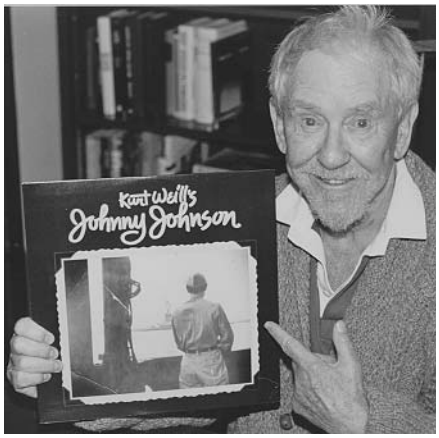
Remembering Burgess Meredith (1907–1997)



Seated at Kurt Weill's desk in the Weill-Lenya Research Center, Burgess Meredith displays the reissue of his recording of *Johnny Johnson,* 1987. *Photo: Robert McCann*

Actor Burgess Meredith died at his home in Malibu, California on 9 September 1997 at the age of 89. He was a virtuosic actor, equally comfortable as romantic lead, comic, or villain in a wide range of media including stage, film, television, and radio. Highlights of his sixty-year career include *Winterset* (the first of three plays written for him by Maxwell Anderson, 1936); *Of Mice and Men* (film, 1939), *Liliom* (Broadway play, 1940), *Diary of a Chambermaid* (film [writer and director], 1946), *Day of the Locust* (film [Oscar nominee in 1975]); *Rocky* (film and three sequels, 1976), and *Grumpy Old Men* (1993). He made many guest appearances on television in the 1960s on shows such as *The Twilight Zone, Rawhide, The Naked City*, and *Wagon Train* and became popular with a new generation of viewers playing the Penguin in the *Batman* series. He was also a noted Shakespearean actor, served as president of Actors Equity, worked as a writer and director, survived blacklisting in the 1950s by Senator Joseph McCarthy, and even made several appearances with the Irish musical group The Chieftains. His distinctive voice sold Skippy peanut butter and United Airlines tickets.

During the 1940s, Meredith lived in New City, New York, not far from Weill and Lenya, and he describes his personal and professional ties to them (some as "missed opportunities") in his autobiography, *So Far, So Good* (Little, Brown, 1994). For instance, he was cast as Crooked Finger Jack in the 1933 Broadway production of *Threepenny Opera*, tried out for *Johnny Johnson* but was rejected by the Group Theatre as an "upstart," and left *Knickerbocker Holiday* when the part of Brom became overshadowed by that of Stuyvesant. But he narrated the first radio broadcast of *Ballad of Magna Carta* and commissioned Weill to provide the music for *Salute to France*, a propaganda film he made during World War II for the United States Office of War Information. He also collaborated with Weill on *Davy Crockett*, a musical that was never completed. In the 1950s he sang "Johnny's Song" on the first recording of *Johnny Johnson*, a work that captured his imagination.

Burgess Meredith remained friends with Weill and Lenya throughout their lives and later was a frequent visitor to the Kurt Weill Foundation. He participated in the 1983 Kurt Weill Conference at Yale University and, in 1988, purchased and donated to the Weill-Lenya Research Center an important collection of letters and documents related to Caspar and Erika Neher.

. . . remembering Lenya

Memories of Lenya—For Her 100th Birthday
Written by Burgess Meredith in 1996

It is difficult to picture Lotte Lenya in a centennial celebration. I think the notion would make her smile—or maybe she'd resent it—hers is an eternally youthful spirit.

When I was trying out a production of *Johnny Johnson* many summers ago in Aspen, Colorado, I telephoned Lenya every week, and she never mentioned the frustrations of the past—she talked about the future. She was enthusiastic about our experiments there and made no remarks like, "I hope to God this one works out, Burgess."

Kurt entered my life, indirectly, when I first became aware of his music, which seemed to me unworldly and wonderful. Its uncanny effect haunts me to this day.

It was 1933 and I had the small role of Crooked Finger Jack in the first American production of *The 3–Penny Opera*, while Kurt was still in Germany. I was happy to be in my first Broadway show, and to hear Weill's abrasive music.

But I was lured away to a larger part in another show. Then a couple of years later I tried out for a part in *Johnny Johnson*—but I was turned down.

Determined to meet the man who wrote this fascinating music, I tracked him down. We hit it off immediately and were friends until his death—and through Kurt I met Lenya.

Our friendship had many facets—not only did we share professional projects, we were neighbors in Rockland County for some of our happiest times—and it even survived differences of opinion on occasion.

Volatile as their relationship was, eventually Kurt and Lenya settled down and were happy—a complete change. When I first knew them I didn't consider they had a serious marriage, any more than the two or three marriages that I had gone through were serious.

But they settled down more than any of us, surrounded by American antiques, a brook flowing by, in a serene domestic framework.

At one point we sat quietly together on his porch on South Mountain Road, and I said to him that my life was being pulled apart while his seemed to be settling down. He said he was glad of his good fortune, because he knew, given time, he would have Lenya all to himself. And, in fact, he did.

His death was a deep loss to me, and I drove to their home to share in a gentle wake, with just a handful of close friends. We sat there crying and laughing and drinking to Kurt, and when it was time to go to bed Lenya said to me, "Would you sleep in Kurt's bed tonight? Just stay there, you know, so it won't be lonely in the house tonight? Nan Huston is sleeping here and the Caniffs will stay, and a couple of other people. I don't want to be alone." So I stayed so that I too could keep Kurt just a little longer.

Lenya is known to the world for her artistry, but I treasure the personal memory of her friendship.

Books

Von der Zeitoper zur Broadway Opera: Kurt Weill und die Idee des musikalischen Theaters

by Heinz Geuen

Schliengen: Edition Argus, 1997. 343 p.
ISBN 3-931264-02-5

The appearance of a 350-page book on Kurt Weill as the opening volume of a new series entitled "Sonus—Schriften zur Musik" (edited by Andreas Ballstaedt) certainly demands attention. In publishing his dissertation, Heinz Geuen has put forth a study whose title, *Von der Zeitoper zur Broadway Opera*, echoes the mottoes of previous publications on Weill: pairings such as Kurfürstendamm-Broadway or Berlin-New York come to mind, if not a "composer in a divided world." However, readers who are hoping for a comprehensive study of all of Weill's theatrical music—which the title might suggest—will be disappointed; a discussion of Weill's American stage works, for example, does not begin until page 302. Rather, the subtitle and especially the preface provide a clear statement of the author's intentions: "Previous studies display a historico-philological orientation, and thus they focus—apart from biographical research—primarily on formal and stylistic aspects of the music." Instead of contributing to such criticism, Geuen intends to "interpret the characteristics of Weill's musical language, which were developed in Germany as well as in the United States, as they pertain to their intended goal." For Geuen, "the interpretation of the musical material's contextual function" leads to the "heart of Weill's compositional identity, which in its various facets is firmly rooted in an idea of *Gebrauchsmusik*" (p. 9). While this approach is not wholly new, it is certainly underrepresented in Weill scholarship. As a result, this book makes a genuine contribution to the field and is a rewarding experience to read as well.

