Blitzstein Lives On

To celebrate the Kurt Weill Foundation's acquisition of a share of Blitzstein's literary and musical copyrights (see p. 3), we requested tributes to Blitzstein from composers, conductors, performers, family members, and scholars. Nearly fifty years after his death, it's high time to recall his musical and theatrical innovations, his inimitable style, and his passionate political engagement.

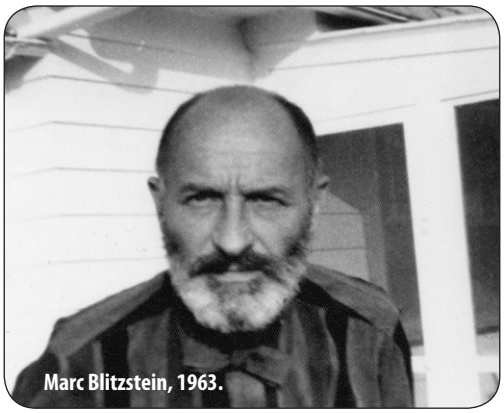
Prologue

Howard Pollack, author of forthcoming biography

Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964) is remembered today primarily for his English adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera* and for two operas for which he wrote both the libretto and the music, namely, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) and *Regina* (1949, adapted from Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes*). These three stage works might well be Blitzstein's greatest accomplishments. But they hardly represent the full extent of his output, which includes ten musical dramas, three ballets, ten incidental scores, seven film scores, and various songs and concert works.

Although not everything in this impressive catalog commands equal attention, little-known treasures can be found throughout. Aaron Copland, who knew Blitzstein's oeuvre better than most, greatly admired, for example, the ballet *Cain*, the film score *Surf and Seaweed*, and especially the opera *No for an Answer*, which he seems to have regarded more highly than either *The Cradle* or *Regina*. Another of Blitzstein's friends, composer Ned Rorem, particularly liked the song cycle *From Marion's Book* to poems by E.E. Cummings ("a happier blend of poet and composer I don't know," agreed David Diamond). Some listeners with a taste for the avant-garde have singled out for commendation the composer's early piano and chamber pieces, while aficionados of the Broadway musical long have found his score to *Juno* particularly appealing.

Since the composer's death in 1964, but especially in the course of the last few decades, a number of such novelties have been revived successfully, including the theater pieces *The Harpies*, *I've Got the Tune*, *No for an Answer*, and *Juno*, as well as the *Airborne Symphony* and *This Is the Garden* for chorus and orchestra. Recent years have also witnessed well-received premieres of works never performed during the composer's lifetime, including his Piano Concerto (in its full orchestral version), Orchestra Variations, and translation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*. (Still other compositions, like the severe choral opera *The Condemned*, await a first performance.) The largely enthusiastic response to these works suggests that the full measure of Blitzstein's achievement has yet to be taken.



Marc Blitzstein, 1963.

PHOTO: STEPHEN DAVIS

He had powerful forearms, square muscular musician's hands, the cuticles bitten raw. He used excessive force to deal with mail, with drinks—lunging at the work, spilling and mopping up, tearing. Time tormented him. He read his wristwatch every minute, lit a cigarette, thought better of it, put it out.

– Christopher Davis, Blitzstein's nephew

Remembering Blitzstein

Stephen Davis, Blitzstein's nephew, and his wife Joyce

After Marc's wife Eva died, his "family" was the Davis family, and he was closest to his beloved sister, Josephine (Jo) Davis. He virtually adopted his nephews, Christopher (Kit) and me (Stephen). Marc spent many summers with his adopted family in Brigantine, New Jersey. One of Marc and Jo's favorite pastimes was "sharing" the *New York Times* crossword every day. Marc would lie on his back on the floor or on the deck, hands behind his head and call out the answers sight unseen as Jo read the clues.

By 1956 the Davises began to include grandchildren. Marc was very solicitous of his new grand-nephews and -nieces. Usually there was an outside babysitter in attendance, and on one occasion, Marc happened to come by as the babysitter gave one of the children a sharp slap. Without consulting either a parent or a grandparent, he fired the sitter on the spot and led her unceremoniously to the door.

In 1963, after Marc returned from a sojourn in Italy, he arrived in Brigantine sporting a full black and white beard. Ed Davis and his grandson, Owen, conspired one afternoon to play a little trick on him. Ed purchased a fake beard and planted it on Owen's face. When Marc arrived for the daily cocktails, you can imagine the hilarity that ensued.

