

# Lost in the Stars: Style or Substance?

## A Selection of Writings by Olin Downes, Howard Taubman, Kurt Weill, and Harold Clurman

Forty-five years ago, on 30 October, *Lost in the Stars* opened to decidedly mixed reviews. The following articles by noted critics Howard Taubman and Harold Clurman are examples of the controversial reception history that surrounded Weill's last completed stage work, and the topics debated by the two critics continue to be central to the evaluation of Weill's approach to his work in America. Taubman attempts in his article to define the dramatic function of music in theater by identifying its role in creating color and atmosphere, characterization, and action. He draws examples in support of his arguments from the theater music of his time and from a few operatic warhorses. Excerpted here are the portions of the article

that compare *Lost in the Stars* with Marc Blitzstein's *Regina*. Perhaps the critical debate about *Lost in the Stars* culminates with Clurman's article, which, appearing a few weeks after Taubman's article, was also the first full retrospective analysis of Weill's American career. Many of the modernist premises expressed by Clurman are now being questioned and re-examined. Also interesting here is the debut of his often-quoted Hottentot metaphor. Clurman's essay is followed (on p.20) by an unfinished draft of a response that Weill intended to submit to the *Saturday Review*. Presented within the context of two letters between Olin Downes and Weill, these writings are reprinted to stimulate further discussion.

### Letter: Olin Downes to Kurt Weill, 9 December 1949<sup>1</sup>

Olin Downes was music critic for the *New York Times* from 1924-55. He and Weill began a friendly relationship in 1938, when Downes served as the music director for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Downes later commissioned Weill, in 1945, to write the radio opera *Down in the Valley* for a series to be produced by him and Charles MacArthur; the series failed to attract financial backing and was abandoned.

I have been meaning for many days to write and tell you what a pleasant time we had at dinner the other Sunday night, and also how interested I was in your show. In many respects I think it is the best thing you have done yet for the theater. It has a remarkable technique, too. I have reservations that evidently the audience has not, concerning the Broadway touches of the show. I think Mamoulian's settings were very effective, also if somewhat Broadwayish. I suppose they would have to be Broadwayish to get over at all.

And I think Anderson has done a swell job on your libretto. No doubt a Broadway spectacle simply has to have numbers in the form of song hits, and that kind of formalism disturbs me a little bit, but I suppose I am more than a purist in having wished that the Negro chorus didn't look so much like the well-off American Negro, instead of seeing a group that was not quite so effectively grouped and attired and all that. The orchestration I thought simply amazing, and the first part, musically speaking, the strongest.

In fact I hope to make an opportunity to see the whole thing again.

I have been going to write about it for a couple of weeks, and now just as I had the decks cleared for a Sunday observation on the subject of your work, and Blitzstein's mishandling of *The Little Foxes*, which I think awfully bad and dramatically false, I find that Taubman has been asked to write an article on New York's musical theater, and I didn't want to either conflict or double on the observations that he might be making in that article about these shows. There will probably still be a good latitude on that subject, and more critical as a musical survey than the factual recital of the state of our Broadway musical theater. Now that will have to come later if it comes appropriately this season, as I think it will.

It's awfully interesting to me to see your hand get firmer with each thing you are doing, and your new treatments and forms and new technical resources. It is wonderful that you've got such an opera over on the stage. This work, and the *Street Scene*, will be among the most significant steps which have so far been taken both to modernize and to popularize the operatic principle, and say something worthwhile in the artistic sense. But I am still waiting for the day when you get exactly the subject which you can treat without the faintest consideration of public taste or expediency of any sort, while in the meantime you are constantly developing a reputation for making it more and more possible for you to do exactly what you want to do ultimately in the music field.

## Good Opera Need Not Be Grand Opera (Excerpts)

by Howard Taubman

Reprinted from the *New York Times*, Magazine Section, 11 December 1949, pp. 14-15, 44-45. Howard Taubman was music editor at the *New York Times* (a position he held from 1935-55, except for a one-and-a-half-year leave during the war) when his Sunday Magazine feature appeared. He succeeded Downes as music critic (1955-60) and went on to become theater critic (1960-65).