In the first and largest of his four chapters Geuen explores Weill's socio-musical background in Europe, locating his influences in the avant-garde, expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, jazz, and popular stage genres such as revue, operetta, and cabaret. The vastness of this undertaking confines Geuen to a "condensed portrayal" (p. 10), in which he gives a brief survey of the standard literature in each of the fields he considers to have influenced his subject. Weill's understanding of both "popular" and "artistic" phenomena was the basis for his rich and diverse musical language, as Geuen rightly observes. Weill's use of popular idioms has caused a number of apologetic authors to "insulate [him] from the leading figures of the *Kleinkunst* and revue scene in the Weimar Republic," a fact that Geuen dismisses as a "wrongheaded 'rescuing' of the composer for so-called serious art" (p. 64). Geuen convincingly argues that attempts to judge Weill's work from the standpoint of an autonomous aesthetic—as Adorno did most prominently—are bound to fail.

Geuen's examples illustrating Weill's own uncertainty about his aesthetic position are not always well chosen. Sensing a "willful perseverance" to maintain the authenticity of his scores and "accepting their unauthorized commercial exploitation at the same time" (p. 88), Geuen mentions as an example of the latter a recording of *Knickerbocker Holiday* (AEI 1148) "produced during Weill's lifetime," with "mutilating cuts" and a "clearly deviating, sweeter orchestration" (p. 116). Apparently Geuen is unaware that the recording—first released in the mid-1980s—combines two different radio shows, neither of which was ever intended to match the theater version. It appears that Weill tried to protect the identity of his works solely in connection with stage productions; the commercial exploitation that he not only tolerated but actively pursued seems to have been necessary to define his success, especially in the Broadway milieu.

In subsequent chapters the author traces Weill's career-long development of an overall musico-dramaturgical concept in his works for the stage. Geuen discusses *Der Zar läßt sich photographieren* and *Royal Palace*, along with Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* and Hindemith's *Neues vom Tage*, to argue that *Zeitoper*, as a symptom of a greater crisis in opera, presented the necessary context for Weill to develop and expand his theatrical skills. In contrast to his colleagues, Weill's special dealing with the "'flash in the pan' *Zeitoper*" (p. 224) is seen in Geuen's study as a key to his later works, particularly the ones composed in the United States. The third chapter, which is dedicated to Weill's theories of musical theater, discusses the influence of Busoni (without considering, alas, Tamara Levitz's dissertation, *Teaching New Classicality: Busoni's Master Class in Composition, 1921–1924*) and the different concepts of *Verfremdung* and *Gestus* held by Weill and Brecht respectively. Here Geuen gives a clear and detailed analysis of this often inadequately treated issue.

The final chapter provides four analytical essays in which Geuen illustrates his theory of continuity in Weill's concept of musical theater. Based on his observation that Weill's musical language employs "every possible means" (p. 282) to serve his dramaturgical purposes, Geuen analyzes parts of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, *Lady in the Dark*, and *Street Scene*. A laxity toward the Broadway environment in which Weill worked may be discerned in Geuen's discussion of the rhumba finale ("Girl of the Moment") of the Glamour Dream from *Lady in the Dark*, in which he notes, "the music of this Brazilian carnival might stem from the pen of Jerome Kern, Oskar [sic] Hammerstein, [or] perhaps remotely from that of George Gershwin" (p. 302). Aside from the fact that he recruits (and misspells the name of) one of Broadway's foremost lyricists as a composer (throughout the book Geuen also misspells the author of *Street Scene* as "Elmar" Rice), this list reads like superficial name-dropping, since neither Kern nor George Gershwin is particularly known for the composition of rhumbas. Truly regrettable, however, is the absence of references to specific secondary literature, such as William Thornhill's and David Kilroy's studies on *Street Scene*.

Such lapses, however, do not detract seriously from the merit of Geuen's study and the overall favorable impression it leaves. Geuen's theoretical stance is clearly delineated, and, because his definition of *Gebrauchsmusik* (and the arguments derived from it) follow Weill's own writings closely, they do not fall victim to the perils of a relativism usually inherent in functional theories. The continuity of Weill's musico-dramaturgical concept, which Geuen carefully and convincingly reveals, is essential to any discussion of Weill's music. One of the questions that Geuen's study now raises is how to approach those elements of Weill's music which are unrelated to contextual function.

Finally, it should not pass unmentioned that the quality of the printing is superb and the book is also well-bound. The lack of an index is puzzling, considering the otherwise professional presentation.

Elmar Juchem
Göttingen

Books

The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich

by Michael Kater

New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 327 p.
ISBN 0-19-509620-7

A recent outpouring of English-language publications on music in the Third Reich is a hopeful sign that the relative neglect of music in scholarship on the Nazi state is beginning to be remedied. Yet many of these new publications have ignored important work on the other arts and on Nazi cultural policy in general, as Michael Kater rightly bemoans in the introduction to his *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich*. They have done little more than borrow generously from Fred Prieberg's research (*Musik im NS-Staat*, 1982) and uncritically adopt his prejudices, sticking as well to an old, Hollywood-reinforced image of Nazi Germany as a rigid, highly organized, repressive system in which the daily musical fare consisted of a strict diet of military marches, anti-Semitic fight songs, and Wagner operas.

Michael Kater's investigation of the functioning of art music in the Third Reich remedies the shortcomings of recent attempts. First of all, Kater ventures far beyond the research of his predecessors, bringing to his investigation a well-grounded understanding of the workings of Nazi society and an up-to-date familiarity with the growing field of Nazi cultural history and new directions in musicology. (His discussion of Kurt Weill, for example, gives due consideration to the debate over his alleged compositional metamorphosis after his emigration.) Most important, Kater dares to challenge long-held assumptions, yielding a representation of musical life in Nazi Germany as a highly complex set of circumstances governed by a multitude of variables.

Kater is no stranger to research on Nazi Germany. As Distinguished Research Professor of History at York University, he is the author of a wide range of authoritative studies on the Third Reich, including such topics as the cultural endeavors of the SS, right-wing student movements, the composition of the Nazi party and the medical profession. Kater has more recently turned his attention to music, first with his impressive 1992 study of jazz in Nazi Germany (*Different Drummers*), and now with *The Twisted Muse*, the second of a projected music trilogy, to be followed by his forthcoming *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits*.

The Twisted Muse provides a much-needed balance to views of musical life in Nazi Germany. Rather than submitting to the common practice of isolating the Nazi period as an aberration in Germany's otherwise impressive cultural history, Kater points to the many continuities in music practices inherited from the Weimar Republic, especially in his discussion of the Hitler Youth. Another tendency in earlier studies was to give an illusion of total government control, an image invoked defensively after the war to rationalize the conciliatory gestures that many prominent musicians had made to the Nazi regime. Kater delegitimizes such claims with numerous demonstrations of laxity in cultural policy and of constant in-fighting among Nazi potentates. Finally, as he demonstrated in *Different Drummers*, Kater convincingly argues that the Nazi regime exercised a pragmatic policy of balancing suppression with tolerance, bending its ideological principles rather than offending popular tastes.