Christopher Davis, Blitzstein's nephew

Marc was at our Church Road house in Philadelphia in the winter of 1940 when he finished the workers' opera *No for an Answer*. He came down in the middle of the morning, unmoored, his job suddenly out of his hands. It was strange to see him at that hour. Since we had been trained to know how artists suffer in the composition of work, Marc's pleasure and the craziness of his mood jumped to Stephen and me and charged us too. It was during Christmas break from school. There had been storms and our street was filled with snow. [Our parents] Jo and Ed were in Florida. Marc needed to celebrate, so we cast around for a way. What did we want? He would buy us something. Finally we put on galoshes and overcoats—Marc would have had only his New

York street shoes—and walked to a variety store half a mile away where he bought us a sled. There was no longer any income from *The Cradle Will Rock*, which had brought him fame and some financial success. We were sure he had spent too much and felt guilty as well as pleased.

The same self-command that made him work at his art kept him distant from and in conflict with ordinary things. A trip to a store to buy the black ink for his music manuscripts, flints for his lighter, a sled for his nephews, became a perilous voyage—the saleswoman consulted as an expert, full information sought, comparisons made, the precise nature of this or that special function discovered, and so on—as if he had come from the moon that morning and had to make fast, intelligent sense of his new surroundings in order to survive.

Minna Curtiss, author

As a personality Marc embodied much of his Russian heritage. Sometimes he was a brooding or violent character out of Dostoyevsky. Sometimes he was as frivolous and high-spirited as one of Turgenev's gamblers at Baden-Baden. Always he was extravagant—in mood and in action. His generosity was excessive and imaginative. The pound of fresh caviar he would bring up to the country involved material sacrifices that I hated to think about. But we had fun being gluttonous.

Blitzstein with Leonard Bernstein, circa 1940.

PHOTO: PHOTOFEST

Jamie Bernstein, daughter of Leonard and Felicia

My parents adored Marc. So close a friend was he that they appointed him my godfather when I was born. He immediately composed a piano piece in my honor, "To Baby Girl Bernstein"; I didn't even have a name yet.

In the summers, my parents were in the habit of making fairly elaborate home movies with story lines. In the summer of 1960, they made "Call Me Moses," their own silent Exodus epic. Marc was cast as the Pharaoh's whipmaster, lashing the slaves on the beach at Martha's Vineyard as they toiled to build the pyramids. Our family watches this movie every year at Passover. Somehow, as Marc laughs with silent-movie evil glee, burnished and handsome under the New England summer sun and melodramatically kissing his cat o' nine tails, he remains completely adorable.

Russell Nype, singer-actor

Marc Blitzstein's mother-in-law encouraged me to audition for *Regina* in 1949. I knew it was an opera, so I sang the Flower Song from *Carmen Jones*. Marc came down to the front of the theater and said, "O.k., I see you've got a few notes. Can you do a comedy number?" So I sang "When I'm Not Near the Girl I Love, I Love the Girl I'm Near" from *Finian's Rainbow*. And just like that, they signed me. Later Jane Pickens told me that they had auditioned seventy actors for my part, so I guess they were pretty worn out by that time and ready to take anyone who came along. That's how I got my first Broadway role. I've always had a warm place in my heart for Marc Blitzstein, who gave me my start on Broadway.

William Bolcom, composer

A half-century ago my longtime collaborator Arnold Weinstein and I were in New York working on our opera for actors *Dynamite Tonite*, to be produced at the Actors Studio Theater in December 1963. Several times we went to visit Marc Blitzstein before the opening to show him what we were doing, and he was always very wise and helpful in his counsel. We both loved his generosity and friendliness and good sense. I'm very grateful for the help and encouragement he gave the green 25-year-old I was then, and I'm sorry there wasn't an opportunity to get to know him better.

I still feel that one of the very strongest things Marc did was his English version of *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht always insisted that translations of his work be translated to the culture as well, and Marc's version is the most successful I know of on two counts: it's idiomatic hip urban New Yorkese in language, and it was refitted to become a completely New York show.

Sheldon Harnick, lyricist

As a lyricist myself, I think I was most impressed by Marc Blitzstein's extraordinarily supple and effective lyrics for *The Threepenny Opera*. I saw the show several times and marveled at his accomplishment each time. I was fortunate enough to meet Marc Blitzstein only briefly in the mid-1950s, at the beginning of my career. A mutual friend had brought him to a backers' audition for a musical whose lyrics I had written, a spoof of the Horatio Alger tales. After the audition, he was wonderfully generous, telling me that I was "another Larry Hart in the making." I've never forgotten how moved I was by this much-needed encouragement from an artist whose work I admired so much.

Appreciating Blitzstein

Eric A. Gordon, author of *Mark the Music*

Beginning in the late 1970s I felt a calling, as insistent as "Mack the Knife," to write Marc Blitzstein's biography. What drove me for ten years were 1) a real love for his oeuvre and for the role he played as citizen-intellectual and artist; 2) a burning resentment that his work had been shoved aside for political and stylistic reasons; and 3) a personal need to vindicate him before the public, before his tracks got too cold. I had the benefit, during the 1980s, of direct contact with scores of people who knew him as family members, as colleagues, friends, co-workers, artists, and even as lovers.