An ancient truth, that music can be a powerful ally of the living theater, has been rediscovered on Broadway in recent years. The result has been beyond any optimist's expectations. Not only is the musical theater being revitalized, but in its daring and originality it is becoming one of the most adventurous forces in America's cultural scheme.

All this has not happened overnight, and not every bold undertaking has been successful or even worthy of success. But there has been a growing band of brave spirits, creators, producers, and performers who have been willing to take a chance on something different from the threadbare formula of preposterous plot, unrelated tunes, a dash of comedy, and girls, girls, girls.



Left: Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg, Summer 1932.

Right: Howard Taubman



Look at the productions, beginning with *Oklahoma!*, that have attempted something novel on Broadway: *Carousel*, *Allegro*, *Street Scene*, *Carmen Jones*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Brigadoon*, *The Medium*, *Magdalena*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *South Pacific*, and *The Rape of Lucretia*. And the new season's entries thus far have been *Lost in the Stars* and *Regina*. Every one of these productions, whether it has been smash hit, *succès d'estime*, or flop, has had this in common: it has sought to fuse music and action into an integrated stage work.

When the fusion is right everybody is happy. Audiences fill the theaters and enjoy enchanted evenings, without worrying whether the form is experimental or whether it should not have a highbrow name. When it does not come off, the querulous and cynical want to know why good plays have to be spoiled by elaborate music.

... The jobs music may do in the theater may be classified roughly into three groups: (1) color and atmosphere, (2) characterization, (3) action. It can accomplish these tasks one at a time and it may do two or three of them at once. However, the use of music in itself will not insure that the job will be done well. Tasteless music in the right place will prove as futile as well designed music in the wrong place. You must have the right kind of music in the right time at the right place in the right quantities. In short, the composer must have talent and knowledge of the theater. Music does not function with mirrors.

... In *Regina* Marc Blitzstein has employed music to do valuable things that Lillian Hellman's original play, *The Little Foxes*, did not do. Through his gay music for the jazz-playing servants and

through his angularly formal dances for the party, he has broadened the background, he has brought the atmosphere of the outside world into contrast with the inbred tensions of the Hubbards. It seems to me he has intensified the sinister mood of the central theme by setting it against an atmosphere that is more wholesome.

I do not mean to suggest that *Regina* is an improvement on *The Little Foxes*, nor do I wish to take issue with those who have contended that *Regina* is a dilution of *The Little Foxes*. It seems to me that *Regina* is an independent theater piece and should stand or fall on its own qualities which, in my opinion, add up to exciting musical theater.

If you were going to compare works for the musical theater with their originals you would have to call *Lost in the Stars* a disappointment. However you judge the piece, Kurt Weill's music strikes me, on the whole, as too commonplace to evoke the atmosphere of South Africa and the mood of its people, white and black. The number that brings to life that atmosphere most effectively is the song called "Cry, the Beloved Country," in which the Negro chorus sings of the tragic fate of the land and its people as the old preacher, Stephen Kumalo, bids good-by to his condemned son.

... In *Regina* Mr. Blitzstein probes deeply at moments. Birdie, unhappy wife of one of the despicable Hubbards, has two extended songs in which her whole life, with its youthful innocence and eventual sufferings, is illuminated with comparison. At the very end Alexandra, Regina's daughter, stands up to her mother in a passage that gives the work a soaring peroration of healing humanity. ... In *Regina* there is a moment when Regina and her desperately sick husband, whom she has inveigled into coming home from the hospital, confront each other alone for the first time. With a few rending measures of the percussion Mr. Blitzstein summons up the bitterness and distrust of these two better than any action could.

... Music is used advantageously in *Lost in the Stars* to bind together the short, scrappy scenes of the old preacher's search for his son.

