

## Wide World of Weill

“Fall of the Weimar Republic: Dancing on the Precipice” is the portentous title of the centerpiece of the 2023–24 Carnegie Hall season. The festival runs from January through April, and naturally enough will present several programs featuring Weill’s music. The roster of performers includes the Philadelphia Orchestra under Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Ensemble Modern with HK Gruber and Wallis Giunta, the Met Orchestra Chamber Ensemble, Ute Lemper, and many more!

This summer’s Edinburgh International Festival will host Barrie Kosky’s Berliner Ensemble production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* for three performances, 18–20 August. The critically acclaimed staging will celebrate its U.K. premiere with some cast changes; Gabriel Schneider plays MacHeath, for example, rather than Nico Holonics, who portrayed the great anti-hero during the 2021–22 season. Adam Benzwi remains music director. The work will be given in German with English supertitles.

Weill returns to the BBC Proms on 31 July 2023 for the first time since Nina Stemme sang his songs on the Last Night of 2017. *Kleine Dreigroschenmusik* will lead off a program that includes works by Adès and Rachmaninoff. The Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra performs with Vladimir Jurowski on the podium. Ten years ago, on Weill’s birthday, Jurowski led the London Philharmonic in a complete concert rendition of *Die Dreigroschenoper*; the cast included John Tomlinson, Felicity Palmer, Mark Padmore, and Meow Meow.



Nothing definite yet, but the legion of Broadway lovers disappointed by the COVID-driven cancellation of *Love Life* in March 2020 may take comfort from an article on the new music director of Encores!, Mary-Mitchell Campbell, in the *New York Times* from 13 March. Her plans are said to include “a new outing for Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner’s *Love Life*.” More news soon, please ...



PHOTO: OPERA NATIONAL DE PARIS

Six singers in training from the Académie of l’Opéra national de Paris got more than they bargained for when they took the stage for a program conducted by company music director Gustavo Dudamel, longtime musical director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic who will take the reins in New York in 2026. The program sported two works by Weill: the Ice Cream Sextet from *Street Scene*; and “Youkali,” which closed the evening. Both numbers featured all six soloists. The live performance at Palais Garnier on 25 January 2023 was streamed later on arte.tv, where those lucky enough to live in France may still watch it.

Congratulations to Opera Zuid of the Netherlands! Its new production of *Lady in the Dark* (premiere: 12 November 2022) earned the Opera of the Year Award from the on-line Dutch magazine “Place de l’Opéra.” Anna Pool’s staging, conducted by David Stern, took nearly half the total votes, beating out Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* (Netherlands Touring Opera) and three offerings from Dutch National Opera. The award serves as a striking acknowledgment of Weill’s own description of the dream sequences as “one-act operas” within the 1941 Broadway show.

The new Weill song evening, “... und mit morgen könnt ihr mich!,” created by the team of Barrie Kosky (see p. 16) and Katharine Mehrling, has made a splash in Berlin this spring. One hundred minutes of Weill’s songs, mostly in German, orchestrated and conducted by Kai Tietje, have turned reviewers’ heads. Mehrling’s numerous costumes have come in for almost as much praise as her vocal variety and dramatic sense. The *Tagesspiegel* admired Tietje as well: “Whether Asian-sounding oboe with drum, slow-motion tango with sprinkles of flamenco, rumba, or swing: the ladies in the row ahead of us were nearly catapulted out of their seats.”

Years in the making, the German edition of Stephen Hinton’s definitive study of Weill’s theater works, *Stages of Reform* (2012), is set for publication in December 2023. Jüdische Verlag, an imprint of Suhrkamp/Insel, will bring out *Kurt Weills Musiktheater. Vom Songspiel zur American Opera*, translated by Veit Friemert. The German edition opens up new frontiers for German-speaking Weill scholars and extends Hinton’s already vast reach in the world of Weill studies.

Newly published in Paris: *Kurt Weill en France: chronique d’une désillusion* (Editions Nuvis, 2023) by composer, filmmaker, and occasional contributor to the *Newsletter* Alain Jomy, a longtime Weill connoisseur. (He recounts in the preface that he discovered Weill’s music in 1961 in the form of Lenya’s recording of *Die sieben Todsünden*.) Following in the footsteps of Pascal Huynh and other French writers, Jomy considers Weill’s professional and personal life in a series of brief chapters covering Weill’s sojourn in France, from March 1933 to September 1935, and closes by evaluating French interpretations of Weill’s works and Weill’s position in French culture today. ISBN: 978-2-36367-300-8.



Fritz Lang fans take note: Kino Lorber has just issued his hard-to-find film *You and Me*, with music by Weill, for the first time on Blu-ray. It was not Weill’s first Hollywood venture, but it was the first that came to fruition. The 1938 gangster film, whose theme was “crime does not pay,” featured George Raft and Sylvania Sydney as the leads and included “The Right Guy for Me” and “The Cash Register Song” by Weill and Sam Coslow. The remastered video and audio have been cleaned up, and the release includes the original trailer and audio commentary by film critic Simon Abrams. Kino Lorber K26242.