My editor at St. Martin's said, "There will never be another biography of Blitzstein, so write what you feel needs to be there—what future readers and scholars will be seeking when they search out his life and work." Now I am in the peculiar and delicate situation of anticipating the appearance of a new biography of Blitzstein, by Howard Pollack, which will be out this summer. That a biographer with his résumé should be attracted to this subject is high tribute to a prodigious and complicated figure who occupied a unique niche in 20th-century American culture.

Blitzstein in London during World War II.

PHOTO: PHOTOFEST

Foster Hirsch, author of *Kurt Weill on Stage*

As a composer-lyricist for the American musical theatre Marc Blitzstein, at 107, remains unique. Although there are echoes of the Brecht/Weill collaborations in his work, along with "quotations" from vaudeville, American folk and popular music, and Gilbert and Sullivan, among other sources, ultimately Blitzstein's voice is one of a kind: by turns raffish, acrid, ironic, and despite himself, lush and sentimental. His melodies could be as insinuating as those of Weill in his most beguiling mood. Like Weill, he was a crossover composer blending high and low, classical and populist; like Weill, he wanted to collapse the distance between the opera house and the commercial musical theatre with 'American' operas written in a native, homegrown idiom. But unlike Weill, he never enjoyed commercial acclaim.

The Cradle Will Rock, which may be Blitzstein's finest theater work, is especially bright, brimming with melodic and rhythmic ingenuity. Blitzstein's two adaptations, *Regina* and *Juno* (based on O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*) have solid books and fully-drawn characters. Collaborating with Joseph Stein, he came closest to a regulation, Broadway-style score with *Juno*, but even that subverts as much as it observes Broadway paradigms.

Blitzstein must have had mixed feelings about the fact that his most enduring fame derives from his adaptation of *The Threepenny Opera*. Yet the vernacular, plain-spoken, distinctly American snap of his translations exhibits the same qualities that distinguish Blitzstein's lyrics for his own compositions.

John Mauceri, conductor

When I was asked to lead a Leonard Bernstein Festival in 1986 with the London Symphony, I thought it would be valuable to play Bernstein in the context of music that he had championed. With that in mind, one of the programs I conducted was Blitzstein's *Airborne Symphony*, juxtaposed with a symphonic suite from *Candide*. The British premiere of *Airborne* caused quite a stir in London. One critic told me he thought the name Blitzstein was a typographical error, since he assumed the composer was Bernstein! The range of press reaction displayed the complex emotions evoked by Blitzstein's extraordinary musical language: naïve, brash, confrontational, and ultimately wholly convincing. On the surface, his music is easy to dismiss, but even the most cynical and resistant person ultimately gives in to its power, its originality, and its intensely passionate sincerity.

Rosalind Elias, opera singer

Having performed in and directed *Regina*, I should say first of all that it is effective theatrically as few operas are; in that regard I would rank it with Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Blitzstein's subtle use of music to define and shape character deserves most of the credit for the work's theatrical power. There is no doubt that Blitzstein's score made the characters in the opera more compelling than those in the original play. When Regina sings "I hope you die," the music makes the moment even more frightening than it is in *The Little Foxes*. I put Lillian Hellman's objections to *Regina* down to sour grapes. She knew the opera was better than the play.

Blitzstein's gift for vocal and ensemble writing shows itself to particular advantage in *Regina*. The "Rain" Quartet is perfectly composed, and the choral work is beautiful. He also had a knack for making difficult vocal lines easier on the singers. In Regina's first-act aria, the soprano has to belt it but must also hit a high A at the climactic moment. Blitzstein led up to it in such a way that the singer doesn't have to strain to hit the high note. His skill in vocal writing makes even difficult passages sound natural and simple.

Blitzstein's musical theater is an enduring success on Blitzstein's own terms. The lyrics are still bracingly urgent. The music sounds as if it had been composed yesterday and couldn't come from anyone else but him. It's all quite unsettling, as if he continues to shake us by the shoulders from our complacency. The work never loses its shock value. Thank God he never wanted to compromise.

– Mark Hollmann, composer

Leonard Lehrman, editor of the three-volume *Marc Blitzstein Songbook*

Blitzstein left a great many works unfinished at his death, including the one-act opera *Idiots First*. It was to be the first of a group of operas on stories by Bernard Malamud, which Blitzstein called *Tales of Malamud*. My teacher, Elie Siegmeister, recommended me for the job of completing this work. Over a three-year period, I studied and analyzed the work with Siegmeister and Nadia Boulanger, which proved very valuable. Ned Rorem has called it "Marc's best work." Jose Ferrer, who premiered a song from the piece under Bernstein's baton, called the lead character "the role of the century." It's had four productions and won the first Off-Broadway Opera Award for "most important event of the season" in 1978. Many have called it the most powerful Jewish opera ever written.

