Kurt Weill

Newsletter

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Sound on Record and Film

In this issue

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Published twice a year, the Kurt Weill Newsletter features articles and reviews (books, performances, recordings) that center on Kurt Weill but take a broader look at issues of twentieth-century music and theater. With a print run of 5,000 copies, the Newsletter is distributed worldwide. Subscriptions are free. The editor welcomes the submission of articles, reviews, and news items for inclusion in future issues.

A variety of opinions are expressed in the Newsletter; they do not necessarily represent the publisher's official viewpoint. Letters to the editor are welcome.

Internet Resources

World Wide Web: http://www.kwf.org

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Information: kwfinfo@kwf.org

Weill-Lenya Research Center: wlrc@kwf.org

Kurt Weill Edition: kwe@kwf.org

Cover photo: Record label from "Lover Man" (later "Trouble Man" in *Lost in the Stars*) from the album, "Six Songs of Kurt Weill" recorded by Bost Records.

Note from the Editor

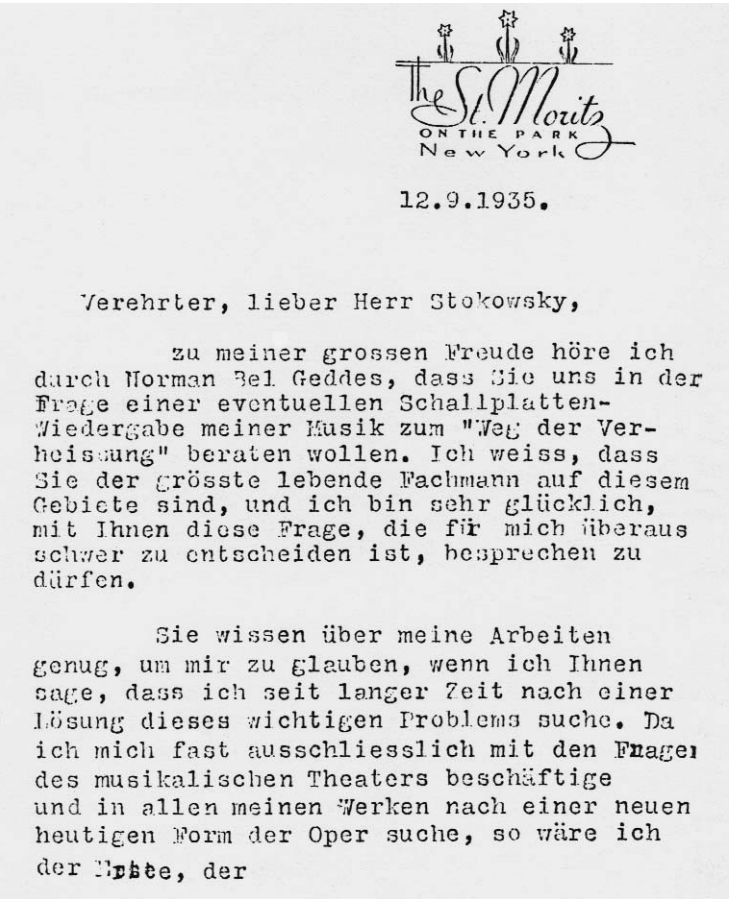
Arnolt Bronnen's *Katalaunische Schlacht* (1924), an obscure play about the waning days of World War I, and Franz Werfel's *The Eternal Road* would seem to have little in common. A notable exception, of course, is that Kurt Weill wrote music for both works: perhaps as little as five to ten minutes of incidental music for a 1928 production of Bronnen's play—no music survives—and a great deal more for the vast Biblical pageant which opened its doors to the public on 7 January 1937. One of the most interesting features of these two productions is their use of pre-recorded music, for which Weill, in both cases, employed the latest technology available.

This Newsletter issue features documents which shed light on the circumstances of the productions and the different technologies involved. In excerpts from an oral history interview, Herbert Borchardt recalls his experiences recording music for Weill, beginning with *Katalaunische Schlacht*. Bronnen's play featured a gramophone in the last act, where we hear the voice of a resurrected fallen soldier. In order to cut running costs, the play's producer apparently also decided to record the incidental music, for which electrical recording techniques were available that hadn't been around for the premiere production in 1924 (Weill had studied and used the new techniques in January 1928 for the scoring and recording of "Tango Angèle" for *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*). The music for *The Eternal Road*, on the other hand, was recorded with a sound-on-film process that used ultraviolet light. We reprint an article from a 1937 electronics magazine explaining this short-lived technology, which was subsequently (and most prominently) used in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. In a letter to Leopold Stokowski, it becomes evident that Weill had some reservations about the use of pre-recorded music in *The Eternal Road*.

Two new books on *The Eternal Road* are reviewed in the back section, which also features a number of performance reviews, most notably a production of *One Touch of Venus* by England's Opera North which caused a sensation, garnering unanimous praise from the press.

Elmar Juchem

Top left: Label of one of Weill's test recordings of "Speak Low" (under its working title, "Too Soon"), made by Bost Records. Bottom left: Venus (Karen Coker) and Rodney (Loren Geeting) at the conclusion of "Speak Low" in Rodney's barbershop, from Opera North's production of *One Touch of Venus*. Photo: Stephen Vaughan



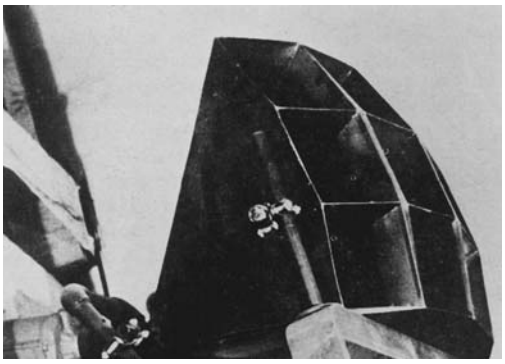
The St. Moritz
ON THE PARK
New York

12.9.1935.