... Music can go wrong in this field, both in opera and in the Broadway musical theater. One of the weakest spots in *Regina* is the place where Ben Hubbard, outwitted by his sister, Regina, sings an innocuous trifle about her being "a greedy girl"; this number does violence to the characterization. In *Lost in the Stars* the first act ends with a song of the same name, sung by the old preacher. This song is meant, I take it, to sum up a simple and noble human being in a crucial moment of confusion and heart-break. I found it embarrassing; it seemed to me the maudlin, torchy kind of thing that Tin Pan Alley grinds out by the yard. I thought it demeaned the old preacher, not revealed him.



**Letter: Kurt Weill to Olin Downes, 14 November [sic, i.e. December] 1949<sup>2</sup>**

Thank you very much for your kind letter. I am more than happy that you liked *Lost in the Stars*, because I know that you have always been very honest with me. Of course, I was especially glad to find that you too consider this score another important step towards an American musical theater. That is what I hoped it would be and what I find it to be every time I see what a deep effect it has on the audiences.

In this connection I was greatly interested in what you have to say about the formality of the song-form, because you have hit here on one of the basic problems of our musical theater. It must be somewhat surprising indeed to find a serious subject treated in a form which (in this country at least) has been used so far only for a lighter form of entertainment. But that was exactly the nature of my experiment — to do a “musical tragedy” for the American theater so that the typical American audience (not a specialized audience) can accept it; and the real success of the piece to me is the fact that the audience did accept it without hesitation, that they accepted a lot of very serious, tragic, quite un-Broadway-ish music of operatic dimensions, together with some songs written in a more familiar style. Personally I don't feel that this represents a compromise because it seems to me that the American popular song, growing out of

the American folk-music, is the basis of an American musical theater (just as the Italian song was the basis of Italian opera), and that in this early state of the development, and considering the audiences we are writing for, it is quite legitimate to use the form of the popular song and gradually fill it with new musical content. But I do agree with you that this infiltration of song in the musical theater will gradually become more refined and more removed from its origins. (I am quite sure, by the way, that *Regina* could have been a better success if Blitzstein's attempts at writing songs would have been more successful.) I hope we'll have a chance to discuss all this.

Mr. Taubman's article in the magazine section could have been an important contribution to one of the most important aspects of American musical life. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a rather superficial and pointless treatment of a subject which, I think, deserves better consideration. By quoting indiscriminately a lot of musical shows of different types (among them a typical old-fashioned musical comedy) under the headline of “Broadway-Opera,” he gives a pretty confused and confusing picture of what we are trying to do. The one point which he makes pretty clearly is that he liked *Regina* as much as he disliked *Lost in the Stars* — which is alright with me since everybody is entitled to his own opinion (although I must confess I am mighty glad that he is in a pretty isolated position so far as *Lost in the Stars* is concerned).

### **Lost in the Stars of Broadway by Harold Clurman**

Reprinted from *The Saturday Review of Literature* (31 December 1949): 43-4. A reprint appeared recently in *The Collected Works of Harold Clurman: Six Decades of Commentary on Theatre, Dance, Music, Film, Arts and Letters*, edited by Majorie Loggia and Glenn Young (New York: Applause Books, 1994, pp. 224-7). Harold Clurman founded the Group Theatre with Cheryl Crawford, and it was his idea that Paul Green collaborate on *Johnny Johnson* with Weill, whose music he knew from *Die Dreigroschenoper*. His book *The Fervent Years* chronicles the first decade of the Group Theatre and is viewed as an important contribution to the social history of the 1930s. He served as drama critic for the *Nation* for thirty years, and his writings appeared in over thirty other publications, including *Harper's*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Times*.

Kurt Weill's score for the “musical tragedy” which Maxwell Anderson has made from the material of Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* is highly satisfactory to the majority of theatergoers now pouring into the New York theater where it is currently being shown. It is an effective score. This means that it makes Maxwell Anderson's words go down easily. It helps the play's sad tale seem elevating as well as touching. Musically speaking, *Lost in the Stars* is a safe security.

