has failed to recognize the strengths and challenges of the play, as well as its potential.

It is quite clear that the house was prepared to invest in the production by recruiting the lead actors from outside the company and providing a lavish stage design and elaborate costumes. Christof Messner proved almost ideal for the shy and stuffy male lead. He gave the character of Rodney Hatch the necessary comic intensity both through convincing acting and a smooth, lively sympathy with the songs. The same can be said for Dionne Wudu as Venus. Her intense and expressive pop voice, combined with an enormous breadth of expression as singer and actor, guaranteed successful performances of "I'm a Stranger Here Myself" and "Foolish Heart." Regular company members did not fare so well in the roles of Taxi Black, Stanley, Gloria Kramer, and her mother. Neither the actors nor the director fully grasped the vaudeville or slapstick nature of these characters, or knew how to manage it onstage. The actors' failure to put across the wit and humor of the lyrics caused the audience to miss them completely. (Roman Hinze's translation, the most effective and accurate so far, cannot be blamed.) Dialogue was no better, often boring and lacking effervescence, humor, and timing. Ivan Oreščanin (Whitelaw Savory), whose commitment to the role was evident, resorted to familiar gestures of operatic performance due to lack of direction. The actors, apart from the four principals, did not seem very serious; many minor, careless mistakes characterized the performances.

One of the essential problems of this production is dance. In *Venus*, which opened only a few months after *Oklahoma!*, Weill and Agnes De Mille used choreography to drive the action; the dances build on dialogue that has gone before and introduce new plot elements. The audience must understand how the ballets "Forty Minutes for Lunch" and "Venus in Ozone Heights" contribute to the story. In Graz, one had the impression that the director did not grasp the necessary integration of the ballets. Thus, they seemed like interpolated, revue-like interludes that are not organically connected with the plot. Some of the principals, especially Messner and Wudu, clearly had the will and ability to dance, but they were not incorporated into the choreography. More generally, the scenic realization of the songs came across as wooden and conceptless. The orchestra fell victim as well; errors



Rodney (Christof Messner) and Venus (Dionne Wudu) in his apartment; a statue fragment looms in the background

PHOTO: WERNER KMETTITSCH

in balance, failure to sense larger musical forms, little willingness to support the singers—for example by tonal and dynamic balancing with the voices, or helping a singer to shape a song (as at the end of "Stranger Here Myself")—testify to the orchestra's lack of expertise in popular musical theater.

The problems with the Graz production went beyond execution to larger issues. Rooted in 1940s discourse, *Venus* depends on a subtext of male sexism vs. female empowerment that this production ignores. Songs like "One Touch of Venus" and "The Trouble with Women" rely on sexist allusions; it is up to the staging to determine whether they comment on sexism or merely perpetuate it. Molly is a strong woman who nevertheless advises young female students to take advantage of stereotypical feminine characteristics to gain control over men. In contrast, the four men of the barbershop quartet are themselves stereotypes whose misogyny highlights their naiveté and awkwardness. Here the creative team did not know how to handle the parody and pastiche in these songs, or even recognize it. The elaborate set design showed a willingness to go big, but lost focus in the process. The stage was littered with large fragments of a broken statue, but it was not clear why. As a side note, we should mention the seemingly arbitrary references to warfare in the sets and costumes—an ill-considered attempt to situate the play in the context of World War II, during which it premiered.

The overall effect: a provincial performance, which did justice neither to the work nor the genre. The production reveals—despite some outstanding acting performances—that there is still too little seriousness and technical expertise here in dealing with musical comedy. Fortunately, Austria has theaters that do better with American musical theater, such as Musiktheater Linz or the Vienna Volksoper, and have the potential to take on Weill's Broadway shows and offer better models to multi-genre theaters.

Nils Grosch
University of Salzburg