Verehrter, lieber Herr Stokowsky,

zu meiner grossen Freude höre ich durch Norman Bel Geddes, dass Sie uns in der Frage einer eventuellen Schallplatten-Wiedergabe meiner Musik zum "Weg der Verheissung" beraten wollen. Ich weiss, dass Sie der grösste lebende Fachmann auf diesem Gebiete sind, und ich bin sehr glücklich, mit Ihnen diese Frage, die für mich überaus schwer zu entscheiden ist, besprechen zu dürfen.

Sie wissen über meine Arbeiten genug, um mir zu glauben, wenn ich Ihnen sage, dass ich seit langer Zeit nach einer Lösung dieses wichtigen Problems suche. Da ich mich fast ausschliesslich mit den Fragen des musikalischen Theaters beschäftige und in allen meinen Werken nach einer neuen heutigen Form der Oper suche, so wäre ich der letzte, der



On either side of the stage are semi-circular coves extending upward 80 feet. At the base of each and facing is a group of 4 loud speakers. Sound strikes these deflecting coves, reaches the audience indirectly, providing reverberation. Illustration from the original publication of "The Eternal Road" in *Electronics* magazine.

Kurt Weill's letter to Leopold Stokowski dates from 12 September 1935, only a couple of days after he arrived in the U.S. The first page is presented in facsimile to the left, and an English translation of the entire letter is given below. The original letter is held in the Weill-Lenya Papers (MSS 30) at the Yale University Music Library, box 47, folder 14.

Esteemed, dear Mr. Stokowski:

Much to my delight I hear from Norman Bel Geddes that you might advise us on the possibility of using pre-recorded discs to play back my music for *Der Weg der Verheißung*. I am aware that you are the greatest living authority in this field, and I am very happy to be permitted to discuss with you a question that I find terribly difficult to answer.

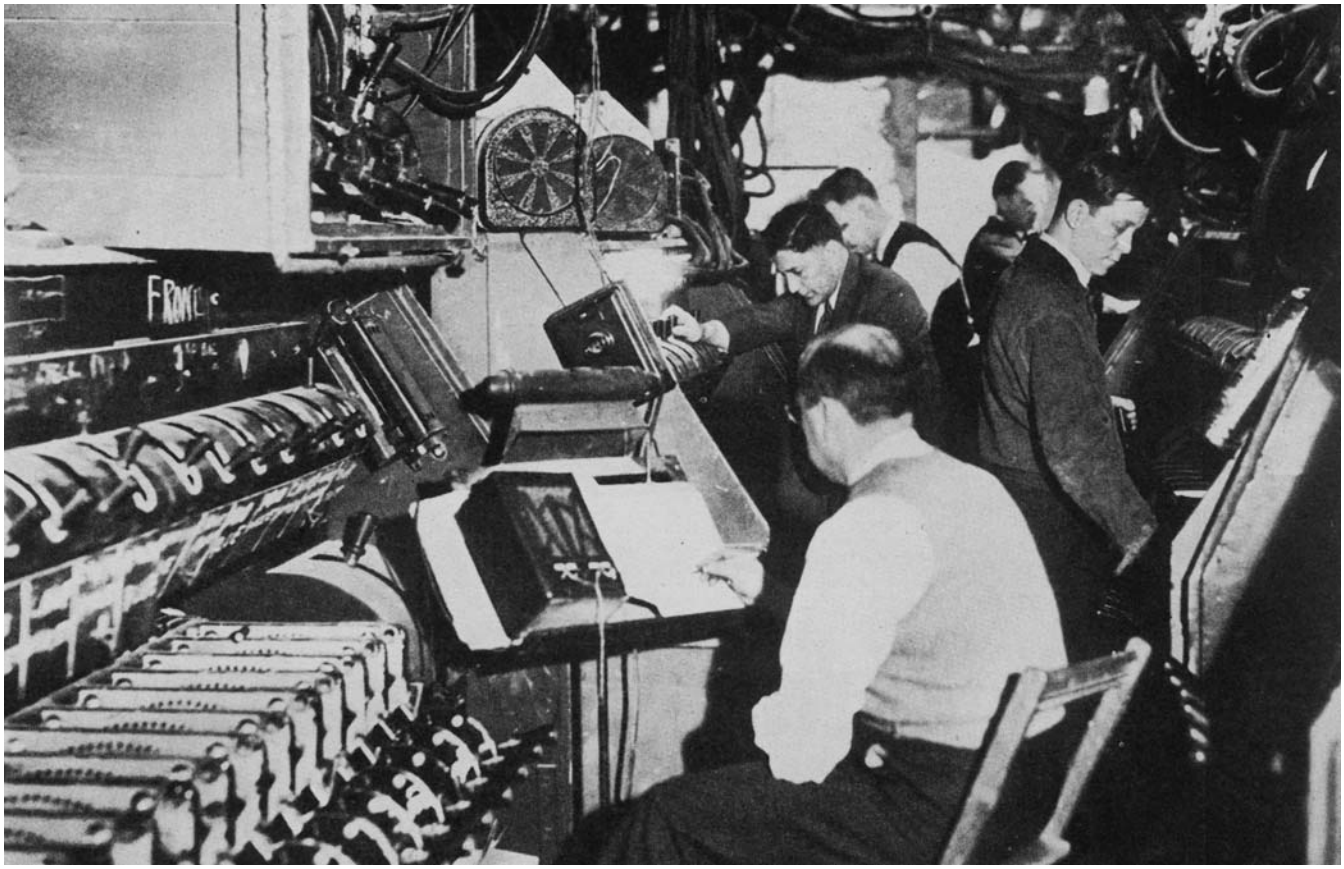
You are familiar enough with my work to believe that I have been searching for a solution to this crucial problem for a long time. Since I have dealt with the difficulties of musical theater almost exclusively, trying to achieve a new, contemporary form of opera in all of my works, I would be the first to embrace happily a path which would utilize the means of modern technology and lower the costs of opera production to a level where opera would become economically viable again.