## HK Gruber's Next Adventure

On 3 December 2022, a stunning all-star program unfolded in Örebro, as soprano Nina Stemme, stage director Sam Brown, and conductor HK Gruber appeared with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra. The all-Weill evening boasted a stage work, *Die sieben Todsünden*; a concert work, the *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2); and a staged concert work, *Der neue Orpheus*. If you missed it, you may have a chance to see it next season on tour, but you will definitely have a chance to hear two-thirds of it when BIS Records releases a studio recording. (Gruber and the SCO have already collaborated with BIS on the *Fantaisie symphonique*; that disc dropped in February 2023. See Gruber's article on p. 7.) The conductor had this to say about *Der neue Orpheus*: "You still find shadows from Weill's first symphony in *Der neue Orpheus*, which was a discovery for me—a fantastic piece that shows the situation of Berlin after the First World War. The tempos must be very aggressive."

## Café Car-Weill

New York City's Café Carlyle has long been a premiere venue for jazz and cabaret artists. The tradition continues in 2023, with a healthy dose of Weill added. Grammy winner and 2018 Lenya Competition \$15,000 prizewinner John Brancy played a two-night stand on 20–21 April, and the set list featured six Weill numbers. For five nights, 16–20 May, singer and composer Rufus Wainwright offered a wholly new program titled "Wainwright Does Weill." The evening included songs from his German, French, and American catalogues, featuring beloved standards such as "Surabaya-Johnny," "September Song," and "Lost in the Stars," without neglecting some less-explored byways. Wainwright freely acknowledges his musical debt: "I have been obsessed with Kurt Weill for my entire life but I have never really sung his songs too much. Maybe it felt too close to home. I relate to his melodic sensibility and feel that he used so many influences from other musical genres in his songs and operas. There is an operatic and classical component in his 'pop songs' and a 'pop' quality in his operas. ... What is fascinating about Weill's music is that he sounds like no one else. The DNA to his melodies is ab-

PHOTO: TONY HAUSER



Rufus Wainwright

olutely unique and you can recognize it by just hearing a little fragment. The same goes for his orchestrations which are absolutely stunning.

"As a teenager I was obsessed with the albums *Lotte Lenya Sings Kurt Weill* and *Teresa Stratas's The Unknown Kurt Weill*. I am almost fifty now and feel I am ready for the richness of his music. The depth of his songs is incredible. I cry each time I hear Lotte Lenya sing 'Lost in the Stars.'"



From Örebro: Anna II (Charlotta Öfverholm) in the foreground with Anna I (Nina Stemme) and the Family behind her.

PHOTO: FABIAN KRIESE

## Kosky on Weill

Barrie Kosky, one of the world's most sought-after opera directors and a noted Weill advocate (see the coverage of his productions of *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in Berlin, along with an exclusive interview, in the Fall 2021 *Newsletter*), has published a memoir. The extraordinary account of his evolution from an Australian schoolboy enthralled by the Muppets—the title, *Und Vorhang auf, Hallo!*, comes from the German version of the Muppets' theme song—includes an entire chapter on Weill. In considering Weill's "timeless" art, Kosky compares him to Schubert, Schumann, and other great German song composers: "He creates in every song its own little cosmos in a matter of minutes. Like Schumann's, Weill's songs are postcards from the soul. ... Their postcards share remarkable simplicity, refinement, and emotion. Their songs look simple on paper but need only a few notes to enter the depths." He goes on, "Weill's music bewildered the German establishment because he breached so many boundaries and broke so many rules ... he won't fit in any pigeonhole."

Barrie Kosky, *Und Vorhang auf, Hallo!* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2023). ISBN: 978-3-458-64370-8.

## Historic Recording

Just out: vintage wine in new bottles from Capriccio Records (C5500). The release is anchored by a live recording of the world premiere of *Propheten*—the work has never been issued on a commercial recording—a work for soloists, chorus, and orchestra devised by David Drew from the fourth act of *The Eternal Road*. The concert took place 28 May 1998 in Vienna, with the Radiosymphonieorchester Wien conducted by Dennis Russell Davies. Normally, a world premiere recording of a world premiere performance would take precedence without discussion, but in this case the companion work is equally noteworthy: Thomas Hampson interpreting Weill's *Four Walt Whitman Songs* at the 2001 Salzburg Festival, also with RSO-Wien under Davies. These live performances, of great historical and musical significance, mark a welcome addition to the discography and an excellent opportunity to get acquainted with these essential Weill works.