Inspired by Blitzstein

Joshua Schmidt, composer

When I think about Marc Blitzstein as an artist and as a human being, I can only think of one word: brave. He wrote brave music: full-bodied harmonies, rhythms, structures, forms. He wrote bravely about things he cared about the most, not locked into any pat or predictable convention. Nor was he afraid to represent the extraordinary aspects of what many of his peers failed to see in ordinary individuals and lives. His vision of art and what it could express could only be typified as brave—how many of us nowadays are willing to put work out into the world in the teeth of forces that will quash and censor it? Who in modern American music and theatrical history offers a greater example of such bravery than Blitzstein? A select few, at best.

Isn't it refreshing to have a concrete historical example not yet 100 years in the past (however troubled, flawed—*human*—that example might be) of a man who not only talked the talk, but stood up and used his gifts to fight for what he believed in? It is an honor and a great responsibility to follow in the footsteps of artists who cared so much, who experienced so much, and who had the nerve to express themselves as truthfully and magnificently as Blitzstein (and Weill). We should all proceed with such bravery and humility, and not be afraid to rock the boat if our hearts tell us to do so.

Blitzstein rehearsing the original cast of *The Cradle Will Rock*, 1938.

PHOTO: PHOTOFEST

Ricky Ian Gordon, composer

When I was a little boy growing up on Long Island, about an hour from the city, intensely curious about music, and apparently music theater, I began going every Saturday to the Performing Arts Library, taking out piles of records and devouring them. Of the many records I listened to during that time, two of the most influential were the CRI recording of Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* and the Columbia Records recording of *Regina*. These two pieces somehow perfectly exemplify what I have been trying to do all my life. A few years ago I won a little competition given by WNYC called the "Must Have" festival, in which contestants submitted their favorite desert island recordings and explained why they couldn't live without them. The prize was a chance to sit with David Garland and play two and a half hours of your favorite music on the air. I began with the very opening of *Cradle*, Moll's "I'm stepping home now." It was exactly right. When David asked me why I liked it so much, I sang the interval that happens on "goin' up to MY room," and he understood. Blitzstein's works are the perfect blend of classical and popular and serious and vernacular; he is and always will be a hero of mine. When I write my own libretti or lyrics—whatever I do, I feel I am continuing a tradition that he began. I wish we had been friends.

Steven Blier, Artistic Director, New York Festival of Song

Each time I play Blitzstein's songs I become more enamored of his elegant, original fusion of words and music. His theater and cabaret songs are like no one else's. They can be bluesy ("Then" or "Nickel Under the Foot"), but they're not constructed like classic blues tunes; they can be vaudevillian ("Penny Candy") but they're far more complex and literary than the kind of material our old-time song-and-dance men performed; they can have broad, open melodies ("I Wish It So," "What Will It Be for Me") but Blitzstein's phrase lengths and harmonic patterns are more unpredictable and quirky than anything in the Great American Songbook. I always joke that "The Rose Song" (my favorite Blitzstein piece) sounds like what Gustav Mahler would have written if he were composing a Broadway musical.

Blitzstein was a bit of a control freak, and he never learned the art of collaboration. This is a debilitating flaw for anyone attempting to put on a show, where success depends on teamwork. I hear the same trait in his songs, which defy the kind of improvisation intrinsic to the music of Gershwin and Rodgers. You have to play them pretty much as written because Blitzstein's unique approach to melody—which seems to meld European art song with Kurt Weill—doesn't leave much leeway for altered harmonies or jazzy interpolations. Blitzstein's own performances bear this out; I remember hearing two different recordings of him playing "Nickel Under the Foot." Though they were separated by several decades, his pianism was identical—the same tempo, the same phrasing, the same pedaling. This is true even in a straightforward walking-bass tune like "Monday Morning Blues"; you have to stay pretty close to the *Urtext* or you'll wreck Blitzstein's musical idea. The lyric is about a sailor who's had a wild weekend on leave and is reluctantly going back on board to resume duty. The song is in C, but Blitzstein takes the entire 32 bars before he allows the bass line to get to that root position chord. It's a perfect musical recreation of a man who is reluctant to go home; the pianist's left-hand pinky resists as long as it can before resigning itself to that final low C.

Blitzstein's songs can be awkward and heavy-handed—Regina's aria "The Best Thing of All" is a rousing piece but it pounds on the rhymes relentlessly and turns a complex viper into a blowhard. But he creates magic when he allows his strange, Cubist songwriting to flower. His best lyrics reveal the depths of the human condition, his finest melodies stay in the listener's heart forever.

John Mauceri, conductor

Will the time come to restore all the missing, inaccessible scores by this extraordinary musician who was in the center of the worlds of Broadway, opera, and political activism? Do we have room to discover this unique American voice? Surely it is time for us to honor this man and say "yes" for an answer.