These insights are important for interpreting the experiences of musicians and composers, which Kater proceeds to do in numerous case studies of individuals. Perhaps his most important contribution to the literature, these studies reveal the variety of conditions that faced those who tried to function in Nazi society. A wide range of personalities populates this study, from the unknown struggling violinist to the director of the Berlin Philharmonic. Taken together, these snapshots of individuals, each with a different story to tell, vividly recreate the system's crass arbitrariness.

The Twisted Muse also serves to illuminate the complexity of determining guilt or innocence. Kater's vast experience as a historian of the Nazi era puts him in a position to interpret political behavior authoritatively, carefully distinguishing between routine practices and overt political acts. Documenting one's Aryan lineage, for example, was a routine requirement, but joining the Nazi party exceeded normal expectations. Kater's thorough investigations, utilizing archival sources, contemporary literature, and interviews, clear up misconceptions and ambiguities surrounding several well-known figures who have been subjects of lengthy debates. He enhances some of these portraits by looking into pre-1933 backgrounds, showing, for instance, that the bourgeois upbringing of both Strauss and Furtwängler naturally inclined them to oppose the Weimar Republic and imbued each with a healthy dose of cultural anti-Semitism. The investigation of Strauss is particularly informative, interpreting the composer's actions within the framework of the Nazi hierarchy, shedding new light on administrative causes for his resignation as president of the Reich Music Chamber, and unearthing shocking revelations about the unusual cruelties meted out to his Jewish relatives. More surprising are the facts about Fritz Busch, long admired as an opponent of the Nazi regime. We learn that Busch was actually driven out of Germany against the wishes of leading Nazis because of personal intrigues circulated against him by Nazis in Saxony that even Hitler and Göring could not thwart.

While Kater draws some general conclusions regarding musical styles, it must be noted that the study is weighted more toward "the musicians" than "their music" and should be read with these expectations. Still, the author's observations on musical trends show convincingly that despite its relentless propaganda, the Nazi regime never devised clear guidelines for distinguishing between "good" and "bad" music, i.e. "German" and "Jewish." By disassociating an individual's compositional style from the degree of success in the Third Reich, the portraits of composers further serve to dismantle any notions of a consistent Nazi musical aesthetic. Thus adherence to Romanticism did not guarantee success for Pfitzner, nor did experiments with serialism jeopardize the careers of Paul von Klenau and Winfried Zillig. Rather, as each case illustrates, a composer's fate depended on a certain degree of talent, fortuitous political connections, and sheer luck.

The Twisted Muse offers crucial challenges to earlier assumptions about the struggles of musicians in the Nazi state. As Kater observes, Nazi leaders valued the importance of music in Germany's cultural history. Toward that end, it seems, they acknowledged that creative artists needed to be nurtured and granted more personal and political freedom than the average citizen. The Nazi state also considered itself a modern state and sought out a brand of modernism in music that would represent the new Germany. A mere revival of Baroque or Romantic styles would not, in the long run, fulfill their goals. These important observations will encourage new ways of looking at musical modernism. They will, perhaps, also encourage researchers and musicians to take a closer look at specific works that succeeded in Nazi Germany, without harboring presumptions of their artistic limitations and regressive tendencies.

Pamela M. Potter
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Books

Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith

edited and translated from the German by Geoffrey Skelton

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. 255p.
ISBN 0-300-06451-9

A new book of selected letters by Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) reveals the enigmatic personality of a composer negotiating his way through the routes of exile from Germany, the challenges of maintaining American citizenship while living in the United States and in Europe, and the complexities of his own international reception during the last ten years of his life. Letters are personal testimonies of the people who write them. Such a self-evident observation takes on new meaning in the age of the computer, when instant corrections and deletions diminish the opportunity to understand a writer's creative process. A welcome gift to music lovers, this volume is also a comment on the passage of time and a tribute to the art of writing letters.

Geoffrey Skelton has compiled quite a remarkable collection of primary source material that relates broadly to the lives of German exiled composers living in the United States during the Second World War. Nearly four-fifths of the book is selected from Hindemith's letters written up till the end of World War II; a substantial portion of that segment comes from the Weimar and World War II periods. Skelton can justify these proportions for several reasons. First, the balance reflects Hindemith's letter-writing output between 1913 and 1963. Second—and especially of interest to readers concerned with Weill and other contemporaneous immigrant composers—the selection gives a clear picture of the stress Hindemith suffered during the Third Reich and from the experience of exile.

What emerges quite clearly from these letters is a picture of the United States as a haven away from Europe at that time. The correspondence between Hindemith and his wife, Gertrud, during his three concert tours of the United States preceding his immigration (1937, 1938, and 1939) is filled with detailed, journal-like entries. His observations of American cities and their people illuminates the frame of mind that prepared him for immigration. A letter to Gertrud dated 4 April 1937 (during his first concert tour as a violist in the United States) reveals a great admiration for his seventy-three-year-old uncle, Gustav Hindemith, who built his home on a farmstead "gathering the bricks and boards one by one" (p. 99). Contacts with people in music circles throughout this country no doubt further enhanced the optimism he felt because of his first experiences with the United States. He relates (again to Gertrud) a meeting with Oliver Strunk at the Library of Congress, of having found "the necessary points of contact" upon learning that he (Hindemith) was on the panel that failed Strunk when he took the entrance exam in composition at the Berlin Hochschule (p. 100).

Beyond relating the purely anecdotal, Hindemith's observations about his interaction with others come across with understated humor and, at times, even with slight sarcasm. He observed that Nadia Boulanger created the feeling in the United States "that she is engaged in some kind of musical politics" (p. 103), and that Stravinsky, "followed by his satellite [Samuel] Dushkin . . . was telling everyone that *Der Schwanendreher* [Hindemith's composition] is an immensely important piece" (p. 103).

By far the most lengthy correspondence in this book is between Hindemith and his publishers (Schott of Mainz and Associated Music Publishers in New York) and their representatives. Another frequent recipient of letters was Oscar Cox, Hindemith's champion and personal lawyer in Washington, D.C. Though Hindemith lived in Switzerland for the last ten years of his life, he never gave up his American citizenship. Cox became the conduit for Hindemith's expressions of dissatisfaction at receiving little support for concert appearances and events in his honor in foreign cities, especially when American diplomats remained conspicuously absent. In an extended letter dated 13 April 1955, Hindemith explains to Cox why he is "forced to do my work here in Europe" (p. 227). This statement comes after Hindemith had given a concert in Cologne attended by the President of West Germany. "It was rather embarrassing not to see any of the Americans, not even a third rate cultural attaché . . . and claim that the successful conductor was something American" (p. 227).

The anguish of adopting a new homeland, returning to post-war Germany with great pride in things American (an attitude not reflected in this selection of letters), and having to deal with the complexities of domicile, double taxation and a conducting career in Europe (p. 227) during the 1950s and '60s, are issues that tell Hindemith's unique story. He never became an icon in American society as some immigrant composers succeeded in doing, perhaps because he refused to write for films. This intriguing issue finds little treatment in this volume.