## Mahagonny in the Wind

Christian Muthspiel, who with HK Gruber created the fifteen-player version of *Die sieben Todsünden* (see the Spring 2019 Newsletter), has arranged six numbers from *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* for wind quintet in response to a commission from Leipzig's Gewandhausorchester. The Gewandhaus-Bläserquintett has already performed *Tänze aus Mahagonny* twice, giving the world premiere in Leipzig on 26 February 2023, followed by a repeat at the Salzburg Easter Festival on 2 April. The work consists of the following numbers: "Alabama-Song," "Denn wie man sich bettet," "Ich habe gelernt," "Ach bedenken Sie, Herr Jakob Schmidt," "Jetzt hab' ich gegessen zwei Kälber," and "Erstens, vergesst nicht, kommt das Fressen." Muthspiel has shared some thoughts on the new work with the Newsletter:

"I tried other numbers, but I concentrated on these six, because they serve as an overview of the moods and styles and tempi of the opera. Of course, it was impossible to leave out 'Alabama-Song,' 'Denn wie man sich bettet,' and 'Jakob Schmidt.'

"Another concern was to substitute instruments for singing voices and make it sound good. A short word had to have a short note, and a long word had to have a long note. I ended up writing the word 'cantabile' every time an instrument reproduces the vocal line.

"I had to depart from the original running order, because the quintet needed a totally new dramaturgy. The hard part was making a smooth transition from the key at the end of one piece to the key at the beginning of the next, to avoid tonal 'crashes,' because the pieces should be played as *attacca* as possible. I never changed the original key, and I didn't add a single note.

"It sounds truly unique. It's a perfect piece for woodwind quintet, and it would be great for a dance company or solo dancer to work with because of its variety."

## Still to Come

In April 2024, *Street Scene* returns to France under the auspices of l'Opéra national de Paris. The production will hit the boards at MC93 in the suburb of Bobigny, directed by Ted Huffman and conducted by Yshani Perinpanayagam, who described conducting the work as "exhilarating" and praised Weill as a "monarch of being able to slip and slide between different genres, really hearing the similarities rather than the differences between them."

Berlin's Konzerthausorchester, led by new chief conductor Joana Mallwitz, honors Weill twice next season. The season opens on 1 September with a program consisting of first symphonies by Prokofiev, Weill, and Mahler. The first weekend of February has a Weill double bill in store, as Mallwitz adorns the subscription concerts of 2–4 February with both *Die sieben Todsünden* (Katharine Mehrling, soloist) and *Fantaisie symphonique* (Symphony no. 2). On 1 February, the Konzerthaus Kammerorchester offers an *hors-d'oeuvre* in the form of Weill's *Tango-habanera*, better known as "Youkali." Deutsche Grammophon has already announced plans to record the symphonies and *Die sieben Todsünden*.

*Der Jasager*, which once rivaled *Die Dreigroschenoper* as Weill's most performed stage work, retains its power. The opera for students, with a libretto by Elisabeth Hauptmann and Brecht derived from a Japanese Noh play, saw over 300 school produc-



## Mahagonny Rises Again (and Again)

Ivo van Hove first presented his vision of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in July 2019 at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and it touched down for a run at Opera Vlaanderen in September 2022. Another co-producer, Dutch National Opera, opens the 2023–24 season with it on 6 September (seven performances). The cast is led by 2015 Lenya Competition First Prize winner Lauren Michelle making her role debut as Jenny and Nikolai Schukoff, an experienced Jimmy; soprano Evelyn Herlitzius will sing Begbick for the first time. Conductor Markus Stenz, whose many encounters with Weill include a complete recording of the score of *Der Silbersee* on RCA, led his first *Aufstieg* in 1992, so he is no stranger to the work. Director van Hove commented, "The themes tackled by the opera are just as relevant today as they were then. ... [It] is an important awareness that Brecht and Weill give us, that as humans we can rapidly degenerate into brutish, malicious behavior. That civilization is a very thin veneer."

tions in Germany between its premiere in 1930 and the Nazi takeover in 1933. Two companies in separate hemispheres put it on this summer: the Scottish Opera Young Company Gateway program for aspiring singers (8 July), and Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires (24–27 August), where it will be paired with Brecht's companion play *Der Neinsager* as set to music by Martín Matalón.

Staatsschauspiel Dresden mounts a new production of *Die Dreigroschenoper* premiering 6 October, directed by Volker Lösch. He will set the work in a "fictional" version of contemporary Germany, reimagining the political implications of the central conflict between Macheath and Peachum. Two notable non-German stagings: In Dallas, Theatre Three will present *The Threepenny Opera* in Simon Stephens's English adaptation—first heard in London's National Theatre in 2016—from 28 September through 29 October. Dramaten, a company of Sweden's National Theater, offers a new repertory production from Sofia Adrian Jupither in Swedish (translation by Magnus Lindman) during December and January.

Marc Blitzstein's *No for an Answer* (1941), his next musical theater work after *The Cradle Will Rock*, enjoys a long-awaited European stage premiere at London's Arcola Theatre, 26–29 July. Directed by Mehmet Ergen, who led a production of *Cradle* at the Arcola in 2010, this production forms part of the Grimeborn Opera Festival. And more Blitzstein at the University of Utah, which opens a production of *The Cradle Will Rock* on 29 September.

