

# Issues in the German Reception of Weill<sup>1</sup>

by Stephen Hinton

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"Wall and barbed wire divide no more" — thus the front-page headline in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (11 November 1989), two days after the opening of the Berlin Wall. The previous day, on 10 November, leading politicians of the German Federal Republic had assembled on the John-F.-Kennedy-Platz, together with a jubilant multitude comprised of West and East Berliners, to celebrate this epoch-making event. Dissension, however, greeted the idea of ending the meeting with the West German national anthem. The FAZ reporter writes: "The singing wafted up to the balcony so unceremoniously as to suggest that one was about to segue from the German anthem into the closing chorale of *Die Dreigroschenoper*." Scurrilous thought: "Verfolgt das Unrecht nicht zu sehr" (literally: "Don't pursue injustice too far") as the new German-German national anthem! Intimately linked with the course of recent German history, the German reception of Weill has lost none of its topicality. Nor have the issues it raises ceased to be at once questionable and worthy of question [*Fragwürdigkeit in jedem Sinne*].

Yet one thing appears now to be beyond question: 9 November 1989 and the ensuing events have ushered in a new era of Weill reception, if only because there will now be just one German reception history to speak of, instead of the customary two. We may dare not predict how that history might look; it is hard enough to find adequate terms in which to describe the reception histories that have already occurred. Even so, we may fondly imagine how we would like to see Weill received, even if history calls for caution and, where possible, objectivity. Works with which we are well acquainted tend to suggest to us an ideal interpretation which not only awaits its realization (or re-realization) at some future date but whose very non-realization may constitute a thread of historiographical continuity. Accordingly, we strive for objectivity by identifying the historical reasons for any perceived shortcoming. We may see this ideal as having already been realized, as some proponents of historical performance practice do, and hence construe history in terms of a subsequent decline. Conversely, we may prefer to believe in a progression toward that ideal, as yet unrealized. Either way, the basic model remains, as does the fact that such reflections embroil us in controversial issues of *Rezeptionsästhetik*, especially with regard to Weill. For reception history is not merely a piling-up of all available documents. By sifting the relevant from the irrelevant ones, we are forced — consciously or unconsciously — to apply criteria, to adopt a position.

As a subdiscipline of the humanities *Rezeptionsästhetik* has lost much of the fascination it once held in the 1970s. Already in 1975 one of its founders, Hans Robert Jauss, defined it as "a partial reflection on methodology, capable of expansion and reliant on cooperation."<sup>2</sup> Such a reflection leads away from the immanent interpretation of texts in favor of the reader or listener as the principal authority of historiography. Writing in 1977, Carl Dahlhaus explained the turn toward reception history "as both an expression and consequence of the crisis undergone by the concept of the autonomous, self-con-

tained work of art in recent decades."<sup>3</sup> Dahlhaus ultimately advocates a healthy eclecticism: reception history is no surrogate for philology, but just one of several approaches. Dahlhaus concludes: "The musical legacy of several centuries, whose aesthetics were predicated on the idea of originality, is the legitimate object of a philology which cannot be supplanted by reception history."<sup>4</sup> Rather than representing alternatives, the two approaches are supposed to complement, not replace, each other. The challenge to any eclectic is to find an approach appropriate to the object at hand. Dahlhaus wished to point out a danger: applied to works that belong to the tradition of aesthetic autonomy, the methods of reception history may simply not be capable of grasping significant aspects of the meaning of these works. Those methods may even miss that meaning altogether, especially when reception history subscribes to what Dahlhaus calls extreme or indiscriminate relativism — a position which as a matter of principle admits all interpretations as equally valid. Such a position is incapable of complementing, let alone cooperating with, the "philological method," which takes the identity of the work as its premise, guaranteed by authorial intention and thereby inferring a single authentic text.

All this, one could interject, is "the snow of yesteryear." Although never concluded, and perhaps for that very reason, the discussion about *Rezeptionsästhetik* has long since died down. Yet for Weill's oeuvre the questions discussed back then are still of critical relevance. His work could even be conscripted as a paradigm with which to rekindle the discussion.

Yet Weill's works present puzzles, even for dyed-in-the-wool eclectics. To the extent to which, as Weill himself would have said, the foundations of his musical production shifted, the appropriateness of different methods of investigation is also affected. Even with one and the same work the matter is not decided *a priori*. The turn toward reception history, according to Dahlhaus, can be understood as the expression and consequence of the loss of authority of the work of art; and Weill himself made his own considerable contribution to this "loss." Already in the 1920s he distanced himself from the standpoint of those who "full of contempt for the public, work at solving purely aesthetic problems." He wished to place his production "in some sort of larger context."<sup>5</sup> He attempted "to create music capable of satisfying the musical needs of broad strata of society," without however "forfeiting its artistic substance."<sup>6</sup> Already then, at the end of the 1920s, he favored a dual yardstick whose standards of measurement he initially formulated as two questions: "The first question for us: Is what we do of any use to society at large? A second question that follows: Is what we do art; for that is decided only by the quality of our work."