Hindemith's own self-deprecating humor reveals most about his intensely private disposition. By definition, the publication of personal letters makes private thoughts public in a way not usually anticipated by the writer. Ironically, the process of people writing "privately" to each other in cyberspace is somewhat analogous to losing confidentiality in published correspondence. Geoffrey Skelton has taken due regard of the confidentiality factor by introducing the letters with annotations and deleting portions not pertinent to the main issue at hand. He has also done a remarkable job of translation, so that the difference between his English usage and Hindemith's own written English is only subtly evident. In the hands of Skelton, a skilled editor and writer, this selection of letters makes for an extremely readable book.

Johann Buis
Columbia College, Chicago

Performances

Street Scene

Altenburg and Gera, Germany
Landestheater Altenburg / Bühnen der Stadt Gera

Premiere: 30 March 1997 (in repertory until mid-1999)

Street Scene, Kurt Weill's "American opera," has been performed in Europe with varying success over the past four years in Munich, Ludwigshafen, Berlin, Freiburg, and Turin. The work is still a long way from becoming a repertory piece here, but it is on the verge of finding at least a niche on the continent in spite of production demands such as the huge singing cast and the ever-problematic translation from the original English. However, up to now it appears that only the landmark coproduction of the Houston Grand Opera, Theater des Westens Berlin, and Theater im Pfalzbau Ludwigshafen was able to present the work without significant shortcomings.

Considering the obstacles, the Theater Altenburg-Gera has achieved some astonishing results. An impressive and effective set, designed by Hanne Eckart, provided an appropriate frame on stage. Replete with rich details, it created a gripping and convincing atmosphere of *verismo*. By placing the tenement houses at an angle with one corner visible at the very left of the stage, the whole set gained depth and perspective, which were cleverly used by director Hubert Kross, Jr.

The Theater wisely decided not to employ its entire staff of actors and singers, instead hiring a few guest soloists. The most outstanding was the American singer Elizabeth Hagedorn, who played Anna Maurrant. Both her singing and acting were truly superb, and she completely fulfilled the expectations and demands of this crucial role. One could hope for a more compatible Frank Maurrant, played by Bernhard Hänsch. Although his voice was appropriate for the role, his character was not fully convincing as an ignorant, inconsiderate brute. The remaining two principals, Birgit Wesolek (Rose Maurrant) and guest soloist Werner Schwarz (Sam Kaplan) equaled the brilliance of Hagedorn.

The numerous secondary characters were very well cast and, at times, a pure delight to watch. To single out the best would require naming almost the entire cast: the Jones family, the Olsens, Hildebrands, Fiorentinos (Lippo sung by guest soloist Uwe Salzmann). Particularly striking was Dick and Mae's jitterbug performance of "Moon-faced, Starry-eyed," danced by the production's choreographer Carlos Guillaume and Lydia Bicks-Fröhlich. A gaggle of "actors-to-be" gave such an extraordinary performance of the Children's Game at the beginning of Act II that the audience wondered whether the kids were professionals.

Hubert Kross's direction revealed aspects of the social significance of *Street Scene*. Here the use of a German translation proved to be a good decision, especially, for example, when it exposed with almost chilling realism the ridiculous yet genuine racism that still exists today. Abraham Kaplan's suggestion of a revolution surely stirred all kinds of emotions in the citizenry of former East Germany. The disadvantages of opera in translation are beyond the scope of this review, but one must note that the translated poem of Walt Whitman (in Rose and Sam's duet) at the end of Act I proved simply ineffective in German.

The generally fresh and convincing choreography went a little overboard in the scene when the two nannies are drawn to the crime scene by—oh-so-present-day—sensational newspaper reports. Regrettably, they overacted their part, turning it into a slapstick number and therefore overshadowing Hughes's words and Weill's music (which contain all the fun necessary).

The Landeskapelle Altenburg, conducted by Thomas Wicklein, performed in the pit. Although the orchestra started out quite well, over the course of the evening there were moments of imprecision and a few numbers could have been crisper.

All in all, the Theater produced a memorable *Street Scene*, one that not only did dramatic and musical justice to a difficult work, but also set a new standard for subsequent productions. Coming just two years after the fusion of the theaters of Altenburg and Gera (in Thuringia, Germany)—a fairly difficult and painful process that many subsidized theaters in former East Germany underwent because of state budget cuts—this production represents a remarkable achievement. This season, the combined Altenburg-Gera Theater has a repertoire ranging from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* to O'Brien's *Rocky Horror Show*. With *Street Scene* in repertory for at least another season (until mid-1999), many more people will have a chance to see the production and especially its splendid cast.

Elmar Juchem
Göttingen

The Ice Cream Sextet (Act 1). *Photo: U. Reinhöfen.*

Performances

One Touch of Venus

Evanston, Illinois
Light Opera Works and Pegasus Players (coproduction), at Cahn Auditorium

16–24 August 1997

There are always risks involved when an opera company tackles musical comedy. One can expect the musical, especially the vocal, qualities inherent in opera to be present, but the style, the acting, even the blocking, can become too stuffy, too heavy, too earthbound. With a show like *One Touch of Venus*, which builds witty one-liners upon a charming fantasy plot, anything earthbound is simply deadly. What should be lighter than air suddenly becomes labored and forced.

Starting with an unlikely story of a hapless barber who puts a ring on the finger of a statue and then watches her turn into a living, breathing goddess, *One Touch of Venus* requires performers who can do justice to Kurt Weill's bewitching score, sell Ogden Nash's snazzy lyrics, *and* punch the jokes stuffed into the script hand over fist by Nash and S.J. Perelman. This is a bright, breezy show, full of wonderful opportunities for a first-rate cast and crew to strut their stuff. Even though too much 1940's wisecracking can sound creaky, and some of the lyrics resonate with pre-feminist messages (most notably the idea that Venus "opened up her bodice" to get ahead with the male deities!), the show can still be very funny in the right hands.

Light Opera Works (a specialist in pieces like *The Merry Widow* and *Desert Song*) collaborated with Pegasus Players (which has a sterling reputation for sharp musical comedy and straight plays) in this production of *One Touch of Venus*. The reputations of these companies offered high hopes for a successful production, but the performance ultimately disappointed, with its clumsy, careless approach. Although a few things were done very well—most notably the orchestral playing and the musical direction—the production was far from flawless.

The production values were no better than slipshod: a clumsy pull-out bed that did not close or open properly, so little smoke and mirrors that Venus's transformation was plain as day, a phone that kept ringing even after it was answered, a skirt that fell off in mid-dance and another that unravelled in mid-song, a towel that should tie a girl to a chair but barely made it around her, and a flimsy flat that was supposed to approximate a chest of drawers but instead flapped in the breeze.