## Michael Feingold (1945–2022)

Understanding theater critic and translator Michael Feingold's importance to Weill reception in the U.S. requires a bit of history. Before 1950, Weill's German works were little more than a rumor to American audiences; even *The Threepenny Opera* was somewhat obscure, despite the fact that it had been staged here and the 1930 recording of part of the score was available. That all changed in 1954, with the opening of the epoch-making off-Broadway production, its authority guaranteed by the presence of Lotte Lenya in the cast and behind the scenes. Lenya also headlined a revival of *The Seven Deadly Sins* in 1958, translated by W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman. Her plan for Blitzstein and the *Threepenny* creative team to stage *Mahagonny* fizzled after years of frustration, and other Weill/Brecht works got little attention here in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a solid start, but many major works were left behind.

In 1971 Yale University produced *The Seven Deadly Sins* and *Mahagonny Songspiel*, the latter translated by Feingold, and revived them the next year. That was the beginning of a Weill/Brecht avalanche at Yale that lasted most of the decade. Feingold was at the center, contributing a new English adaptation of *Happy End* (1972) and a new translation of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1974), soon published by Vintage Books. Both versions remain standard. Feingold's *Happy End* adaptation is generally considered superior to the original, having made it to Broadway in 1977 with Meryl Streep and Christopher Lloyd. His translation of *Aufstieg* graces major video recordings by Los Angeles Opera (2007) and Teatro Real (2010).

Feingold did not stop there. His rendering of *Die sieben Todsünden* into English from the early 1980s soon rivaled Auden and Kallman's. He was tapped to create a new translation of *The*

*Threepenny Opera* for the 1989 Broadway production featuring Sting. *Das Berliner Requiem* and the school opera *Der Jasager* also received the Feingold treatment, along with a host of Weill's French and German songs. When the song "Lied vom blinden Mädchen" was discovered (see the Fall 2017 *Newsletter*), the Foundation approached him immediately to prepare the English translation. All this time, he was also one of the nation's most distinguished drama critics and commentators from his perch at the *Village Voice*, renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of theater. Establishing Weill and Brecht as a fixture on U.S. stages might in itself have constituted a career for some; it was only a small part of Feingold's.

He remained an unflinching partisan of Weill his whole life and a rigorous advocate. Always a friend of the Foundation, he was no stranger to the *Newsletter*, having contributed a number of essays and reviews over the years. "The Weill Party" anchored the "Centenary in Review" issue (Spring 2001), and a trenchant review of John Fuegi's controversial book *Brecht & Co.* (Fall 1994) attracted the ire of Fuegi himself. His homage to *Threepenny* (Spring 2003) read in part, "the rapport [between work and audience] makes [the work] extremely hard to ruin. There is so much pleasure and so much fascination in even the most misguided rendition of any of its songs. And its texture is so rich that some fragment of it will jump to the forefront of your mind in response to any external event." Feingold made his last appearance in these pages (Fall 2013) with a typically lucid and informed account of Gotham Chamber Opera's reconstruction of the sequence of four short operas originally performed on the same bill at Baden-Baden in July 1927, including *Mahagonny Songspiel*.

Now we must bid him a formal farewell, with gratitude and above all respect for a lifetime of devotion to Weill's music and for tirelessly spreading the word.

## Ned Rorem (1923–2022)

Rorem's contributions to American music and letters are much better known than his contributions to Weill reception.

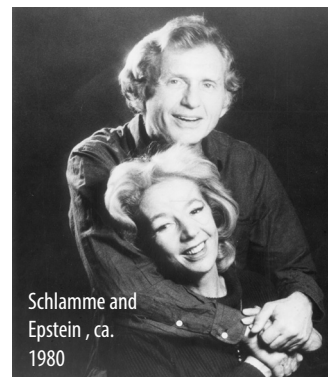
Rorem first became aware of Weill when he lived in Paris, roughly twenty years after Weill passed through France. The point of contact was arts patron Marie-Laure, vicomtesse de Noailles, who had assisted Weill just after his flight from Germany in March 1933. Weill composed *Die sieben Todsünden* while living in the vicomtesse's apartment; in gratitude, he gave her an autographed score of his school opera *Der Jasager*. Rorem uncovered it in her collection, and, in his words, "week after week I played it on [her] white piano in love and awe." Not ten years later, he led a performance from the piano at the University of Buffalo, having translated the libretto into English. His translation survives in the collections of the Weill-Lenya Research Center.

Weill appears regularly in Rorem's writings; the essay collection *Settling the Score* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) devotes a chapter to the formerly German American composer whom Rorem first encountered in Paris. Let its last words serve as a fitting tribute to them both: "Weill is today in the position toward which all dead composers aspire, of being able to take care of himself."