The fact that the so-called "American" Weill adopted a similar standpoint, albeit under changed cultural conditions, hardly needs elaborating. For this reason, we should speak less of a gradual or abrupt abandonment of the traditional notion of art music, as the hypothesis about "the two Weills" suggests and most of the literature

on them automatically presumes, than of a dualistic aesthetics which informs both the American and the German works. Although the twofold demand of such an aesthetics provokes a conflict, it is unclear whether such a conflict is in the nature of things or merely determined by tradition. Schoenberg formulated the problem in extreme terms with his maxim about the fundamental incompatibility of art on the one hand and society at large on the other. The late Peter Heyworth, biographer of Otto Klemperer, described it as a "flaw in Weill's character." "That desire to have his cake and eat it," Heyworth wrote, "was to prove fatal during his later years on Broadway."<sup>7</sup> Weill wanted the one without relinquishing the other. Translated into the categories of the discussion about *Rezeptionsästhetik*: the more Weill's compositions become common property, the more they place themselves in a "broader context," the more they tend to lose their identity as works; occasionally that identity may be extinguished altogether. It would be quite absurd, taking an extreme example, to judge the numerous recordings of "Mack the Knife" or "September Song" with the yardstick of "fidelity to the text" [*Texttreue*]. In this case, the "philological method" would not lead very far. On the other hand, Weill consistently fought to protect the identity of his works in connection with stage productions by prohibiting any tampering with the score. In 1949, one year before his death, for example, he sought a legal injunction against arrangements made by another hand for a Munich production of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The same goes for the instrumentation of the Broadway works, even if an *Urtext* in the strict sense cannot be reconstructed. A burning question, then, for Weill philologists: What constitutes the identity of the American works; how can "fidelity to the work" [*Werktreue*] be measured? Meanwhile there is a lesson to be learned from greater familiarity with the European works: they too offer a far from unambiguous picture. "The very nature of the work compels us," David Drew has written, "to continue searching for ideal solutions long after we have recognized there are none to be found."<sup>8</sup> Drew made this observation by way of conclusion to his notes on *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*; it could equally well have applied to *Lady in the Dark* or any one of the other musicals.

Here, too, with regard to the respective notion of work [*Werkbegriff*], the differences between the "two Weills" are merely gradual. They have only become absolute thanks to reception, especially in Germany. And the reasons are to be sought, I believe, in the difficulty (which may just be unwillingness, especially on the part of German audiences) to take account of Weill's dualistic aesthetics. Whether we are dealing with a fundamental problem, as Schoenberg's maxim suggests, or with an unwillingness grounded in unfamiliarity, can be decided only when hasty prejudice gives way to informed judgment. Therein lies the crux of the problem: in the reception of Weill the categories on which judgments are based are divergent, if not contradictory, insofar as a judgment about a work's aesthetic merit [*Kunstcharakter*] relies, to a certain extent, on the "philological method," whereas one about satisfying "broad strata of society" can scarcely eschew the relativism of *Rezeptionsästhetik*.

An early instance of the type of reception that systematically plays off aesthetic merit against "satisfying broad strata of society" can be found in the late 1920's, namely in the apologies by Theodor W. Adorno and other representatives of a higher criticism which interpret the popularity of the European Weill in terms of a fundamental misunderstanding. Adorno's article on *Die Dreigroschenoper*, published in 1929, in which he voiced his sociological reservations about the "congruous harmony" between art and society, has been cited frequently and usually uncritically.<sup>9</sup> Popularity becomes synonymous with usurpation by what Adorno later called the "culture industry." Less well known is the exaggeration of Adorno's thesis by

Ernst Bloch in a newspaper article published in 1937. Bloch is describing Hanns Eisler's exile cantatas in terms of music that "engages us" [*ergreift*] and which "in almost the same act can be both politically and artistically revolutionary." He also uses this observation as an opportunity to play off Eisler against Weill: *Die Dreigroschenoper*, according to Bloch, succumbed "to the danger of being lauded by a public for whom it was not made."<sup>10</sup> For whom, we may well ask, was it actually made? Who, according to Bloch, was the intended audience?

The intention, at any rate, is clear. For Adorno and Bloch, Weill's music remains "dangerous," even subversive. The fact of its being approvingly received by the bourgeois public at large represents a misunderstanding and vitiation. Its "dangerous" quality — though conveyed by "literary" means, according to Adorno, not immanently musical ones — is a positive, unqualified facet of its aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup> Here the critical theorists agreed — albeit for absolutely contrary reasons — with the National Socialists. Bloch wrote that Weill "transforms that better mix of classes that does listen not so much into 'Volk,' whose praises are to be sung, as

into subversion."<sup>12</sup> The *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* ("Dictionary of Jews in Music") corroborated this opinion a few years later, this time in utterly negative terms: "The name of this composer is inseparably linked with the worst kind of subversion of our art."<sup>13</sup> Curious how both parties construe the ironic slant of music and text quite literally, unironically and with grim earnest. According to critical theory, "Das Lied von der Unzulänglichkeit menschlichen Strebens," or at least its words, should be read as a stinging attack on the "better mix of classes" in the audience. At the exhibition of "Degenerate Art," on the other hand, the Villon quotation of the song's refrain, lightly retouched by Brecht ("nur wer im Wohlstand lebt, lebt angenehm"), was cited as the "personal conviction [*Selbstbekenntnis*] of the creator of the *Dreigroschenoper*." To the same end, the refrain "Erstens, vergesst nicht, kommt das Fressen" from *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* was printed as a "personal motto," as though the composer and librettist had wanted to set up the city of Mahagonny not only on the stage but in the real world as well.