Under the circumstances, it seems almost churlish to question if the songs which compose this solid score are also good music. This is particularly true since the term “good music” is almost impossible to define. The *Lost in the Stars* score is certainly good in that it performs its theatrical function. To those who have seen the play and enjoyed it, the excellent recordings Decca has made of its songs will recall the pleasure of the performance.

The fact that the music is not particularly original — that it is, indeed, full of obvious reminiscence — is not in itself as damaging as certain connoisseurs would have us believe; it is undesirable for a theater score to be startlingly original. What is wanted in the theater is a score with a novel twist on the thrice familiar.

Two things have always characterized the best of Kurt Weill's music. He had the faculty of writing scores, every part of which might be proved to lack any striking novelty, but which nevertheless were original in the sense of being *individual*, taken as a whole. The second characteristic of a Weill score was that each section — even the shortest fragment intended to illustrate the briefest bit of action — was written so that it seemed to have the completeness of a little music drama, a thing in itself with a rounded scenic feeling.

The second of these features is still very much one of the assets of Weill's music. No Weill score can be wholly inadequate. On the contrary, it may be safely said that no Weill score can fail to offer a certain degree of satisfaction when the other factors are acceptable. This dependability is an attribute of Weill's unerring sense of the theater.

But we must come back to the question of the music as music. Though I am vaguely gratified as I listen to *Lost in the Stars*, at no time does the music penetrate my consciousness as a living element. It does not stick. It does not add any new quality of feeling to my being. It does not enlarge my awareness.

An artist friend of mine once told me that in judging new paintings he had one infallible criterion by which he could determine their aliveness: he asked himself whether the paintings

helped him see the world differently, whether they had in any way transfigured his vision. Is it not our common experience, when we are under the sway of a real creation, that we begin to see and feel in its vein? The world takes on Rembrandt shadows after we have seen an exhibition of his work. Even the anti-Wagnerites in the controversial period of that German composer's day had to admit that it was no longer possible to hear and feel except as people who had dwelled in the Wagner world.

By such a test – and I am convinced that it is valid – the score of *Lost in the Stars* is not good music. It creates no world of its own. It is synthetic, not simply because it has been made of borrowed materials – this is true to some extent of all art – but because its materials have not been informed with a new life. This music is pleasant in general, and true art – even the most abstract – is specific. It always reveals its own inalienable soul.

This brings us to the question of Kurt Weill's career. For, obviously, there would be little point to an extended discussion of the present score were it not the work of one of the most gifted and cultivated musicians writing for our theater. We cannot forget that Kurt Weill composed *The Threepenny Opera*.

It is not my intention to indulge in that other form of critical sadism, which consists of hanging an artist on the hook of his most notable work. I mention Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, which, after all, is less known in this country than some of Weill's more recent scores, because it marks a turning point in a career that had an important preceding history as well as a significant later one.

As a student of the great pianist-composer Busoni, Weill began his career as a composer of what many would call highbrow music, that is, music which, to say the least, was not easy. Two factors altered Weill's musical path. He was temperamentally a composer who preferred to write to order for specific occasions (generally speaking, like Mozart) rather than one, like Beethoven, whose work more often than not seemed to be generated by a spontaneous, inner urge. We must also remember that the early Twenties, the point at which Weill's career began, was a period when even the most serious composers turned toward the theater as a way of reaching a larger and more alert public than was to be found in the perennially conservative concert halls.

This impulse might lead a French composer of the time to Diaghilev's fashionable Ballet Russe or a German to slightly Dadaistic, occasionally leftist, but certainly unorthodox experimental groups, which combined something of the qualities of the political forum, the artistic cabaret, and eccentric popular tribunes. In such places music could overcome the stuffiness and turgidity or the pained ineffability with which, after Wagner, music became burdened. Music was no longer to be a refuge for solid citizens of slow digestion or for old ladies of both sexes too timorous to face a topsy-turvy world. Music was to go into the marketplace – laugh, scream, threaten, flatter, amuse, jolt, teach the teeming populace.