## Honoring a Great Performer

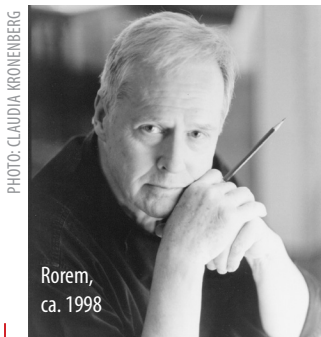
Austrian singer-actor Martha Schlamme (1923–1985) enjoyed a long career in the U.S. after fleeing the Nazis as a teenager. Noted for her performances of folk songs in many languages, she was also a fine actor. One of her passions was Weill's music, which she performed and recorded as a solo artist and in partnership with Will Holt, Alvin Epstein, and others. 2023 marks her centenary, and Leonard J. Lehrman, scholar and pianist, is celebrating with a series of concerts in her honor. Three are upcoming: two in Valley Stream, N.Y. on 30 July and 20 August; the last in Manhattan on 23 September, exactly two days before Schlamme's hundredth birthday.

The concert repertoire centers on Weill's German, French, and American songs, with contributions from other composers, notably Marc Blitzstein. Performers include Lehrman, Helene Williams, Belle Linda Halpern, and Ron Roy. Schlamme herself will make a video appearance at the final concert, which will feature recordings of her performances of five numbers, three by Weill.



Schlamme and Epstein, ca. 1980

PHOTO: COURTESY OF WLRC



Rorem, ca. 1998

PHOTO: CLAUDIA KRONENBERG



# Lenya@25: The Celebration

One concentrated, exhilarating day: exhibits, panel discussions, a gala concert, the finals of the 2023 Lenya Competition, and a scene-stealing awards ceremony. Our writers on the scene, former Foundation Archivist David Farneth, Competition laureate Erik Liberman (Second Prize, 2005), and Competition chronicler Michael Lasser guide us through the day's events.

## 25 Years and Counting

by David Farneth

Congratulations to the Kurt Weill Foundation on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Lenya Competition, initiated in 1998 by Foundation President Kim H. Kowalke and supported by an expert Board of Trustees (including Lys Symonette in the early days), a dedicated administrative staff, and a host of external advisors. From modest beginnings, the Competition has grown into a unique and influential contest, in which participants must demonstrate excellence in all facets of music theater performance: development of character, vocal ability, delivery of text, acting, movement, collaboration, and communicating complex emotions. The annual event has attracted applicants from every state in the U.S. and almost fifty other countries. More than 4,000 singer-actors have auditioned, with total prizes awarded to more than 700 contestants exceeding \$1.5 million.

Kowalke explains why he felt compelled to pursue the project in the first place: "I started the Competition after conducting *Street Scene* and a huge original Kurt Weill revue for Eastman Opera. I was surprised by the lack of acting, movement, and basic stagecraft skills. So, I guess, I hoped to make a few waves to motivate change in my backyard. I had no inkling that the swell would become international so quickly and that Lenya Competition winners would soon be at the Met and on Broadway simultaneously, winning 'Singer of the World' and 'West End Newcomer of the Year.' That I could never have imagined."

This year's edition of the finals returned to Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester—an invigorating day-long series of events billed as "The Lenya Competition Celebrating 25 Years," produced by Kowalke and the Foundation's Director of Programs, Brady Sansone. Although this august institution is no stranger to luminaries and storied musicians, the somewhat staid, dark-paneled Kilbourn Hall took on renewed energy with the buzz of emerging and established music theater performers, probing discussions, and the natural tension surrounding intense competition for a top prize. Two exciting performances on Saturday, 29 April, formed the centerpieces of the celebration: the Competition finals in the afternoon followed by a gala evening concert presented by previous Competition prizewinners, which culminated in the announcement of this year's prizes and awards.

In the final round, the performers vie for three top prizes (\$25,000, \$20,000, and \$15,000) as well as several possible \$6,000 awards granted at the discretion of the judges.

Each contestant has fifteen minutes to demonstrate versatility through four contrasting musical numbers of their own selection: one theatrical selection by Kurt Weill, one song from a musical written before 1968, one song from a musical written in or after 1968, and one selection from an opera or operetta. Everyone performs on an essentially bare stage, using only a chair, or costumes or accessories of their choice, to support character development.

The illustrious panel of judges consisted of Dame Josephine Barstow CBE DBE, universally hailed as one of the world's leading singing actors; Ted Chapin, whose career encompasses leadership of the American Theatre Wing, the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, Encores!, and the Lyrics and Lyricists series; James Holmes, British musical director (English National Opera, Opera North), editor, arranger, Grammy nominee, and strong advocate of the American musical theater repertoire; and reigning Broadway star Kyle Scatliffe (*Hamilton*, *Les Misérables*), the first past prizewinner (Lys Symonette Award, 2010) ever to judge a final round. A special shoutout goes to Lyndon Meyer and Shane Schag, both renowned collaborative pianists whose diverse responsibilities and essential contributions were acknowledged in a public session earlier in the day.