The snafus ruined the extremely nice-looking costumes and set designed by Shifra Welch and Alan Donahue respectively. Welch's contributions included a terrific parade of costumes for the Artists' Ball, while Donahue offered beautifully detailed, watercolored curtains (dropped to disguise frequent scene changes), a whole bus station, and a fabulous take on Rockefeller Center for a very effective "Forty Minutes for Lunch." Although the sets were witty, whimsical, and really added to the production, they complicated the flow of the piece enormously; director J.R. Sullivan's staging could not help but be static and stodgy. Because of the constraints of the set, sometimes the singers simply stood and sang in front of the curtains. Act I came in at an hour and forty-five minutes, which was about fifteen minutes too long. Streamlining the set changes and picking up cues would have trimmed the excess time. Although Marla Lampert's choreography worked well for the two big ballets ("Forty Minutes for Lunch" and "Venus in Ozone Heights"), the Artists' Ball, and "Doctor Crippen," the incidental choreography looked rather aimless.

Old hands from the Light Opera Works filled most of the roles. As Rodney, the humble barber whose life is turned upside-down, William Chamberlain projected a boyish manner with a truly lovely, old-fashioned tenor voice, making the "Wooden Wedding" really shine. Unfortunately, he did not succeed in mining the jokes crammed into Nash's lyrics, especially on catalog songs like "How Much I Love You" and its counterpart, "That's How Sick I Am of Love." And even though Rodney is just a regular guy, there should be more electricity, more romance, than Chamberlain finds in the role. If Chamberlain did not make the most of the lyrics, baritone John Payonk, who played the high-toned art connoisseur Whitelaw Savory, positively muddled them, despite his fine voice. But Payonk pulled off a charming caper at the end of "Foolish Heart" and swirled a mean cape at the

Susan Prischmann (Venus) and William Chamberlain (Rodney) in the Chicago Light Opera Works' *One Touch of Venus. Photo: Rich Foreman.*

end of Act I. He displayed good chemistry with Susan Prischmann (Venus), and Breisa Youman (his snappy secretary).

As the leading lady, Prischmann made a very pretty, graceful Venus, and she gave impressive, romantic interpretations of the classics "Speak Low" and "That's Him." An amiable performer, Prischmann did the best job of balancing singing and acting, as well as garnering laughs. Thomas A. Shea stood out as a pea-brained hoodlum named Stanley. He, too, had the comic timing to sell the jokes.

Still, the orchestra rose to be the star of the evening. In the intimate confines of the Cahn Auditorium, it sounded wonderful. Conductor Guy Victor Bordo navigated the score beautifully, emphasizing the lush strings and sparkling percussion of Weill's original orchestration.

This *Venus* never reached the Ozone Heights it promised. Although Weill's score sounded great, the effortless charm of the book and lyrics became dull by the flagging pace or drowned in a sea of miscues. *Venus* needed a lighter touch all around.

Julie Kistler
Chicago

Program cover for this year's BBC Proms concerts in London.

Performances

Mahagonny Songspiel and *Die sieben Todsünden*

London
BBC Proms Concert
Royal Albert Hall

3 August 1997

Weill is gradually becoming a regular at the annual BBC Promenade Concerts in London. Twenty-nine years ago, an English-language *Seven Deadly Sins* (with the new translation by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman) and the Second Symphony were the first Weill pieces ever to be programmed in the Proms. The 1968 performance, with soloist Evelyn Lear and conducted by Sir Colin Davis, restored *The Seven Deadly Sins* to the soprano key in which Weill had originally written in 1933. The landmark concert was well-received by press and public, although the music seemed difficult and obscure to some people then.

This is the fourth time *Die sieben Todsünden* has been heard at the Proms (Maria Ewing and Anja Silja sang it in concert in the intervening seasons). However, it is the first time a staging has been attempted. Marie McLaughlin, well-known as Jenny in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, plays the singing Anna very well. However, the staging by John Abulafia forces her into a particularly violent reading of the part, frequently striking her sister and throwing her to the floor. I do not believe the music suggests such violence, nor do I read it in Brecht's text. Surely Anna the singer is half of the same person as Anna the dancer. Although Anna the singer keeps her eye on all chances to advance herself and her dancing sister, she is weary of the world. She should be sympathetic to her sister's emotional responses. Donald George, Jeffrey Lloyd-Roberts, Jonathan Veira, and Nicholas Cavalier are effective in portraying the comic elements of the family quartet. The conductor, Anne Manson (the first woman ever to conduct at the Salzburg Festival), showed a fine response to Weill's music, despite the staging.

Well-attended by young standees, *Die sieben Todsünden* formed the climax of an afternoon concert which began with a sequence of cabaret songs by Eisler, Hollaender, Nelson, and Ilse Weber. Unfortunately, the Royal Albert Hall (with its 5000 seats sparsely filled for this performance) is the least suitable place in the city for lieder or small-scale song recitals. (Fischer-Dieskau did once give an all-Goethe-Wolf program here to remarkable effect.) It is quite an achievement that the singers managed to get the words across—Jeffrey Lloyd-Roberts was especially good in Nelson's "Peter," and Jonathan Veira had a good stab at "Das Nachtgespenst." Elena Ferrari bravely essayed "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss" from *The Blue Angel*. The revelation of this segment of the performance was Marianne Rorholm's performance of Ilse Weber's "Brief an mein Kind." This was composed by Weber as a letter to her son in Sweden when she was already in the concentration camp at Terezin. She died at Auschwitz in 1944. Her son eventually published the song in 1978.

Mahagonny Songspiel, which concluded the first half of the program, was the most successful segment of this afternoon concert. Incidentally, *Mahagonny Songspiel* has also been presented four times at the Proms, in 1972, 1987, 1993, and now. I recall that the two earlier performances were amplified, while the latter two were not.

There remains a segment of the musical public unfamiliar with Weill's work. Two well-traveled American concertgoers in their late 40s sat near me during the concert. They were intrigued by the works and told me this was their first hearing of any of Weill's music. I was on the verge of telling them how well-known these works have become, and that they need a smaller auditorium than the Royal Albert Hall to make their mark, but I changed my mind. Thanks to the program-planners at the Proms, more people now have the opportunity to come face to face with Weill and his music.

Patrick O'Connor
London

Recordings

The Seven Deadly Sins

Teresa Stratas, soprano; Frank Kelley and Howard Haskin, tenors; Herbert Perry, baritone; Peter Rose, bass

Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Lyon

Kent Nagano, conductor

Erato 0630-17068-2

The success of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's version of *Everyman* (1911) suggested that there might be a market for modernist extravaganzas in the domain of morality plays. By 1916, Sibelius had written forty minutes of rich incidental music for Hofmannsthal's text; by 1927, Max Reinhardt had produced a lavish "super-cathedral" version at the Century Theater, New York, with Hollywood-style golden angels, antiphonal choirs, and organ music. Mammon, defeated by Good Works in his quest for Everyman's soul, had clearly moved on to the role of impresario.

The Seven Deadly Sins, a *ballet chanté* first presented in Paris in 1933 with music by Weill, scenario by Edward James and Boris Kochno, poetry by Brecht, and choreography by Balanchine, represented a still further stage in the decadence of the morality play. The seven deadly sins play no explicit role in Hofmannsthal's *Jedermann*, or in the Dutch and English *Everyman*s that began to be published in 1495. But there are many morality plays in which the deadly sins are important cast members, such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, where they gang up on Mankind to seduce him to bad behavior. The joke of *The Seven Deadly Sins* is that it is a morality play mockingly presented to the glory of Mammon; the deadly sins are not deadly because they keep the soul from God, but because they keep the soul from acquiring money. Sloth interferes with wage earning; Lust makes Anna eager to sleep with a poor man, instead of the rich man who will pay for it.