Kurt Weill, possessing a keen sense of popular trends, joined in this movement. His associates were lively insurgents among young stage directors and scene designers as well as the best young poet in Germany, Bertolt Brecht. Together they produced a series of tragic shockers or satiric operas bitterly reflecting the diseased society they lived in. Not all these people agreed exactly as to what they were for; they all knew what they were against. It gave them all some sort of emotional line or direction, without which it is extremely difficult for an artist to grow. Out of this movement came *The Threepenny Opera*.

It is too little to say that the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera* was a masterpiece of its time. When one hears the score today, it not only lives again with all its old charm, but it takes on added grace through the flatness, the lack of a particular color, which is the dominant characteristic of the present moment. One is not only delighted by the wit of the Weill score – not to mention the brilliant lyrics – but captivated by its sweet raffishness, its poisonously warm abandon, its drugged back-alley romanticism, its occasional burst of buoyant populism and street-corner bravery. This funda-

mentally popular score is truly good music. It had an enormous influence in Europe, and in this country, on such composers as Marc Blitzstein.

When Hitler made it impossible for Weill to live in Germany, he migrated to France and then to England. Weill's capacity for change and adaptation evinced in his transfer from the near-Schoenbergian mode of his first works to the satirical frivolity of *The Threepenny Opera* displayed itself clearly in his minor essays on the London and Parisian stages. Weill tried hard to be ultra-English and typically Parisian. I have no doubt that had he tried longer he would have succeeded.

When Weill came to this country in 1936 [*sic*] to provide and supervise the score of the Werfel-Reinhardt-Norman Bel Geddes *Eternal Road*, he was little known except by musicians who had been to Berlin and by adventurous spirits who enjoyed picking up exotic flowers in odd byways of the entertainment world or on imported records. Among these were the members of the Group Theatre, and though *The Threepenny Opera* had failed on Broadway (1933) – due to inadequate production, insufficient publicity, and bad times – the Group Theatre commissioned Weill to write *Johnny Johnson* with Paul Green.

*Johnny Johnson* was not a success – although it had its admirers. Only one or two of the critics remarked on the original quality of the score, in which Weill managed to combine elements of a peculiarly sensuous and melancholy nature with typically American musical folklore materials – a strange but affecting mixture, superior, in my opinion, to most of what Weill has subsequently written.

Weill is so much the adaptable artist – he is characteristically twentieth century in this respect – that if he were forced to live among Hottentots he would in the shortest possible span of time become the leading Hottentot composer. Broadway isn't altogether Hottentot, but Weill's career since *Johnny Johnson*, despite excellent work now and again – always on a high level of craftsmanship – has been an adaptation toward an increasingly facile, I might say, artistically nondescript goal. The result has been – not unnaturally – an ever more conventional musicality, a decline in real quality, and an increase in journalistic praise as well as box office receipts.

The score for *Lady in the Dark* was *Threepenny Opera* diluted with Noel Coward and Cole Porter, but it was cleverly suave and fashionable, cutely tough, glamorous music for a cocktail verandah world at 10:00 P.M. I am unfamiliar with the score of *One Touch of Venus*, but no one has recommended it to me. *Love Life* last year had its catchy moments ("Green Up Time") but was hardly as distinguished as the best of *Knickerbocker Holiday* – where Weill tended to mark time by borrowing too much from himself, always a symptom of trouble. *Street Scene* was a smooth amalgam of Puccini, jazz, and Viennese operetta for the purpose of putting over the opera form among those prejudiced against it. Now we have *Lost in the Stars*, which is slickly impressive and as basically void as the architecture of our giant movie emporia.