During the years of Nazi rule, Weill's music, officially banned, became dangerous not only in an aesthetic but also a practical sense. Listening to it with confidants, huddled in front of a wind-up gramophone, was tantamount to an act of conspiracy. *Die Dreigroschenoper*, as ever, remained his best-known and most frequently played composition in Germany, as the memoirs of German emigrés attest almost without exception. Erich Fried, for example, recalled the last screening of the Pabst film prior to the *Anschluss* as follows: "We actually managed to see the last performance. It had been banned in Austria, and had only been on for the last few days. Now we hummed the tunes. But we hummed them softly. We looked to left and right as we came out of the cinema. No brown uniforms yet."<sup>14</sup>

Apart from functioning as a symbol of resistance against suppression, Weill's music became — with the aid of hindsight — an unheeded warning against barbarism. I quote from the Weill obituary by the director Karl Lustig-Prean, published in the Viennese *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (9 April 1950) under the title "Der Tod des Avantgardisten": "Weill had recognized these brown portents well in advance and alerted us to them. The hammering rhythms of his music to Brecht songs, to workers' agitational ballads, to whiplashes against a reactionary bourgeoisie arrogantly becoming stupefied while betraying its own kind, were signals, nay screams, of warning about the horror to come; but in a tragic chain of tragic circumstances, they were no more heard than their texts (to which they gave the vital spur) were turned into deeds." The music also fostered

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feelings of nostalgia for the good old days, the glorious Golden Twenties. It still does. Yet the premiere audience at Schiffbauerdamm could not possibly have understood Weill's music in either of these senses, either the political or the transfiguring sense. Hence, diagnosing the work's popular reception as a misunderstanding is largely anachronistic. Nonetheless, the subsequent understanding of his works in these terms has lastingly shaped Weill's postwar image in Germany on both sides of the wall. Weill without Brecht would have been an unthinkable formula until recently. And the anachronistic interpretations described form the kernel of both reception histories. "Extreme relativism" would strictly preclude any so-called misunderstandings; each understanding coexists with equal legitimacy alongside others. On the other hand, Adorno and Bloch's much-invoked charge of misunderstanding could well be turned against itself. In terms of philology and history, it is itself a misunderstanding.

The German reception of the European Weill has at least been a reception actually related to some of the works, even if the Brecht connection has been overstated, whether for apologetic or critical reasons. Either people have tried to explain Weill's music using Brecht's theories or they have sought to criticize it using those theories.<sup>15</sup> Above all, there has been a tendency until recently to accept Brecht's own accounts and thereby to play down Weill's contribution. We are now witnessing a period of reassessment. The collapse of German state communism will not leave Brecht reception unaffected; if only for this reason, recent developments must have a bearing on Weill reception as well.

A German reception of the American Weill, on the other hand, has scarcely taken place. Of the American stage works, there have been only a handful of performances in the Federal Republic. In the GDR there has been none. As a result, any opinions that circulate are quite literally prejudiced. A rare exception was that of the German theater critic Friedrich Luft. After seeing the New York production of Weill's vaudeville *Love Life* in 1949, Luft wrote an enthusiastic letter to the composer (dated May 14). "This performance ranks among the most wonderful and powerful we have ever experienced," he remarked, while mentioning a difficulty: "Such a mix of music, dance, light and wit is something that, in the foreseeable future, could scarcely be produced in Germany with such easygoing precision." Whether, 40 years later, German precision can become easygoing (or even wishes to) remains to be seen. Particularly crass examples of blind prejudice are to be found in the obituaries published in the German press. Heinrich Strobel, Weill's one-time admirer, at least admitted in his notice that he knew little of Weill's American works; and he was probably happy to leave it like that. "In America," wrote Strobel, "he seems, with his stage works and films, to have subjugated himself to Broadway."<sup>16</sup> What this apparent subjugation meant to a European was described in greater detail 10 years later by the Austrian Helmut Fiechtner: "The separation from Brecht and Berlin, the absence of a critical audience; instead, the all too light, dollar-heavy successes in the theaters of Broadway — this was all bad for Kurt Weill. Our sense is that what Weill wrote 'over there' was a mere trifle: a confection of Puccini and Menotti, Gershwin, musical and operetta. We acknowledge this with sincere regret — and return to the old, genuine Weill with its whiff of tobacco and Russia leather."<sup>17</sup>

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Weill's death (3 April 1980), the East Berlin newspaper *Der Morgen* was still playing off Weill's "own unmistakable voice" in the European works against the "decline" in the later ones: "Here [in the works with Brecht] no-one senses anymore that the composer learnt his craft with Humperdinck, nor do they detect anything of the almost tragic attempt by the American Weill to raise the level of popular music, only to lower his own level imperceptibly; they sense rather a highly individual, original musician who, in the collaboration with Brecht, totally found his own voice." No less resolute was the judgment of Philipp Jarnach, fellow Busoni pupil. Writing in a letter to the Academy of Arts in West Berlin, dated 24 March 1958, Jarnach voted against a proposal to commission a bibliography of Kurt Weill: "This later [American] production signifies a total abandonment of the earlier serious aims

of this composer, and I believe that it won't do when people try and convince themselves that it still has any stylistic significance." The Music Department, Jarnach continued, "has other, more pressing tasks to fulfill," including "active support... of serious research in the field of music aesthetics." Jarnach himself could doubtless have profited from this latter activity, had he wished to do serious justice to Weill's heterogeneous oeuvre. For it really won't do to judge the American works with the yardstick of the European. Nor has it been decided once and for all what the respective yardsticks should be. That is something for each generation — with its preferences and prejudices — to discover for itself.

