

Blitzstein's Musical Legacy

Remarks shared by Elizabeth Blaufox, Associate Director for Programs and Promotion, Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, at the installation of a historical marker at the birthplace of Marc Blitzstein, 419 Pine Street, Philadelphia, PA, 12 June 2017.

Marc Blitzstein is best remembered for two works: The first is his 1937 agit-prop musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, made famous by the spectacle that ensued when the government attempted to shut down the production on opening night. The second is his English-language adaptation of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's musical theater piece, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, or as it is known in English, *The Threepenny Opera*. *Threepenny*, though an instant success when it premiered in Berlin in 1928, was virtually unknown in America. An earlier attempt at an English translation flopped on Broadway in 1933, closing after only twelve performances. Weill, who immigrated to the US in 1935, had since gone on to stake out other successes on Broadway with such shows as *Lady in the Dark*, *One Touch of Venus*, and *Street Scene*. According to Blitzstein, in January 1950 he telephoned Weill to tell him that he had made a translation of "Pirate Jenny" and sang it over the phone to Weill and his wife, Lotte Lenya. Weill responded, "I think you've hit it. After all these years....Marc, do it all, why don't you?...You're the one for it!" Though Blitzstein did not complete the adaptation until after Weill's death in 1950, he was assured by Lenya that it would have met with Weill's approval. Similarly, Brecht piled praise on Blitzstein, declaring the adaptation "brilliant." *Threepenny* opened at the Theatre de Lys in Greenwich Village in 1954, and went on to run for 2,707 performances, the longest run of a musical at that time. It is largely due to Blitzstein that Weill's most well-known work, and his most popular song *Mack the Knife*, has had any success in America.

But is this all there is to say about Blitzstein – that he was the creative force behind these two works, works whose success cannot even be entirely credited to Blitzstein’s own talents as a composer? By no means. In fact, Blitzstein created a vast and diverse body of work which touched on myriad genres, assimilated popular and classical styles, drew inspiration from sources as varied as the Bible and the stories of Bernard Malamud, and left strong impressions on audiences, most especially the close circle of contemporary composers with whom Blitzstein associated.

As a young composer in New York in the 1920s and ‘30s, he came in contact with the preeminent figures of the New York new music scene, including Aaron Copland, Hanns Eisler, Virgil Thomson, Elie Siegmeister, and Charles Seeger. The influence of these colleagues and the opportunity to have his works performed at the concerts hosted by the Composers Collective of New York and the New York Composers Forum-Laboratory proved invaluable in his early development.

Copland in particular recognized Blitzstein’s promise early on, and took on the role of mentor, champion, and friend. His support took many forms, including encouraging Blitzstein’s efforts, helping to arrange performances of his pieces, and also invariably offering critique with a view to pushing Blitzstein to reach his full potential. In his essay “Thomson and Blitzstein”, Copland credits Blitzstein as one of two composers—Virgil Thomson being the other—responsible for the creation of an operatic style that could be considered uniquely American, calling *Regina* Blitzstein’s best work and “one of the significant 20th century American operas.” “His style,” Copland wrote, “as musical theater, is always enormously effective, whether the mood is one of heartsick yearning or punch-line sarcasm, social uplift or the dregs of dejection. It is a thoroughly malleable style that can be applied to almost any subject matter.”

Blitzstein was also responsible for nurturing and mentoring the younger generation of composers. Counted among his protégés are David Diamond, Ned Rorem, and most notably Leonard Bernstein. Blitzstein and Bernstein met in 1939 when Bernstein led a production of *Cradle* at Harvard. Their meeting led to an “instant and lifelong” friendship, a relationship which Howard Pollock describes as “so symbiotic as to make it difficult to pinpoint influence.” The nature of their friendship is documented in the many letters and telegrams they exchanged, and by Bernstein in his own writings and interviews. Bernstein was so distraught at the news of Blitzstein’s death, he compared his grief to the “loss of a limb.” He said, “Marc was so close a personal friend that I cannot even begin to measure our loss of him as a composer. I can think only that I have lost a part of me; but I know also that music has lost an invaluable servant. His special position in musical theater is irreplaceable.”

Yet, despite the esteem and admiration of so many colleagues and contemporaries, so little of Blitzstein’s music is known today. One possible cause was Blitzstein’s almost obsessive proclivity for revision: Never satisfied, he constantly reworked, rewrote, and discarded his compositions. This, in combination with his unexpected and tragic death at the age of 59, resulted in a body of work in various stages and combinations of incomplete, unedited, unpublished, unperformed, and un-performable condition. Even the works which receive performances regularly have some element of elasticity.

Nonetheless, his flame has not been entirely extinguished, as evidenced by this gathering. In the intervening years, a small number of his works have remained in the repertory, and receive occasional performances, mostly in America. In 2012, Marc’s nephew, Stephen Davis, donated his 50% share of Blitzstein’s musical and literary estate to the Kurt Weill Foundation. In the time since the KWF took over administration of the catalogue, we have seen a slow but sure increase

in the number of Blitzstein works performed each year. Highlights include a production of *Cradle* at New York City Center's Encores Off-Center series in 2013 (which featured the score in a new 14-instrument arrangement); a production of *Triple-Sec* in Berlin in 2015, the work's European premiere; *Airborne Symphony* in San Francisco last year; professional and university productions of *Regina*; and a four-part radio documentary on his life and work, which aired in Europe and in the US on the WFMT radio network. The KWF is proud to support these performances and projects through its Grants Program. In 2016, we launched the official Marc Blitzstein website, www.marc-blitzstein.org.

And of course *Cradle*, which has taken on alarming new relevance alongside current political events, remains a repertory staple, a favorite of colleges, universities, amateur, and professional companies alike. Next month, Opera Saratoga in upstate New York will present a new, fully staged production of *The Cradle Will Rock*, with Blitzstein's orchestration, conducted by John Mauceri. This will be the first time the original orchestration has been performed in the US since the New York City Opera production in 1960. And I am further pleased to share that Opera Theatre St. Louis has just announced it will open its 2018 season with *Regina*, starring the legendary Susan Graham in the title role.

It is too early to declare any sort of revival or renaissance of Blitzstein's music, but we can at least say that the significance of his contributions to musical theater and his influence on American music in the 20th century have not been forgotten and should not be overlooked. It is precisely for these reasons that his legacy must be preserved, and this historical marker is one small but essential part of that mission.