There is nothing wrong in adapting oneself to a new environment, but one must adapt oneself upward rather than downward, that is, to the more challenging and difficult as well as to the simpler and safer. Failing, at least, an occasional effort in the direction of the untried, the hazardous, and possibly even the unpopular, a composer as talented as Weill may find there are forms of liquidation that a composer may suffer other than those of the concentration camps. To develop real roots in a chaos such as ours today, an artist must shape some definite ideal for himself of the kind of world toward which he can aspire.

*For Weill's unfinished draft of a response to Clurman, see page 20.*



## [Notes for a response to Harold Clurman]

by Kurt Weill<sup>3</sup>

It always seemed to me one of the more commendable customs of our time that a man should not talk back to his critic. If I don't adhere to this rule in the case of Harold Clurman's article "Lost in the Stars of Broadway," it is because it seems to me that this article was not written as a criticism of my music (since Clurman certainly is not a music critic), but as well-meant advice from an old friend who is worried about the way things are going with me. It might have been fairer to me, and (since I don't consider my "case" as one of public interest) to the readers of SRL, if he would have given me his advice in private instead of in public where it looks much more like an attack than I am sure it was meant to be, coming from an old friend. But since this is the forum he has chosen, and I want to say a few things in reply, I have to tax some more of the patience of the readers.

... It seems to be a good thing, at certain moments in our lives, to stop and look as objectively as possible at our own work, and to check the measure of achievements with our original intentions and early dreams. In my own career such a moment of contemplation seems to have arrived when *Lost in the Stars* opened at the Music Box early in November, because this musical drama represents to me the furthest advance in a direction which I had laid down for myself in the early years of my life as a composer.

... The new musical theater which is growing in this country, partly out of the Broadway theater, partly from the steadily expanding theatrical life in schools and universities, seems to have created a certain amount of confusion as to its origin and its purpose. This confusion originates mostly in certain musical circles which, as usual, are so far removed from the living theater that they have little understanding for a movement which has its roots more in theatrical than in musical developments. This is nothing new. The biographies of men of the great theater companies are full of incidents which show the contempt of contemporary musicians for the popularity of their music. When I started writing music in Europe in the early twenties, Verdi was looked upon as a writer of "circus music" and *Carmen* was generally considered an "operetta" in musical circles. A few years later, Franz Werfel's famous revival of *La forza del destino* suddenly turned the tables; we began to study Verdi's scores and discovered behind those popular melodies the emotional depth and the textural brilliance of a great composer.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Weill-Lenya Papers, Yale University Music Library.

<sup>2</sup>Olin Downes Collection at the Hargreave Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.

<sup>3</sup>The first two paragraphs of these notes were apparently typed by Weill. The third is a transcription from pencilled notes. A fourth paragraph, largely illegible, is omitted.

## Papageno in Potsdam: Kurt Weill's Parody of Prussian Militarism

by Anton Heuff

After removing "Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen" from the Berliner Requiem, Weill rescued it from oblivion by publishing it in a version for voice and piano in his 1929 Song-Album (UE 9787) and also by arranging it for male chorus for publication in Universal Edition's *Die rote Reihe* series. Brecht's 1927 text is a direct and hard-hitting anti-militarist manifesto, worlds apart from the expressionist poems which form the main body of the Requiem. In setting the text for the voice and piano version, Weill showed his intimate knowledge of the Prussian capital and its traditions, notably by adding a handful of notes which could be mistaken (especially by non-Germans) for an out-of-place quotation from *Die Zauberflöte*. Finally in 1987, almost sixty years after Weill composed "Zu Potsdam," the actual source from which he drew these notes – the carillon of the Garnisonskirche in Potsdam – could be heard again.

"Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen" ("At Potsdam under the Oak Trees") depicts a pacifist demonstration in which a coffin is taken through the streets. A banner on the coffin reads: "This is every soldier's home." The police, of course, end this procession with their usual act of violence. The solemn tone of Weill's composition turns to ironic gayness as the police arrive on the scene, and a lively countermelody is heard as an added accent. Obviously this countermelody is a quotation, but what has it to do with Potsdam, or even militarism?