When Adorno composed his obituary for the *Frankfurter Rundschau* he was not writing — like most of his German colleagues — out of ignorance of Weill's American works. Nor did he conceal his prejudices, which he declares in his very first sentence: "The profile of this composer, who died in America, is hardly commensurate with the concept of 'composer'."<sup>18</sup> Not, at least, with Adorno's emphatically Romantic concept of "composer." The current Weill renaissance stems, in part, from the fact that we have discovered values that can do greater justice to Weill's music than was possible 30 or 40 years ago. In many respects, these values can be seen to undermine the very idea of the three unities underpinning the traditional concept of the composer: the unity of the oeuvre, described in terms of an organically developing whole; the corresponding unity of a biography that follows a teleological path toward a *Spätwerk*; and the immanent unity of the individual works as creations which, as Adorno puts it, "exist for themselves on the basis of substance and design."<sup>19</sup> It is these central categories of art criticism that Weill's work, as a whole, requires us to take issue with.

Translated by the author

<sup>15</sup> The essay's original title, "Fragwürdiges in der deutschen Weill-Rezeption," contains a double meaning which cannot be rendered in English with appropriate economy. The adjective "fragwürdig" connotes something that is either "questionable" or "worthy of question." The title as a whole also alludes to an earlier publication on Weill reception: "Fragwürdiges in der Kurt-Weill-Rezeption: Zur Diskussion über einen wiederentdeckten Komponisten" by Jürgen Engelhardt (*Angewandte Musik - 20er Jahre*, Argument-Sonderband 24, ed. D. Stern, Berlin, 1977, pp. 118-37).

<sup>16</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, "Racines und Goethes Iphigenie," in R. Warning (ed.), *Rezeptionsästhetik*, Munich, 1975, p. 381.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Grundlagen der Musikgeschichte*, Cologne, 1977, p. 238.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 259.

<sup>19</sup> Kurt Weill, "Verschiebungen in der musikalischen Produktion," in *Musik und Theater: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. S. Hinton and J. Schebera, Berlin, 1990, pp. 45-7.

<sup>20</sup> Kurt Weill, "Die Oper - wohin?," *Ibid.* pp. 68-71.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*, vol. 1, Cambridge, 1983, p. 294.

<sup>22</sup> David Drew, *Kurt Weill: A Handbook*, London, 1987, p. 185.

<sup>23</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno, "Zur Dreigroschenoper," *Die Musik* 22 (1929), pp. 424-8; English translation in *Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera*, ed. S. Hinton, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 129-34.

<sup>24</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Eislers Kantaten in Prag," *Deutsche Volkszeitung*, Prague, 26 December 1937.

<sup>25</sup> Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno, "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 1 (1932), p. 122: "Unquestionably, Weill's is the only music today with a genuine socio-polemical impact, as long as it remains at the height of its negativity; it has perceived itself as such and found its place accordingly. Its problem stems from the fact that this height cannot be sustained; that Weill the musician has to consider resorting to working methods that from a musical perspective necessarily seem 'literary,' like the paintings of the Surrealists. The misunderstanding by the public - who calmly consume the songs of *Die Dreigroschenoper* as hit-tunes, although these are their own and the public's worst enemy - may be justified as a means of dialectical communication. The further course of things, however, reveals ambiguity to be a danger: formerly exposed superficialities turn into false positivity, destruction into community art within the confines of the status quo."

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Zur Dreigroschenoper," *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt/Main, 1962, p. 230; English translation in *Kurt Weill: The Threepenny Opera*, ed. S. Hinton, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 135-7.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Über Kurt Weill*, ed. D. Drew, Frankfurt/Main 1975, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> Erich Fried, "The Day Hitler Marched In," *Observer*, 8 March 1988.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Stephen Hinton, "The Concept of 'Epic Opera': Theoretical Anomalies in the Brecht-Weill Partnership," *Festschrift Carl Dahlhaus*, Laaber, 1988, pp. 285-94.

<sup>30</sup> Heinrich Strobel, "Erinnerung an Kurt Weill," *Melos* 17/5 (1950), pp. 135-6.

<sup>31</sup> Helmut Fiechtner, "Die Bühnenwerke von Kurt Weill," *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 16/5 (1961), p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Kurt Weill - Musiker des epischen Theaters," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 April 1950.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*



Santa Fe Opera's Summer 1993 production of *Der Protagonist* and *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* marks the premiere of the double bill in the United States. The occasion has prompted this special section, which includes:

Costume designs for Santa Fe by Robert Perdziola

Historical notes by Gunther Diehl

and. . .

## Director's Notes for a Kurt Weill Double Bill

by John Eaton

One of the challenges facing a director preparing any double bill is how to create for an audience a coherent sense of a whole evening of music theater, an event where the parts do not just stand alone but can complement and illuminate each other. In the early stages of interpreting the distinctly different spirits of *The Protagonist* and *The Czar* an exploration of areas of compatibility offer some fascinating insights.

Both pieces, in their different ways, explore tensions between the false and the true, between deception and honesty, pretense and reality. The ultimate artistry for the Protagonist is to lose himself in the role he plays; the Czar's great desire is to escape his role of functionary and find himself as a common man.

The Protagonist flirts with madness, so powerfully is he drawn into the illusion of the character he plays. For the Protagonist, the outer world is harsh and ugly; his sister supplies the truth and beauty in his life; she is his unblemished mirror on reality. When he discovers that her honesty is flawed, his world is shattered. He has to destroy her, and this he does consciously, glorying in the awareness that when he next performs, he will no longer be able to rely on the truth she reflected to draw him back from the all-consuming illusions of acting. Irredeemably, he will become his role and give his most magnificent performance, and consequently destroy himself with madness.

The Czar finds himself consumed by the demands of a public figure that deprive him of his private identity. He flirts with death, courting assassination to throw off his role as Czar and seek true experience in the passions

of a common man. As with the Protagonist, it is the spice of self-destruction and the love of woman that he relies on to transfigure the falsehoods of his role in life into the truth of self-realization.