Weill and Brecht have received due credit for their excellent work, but perhaps Edward James's contribution has been a bit neglected. James wanted to produce an important spectacle to flatter his estranged wife, the lead dancer Tilly Losch. But James was also a surrealist poet, and *The Seven Deadly Sins* forms part of the history of French surrealism, in addition to its better-known role in the history of Brechtian epic theater. The fractured stage, in which sung narration and dance are co-present and yet isolated, can be discussed as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, but it can also be discussed in terms of such surrealist music-spectacles as *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), in which Cocteau sat inside a giant phonograph and read his text aloud. (Weill and James originally tried to enlist Cocteau for *The Seven Deadly Sins* and only turned to Brecht after Cocteau refused.) James belonged to the world of *Les Six* and surrealism; Poulenc set James's own poetry in *Sécheresses* (1937), a choral cantata that remains the most striking musical equivalent ever made to the evacuated surrealist landscapes of Dali or Tanguy.

The present recording of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, conducted by a specialist in modern French music and played by a French orchestra, is perhaps more attentive to the surreal aspects than any previous one. Where most performances sound rigorous and evil, Nagano's sounds insinuating, eager to please. "Pride," for example, has never sounded more humble: Weill's waltz-tunes seem tinseled, light-footed, almost Gounod-like. Similarly, "Sloth" is unusually nimble: the male quartet, representing Anna's family, declaims its motto on the virtue of hard work in a clipped, almost mincing style. "Gluttony" begins austerely, as it should, but when the family members recall the delicious food that Anna (who needs to be thin to keep her job in the entertainment industry) no longer gets to eat, they audibly swoon with the sheer voluptuousness of chicken and asparagus—they in effect impersonate the sin of Gluttony, which they are ostensibly urging Anna to avoid. Nagano is sensitive to the dancing qualities of the ballet, and by keeping the textures light and the pitch oriented to the treble, not the bass, he reminds us how thoroughly the music contradicts the story. Weill seems determined to prove that he never sins, no matter what sort of mess Anna makes of her life. A surrealist theater is a theater of dissonance, in which music, spectacle, and text proceed along fully independent lines. This recording of the *ballet chanté* never tries to homogenize the ingredients, never makes the music explain the words.

This is not to say that you should buy this recording. The performance, for all its delicacy, is slow—sometimes amazingly slow. And Stratas's performance requires some indulgence. Perhaps we owe her this indulgence, for no singer has done more to advance the cause of modernist music—her Lulu, her *Mahagonny* Jenny, have been necessary to hear. To remember what Stratas can do, I compared her *Seven Deadly Sins* with her 1981 recording of *Complainte de la Seine* (1934), one of the most intense and lyrical performances I have ever heard of anything. It provides a useful comparison, because Weill re-used the march tune of "Envy" to set a French *chanson* by Maurice Magre—a rather surrealistic text concerning the stuff found at the bottom of a river, such as old rings, abortions, and hands chopped off by propellers. In the *chanson*, Stratas's line is firm; her voice rises to a sort of dark elation. Stratas, like Lenya, has one great gift necessary to sing Weill, the gift for plain-speaking. She trusts the words and the music, and is never merely eloquent.

Some of these virtues persist in *The Seven Deadly Sins*, recorded in 1993, when Stratas was nearly 55 years old—Lenya recorded the piece when she was 57. There are moments when her old genius for piercing emphasis comes through—she makes something of the detail (in "Lust") about the ass worth more than a little factory—but her performance of the "Envy" march, after a strong beginning, is listless, and her voice cracks sadly at the end of many of the phrases. I will keep this disc, perhaps mostly for the sake of the lithe and balletic performance of the Symphony No.2 that accompanies it—an ideal coupling, in that the Symphony shares so many turns of phrase with the ballet. But there is no substitute for steadiness of voice, in Weill's music or elsewhere, and I find myself entertaining the surreal wish that Weill had married, instead of Lenya, Kirsten Flagstad.

Daniel Albright
University of Rochester

Recordings

The Threepenny Opera

Original Cast Recording of the Donmar Warehouse Production: Tom Hollander, Macheath; Tom Mannion, Mr. Peachum; Beverley Klein, Mrs. Peachum; Sharon Small, Polly Peachum; Tara Hugo, Jenny; Simon Dormandy, Tiger Brown; Natasha Bain, Lucy; Gary Yershon, conductor

Jay CDJAY 1244

After a few honorable tries, including Weill's own attempt to get a Brecht-less rewrite off the ground, *Die Dreigroschenoper* finally became a hit with English-speaking critics and theatergoers in 1954. Marc Blitzstein did the adaptation and translations—achieving the impossible by thrilling both Brecht and Lenya—for a Greenwich Village show that ran for 2,707 performances. That famed Theater de Lys version, as well as the musicological culture that has grown up around Weill, might blind us to the possibility of taking the work even further from the worlds of Brecht and Weill. (We should remember that Lenya refused to give the Blitzstein an "authorized version" imprimatur, and Weill himself anticipated rewriting and adapting the work for non-German stages.) There's another danger in the apparent definitiveness of the best-selling MGM record of the unpublished Blitzstein "edition." MGM executives forced a radical cleanup of the work's mores and language, leaving behind a *Threepenny* that had—linguistically if not musically—been tamed, toned down, and scrubbed behind the ears.

In December 1994, director Phyllida Lloyd opened her fairly dramatic transformation at the Donmar Warehouse, Covent Garden. She respected Brecht's precept that *Dreigroschenoper* is "inseparably tied to a climate of crisis" by translating the scenario to Britain at the accession of William V in 2001: a world of AIDS, non-stop surveillance cameras, beggars demanding prosthetics, and public executions turned into TV game shows. The *Sunday Times* called it a "sizzling, cheerfully nasty production of bruised but pugnacious sexuality."

Certainly Jeremy Sams's lyric translations—clever and biting, but respectful of Weill's music as well as Brecht's imagery and scansion—bring the scenario up to date with plenty of four-letter words and other bows to post-Cold-War rancor. (The *Financial Times* critic thought Sams's cynicisms made the evening "Brecht-heavy.") He also updates things with a raciness at which Brecht only hinted. In the "Barbara Song," for example, Brecht's "Ja, da musst' ich mich doch einfach hinlegen" becomes "yes, you're sometimes glad to pull your panties down." With references to "darkies" and other such British colloquialisms, his translating of Brecht into twenty-first-century England will mystify many Americans. "Cannon Song" begins "John was a squaddy and Jim was a toff, and both of them behaved like wankers. . . ." (I hope I have spelled these words correctly; the recording includes no printed texts.)