This year—in an unprecedented outcome—the top three contestants all received exactly the same combined number of points from the panel of four judges, which prompted them, after considerable discussion, to decide on three equal First Prizes of \$25,000 each for Taylor-Alexis DuPont, Ryan Johnson, and Nyla Watson. (Previous finalists DuPont and Watson had each won a judges' discretionary award, in 2021 and 2019, respectively.) Although unprecedented, in retrospect the three-way tie is not hard to understand. Each First Prize winner presented beautifully crafted and thoughtful programs, diverse and rich in emotion, delivered with an authentic naturalness that created strong connections with the audience.



The judges: Dame Josephine Barstow, Kyle Scatliffe, James Holmes, and Ted Chapin

PHOTO: KURT WEILL FOUNDATION

Taylor-Alexis  
DuPont

Ryan Johnson



Nyla Watson



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Taylor-Alexis DuPont showcased her impressive voice and dramatic flexibility with “Nobles seigneurs” (*Les Huguenots*), “Trouble Man” (*Lost in the Stars*), “No One Else” (*Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*), and “Wie lange noch?.” Each selection evoked different emotions: happy expectation, tragedy mixed with longing, joyful reunion, and remorse. DuPont’s effective costume adjustments reinforced her up-to-date, stylish characterizations: a red tailored coat for the page’s aria; a simple, multi-purpose white shift dress for the rest of the program; and deft use of UGG-style boots. This provocatively staged, well-paced, and engaged performance was a clear audience favorite.

Ryan Johnson made surprising and effective choices for his first and last numbers: “And Where Is the One Who Will Mourn Me When I’m Gone?” (*Down in the Valley*) and “È la solita storia del pastore” (*L’Arlesiana*). He effortlessly shifted characterizations and vocal styles in a comically confident but unsure “She Loves Me” (*She Loves Me*) and the romantic ballad “I Can Hold You” (*Listen to My Heart*). For costuming, Johnson chose a guy-next-door approach by dressing unostentatiously in an untailored blue jacket,

open-collared shirt, and dress sneakers. Johnson shaped his soaring tenor/light baritone voice to full effect, communicating the songs naturally, believably, and seemingly effortlessly, leaving many audience members smitten.

Nyla Watson’s commanding and committed performance felt like a force of nature. The word “fearless” also comes to mind. The

audience sat bolt upright as she started her program by tripping onto the stage and immediately launching into “Come Down from the Tree” (*Once on This Island*), almost as if in mid-song. Watson’s second and third numbers—“Dieu quel frisson” (Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*) and “That’s Him” (*One Touch of Venus*)—were about as far apart stylistically as one can get. While physically maximizing the entire stage, she employed subtle vocalization and expressive facial, arm, and hand movements to underscore the texts and make smooth transitions both within and between musical numbers. Her casually elegant white dress and bare feet worked in tandem with her expressiveness to elevate the performance to some sort of out-of-body higher plane. Watson’s powerful rendition of “Being Good Isn’t Good Enough” from *Hallelujah, Baby!* brought down the house and provided an emotional and uplifting conclusion to the three-hour competition.

The judges also bestowed two discretionary awards, each bearing a \$6,000 cash prize. Jeremiah Sanders’s big-voiced, searing plea to his god in “O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me” from *Lost in the Stars* won him the Kurt Weill Award (outstanding performance

of a song by Kurt Weill). Celeste Rose took home the Rebecca Luker Award (best performance of a Golden Age number) for her nuanced and charming interpretation of “I Cain’t Say No” from *Oklahoma!*. Seven other finalists competed: Rebekah Howell, Stavros Koumbaros, Midori Marsh, Juliane Stollenbach Ramos, Lucie St-Martin, Alicia Russell Tagert, and Ian Williams. Each

Celeste Rose

Jeremiah  
Sanders



received a total of \$4,250 in prize money from the semifinals and finals.

After a dinner break came the Gala Alumni Concert featuring past winners of the Lenya Competition, adroitly hosted by Erik Liberman. Here was one of those memorable, magical nights in the theater that leaves audience members feeling privileged just to have been there. How often does one get to hear in one place ten musical theater artists at the top of their game showing what they do best? The strong familial connection within this community came to the fore as the ten participants—Ruth Acheampong, Richard Todd Adams, Natalie Ballenger, Christopher Herbert, Justin Hopkins, Amy Justman, Reilly Nelson, Lauren Pastorek, Andrew Polec, and Laura Corina Sanders, assisted by collaborative pianists Thomas Rosenkranz, Zachary Peterson, and Timothy Long—performed for each other as much as for the audience. Seven of the performers reinforced the theme of the gala by presenting songs from their winning Competition programs. Several times during the evening I remember thinking, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard this song performed better.”