These tensions between reality and illusion are clearly articulated in competing levels of reality in the structure of the music and drama in both operas. *The Protagonist* radically subverts many conventions of a more traditional operatic 'reality.' The work is set up as a rehearsal for a subsequent performance that is never witnessed; its main characters are given no names and are characterized by their functions and the individuality of their relationships. The climax of the work is a rehearsal for a play that abandons sung language in favor of mime, accompanied by instrumentalists who are exhorted to improvise their music, and who, according to the original stage directions, emerge from and return to the orchestra pit, thus stepping over one of the most hallowed boundaries of more traditional opera. Clearly, in this, his very first essay in the genre, the resulting formal experimentation is not simply indiscriminating iconoclasm, however. Conventions are broken to highly expressive purpose. For a work that explores the shifting ground between reality and illusion, it is wholly appropriate that the music should shift in its roles and relationship to the drama. With varied and opposing musical forces, with fluidity between music of the orchestra pit and that of the stage, and between prescribed and apparently improvised music, with all these volatile and fragmenting devices, Weill supports magnificently the kaleidoscopic world the Protagonist inhabits. Conventions are ruptured to convey ruptured relationships.



The Protagonist

Costume Design for Santa Fe Opera by Robert Perdziola



*Der Protagonist* - Synopsis

The Protagonist, one of the greatest actors of his day, hopes for an invitation to perform before a discerning duke.

He and his traveling players seek a rehearsal space in an inn near the duke's castle. Contrary to the norm — women are not permitted to act on the stage — the Protagonist is accompanied by his sister. He is clearly much dependent upon her. She is his mirror on reality; he relies on the unblemished honesty he sees in her to draw him back from the all-consuming deceptions of his art.

The sister, however, has recently acquired a secret lover whom, in her passion, she has promised to marry. She has neglected to tell her brother of this; she fears that the Protagonist will view this omission as a shattering dishonesty and agonizes over the consequences of confession. Pressed by her lover, who has followed the troupe in order to be with her, she resolves to choose a propitious moment to admit her deception.

The duke's Major Domo arrives and announces that the duke will be pleased to have the players perform a comedy, but it must be mimed without dialogue, in deference to foreign guests the duke is expecting. He offers the duke's own musicians to accompany the mime.

An outrageous comedy of sexual infidelity is rehearsed, leaving the Protagonist in high good humor. The sister judges his mood favorable to her confession, and, telling her brother not to change his mood or costume, she goes to fetch her lover.

Meanwhile, the duke's messenger returns with a request to alter the evening's entertainment to a more serious drama, in order to accommodate the sensitivities of an unexpected guest — a bishop. The Protagonist complies, the players change their costumes and a new, tragic version of their play is rehearsed.

As the players are reaching the climax of their play the sister runs in and, noticing too late the transformation in her brother's costume and mood, joyfully confesses her deception. The Protagonist's mirror on truth is shattered; the consequences of his sister's confession surpass her worst fears.

*Der Zar lässt sich  
photographieren*

## Synopsis

Paris in the chic and hectic twenties. The Czar is visiting.

Terrorists take over the studio of Angèle, a fashionable lady photographer, and lure in the Czar to have his portrait taken. The Czar is tired of the trappings of his position, its public exposure, the attempts on his life, and the ever-present security police. He wants to enjoy Paris in privacy, as a common man might and perhaps enjoy a liaison with a chic Parisienne. So he agrees to have his photograph taken provided it be a portrait of the man and not the public functionary. It must be a private affair.

Is he aware that the luscious (imposter) Angèle means to assassinate him? The political act is played out as an intense personal confrontation, an intimate drama of perverse attraction, dark eroticism, suspense, and unspoken fear.

If the formal experiments evident in *The Protagonist* display Weill's uneasiness with the relationship of art music to the art form of opera, *The Czar* shows a different route Weill took to expand or explode the conventions of the genre. Unlike *The Protagonist*, which continues in the aesthetic tradition of music as high art, *The Czar* shifts musical terrain to encompass the tonalities of popular music of the period. This offers a sound-palette that audiences today associate with Weill's more familiar European music: the seductive melodies, acerbic harmonies, and foot-tapping rhythms derived from jazz and the dancebands. As with the roving instrumentalists in *The Protagonist*, Weill cannot settle for a stage; in *The Czar* he introduces a male chorus of ambiguous character identity to comment on the action. And here again, for the climax of the work, Weill abandons the most fundamental convention of opera: instead of singing words to the accompaniment of an orchestra, the false Angèle winds up a gramophone player and dances a tango with the Czar. This leap out of conventional bounds is also a musical-dramatic masterstroke; the two characters have exhausted the more predictable possibilities of their bizarre relationship and resort to the brutal eroticism of the tango to consummate their passion.

Musically, then, with its reference to popular idioms of the day, *The Czar* belongs very much to the twenties. The stage directions of

*The Protagonist*, however, tell us that our setting is England, in the time of Shakespeare, with traveling players rehearsing to perform for the local duke. The question arises as to whether, when twinned in a double bill with *The Czar* and performed in America in the nineties, the Shakespearian setting serves the work best and offers the most coherent evening in the theater. In the twenties, Shakespeare

was (and still is) the second most widely performed playwright in Germany. This is not the case in America, where an Elizabethan setting offers up imagery that might seem more remote. Moreover, the subject matter of *The Protagonist*, its fractured minds and ruptured relationships, the language and dramatic style of Kaiser's libretto, with its intimations of a final personal cataclysm, a sort of short-circuit of the psyche, all these carry the unmistakable stamp of German Expressionism of the twenties. The music that Weill wrote for *The Protagonist* also evolves clearly from the traditions of the art music of his day; listening to this score, the ear does not lead the eye to see a rustic English inn of the year 1600. These impressions alone might encourage a director to abandon the Shakespearian setting of the libretto in favor of the period in which the work was composed. With the work being given in tandem with the twenties jewel that is *The Czar*, the arguments for giving *The Protagonist* a setting that connects more to its companion piece and to the twentieth century seems all the more compelling.