In Europe, these technological means still lag far behind. But since I have become acquainted with your recording projects, I am convinced that here in America we have the possibility of achieving a truly ideal sound quality from records. In other words, I am aware that by recording my music on discs I will achieve a much better sound quality than in a theater, where I have to face the difficulties of a pick-up orchestra and all the acoustic problems of a theater performance. Therefore, I wouldn't hesitate to employ records for all types of purely orchestral stage music, especially since I have some experience in this area from my work in Berlin (*Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* and *Die Bürgschaft*).

However, in a work that is sung for the most part (arias, ensembles, recitatives, choruses, etc.), I simply cannot make up my mind whether it should be accompanied by an orchestra that has been pre-recorded on discs. How is a singer supposed to develop the music with full intensity and devotion on the spur of the moment, when he is shackled to a tempo relentlessly dictated by a machine? Perhaps one could make the recordings only after all the singers and choruses have been rehearsed so thoroughly that the singer could shape the recording so that all his needs will be met for a live performance of the music. But even then one would lose everything that the night of a performance offers (and each night in a different way), which makes musical theater so exciting.

The reason I am hesitating to use pre-recorded music, especially in the case of *Der Weg der Verheißung*, is the following: In concord with Max Reinhardt and much to his delight, I have tried something here that has often been attempted but never been done so consistently. I have composed about three quarters of Werfel's text in a way that my music, which is being performed mostly by singing actors, not by singers, utilizes the full range between the spoken word and pure singing, including the in-between levels of half-speaking and half-singing. The in-between levels, in particular, which always emerge from the music and blend back into it, will be created only during the rehearsals since they cannot be notated. This kind of musical theater, where the word is always embedded in music, requires of course a sensitive, flexible, and adaptable orchestra, even more than opera does. Do you think this is possible when the music is recorded on discs which will then be used for playback? I would be tremendously interested in hearing your views and in discussing the whole matter with you.

Many thanks in advance and kindest regards from your devoted



Electricians at work, getting orders by loud speaker.

Music for *The Eternal Road*

While en route to America in September of 1935, Weill learned that the intended set design for *The Eternal Road* at the Manhattan Opera House left no room for a live orchestra. Immediately after his arrival in New York, he pondered the advantages and disadvantages of the situation and also explored new recording techniques. Ultimately, the music was recorded with a new technique developed by RCA for sound on film, but a small ensemble of musicians still played live during the performances. This early stereo recording technique was subsequently used for the Disney film *Fantasia*, but the delicate medium was prone to defects and was superseded after World War II. None of the sound films for *Eternal Road* has been traced. Since the films' base was a flammable nitrate that can dissolve and emit toxic gases, there is little chance that they have survived. The documents presented here—a letter from Weill to Leopold Stokowski, an article on the process of recording the *Eternal Road* score, and a letter from RCA to producer Meyer Weisgal explaining the maintenance of the sound films and projectors—shed new light on the recording process and Weill's thoughts on employing recorded music for a stage work of such vast musical proportions.

The Eternal Road

by G. L. Dimmick

When Mr. Kurt Weill decided to record the music which he had composed for Max Reinhardt's production *The Eternal Road* and to eliminate the orchestra from the theatre, he set a precedent for the legitimate stage. His decision was prompted by the many real advantages resulting from the use of reproduced music.

More space is made available for elaborate stage settings. The orchestra may be recorded under the most favorable acoustic conditions, and the music to be recorded may be rehearsed until the most exacting requirements of the composer are satisfied. In reproducing the music in the theatre, the volume may be controlled with ease and directional effects obtained by placing several loudspeakers at different positions on the stage.

Film recording was chosen because of its longer playing time and because of the ease of cutting. The RCA ultra-violet push-pull method was chosen because of its large volume range and freedom from distortion. (See March and June 1936, *Electronics*, July 1934 and August 1936 *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*.)