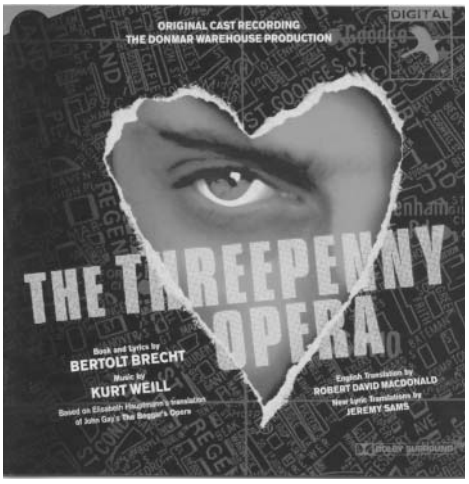
Likewise, the array of accents employed by the cast on the recording hints at all sorts of London castes and social hierarchies that will fall on deaf ears in the States: Polly has an Irish brogue, Peachum is Scottish, and Mrs. Peachum London-Jewish. I take it on the authority of one London reviewer that Mackie sounds like he hails from Essex.

Sams has said that he wanted the audience to forget about feats of translation. Any winks and games of "let's see how he renders such and such" are soon forgotten in this well-conceived and very well-sung recording. From the purely musical angle, things are spot on. The Broadwayish voices are an antidote to the dull, studio-bound operaticisms on the London-Decca recording. All the principals combine modern musicality with the kind of huskily verismo delivery heard on the old Columbia/Sony set. The only miscalculation is the Mackie, who sounds more like a slightly dumb, small-time hood than the magisterial and charming Macheath of the Pabst film (or Sting in Michael Feingold's Broadway rewrite!). Both instrumentalists and singers take a personal, vernacular freedom with Weill's rhythms. The exciting and hard-pressed overture carried me away immediately and the tango rhythms are sexy. The studio sound is open and substantial, suggesting a large-ish theater acoustic with voices and instruments alive, present, and impeccably balanced. No dialogues or monologues are included and the part of the Ausrufer is entirely omitted.

The recording respects Weill's orchestrations, but there have been changes made to the score. Yershon's liner note spells these out, indicating that most are transpositions to accommodate singers. Two alterations are substantial. The "What's the Point Song" (a streamlining of Brecht's "Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens") is performed entirely a cappella. A very big change, but not one without historical precedent, is that the "Flick-Knife Song" (the "Moritat") is slowed down and moved to the middle of the work as a pre-intermission closer, its instrumentation re-distributed among the verses. This perennial is thereby quite destroyed, at least for those who grew up on the Lenya recordings.

This new recording is a necessity for anyone wanting a *Threepenny* in English and with barbs intact. Still, it remains to be seen whether Sams's Britishisms will annoy American listeners or just take on more local color with further hearings. And I hope someone will some day do the work necessary to re-record the Blitzstein version with an unexpurgated text.

Arved Ashby
Ohio State University



Recordings

To The Soul

Thomas Hampson sings the poetry of Walt Whitman

with Craig Rutenberg, piano

EMI 7243 5 55028 2 7

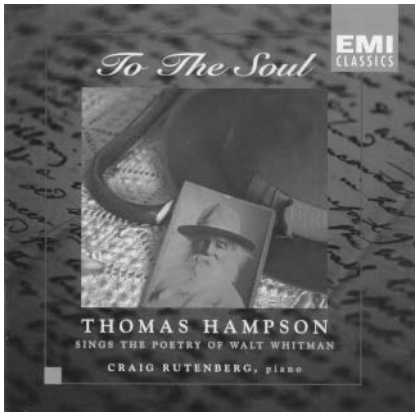
Recording includes "Dirge for Two Veterans" by Kurt Weill.

There have been hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of musical settings of Walt Whitman's poetry. Still, the recently released "To the Soul," featuring baritone Thomas Hampson with pianist Craig Rutenberg, may be the first compilation of its kind. The disc includes more than an hour's worth of recorded Whitman settings by American, British, and German composers. It is heartening that EMI is willing to support a project with less than widespread commercial appeal and that an artist of Thomas Hampson's stature is willing to participate. This addition to the catalogue will certainly delight fans of Mr. Hampson's previous recorded explorations of Americana and should be especially rewarding to the few who, like American song specialist Paul Sperry, have themselves delved into this repertoire and presented programs of Whitman settings.

However, "To the Soul" will not become a best-seller, nor should it. Many of the included songs are clear examples of problems that can arise in setting poetry to music. A number of them are little more than pseudo-recitations, with the piano articulating a steady stream of chords, one per beat, while the voice intones the text. This approach may facilitate comprehension of the words, but its musical value is open to question. Fauré used such a texture to great effect in his later songs, particularly in *Diane, Séléné* (1921), which describes a quiet moonlit scene. (Ned Rorem's *Look down, fair moon* (1957), included here, features the device too.) But this ornamented chorale texture so pervades the settings collected in "To the Soul" that its effect is greatly diminished. Perhaps Whitman's texts require little embellishment beyond simple recitation; but if they are unable to hold their own aside a characteristic musical gesture, maybe they should not be set to music at all.

The most successful settings on the disc are those which abbreviate or condense the Whitman originals. William Neidlinger's *Memories of Lincoln* (1920) selects eighteen lines of text from three separate poems; Robert Strassburg's *Prayer of Columbus* (1993) selects fifteen lines from a sixty-five-line work. Although both exhibit a hint of romantic excess, they are gripping songs with musical interest.

Another strong dramatic scene is Kurt Weill's "Dirge for Two Veterans" (1942) from *Four Walt Whitman Songs*. Setting ten of the eleven original four-line stanzas, Weill manages to maintain continuity without resorting to blatant sound effects or sudden dramatic shifts. Drums and bugles are common presences in Whitman settings, and there are a few in evidence here, but also apparent is a distinctively American harmonic palette. This master of the theater keeps the listener engaged in all forty lines of text, with ample but expert recycling of musical material providing a



sense of development and continuity. The distinct voice exhibited by "Dirge for Two Veterans" sets it apart from many of the other works on this disc. Whitman the populist sounds more at home in the theatrical style of Weill than in the rarefied world of art song.

Of the more contemplative texts, Hindemith's "Sing on There in the Swamp," from his set of *Nine English Songs* (1944) (and also used in his *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd: Requiem for Those We Love* (1946)), stands out. Rhythmic ostinato serves here to create a concise outline of scene, thought, and emotion.

Some of the Whitman texts are virtually without conventional poetic characteristics; their prosaic style defies musical setting, even when the topic is song itself. Take the following example from *Calamus* (1860, 1867): "Sometimes with one I love I fill myself with rage for fear I effuse unreturn'd love, / But now I think there is no unreturn'd love, the pay is certain one way or another. / (I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd, / Yet out of that I have written these songs.)" Ned Rorem cleverly uses these lines in "Sometimes With One I Love" (1957), the introductory song to his *Five Poems of Walt Whitman* (an essential fact that the copious notes by Mr. Hampson with Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold fail to mention), and his setting clearly underlines the meaning. Even though in its original context this Rorem song serves as a theatrical curtain raiser, it is placed as one of the final selections on the disc. Perhaps the placement is justified by a thematic link to the songs that surround it. The final group of seven seems to be conceived as a gay set, culminating with Bernstein's compelling "To What You Said" from *Songfest* of 1976. According to the liner notes, Bernstein interpreted this text, written from the point of view of an army officer rejecting an advance, as "a repressed poem on a repressed subject."