The Czar

## *Der Protagonist: To Be or Not to Be with Der Zar?*

by Gunther Diehl

The long-awaited American pairing of *Der Protagonist* and *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*, both one-act operas set to librettos by Expressionist playwright Georg Kaiser, has historical precedent. Even after Weill's legendary success with the premiere of *Der Protagonist*, he found great resistance from his publisher and opera company directors to devote an entire evening to these highly contrasting pieces. Only a few productions of the double bill are on record: three during Weill's lifetime and one 1960 production in Frankfurt, staged in conjunction with the first German presentation of *Die sieben Todsünden*. The story of the genesis of *Der Protagonist* is interesting insofar as it documents the beginning of the artistic collaboration between a young composer and an established, successful dramatist. In an analogous fashion, the surviving correspondence between Weill and Universal Edition affords insight into Weill's developing artistic self-awareness.

### Der Protagonist

The collaboration between Weill and Kaiser began with trial and error. The two were probably introduced by Fritz Stiedry, who was a friend of Kaiser and the conductor of the premiere of Weill's *Frauentanz* in January 1924. But Kaiser and Weill may well have become acquainted as early as the beginning of the 1920s: the young, penniless music student was in search of a room (with piano), and Georg Kaiser was in the position to offer him one.<sup>1</sup> In early 1924, Dresden Opera director Fritz Busch provided the occasion for their first artistic collaboration; Busch wanted a three-act ballet-pantomime. But Weill and Kaiser abandoned their work several weeks into the project. Indeed, Kurt Weill's own explanation (often cited in this context) as quoted in his essay "Bekennnis zur Oper [II]" provides only a glossed over image of the real situation, leaving unmentioned the temporal gap between the pantomime project and the collaboration on the opera:

It had given me pleasure, and I felt honored when Georg Kaiser offered to write me the scenario for a full-scale ballet. We began working together. In ten weeks nearly three-quarters of the piece was written. The score of the prelude and the first two acts was

complete. Then came a block. We had grown out of the subject matter, the muteness of the characters bothered us, we had to burst the chains of the pantomime: it had to become opera. Georg Kaiser reverted to an earlier piece which he had at one point conceived in his mind in terms of opera, the one-act play *Der Protagonist*. Here we had what we were looking for: an unforced, fortuitous dovetailing of opera and pantomime.<sup>2</sup>

"Fortuitous," to Weill, in that Kaiser's 1920 play already included the pantomimes, which were to be set to music. Kaiser had approached his friend Stiedry to compose the pantomime music in 1920, but Stiedry expressed interest in setting the entire text.<sup>3</sup> Apparently he never completed the project.

The months between the first meeting with Kaiser and the actual beginning of work on the opera *Der Protagonist* represented an important phase in the career of the young composer: on 22 April 1924, he signed a ten-year contract with Universal Edition. His Violin Concerto, op. 12 – the only instrumental work to appear in 1924 – directly foreshadows the musical language of the opera.<sup>4</sup> Weill's correspondence indicates that he had begun working on *Der Protagonist* by late August 1924. On 27 March 1925, he reported to the

publisher Universal Edition that "I have finished the score to my opera."<sup>5</sup> Already, less than a year after signing his contract with Universal Edition (UE), the interval between the completion of the score and the premiere of the opera is marked by a decline in relations between composer and publisher. In the aforementioned postcard, Weill indicates incipient doubts about the reliability and initiative of his publisher, and he requests a personal interview with UE's director, Emil Hertzka. Weill reacts with obvious disappointment to learning of the repeated deferrals of Fritz Busch; indeed, "the most favorable prospects for acceptance" of the opera had resulted from Weill's own negotiations with the Dresden Staatsoper, although the question of casting the tenor role remained undecided.<sup>6</sup> Weill writes to UE (15 June 1925):

These negotiations, which really were as good as settled, have demonstrated anew that it is practically impossible for a composer to place an opera without some sort of help, and I'm convinced that immediate and skillful intercession on your part can still save the situation.

Three months later (26 September 1925), Weill holds his publisher responsible for the postponement of the premiere, which Weill and Busch had agreed would be 8 October 1925:



The Players in *Der Protagonist*

Gunther Diehl earned his doctorate from the University of Kiel in 1992 with a dissertation on the young Kurt Weill and his one-act opera *Der Protagonist* in which he analyses the musico-dramatic structures and their compositional form.



If the piano reduction had been ready on the day of the Dresden acceptance (something for which you had plenty of time over the summer), Taucher could have managed with ease. Since I have heretofore arranged all my performances myself and without your help, even the opera acceptance, I find it very aggravating when these external matters present additional difficulties.