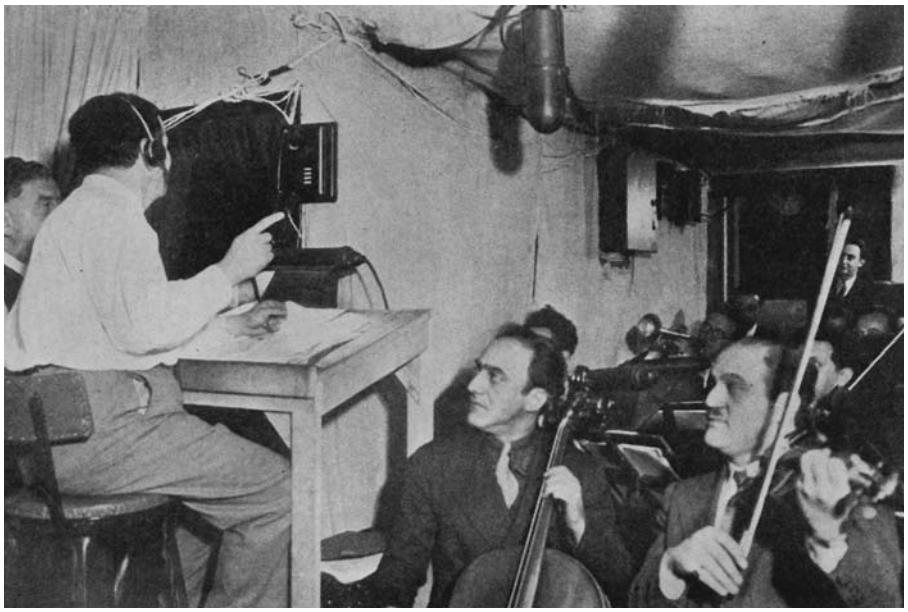
The recording of the music for *The Eternal Road* was done at Liederkranz Hall, New York City. The Hall is approximately 75 feet long, 50 feet wide and 30 feet high. The internal construction is

largely of wood, providing sufficient acoustic damping to prevent excessive reverberation, but having enough reverberation to give the live quality necessary for most effective reproduction of a large orchestra or chorus. A platform about 4 feet high and large enough to accommodate the orchestra was constructed at one end of the Hall. To secure adequate coverage with the smallest number of microphones, the orchestra was bunched rather closely together. The string instruments were to the front and right, the wood winds to the front and left and the horns to the back. Two ribbon microphones were suspended from booms about 10 feet from the floor, 10 feet apart and 8 feet from the nearest instruments. They were pointed toward the back row of instruments, compensating to a large extent for the different distances to the various instruments. The ribbon microphone is most sensitive in the direction at right angles to the axis of the ribbon and falls off to zero sensitivity in the direction parallel to the ribbon. The fact that these microphones have equal sensitivity on the two sides made it possible to obtain an intimate pickup from one side and a reverberant pickup from the other side. The best balance between direct and reflected sound was obtained by the simple process of varying the distance between the microphones and the orchestra.

Master control system for all sound apparatus, located in a box on the 4th tier.

The necessary recording equipment, a high fidelity monitoring system and a push-pull film phonograph were assembled in an adjoining room. The output from each of the microphones was fed through cables to a pair of microphone amplifiers. These in turn were fed into a mixing panel with the necessary facilities for mixing the output from the two microphones, for adjusting the level of either microphone and for adjusting the level of the combined signal. From the mixing panel, the signal was fed into the recording amplifier connected to the recording galvanometer. A Neon type volume indicator and a monitoring amplifier were bridged across the recording amplifier. The volume indicator consisted of 13 small neon lamps connected in such a way that as the signal was raised, each lamp in turn would light at a predetermined level. The indicator covered a range of 48 deg. It was placed just over the mixing panel so as to be easily visible by the mixer. A monitoring speaker at one end of the room was used to judge the quality and balance of the orchestra. The push-pull film phonograph and the recorder were equipped with three-phase synchronous motors, thus insuring perfect synchronism.

During the recording of the orchestra selections, it was necessary to compress the volume range somewhat. The original volume range of the orchestra was about 55 db. It was found advisable to compress this to about 45 db. by allowing the very loud passages to overshoot the sound track as much as 3 db. and by raising the level as much as 7 db. during the very weak passages. So that the time for the loud and weak passages could be known in advance, the mixer followed the musical score and made the necessary volume changes smoothly and slowly.



The orchestra plays in a sound proof booth to a microphone. The conductor wears headphones. Twenty-eight giant loudspeakers spray the audience and performers with music, properly mixed.

After the orchestra recordings had been completed, preliminary prints were made for the purpose of synchronizing the subsequent chorus recordings. A chorus of seventy-five voices was assembled in the large hall. Each member was given a Sonatone bone conduction receiver which fastened behind his ear. The director, who was also supplied with a Sonatone receiver, occupied a partially sound proof booth with a window facing the chorus. All of the receivers were connected in parallel and were fed from the film phonograph amplifier. In this way recordings were made of the chorus singing in perfect synchronism with the accompaniment of the orchestra.

The final prints of all the recordings were made on an ultra-violet non-slip

Sound effect man.

printer. Even though the negatives were perfect, the full quality could not be transferred to the print if intermittent slippage occurred between the films during the printing operation. With the sprocket type printer in common use at the present time, it is nearly impossible to prevent intermittent slippage. The non-slip printer automatically compensates for film shrinkage and insures perfect contact and no relative motion between films. The use of ultra-violet light for printing further improves the quality by restricting the exposure to the surface of the print.

The negatives were recorded on regular positive sound recording film. They were processed to a gamma of about 2.0 and a density of 1.9. The prints were made on regular motion picture positive film and were processed to a gamma of about 2 and a density of 1.4.

Four push-pull soundheads are employed as film phonographs to reproduce *The Eternal Road* music in the Manhattan Theatre. A Selsyn generator supplies the power for the soundhead motors so that they can be interlocked. The orchestra and chorus are reproduced from two of the film phonographs while the other two are used for sound effects. A mixing console has facilities for mixing any or all of the outputs from the four films and for varying the levels. A number of loudspeakers on the stage permit the sound to be directed to the audience from various points. The orchestra may be allowed to come from one direction, the chorus from another and sound effects from still another. In addition to the recorded sound, provision is made for the direct pickup of a small chorus, individual voices, and local sound effects.