The entire program was beautifully conceived and professionally produced. While everyone delivered \$500-a-seat performances, I had few personal favorites. For all-out dramatic singing, Laura Corina Sanders’s playful coloratura in “Chacun le sait” from *La fille du régiment*, and, especially, Reilly Nelson’s expressive, beautifully phrased “Youkali.” For combined singing, acting, pacing, and characterization, Andrew Polec’s impactful, on-the-edge, eight-minute dramatic scene “Bat Out of Hell.” Ruth Acheampong is a performer one could watch and listen to all day. Her warm, clear soprano, natural acting style, and clean delivery of the text all contributed to an endearingly comic rendition of “Mr. Snow.” For further comic relief, Natalie Ballenger’s “The Secret Service” with Erik Liberman providing silent, authoritarian support. Who doesn’t get a charge out of a well-performed “Getting Married Today”? Ballenger, Amy Justman, and Richard Todd Adams delivered the goods for the penultimate number. The concert organizers wisely chose an inspirational closing: Justin Hopkins singing one of the most famous and moving musical theater songs of all time, “O! Man River.” Beautiful, powerful, uplifting, timely. There were no dry eyes among the cheering crowd. (While writing this paragraph and watching the video again in private, I started sobbing all over again.)



Andrew Polec



Ruth Acheampong



Reilly Nelson



Laura Corina Sanders



Natalie Ballenger

ALL PHOTOS: MICHAEL SHERMAN



Natalie Ballenger, Amy Justman, Richard Todd Adams

ALL PHOTOS: MICHAEL SHERMAN



The live performances were interspersed with Erik Liberman's insightful tributes to Harold Prince and Teresa Stratas, both of whom made critical contributions to the early development of the competition. Several of the invited performers were unable to attend in person but addressed the audience via video, including Brian Mulligan, John Brancy, and several Eastman alumni.

The packed day of events, highlighted by the cumulative emotional roller coaster produced by the performances of both finalists and alumni and topped off with the award presentations, left participants and audience alike feeling energized and exhausted at the same time. A great day for Lotte Lenya, the Foundation, and the future of musical theater.

Justin Hopkins



## Competition Conversations

### by Erik Liberman

On 29 April, the Lenya Competition received a warm welcome at Eastman School of Music's Kilbourn Hall in Rochester after years of pandemic exile. The festivities kicked off with a pair of panel discussions. During a brisk first hour, Grammy-winning performer and Eastman Professor of Voice Katherine Ciesinski moderated a lively conversation with past Lenya winners, asking what distinguishes this Competition from others.

Reilly Nelson (\$10,000 Winner, 2018) tinkered with her repertoire "like a jigsaw puzzle," noting that the Competition "launched my love of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, which informed my world view." Another four-time competitor, Natalie Ballenger (Third Prize, 2014) marveled at the Foundation's "investment in us through the years—that has been really special and different." Andrew Polec (First Prize, 2021) auditioned exactly once, but only after taking *nine years* making up his mind to enter after being "blown away" by the work he'd seen at Kilbourn as a student. Then he spent *nine months* preparing his repertoire!

Ciesinski acknowledged the "skill and *chutzpah*" it takes to assemble a good "audition package" for the Competition and asked

Erik Liberman



how personal branding had affected each winner's approach. As Justin Hopkins (Second Prize, 2012) aptly put it, "*Avoidance of branding can be a brand!*" Christopher Herbert (Third Prize, 2007) noted the dangers of "checking boxes that are *not* you." Laura Corina Sanders (\$15,000 Winner, 2018) concluded that the Competition shatters ceilings for artists who feel trapped within "the rigid confines of their genre," capturing a sentiment shared by the winners: that artistic autonomy—advocating for the kind of artist *they themselves want to be*—remains an essential lesson absorbed from participating.

The following panel, led by Competition Founder Kim Kowalke, featured former Foundation Director Carolyn Weber and judges Ted Chapin (eleven finals), James Holmes (seven), and 2023 semifinals adjudicator-coach Amy Justman (First Prize, 2004). Weber had "not a clue" that the Competition would last as long as it has but was honored to take on the "yeoman's work" of executing Kowalke's vision of building a genre-defying contest of global scope. Justman described the elation of coaching semifinalists, noting that opera singers frequently excelled when encouraged to "do less," while musical theater performers often soared when invited to expand (or enlarge) their sound. Chapin praised the Competition's "pu pu platter" of four distinctly crafted acting pieces, while Holmes added, "If they don't nail a high note but make dramatic sense—that's what's gonna score with



me!” From the audience, Hopkins brought the session to a close by referring to Weber as “a shaman” who urged him to take on the challenging aria from *Lost in the Stars*, “O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me!” At first, Hopkins was baffled by her suggestion, but Weber had already intuited “just how special Justin was, so I asked myself, ‘What to give him so he can show those unique qualities in himself?’”