Finally, Weill's first opera premiered on 27 March 1926 with great success in Dresden under musical direction of Fritz Busch and staging by Joseph Gielen. It was coupled with *Der große Krug* by Alfredo Casella. The enthusiastic reception by both audience and critics prompted a wide-spread popularity for the twenty-six-year-old Weill, and the artistic achievement marked a decisive point in his career.<sup>7</sup> The success clearly influenced Weill's determination to pursue the revitalization of opera as a compositional form.<sup>8</sup>

Even though *Der Protagonist* signified for Universal Edition the first noticeable commercial success of Weill's music, it was the composer who had to motivate his publisher to carry out seemingly the most obvious and basic promotional efforts. In his letter of 6 April 1926 he urges them to exploit the success of the production and to obtain new engagements. At the same time, he urges UE to issue a promotional flyer comprised of excerpts from the reviews and requests clarification on the manner in which royalties are to be handled. In this first letter written to UE after the premiere, Weill expresses renewed indignation over UE's inability to produce a piano score by the time of the intended premiere. "Most critics walked into the opera house without the slightest inkling of my music. The result is misunderstandings, for which your negligence alone is at fault!"

During the summer months of 1926, relations between Weill and Universal Edition moved from vexation to real crises. In a letter to his parents (22 July 1926) he writes of "open conflict" and mentions looking for an attorney. "But I'm skeptical about the outcome. I'm always the one to be betrayed." But even if the success of Weill's first opera project did his contractual status little good, it bore unmistakable significance for Weill's self-awareness as an artist. In a personal letter to Hertzka, Weill resigns himself, doubtless guided by the insight that it is useless for an individual artist attempting to develop a reputation to manage without the powerful channels of publicity open only through such a publisher.

### Der Zar

A few months after their unqualified success with *Der Protagonist*, the authorial team Weill-Kaiser recognized "the necessity of producing a work that would fill the rest of the evening in a way complementary to *Der Protagonist* but in buffo style,"<sup>9</sup> and Kaiser resurrected a scenario he had already sketched out in the summer months of 1926. Although Weill had received a commission in 1927 from the director of the festival of German chamber music at Baden-Baden – along with Darius Milhaud, Ernst Toch, and Paul Hindemith – to write a mini-opera, he knew that the Kaiser work would be inappropriate for the venue. On 23 March 1927 he wrote to UE:

[Kaiser and I] have worked out a scenario, and it is now perfectly clear that the material would be too much for the Baden-Baden framework. It will be a work of about 3/4 hour which cannot be done without a real orchestra and stage apparatus. Quite honestly: I would have been sorry to have wasted the work on the snobbishness of a music festival. It will decidedly be a work for the general public and a wonderful complement to *Protagonist*. ... [U]nder no circumstances are you to give away the new one-act work without the *Protagonist*.

Kaiser conceived the dramatic material of *Der Zar* as an opera libretto from the very beginning, the first time he had done so. Weill worked on the musical setting between May and August of 1927. On 4 August 1927, he informed his publisher that the composition was finished; he completed the orchestration by the middle of September. During these months and on into December there were various changes in title: first *Photographie und Liebe*, then *Der Zar lässt sich ...*, and finally *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren*. For a period of time in May and June 1927 Weill interrupted his work on the opera to devote himself to the composition and production of the *Mahagonny Songspiel* for the Baden-Baden Festival.

At first Weill tried to stipulate that the premiere of *Der Zar* had to be given in a double bill with *Der Protagonist*. The Berlin Städtische Oper and its director Heinz Tietjen clearly favored the newer and more farcical opera, as did the Leipzig Oper. Both companies rejected the joint production recommended by the composer. Weill wrote to his publisher in Vienna on 20 September 1927:

Tietjen wants to do the *Zar* (about which he is enthusiastic), but not the *Protagonist*, which he "doesn't find suited for Berlin at the moment." Naturally I did not retreat from my demand that for the premiere of the *Zar* the *Protagonist* has to be part of the bargain. Since Tietjen's mind seems to be made up, and he also takes the same position with Hörth (who nevertheless wanted to do both operas), I made a quick decision to go to Leipzig on Sunday (presuming your approval) and had a long discussion there with Brüggmann and later with Brecher. There, too, there was immediate enthusiasm for the *Zar*, but with Brecher there was some initial resistance to the *Protagonist*. He thought that the contrast between an older classical work and the *Zar* might be very effective, and he went so far as to offer a full evening's royalties for the *Zar* alone. I emphasized, however, that it wasn't a question of royalties, but rather a question of documenting from the outset the complementary nature of the two works.

After intensive negotiations between October 1927 and January 1928, Weill finally agreed to a production of *Der Zar* by the Leipzig Oper, but coupled with Nicola Spinelli's *A basso porto*. Opening night occurred on 18 February 1928 at the Neues Theater. Gustav Brecher conducted and Walter Brüggmann directed. This premiere lies precisely between the premieres of two of the most famous Weill-Brecht collaborations: *Mahagonny Songspiel* and *Die Dreigroschenoper*. These chronological facts as well as the genesis of *Der Zar* document

Weill's artistic cooperation with Georg Kaiser as pre-dating his collaboration with Brecht and, further, that his work with Kaiser and Brecht intermingled. *Der Zar* was an immediate success; by 1931 it enjoyed productions in at least 35 German cities.



The Protagonist

### The Double Bill

Kurt Weill finally saw his hopes for a double bill fulfilled on 4 April 1928, when *Der Protagonist* and *Der Zar* were performed together for the first time at the Landestheater Altenburg. That the joint production did not happen right away and indeed occurred only as the exception to the rule has to be understood in the context of the actual successes of the so-called "Zeitoper" of the day. From the point of view of both the subject matter and its musical language, a one-acter such as *Der Protagonist* was bound to encounter skepticism on the part of most directors of the day. In a note written just a few months ago to the present author, Maestro Maurice Abravanel, the conductor of the Altenburg production, made remarks with regard to *Der Protagonist*:

For Altenburg the score was impossibly modern. Rudolf Otto Hartmann, later the Munich intendant, staged it very simply and effectively and was with me 100%.... The opening pages and some other passages of the score were in those days beyond the ability of my players; I was very upset, to which Weill said: "In this kind of music if I get 80% right, I am very happy. You got more than 90% right — this is absolutely marvelous...." Hartmann decided that if any protest came from the audience, he would immediately have the lights up in the auditorium (which is supposed to shock the audience into silence). Thank God, that was not needed. We had small audiences but both *Protagonist* and *Zar* in Gera and Altenburg were successful, with excellent reviews in Berlin and Vienna.