Originally printed as "The Eternal Road" in *Electronics* magazine, April 1937. All photos reproduced here, along with their captions, are taken from the original publication. The author, Glenn Leslie Dimmick, worked for RCA in Camden, New Jersey and was credited with a number of inventions that improved the sound quality of the recording technique that he describes.

Letter from Ralph Austrian of RCA (in New York) to Meyer Weisgal, 11 January 1937

Now that *The Eternal Road* has opened and is well under way, there are a few points in connection with the handling of the sound film that I would like to call to your attention. It is most necessary that these suggestions be followed closely in order that any breakdown in the sound shall be avoided.

1. At the conclusion of each performance the reels of film should not be rewound but they should be placed immediately in fireproof and dust proof containers and stored in a safe, cool place until an hour before the next performance, at which time they should be rewound and while rewinding, they can be cleaned and each patch carefully inspected to see that it is good shape and in no danger of opening at the next showing. Your operators have been instructed as to this procedure.

2. At all times when the film machines are not in use, they should be completely and carefully covered with dust proof, moisture proof covers.

3. The film machines should be constantly inspected to make sure that they are free from dust and dirt.

4. It is recommended that if it has not already been done that the floor of the generator room and the film machine room be painted with a rubberized paint, and at all times this floor should be kept free from dust.

5. With good care and careful handling, the two prints with which we have supplied you should run quietly for at least four weeks each. When you desire new prints made up from the negative, we ask that you give us at least one week's notice as all these prints must be made with infinite care and precision.

6. It is suggested that immediately prior to curtain time that the film machines which are selected for use at that particular performance, be run without film for at least five minutes so that they may be thoroughly warmed and lubricated. The amplifier racks should be lit at least five minutes before each performance.

Dual prompters' box facing stage controlling sound and lights. Loud speakers become microphones at throw of switch.

Recording Kurt Weill . . .

. . . *Herbert Borchardt remembers*

Herbert Borchardt (1906–2000) was a recording executive whose professional path crossed Weill's in Germany, France, and the United States. A Berlin native, Borchardt began his career in 1926 in London, working for Brunswick Records, a subsidiary of Deutsche Grammophon. After a brief stint in Berlin in 1927/28, Deutsche Grammophon sent him to Paris to start Polydor Records in 1929. As president he oversaw the construction of the first record manufacturing plant in Paris. When the German army invaded France, Borchardt was placed in an internment camp for Germans residing in France. He managed to escape in September 1941, when he fled with his wife and son to the U.S. Borchardt's family was among 2,000 Jewish refugees who constituted the last group permitted to enter the U.S. during World War II. In New York, Borchardt joined forces with Rudolf Steiner, a businessman, and started Bost Records. The company quickly folded because pressings were difficult to obtain in wartime. In 1943, Borchardt became president of Recoton and continued to work for this company until he retired. The interview was conducted by David Farneth and Kim H. Kowalke on 13 December 1984. The following excerpts have been edited for readability and length.

In Germany

I met Weill back in 1928 when he was making the background music to a play of the Deutsche Schauspielhaus, and [Leopold] Jessner called me up. If we could work out a deal where we would supply the first electronic machines which were built by us [Deutsche Grammophon] together with AEG with loudspeakers and pick-ups, we could record the background music because they didn't want to pay the musicians every night. Jessner was one of the great producers, I would say in English. He was Intendant of the Deutsche Schauspielhaus.[1] He asked Weill to write the background music for a play.

We have a list here. Do any of these plays ring a bell?

It might have been the *Katalaunische Schlacht* by Bronnen. It was in '28 and I was in Berlin in '28. In 1929 I left for Paris to open up a factory for the Deutsche Grammophon Polyphon under the name Polydor in Paris. Weill invited me to the rehearsals of the *Threepenny Opera*, which I wanted to record, but the director in charge of recordings was a middle-aged fellow from Saxony who was formerly a banker, and he had no interest in modern music. I personally, even though my uncle was the president of the company, I never bought our popular records, because I bought them from the competition which had the right artists. And they didn't know how to pick the artists. When I went to Paris I had all the film artists—*Tonfilm* came—and made the original recordings. And when I had the contacts with the French subsidiaries, mostly of the UFA and which was called ACE in Paris, I believe. And they wouldn't think to hire these artists. So, in one case I even took an artist from the competition who was singing the French version of a German film, Charell's *Der Kongress tanzt*, because I had under contract the French co-star [Henri Garat] and she made the record for the competition with her German co-star [Willy Fritsch] in German, but she made the record in French for me because she was an old friend of mine, Lilian Harvey. I knew her when she went to school. So I got friendly with Weill, and he invited me for the rehearsals and I met Aufricht. And I pleaded with the manager in charge of recordings to record the whole *Threepenny Opera*, but nothing doing. He wouldn't record this sort of modern music. I had shortly before recorded the whole score composed by another modern composer by the name of [Edmund] Meisel for Piscator, who made the *Soldier Schweik*, and he wanted incidental music and wanted it recorded, so we put up the electronic equipment to have it played and we later made a catalogue of these recordings and sold them so that people could use them for background music, for radio programs, and for incidental music.

Weill supervises the placement of a gramophone on stage for the first Berlin production of *Katalaunische Schlacht*, which opened 25 April 1928 at the Staatstheater on Gendarmenmarkt.

Did that happen to Weill's music for this Jessner production of Katalaunische Schlacht*?*

No, no. That was only recorded. We got publicity in the program and we spent the money for the recordings, and the Deutsche Schauspielhaus and Weill didn't spend anything and it was strictly used for this play. I don't know if the play was then done in other theaters in Germany. Then probably they would have taken the records and would have tried to do it in another city, too. But we never sold the records.