The performances in general are praiseworthy. Hampson's singing is beautiful, as usual, with pliant, smooth, controlled, and predictable tone. Rutenberg's playing is always capable. Surprisingly, while most of the interpretations are strong, a few show unexpected weaknesses. Technically distinguished performances are occasionally marred by wrong notes, and in some songs few words can be understood without the aid of the printed text. The articulation of certain consonants is sometimes too deliberate, with the performance seemingly striving for effect rather than for meaning. The sudden growl on a word such as "rage" might be welcome from a distance in the opera house, but here it seems overwrought. Finally, the decision to include four spoken poems was a lapse of judgment.

The recording's title song "To the Soul" is by Charles Villiers Stanford, a turn-of-the-century composer with a style mixing Wagnerian and Victorian pomp. Here Hampson sings at his best, with perfect legato, musical phrasing, well-executed climaxes, and carefully planned effects. Yet at the key moment in the final phrase, the words "O soul" are sung with such intensity and passion as to suggest melodrama. This moment crystallizes questions about the state of the soul, of the song, of singing, and ultimately about the compatibility of Whitman's poetry to music.

Richard Lalli
Yale University

Recordings

Pascal von Wroblewsky singt Kurt Weill

Pascal von Wroblewsky, vocalist
Deutsches Filmorchester Babelsberg
Bernd Wefelmeyer, conductor
Orchester der Komischen Oper Berlin
Mario Vencago, conductor
with Männerdoppelquartett der Komischen Oper Berlin

Deutsche Schallplatten DS 1048-2

Recording includes *Die sieben Todsünden*; *Berlin im Licht*; "Ballade vom angenehmen Leben," "Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens," "Kanonensong," "Salomon-Song," "Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?"; "Ballade von der Höllen-Lili," "Lied von der harten Nuss"; "Marterl."

Some musical myths die hard, and one of the hardiest is the myth that the worse you sing Kurt Weill, the better. The origins of the Weill myth lie in the performances and recordings by Lotte Lenya in the 1950s and 1960s, which were accepted as "authentic." Lenya did indeed give the original performances of many classic Weill songs from *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Mahagonny*, as well as *Die sieben Todsünden*, but she did so in her youth, when her voice was (in Ernst Bloch's memorable phrase) "sweet, high, light, dangerous, cool, with the radiance of the crescent moon." By the time Lenya recorded her most famous interpretations of Weill, she was in her fifties, and her voice was (in someone else's memorable phrase) "an octave below laryngitis."

Lenya's CBS recordings of the three works listed above, and of Weill's other German theater songs, are stylish, moving, and, in their way, "definitive." But they're not always what Weill wrote. To accommodate Lenya, the conductor Wilhelm Brückner-Rüggeberg transposed *Die sieben Todsünden* down a fourth and similar changes were made to other works as well. For many years, Lenya's style was considered *echt* Weill. This was not so bad when she herself sang the music with such artistry, but in the hands of droning, gravel-voiced imitators the results—especially in a musically ambitious work like *Mahagonny*—can indeed be truly vile.

Since Lenya's death, the original version of *Die sieben Todsünden* has become the accepted one, and it has been performed by some estimable singers. In the past few years alone Brigitte Fassbaender, Angelina Réaux, Anne-Sofie von Otter, and Teresa Stratas have recorded it. They have proven that the music requires not only acting ability but a "legitimate" voice to do it justice. In short, we now can hear this Weill masterpiece as he wrote it, so it is something of a surprise to encounter a new recording of the old, transposed version.

"Rather than jazz, spirituals, or gospel songs, Pascal von Wroblewsky sings Kurt Weill," announce the notes for this release. Apparently she sings all four, being well-known in Germany as an actress, too. (She has played Polly in *Die Dreigroschenoper.*) Hearing her drone through the first number on this disc, the catchy foxtrot *Berlin im Licht*, the bad old days of diseuses droning and crooning these wonderful tunes came back in their dubious glory. Hearing the

eight songs that follow made me wish she had stuck to jazz, spirituals, or gospel songs (although her lack of musical imagination would not seem to recommend her for those either).

The nine numbers (apart from *Die sieben Todsünden*) on this disc are among Weill's most popular songs and need a fresh approach to justify yet another recording. Wroblewsky's drab delivery (often *two* octaves below laryngitis) does not provide it. Nor do Bernd Wefelmeyer's ricky-tick orchestrations, with their xylophones, woodblocks, and—in a teeth-grittingly sentimental setting of the "Marterl" from *Berliner Requiem*—solo saxophone.

Wroblewsky recorded *Die sieben Todsünden* live in a 1995 concert at Berlin's Komische Oper led by the Swiss conductor Mario Vencago (on a double bill with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony!). That performance was well-received (some of the applause is included here), but as an addition to a crowded field of recordings it is a non-starter. Wroblewsky uses the Brückner-Rüggeberg arrangement for low voice, and barely gets through it. She presents the text clearly if not very subtly, but her phrasing is choppy and unmusical. She brays as much as she sings and her voice is completely unequal to the tremendous climax of the march in "Envy," proving definitively that "cabaret" ability is not enough for this work.

Vencago's interpretation is stiff and characterless, with slow tempos, little rubato, and even less highlighting of the dance rhythms. The waltz in "Pride" is anything but seductive and the manic foxtrot of "Anger" is annoyingly placid. The performance employs a male octet in place of the usual quartet. I do not know why this choice was made, but the octet does sing quite well, bringing the proper glee club feeling to "Gluttony."

The recording quality itself is completely unsatisfactory. Wroblewsky often sounds like she is singing from behind the orchestra, which is poorly balanced and recorded as well: the strings sound scrappy, the brass sound blatty, the percussion is dull and unfocused, and "Anger" turns briefly into a trombone concerto. (The studio recordings of the songs, though tinny, are better.)

In short, this recording is a poor introduction to a wonderful score. Luckily there are a few recordings that are much better. On Deutsche Grammophon, Anne-Sofie von Otter proves that a gorgeous voice does not hurt this music one bit. Her performance of "Envy" is very exciting and makes a true climax to the work. John Eliot Gardiner does marvelously subtle things with the orchestration, which has a livelier sound in Weill's original version. On Teldec, Angelina Réaux's voice doesn't have the sensual beauty of von Otter's, but her reading is direct and appealing while Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic are direct to the point of brusqueness. This recording also features an excellent male quartet, Hudson Shad.

For those who still want the "low voice" version, Lenya's is intermittently available on Sony Classical. Gisela May's old Deutsche Grammophon recording is now on Berlin Classics, with satisfyingly nervy conducting from Herbert Kegel and a male quartet led by the young Peter Schreier. Any of these older recordings reveal musical and verbal wonders in *Die sieben Todsünden* that this new one does not begin to suggest.

David Raymond
Rochester, NY

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