For the answer, credit must go to the great German actress and singer Gisela May, who used to enlighten her audience about its source. The quotation is taken from the old German song "Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit" ("Be Always True and Honorable"). For almost two centuries its melody was heard from the carillon of the Garnisonskirche, the church belonging to the Potsdam garrison. With "Üb immer" played at the half hour and "Praise the Lord" at the hour, the people of Potsdam – king, military, and civilians alike – were constantly reminded of their responsibility to God and their fellow citizens. So, history confirms that Weill hit the mark: those few notes quoted from the carillon of the Garnisonskirche are Prussia.

The Potsdam that Brecht and Weill depicted in their song was the capital from which the Hohenzollern kings had ruled Prussia (and eventually the German Reich) for 278 years. Hitler, too, knew where to go when on 21 March 1933 (the "Day of Potsdam") he wedded Nazi ideology with German military tradition. The place of this unholy ceremony was no other than the Garnisonskirche. Soon thereafter, minister of propaganda Goebbels ordered "Üb immer" to be used as a pause signal on the radio. (For Weill, by the way, the Day of Potsdam was a signal to take to heart warnings that his life was in danger; he left Germany on that day.)

Potsdam had to pay heavily for its military-dominated past when British bombers raided the historic inner city only days before the collapse of the Third Reich. One of the victims of this senseless act of revenge was the fine baroque Garnisonskirche, built in 1735, the symbol of Prussian militarism. Its carillon silenced, the steeple stood in ruin for more than two decades until East Germany's leaders had it demolished in 1968, reportedly to wipe out the reminder of old Prussia.

*Anton Heuff is on the editorial staff of Algemeen Dagblad, a daily published in Rotterdam.*



Die Garisonskirche in Postdam,  
1885. Photo: F. Albert Schwartz

Heim! So zo-gen sie durch Pots-dam für den

Mann am Chemin des Darnes, da kam die grü-ne

Po-li-zei und hau-te sie zu-samm.

### Excerpt from "Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen."

Music by Kurt Weill. Lyrics by Bertolt Brecht. Copyright 1929 Universal Edition. Copyright renewed. Used by permission of European American Music Corporation.

Potsdam earned its place in recent history by hosting the 1945 conference where the Allied leaders met to divide Europe. The leaders decided to isolate West Germany from Prussia and give Potsdam to communist East Germany. But traditions persevered, and Potsdam, a city of barracks, naturally became the military headquarters of the USSR.

Do Potsdam and Prussia still evoke the traditions of the past? No doubt unification has encouraged a suspicious kind of nostalgia. For instance, the coffins of the Hohenzollern kings, which were evacuated during the war from the crypt in the Garnisonskirche, are back. And the carillon has returned to Potsdam.

In 1984, West German paratrooper commander Max Klaar voiced his desires to have a replica cast of the lost carillon, claiming that the message of "Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit" had lost none of its urgency. On 17 June 1987, the song was heard again when the forty newly cast bells were inaugurated at the Iserlohn air force base. After unification, the bells were moved to Potsdam, where they are mounted in a steel frame on Yorckstrasse, near the site of the former Garnisonskirche.

Today, anyone can take the Berlin S-Bahn to see Potsdam, now the capital of the state of Brandenburg. Listening to the carillon ring out its "Praise the Lord" and "Üb immer," one can understand why these songs are referred to as "chorales" in Potsdam; the sound is very solemn indeed. Still, the song that Weill quoted is the worldly member of the pair, following the tradition in the Netherlands (where most of the original bells were cast) that calls for a religious tune to sound at the hour and a secular one at the half hour.

Of course Weill also knew the original source of the tune for "Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit": it is Papageno's aria "Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen" from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. When the newly crowned Frederick William III had to decide in 1797 which songs should be played on the carillon, he simply chose one of the most popular opera arias of his day. No connection with Prussian virtues whatsoever! The admonitory words by the poet Ludwig Hölty (1748-1776) are a later addition.