Was this innovative for it to be put on record at this time?

This was at the time they started to manufacture and sell electronic reproducers for recording, which was done at 78 rpm at the time. You put the record and the magnetic pick-up on it, you had an amplifier, and you had loudspeakers. And we were the first company in Germany to have it. In England it was sold by the British Brunswick where I worked in '26 for a year, and they had the concession from the British company, Thompson-Houston. The original patents for this electronic equipment were held by General Electric in America. And they farmed it out to their partners in Europe which was a French Thompson-Houston in France, the British Thompson-Houston in England, and the AEG in Germany. This was the first time that you could play a record in a concert hall. Back then the fair of Leipzig took place every year. We rented the opera house in Leipzig and played for our worldwide customers our records in the opera house on a little instrument which was at center stage.

Now, do you think it would be possible that a recording of this music for this 1928 production of Jessner could possibly have survived anywhere in Germany? Because most of the music for that production is lost.

If it survived, Deutsche Grammophon should have it.[2] Unfortunately, my colleagues from that time are all dead. And one who was a factory manager later became the head of the company and it was already Polygram. Together with Philips it's in very bad shape.

Do you know if Deutsche Grammophon has an archive where they would keep old recordings like that?

They used to do, but they would be in the factory in Hanover. They used to keep most of the recordings. Not all of them. I remember I had someone who was interested in jazz and we had all the masters from the United States, and he made an album of twenty records with a booklet. And we had some masters which the Germans didn't have anymore. And some masters we didn't have, we never published, but the Germans had them. And then when this album became a tremendous success because suddenly the interest in jazz transpired in the beginning of '30s, we had to send our album and the masters to the United States—at that time Brunswick Records was owned by Brunswick-Balke-Collender, the billiard people, and they published the album here.

What were the rehearsals of the Threepenny Opera *like?*

I went to the opening night and I was, as a young man, amazed at the type of music and the songs and intrigued by it like the youngsters today love rock and roll. I mean, when something new in music came up, I was extremely intrigued by it. And I loved the music. We later made symphonic recordings of *Threepenny Opera* with [Alois] Melichar who was our in-house conductor. He made the arrangements, I guess.

In France

When we recorded Marlene Dietrich—that was the first, only recording she made after her recordings in Germany—Weill was already in the United States. I asked him to make songs for a very famous French singer by the name of Lys Gauty. I checked my records; I made a little note. We made a recording of two songs which he did with Maurice Magre, in French, "Complainte de la Seine," and "Je ne t'aime pas." I made that record for him and I asked him to write the songs for Lys Gauty, who was under contract with me. There was a company called Coda. The head of the company was a German who came from Berlin and was a head in Berlin of Ufaton. He started the Coda company, and he was a friend of mine. I forget his name, and he worked with me on Weill and Lys Gauty to make these records. That's how we got the record.

Do you know where the records might be?

They might be at Philips in Paris. The record division is called Polygram and the president of Polygram is Mr. Hazan.

You don't have a copy of them, though, personally?

No. I didn't bring a single record, and all the 78 rpm's I gave to my children disappeared.

Oh, boy. And how successful were these recordings?

I would say in those times a good sale of a record, unless it was a very great hit, was five to ten thousand records. And it was not a great hit. I mean, a great hit went over a hundred thousand like Al Jolson's record, and then all the records we had from the *Congress Dances*, from Charell. The Ufaton film with Lilian Harvey and Henri Garat. These records sold over a hundred thousand, but normally a record was a good sale when it reached between five and ten thousand, in the French-speaking countries. This one probably sold about that.

What kind of a singer was Lys Gauty?

She was one of the top popular singers in France at that time, with a decent voice, I would say. We made further "J'attends un navire" from *Marie Galante*. With Florelle, another singer, who played the title role in *Marie Galante*. She also did the role of Polly in the *Threepenny Opera*, in the film which was made in Germany by Ufa. But released in France in French. I don't know who was playing besides Florelle, but she was under contract with us for the time I can remember, until the war broke out. She made, first of all, *L'opéra de quat'sous*. She recorded "Chant de Barbara," "Complainte de Mackie," "La fiancée du pirate," and "Chant des canons." She made these four sides and then recorded from *Marie Galante* "J'attends un navire," "Le roi d'Aquitaine," and "Les filles de Bordeaux."

This film, the French version of The Threepenny Opera *film, was made in 1931 at the same time as the German film. So, Florelle would have gone to Germany to film it?*

The sheet music cover for this issue of "J'attends un navire" (Heugel) notes that Lys Gauty's recording appears on Polydor.

To film it, yes. She came back and recorded it in Paris. And there is a very cute story about the recordings. We tried to record it and I had an in-house conductor who worked with young composers and arrangers, and he made the arrangements. But somehow we couldn't record. He didn't understand "Kurt Weill," and the arrangements were horrible, and he couldn't conduct Weill's music. Even though he was a great composer. His name was Jean Lenoir, and he wrote "Parlez-moi d'amour." He was originally a Jew from Poland. His name was Jakob Schwartz and he changed it to Jean Lenoir. And he wrote, which was probably the biggest hit ever made in France in the '30s, the song "Parlez-moi d'amour," which Lucienne Boyer recorded.

Who conducted the music then?

I had in the orchestra a young pianist, who was an arranger. Originally from Russia, he studied in Berlin at the Klindworth-Scharwenka Conservatory, and then came to Paris. I asked him if he could make arrangements, compose an orchestra with young, good musicians, and conduct it. And these were the first arrangements and the first recording which he made as a conductor. He's still alive. I saw him six months ago for lunch at his house, in Passy, near Paris. He still works for German radio where he composes music; otherwise he's more or less retired. He's about seventy-five now, and he was then about twenty, twenty-one. He made the background music and I introduced him to Weill when Weill was in Paris. I believe he did some work for Weill, I'm pretty sure he did the Florelle records from *Marie Galante* and he did the recordings with Lys Gauty, too.