The achievement of the Altenburg-Gera production takes on added meaning in the light of this background. A few days after the

premiere, in a letter to the director published in the daily paper, Kurt Weill expressed his gratitude for the "splendid production" of the two operas: "I am delighted to have experienced this production, which has acquired special significance for me as the first joint production of the two works."<sup>10</sup> After Altenburg-Gera, the double bill appeared only twice again in Weill's lifetime: in June 1928 at Frankfurt and in October 1928 at the Berlin Städtische Oper.

### Epilogue

Weill and Kaiser would collaborate on only one more major work — *Der Silbersee* in 1932-33 — although after moving to the United States Weill often considered undertaking musical treatments of other Kaiser works. In two undated letters from Kaiser to Weill from the early 1930s the special intensity of their personal relationship becomes clear (something which goes beyond the concrete parameters of the initial collaboration):

Kurt — since it was your birthday last Sunday we talked a lot about you. Yes, we're unusually faithful contemporaries. In the meantime your long letter to Billa arrived — it stirred up the loveliest memories. Kurt Weill is a topic that never wears out around this house.

[L]ast night I dreamed of you: you came out to Grünheide — and everything was the way it had been in the good old days. Today at the midday meal I read about the approaching production of *The Seven* (ah, but there are so many more) *Deadly Sins*. Why didn't you invite me? Why not? Why not? [...] Don't forget to write to me, wherever you are. I wish I could soon be with you again.<sup>11</sup>

Translated by Peggy Meyer Sherry

### Alfred Einstein on *Protagonist* and *Zar*

*With so much attention devoted in this issue to Protagonist and Zar, this excerpt from Alfred Einstein's review of the 1928 Berlin Städtische Oper production cannot be ignored (Berliner Tageblatt, 15 October 1928):*

There is ambiguity in Weill's two one-act operas, but it is easily solved. It lies in the question of why there is so little music in both of these works. There are people who believe that a lack of music is a path toward a new operatic form (even Gluck held a similar opinion at one time). This opinion was disputed by Kurt Weill who compared the two earlier works, *Der Protagonist* in 1925 and *Der Zar lässt sich photographieren* in 1927, with *Die Dreigroschenoper* in 1928. One can achieve bliss in a hundred ways of melodic expression, but in some form one has to be a melody writer. In the barrel organ tune of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, as well as in the brief fervent prayer of Captain Macheath, who is awaiting execution by hanging, there is imminently more than in both these operas put together.

<sup>1</sup> This statement is opposed to the position of those who identify Fritz Busch as the mediator of this artistic contact and date the first encounter with the year 1923-24.

<sup>2</sup> *Blätter der Staatoper Dresden*, 1925-26 season, Nr. 13, 1 April 1926, p. 97-99. Quoted from: Kurt Weill, *Kurt Weill: Musik und Theater: Gesammelte Schriften*, Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera, eds., Berlin/DDR: Henschel, 1990, pp. 33-34. Translated by Stephen Hinton.

<sup>3</sup> Kaiser wrote to his wife Margarethe on 14 September 1920: "Stiedry has begun the composition for *Der Protagonist* — he hopes to set the entire one-acter to music. According to what I heard of it yesterday I have faith in his great abilities. Whether he will complete the project is another question." (Gesa M. Valk, "Georg Kaiser in Sachen Georg Kaiser," *Briefe 1916-1933*, Leipzig: G. Kiepenheuer, 1989, letter no. 153, p. 123)

<sup>4</sup> A comparable interpretation applies to the music of the partly defunct song cycle *Stundenbuch*, op. 13, for baritone and orchestra, based on texts by Rainer Maria Rilke.

<sup>5</sup> All correspondence between Weill and Universal Edition is reprinted with the consent of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music and Universal Edition. Collection: Weill-Lenya Research Center, Series 41. Translations by Christopher Hailey.

<sup>6</sup> Curt Taucher, who eventually sang the part in the premiere, is first mentioned by Weill in a letter of 22 August 1925.

<sup>7</sup> After the series of the first productions in March and April of 1926 there were admittedly only two other productions in the 1926-27 season, and those were in Erfurt and Nürnberg.

<sup>8</sup> An evaluation of the surviving reviews for the Dresden premiere (about 20 texts) reveals the impact which the music and the staging must have had. They especially emphasize the musico-dramatic talent of Kurt Weill and his skill with the orchestra. Although he was no doubt imbued with respect for the appeal of opera composition from his tutelage with Ferruccio Busoni for three years, until this time he was known to a rather narrow circle of Berlin audiences and primarily for his instrumental work.

<sup>9</sup> *Leipziger Bühnenblätter*, 1927-28 season, Nr. 14, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> *Altenburger Zeitung*, 11 April 1928: The musical direction of the evening lay in the hands of the young director Maurice de Abravanel, whose "amazing powers of empathy" with the imaginative world of the works is singled out by Weill in his letter.

<sup>11</sup> The originals of these letters are to be found in the Yale University Music Library.