In Kilbourn Hall and on multiple floors of Sibley Music Library across the street, visitors also admired priceless Weill artifacts, celebrating Universal Edition’s deposit of Weill manuscripts at Eastman in 1998, also the inaugural year of the Competition. Among the highlights were Weill’s holograph score of *Der Protagonist*, Bertolt Brecht’s handwritten notes on “Zuhälterballade” from *Die Dreigroschenoper*, UE’s praise for Weill’s “promising style for a new popular, modern opera,” and a note from Weill thanking UE for accepting his *oeuvre*, amusingly citing the benefits of “not needing to raise a complete unknown out of obscurity,” thanks to his prior successes as a composer.

An indelible weekend celebrating the roots—and fruits—of the Foundation’s 25-year “labor of love” to nurture emerging artists, bring Weill’s work to contemporary audiences—and the Lenya Competition to life!

## Hot Takes

by Michael Lasser

Best known for his long-running NPR program, “Fascinatin’ Rhythm,” Michael Lasser has attended twenty Finals through the years. He shared some stories from the 25th Anniversary Competition:

I’ve been handicapping final rounds for many years, trying to anticipate the judges’ decisions. When I saw Kim Kowalke at the reception after the gala, he asked me what I thought. I said that I’d done pretty well: I chose Watson for first, and Johnson and DuPont tied for second. He said, “Yeah, but you didn’t have three First Prize winners.” Kim is nothing if not precise.

When Nyla Watson, the first prizewinner to be named, took the stage in Kilbourn Hall, she broke into a brief dance of joy. When I asked her if it was something she had planned, she grinned, “My body just took over.” She added, “I think I have a calling. I began by singing gospel music in church. My singing is a gift to give away.” Joining her in quick succession onstage were the other two winners, Ryan Johnson and Taylor-Alexis DuPont. Because the Competition is unique in rewarding both singing and acting, I asked all three if they leaned more toward theater or opera. Watson said theater, Johnson opera, but DuPont, the shrewdest, or perhaps coyest, flashed a smile and said, “I’m a singing actor.” And so she was, and so were they all.

Dame Josephine Barstow, judging for the first time, said it “felt like a whole family with warmth generated by how the Competition is run.” Ryan Johnson summed up the Competition as “a place filled with learning.”

## Prizewinners’ Proving Ground

Since 2014, the Foundation has enjoyed an especially fruitful partnership with the Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown, N.Y. Nearly every summer since then, the Foundation has supported at least one guest artist or young artist there—both established performers and those starting their careers. 2023, the tenth summer since Glimmerglass hosted the first Kurt Weill/Lotte Lenya Young Artist, will see a bumper crop. The Foundation has named Katrina Galka (Second Prize, 2022) this year’s Weill/Lenya Artist, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. Every stage production—six in all—will feature at least one past prizewinner. Five prizewinners or finalists are members of the Young Artist Program; five more past winners will form part of the regular Glimmerglass company. You won’t be able to tell that many players without a scorecard, so here is a roster of Competition alumni and their roles:

*Candide* (Bernstein): Brian Vu (First Prize, 2016) as Candide; Katrina Galka as Cunegonde; Meredith Arwady (Lys Symonette Award, 2006) as the Old Lady; Young Artist Lisa Marie Rogali (Special Award, 2017) as Paquette; Young Artist Alicia Russell Tagert (Finalist, 2023) as Queen of Eldorado; Young Artist Ryan Johnson (First Prize, 2023) as the Grand Inquisitor

*La bohème* (Puccini): Teresa Perrotta (Trustees’ Award, 2020) as Mimì

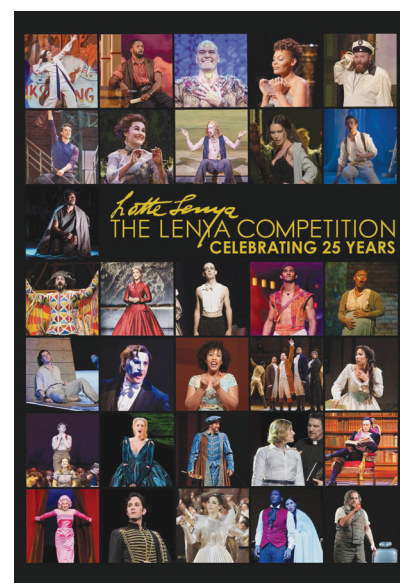
*Love and War* (Monteverdi): Jasmine Habersham (Special Award, 2017) as Clorinda; Brian Vu as Tancredi

*Rinaldo* (Handel): Jasmine Habersham as Almirena

*The Rip Van Winkles* (Ben Morris): Young Artist Amanda Sheriff (First Prize, 2022) as Callista; Young Artist Taylor-Alexis DuPont (First Prize, 2023) as Audrey

*Romeo and Juliet* (Gounod): Lisa Marie Rogali as Stephano; Meredith Arwady as Gertrude.

Copies of the 25th Anniversary brochure are available at no charge. Simply send your request to [kwfinfo@kwf.org](mailto:kwfinfo@kwf.org).



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