What was his name?

Wal-Berg. Vladimir Rosenberg. His artist name is Wal-Berg.

How successful was the Threepenny Opera *in France? Was the film a big hit?*

No. The public didn't understand it. Mauprey, who translated the *Threepenny Opera*, his name was André Bloch. He was Alsatian and I knew him very well. He translated all the German operettas and all the important German films and musicals which were played in Paris. I mean, he translated all the Lehár operettas, Kálmán, and whatever was played of German operettas in Paris.

And he did the film translation?

He did the film translation, too, I believe.[3]

In the United States

Did you know the Aufrichts?

I met him in Berlin when he produced the *Threepenny Opera*. I saw him back in Paris, where his boys went to school, where he tried to produce things but never did anything [successfully]. I saw him again in the concentration camp in France, during the war, and then here in New York. And as I had a recording studio, we started to make a few albums on the Bost label. But we couldn't get pressings, and the pressings we got were not up to the standards which I liked. Nobody would give us pressings, and I didn't know the trick which some people learned who were never in the record business. They went to the Polish army and they said "The Polish army needs Polish records." And they asked the government to force RCA or Columbia or Decca, who had factories, to press for them. I didn't know that trick. I could have done it with the Free French, with De Gaulle, because I did all the production for the Office of War Information.

You did!?

In German and in French. And there I did it for the Lazareffs (?), and Brecht, Aufricht, and Weill were some of the artists who worked with me on these German and French productions. I had the first recording of "Lili Marleen," and I had to make a hundred copies for the Office of War Information. I called up Marlene Dietrich and Greta Keller if they wanted to record it. And they wanted to. Then I shopped around to see if I could get pressings. Nobody would make pressings for me, I would have sold hundreds of thousands, even during the war, of that German song. But I couldn't get pressings and I didn't know the trick that you have to go through a foreign army, in order to get through the War Department the right to force the record companies to press records.

Now, did Weill write songs for the Office of War Information recordings?

Yes. He wrote songs. And there is one song which was one of Brecht's best songs which we recorded and I don't know if it exists here ["Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?"]. It's a story about the Germans, that they come to Paris and they buy perfume and dresses and send them back. And they go to all these countries and they ship home food and things and so on. And then the song ends and then they go to Russia. And then they send the body bag to the widow. This song was in one of the productions of the Office of War Information. They wanted to send it over to the German army.

Do you remember a song called "Wie lange noch?" by Walter Mehring and Kurt Weill? Supposedly it was written at that same time for the Office of War Information.

I think I remember. I think we recorded it. You see, what happened here is that Kurt Weill was a friend, and he was not only an old friend of mine, he was a friend of my partner. They became very good friends. My partner was Hungarian and he lived in Paris;[4] he came here with millions while I came here with five hundred dollars in my pocket. And I came in '41 and he came in '39. He was a frustrated singer who loved recordings. And through a friend of mine I met him and he said, "If you run the company, I'll give the money." We started in '41. I've still got all the recording equipment. RCA would call me up and said "Can you cancel your order? We need it for the war effort." Said "Sorry, others get or might need the equipment." I had a fellow, an engineer who was a alcoholic, who made the Pickering cartridge. He built all my recording equipment and we had a studio on [29 West] 57th Street in the penthouse, and Weill came over. He stayed mostly at St. Regis when he was in New York working. And before he would make a show he would try out by himself every song, and he very often would change the words. He didn't like the words, even from Brecht. And he would change them. And Brecht would agree with them because they did not fit the music. Weill was very keen on words. He was an excellent linguist, especially in the German language, and he understood it very well. He really collaborated together with a lyric writer more than I have ever seen, and I have seen many composers and lyric writers work together. He gave them ideas. He changed words. And he tried out all these songs, I remember, for *Lady in the Dark*,[5] for *Liliom*, in our studio. I heard them. He was singing them. He was playing the piano, singing, recording them and then he would listen to the recording which was done at that time on sixteen-inch discs, forty centimeters. And you could record about half an hour.

It's going around about Liliom *that he actually did write some songs for* Liliom, *but it never was produced because he couldn't get the rights from Molnár. Now, if you are sure that he actually wrote some of those* Liliom *songs, that would be an incredible piece of information.*

I remember that he wrote songs for *Liliom* which he wanted to produce. Now, I don't know if they were incorporated into the Hammerstein and Rodgers version.[6]

Probably not, because that was later.

Weill's last show on Broadway was *Lost in the Stars*. I remember, he came up to the studio, sometimes for an hour or two, sitting in the studio below us, and worked at the piano. When he was ready, he asked if someone could make a take, and we recorded it and played it back to him. He listened to it and made changes.

Album cover for "Six Songs by Kurt Weill" (Bost Records BA8).

After hearing it sung by himself—isn't that interesting? So, he needed to step back from it and hear it as a performance.

[…]

We did a lot of recordings and maybe we recorded American hit songs translated into German, but then we were given the material by the Office of War Information. We did not make too many shows with Marlene Dietrich because she was mostly traveling in Europe during the war. And if she did recordings, she probably did them with the army somewhere in Europe for the radio stations which the Americans built in Europe. They still exist, and now broadcast behind the Iron Curtain. That was called Radio Free Europe. The network was originally built by the Office of War Information and then taken over by Radio Free Europe, which was under the State Department.

Would you happen to know if Lenya ever made any recordings like this?

I would say that Lenya did recordings for the Office of War Information. Marian Anderson did recordings. But she mostly did classical music which was piped over to the German lines. Greta Keller did recordings in German. That is about all I can remember about ladies who made recordings.

Other than this song, can you think of any other songs that he might have composed just for the war effort?

This is the one I remember most and which I like best. So others, if he did others, and he probably did others together with Brecht, they weren't as good as this one.

Did Brecht ever come up to your studio?

He worked on songs together with Kurt Weill. They had the songs written, and then they came to listen to it. They recorded them and either Kurt Weill was singing or even Brecht was speaking some.

Can you tell us some things about this set, "Six Songs by Kurt Weill"? Maybe when it was done? Was it done all in one session?

It was done in '42. These were normally recorded in one session. I don't remember, whether it was with orchestra, a small ensemble, or only Kurt Weill at the piano.

So when they were recorded, of course, Kurt Weill came and sat in on the sessions?

Yes. He definitely played the piano. If he didn't play the piano then we used at that time Rudolf Goehr, who went to Israel. He was a composer and I introduced him to Kurt Weill, and he made a lot of arrangements for Weill's musicals. For *Lady in the Dark* and other shows which he did later.[7]

When is the first time you got reacquainted with Weill here in this country?

Pretty fast. I arrived in September '41. I opened my recording studio and the company in December of '41, so in '42 I got in touch with Weill. I believe I got in touch with him through Aufricht; I lived nearby and we saw each other quite often at that time. He came up a lot to our studio. We had a lot of European artists coming up because they had a place to meet and to talk to each other, find out what they can do and how they can get some work. It was a meeting place for people like Oscar Karlweis who was on Broadway here, and who played in *Jacobowsky and the Colonel*. He was a pretty famous operetta singer in Germany and a film artist. And he made films in France. And he came here, made films here, and he played on Broadway. His wife was a French woman [Ninon Tallon], and she was the director of the Rothschild's Theater in Paris. She was a niece of Edouard Herriot, the Prime Minister of France in the '30s.

Are there any perceptions you can share with us as to the difficulties he had when he moved here and the general belief that he tried to become more popular and have his work be approached by a more popular audience than it had once been?

He definitely had, when he came to this country, problems like everybody who came from Europe during the Hitler time and probably didn't speak the language too well and didn't have the contacts and connections, but when I came to this country in '41 he was already well-known and established. And when I met him again he appeared to me as a very modest man who wanted to become an American composer, catered to the American public, and was proud that the American public accepted his music. As a person he was living very modestly, I would say, for the money he was probably making, although he stayed at a good hotel and had a suite because he worked very hard. But if he would go out for dinner, he would go to a small Italian restaurant and not to the Pavilion or one of the restaurants which were the fashionable places at the time.

When you first met him during the Threepenny Opera*, did he ever talk to you about how he felt about the success of that piece? Was he surprised, or did he take it in stride, or did he expect it?*

He was a very simple man, and he was never arrogant, and didn't change after his great successes. When I met him in the '30s in Paris he was very simple and he hadn't changed from the time when I met him before he had written the *Threepenny Opera*.

After you had both come here, did he speak to you in German or in English?

I think we spoke in German.

We've been under the impression that after he moved to this country that he tried not to really associate with other emigrants because he didn't want to be identified as a German. He was anxious to become assimilated as an American as soon as he could. Do you have any thoughts on that? Whether that's true?

I would say that he tried to assimilate, but that he would not renege on any relationship with old friends. That was not his character. And it was not Lenya's character, either.

Notes

1. Leopold Jessner was *Generalintendant* of the Berliner Staatstheater (which produced *Katalaunische Schlacht* in April 1928).

2. Bernd Meyer-Rähnitz's *Kurt Weill Discographie: Die Grammophon-Schallplatten, 1928–1961* (Dresden: Bibliophilen Verlag, 1998) lists such a record and describes it as "Blues aus *Die Katalaunische Schlacht* (Bronnen-Weill)" on a "Homocord Testplatte" (p. 40).

3. Mauprey translated the French film version (with Solange Bussy), and both the 1930 and 1937 stagings in Paris (with Ninon Tallon), the latter produced by Aufricht.

4. Borchardt is probably referring to Rudolf Steiner, a businessman who made money from, among other projects, the "15-puzzle," a hand-held early precursor to Rubik's Cube and today's Game Boys.

5. *Lady in the Dark* opened on Broadway in January 1941, nine months prior to Borchardt's arrival in the U.S. Borchardt is almost certainly referring to *One Touch of Venus*. The Weill-Lenya Research Center holds copies of several test recordings of songs from *Venus* that bear a "Bost Reference Recordings" label; the recordings were the source of the *Tryout* LP released on Heritage Records in the 1950s. Borchardt donated the discs to the Research Center in 1984.

6. Weill's plans for *Liliom* came to a halt in May 1937, when Molnár categorically refused to give the musical rights to his play. There is no evidence that Weill composed any music or approached a collaborator. For details see David D'Andre, "The Theatre Guild, *Carousel*, and the Cultural Field of American Musical Theatre" (Diss. Yale, 2000).

7. Rudolf Goehr was also in a French internment camp, fleeing to the U.S. in the summer of 1941. There is no evidence that Goehr arranged any of Weill's works during the composer's lifetime. However, Goehr was a piano accompanist at the Kurt Weill Memorial Concert at New York's Town Hall on 3 February 1951. The concert was produced by Aufricht.