Although the 1929 Song-Album in which Weill's quotation originally appeared has been out of print for decades, this voice and piano version was reprinted in *Das große Brecht Liederbuch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 118), a collection edited by Fritz Hennenberg, who identifies the quote in his annotations (p. 402). This version has not been recorded, but Weill's quotation has been incorporated into at least three recorded arrangements of the song. Gisela May presents an arrangement for small ensemble by Henry Krtschil, which hammers out the countermelody on a glockenspiel quite nicely, like a modern-day Papageno (Capriccio 10 180). On the other hand, Dagmar Krause's arranger, Jason Osborn, creates a military atmosphere by using the high woodwinds for the quotation (Hannibal HNBL 1317), a solution gratefully imitated by Ute Lemper and her arranger on Decca (NL 425 204-2). Walter Goehr also used the quotation in his two 1960 arrangements of the song: one for Lenya (barely audible on a pirated Rococo recording), and the other for male chorus and orchestra.

#### NOTES

A number of publications about Prussia and its capital appeared when Potsdam celebrated its millenary in 1993. *Der Spiegel's* special issue "Preussenstadt Potsdam" and *Geo* (issue 4, 1993) provided the historical background for this article. Werner Schwipps's 130-page *Die Königliche Hof- und Garnisonskirche zu Potsdam* (Berlin: Arani-Verlag, 1991) contains detailed information about the church and its carillon.

## "Ich sitze da un' esse Klops": Traditional or Modern?

by Joachim Lucchesi

David Drew notes in *Kurt Weill: A Handbook* (p. 161) that Weill's 1925 song "Ich sitze da un' esse Klops" sets a *traditional* Berlin text. Earlier this year I discovered two 1925 publications of this poem that may eventually lead us to a different conclusion.

The poem, entitled "Icke," appears in *Europa Almanach 1925: Malerie, Literatur, Musik, Architektur, Plastik, Bühne, Film, Mode* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag). Introduced by an editorial note – "Jemand fand in Berlin ein Blatt Papier, auf dem dieses mit Jean de Bourgois unterzeichnete Gedicht stand" ("Someone in Berlin found a sheet of paper bearing this poem signed by Jean de Bourgois") – the poem appears between contributions by Carl Einstein and André Gide. I believe the author's name to be a pseudonym.

Kurt Tucholsky, who himself wrote poetry in Berlin dialect, was so impressed by this little poem that he reprinted it in full in his review of the *Almanach* which appeared in *Die Weltbühne* 15, 1925.

I discussed the matter with Dr. Lukas Richter, a well-known specialist of Berlin *Gassenhauer*. Dr. Richter is of the opinion that the text is modern and not from the 19th-century (à la Adolf Bläßbrenner). I share his view, mainly because the tone seems very modern and surrealistic.

One might easily deduce that Weill first saw the poem in either the *Europa Almanach* or *Die Weltbühne*. The character of the text and its appearance in the *Europa Almanach 1925* supports the conclusion that the poem is modern rather than traditional.



*Jemand fand in Berlin ein Blatt Papier, auf dem dieses mit Jean de Bourgois unterzeichnete Gedicht stand:*

**Icke**  
**Ich sitze da un' esse Klops.**  
**Uff eemal klopp's.**  
**Ich kieke, staune, wundre mir,**  
**Uff eemal jeht se uff, de Tür.**  
**Nanu denk' ick, ick denk' nanu,**  
**Jetz is se uff, erscht war se zu?**  
**Un ick jeh raus un blicke**  
**Un wer steht draußen? – Icke!**





## “J’aime tes grands yeux”: Homage to Lys Gauty

by Pascal Huynh

Lys Gauty died shortly after the new year in Monaco, where she lived for many years in obscurity. As one of the great names of French chanson and classical art song – along with Florelle, Marianne Oswald, and Madeleine Grey of the same era – Lys Gauty introduced the name of Kurt Weill into the tradition of French chanson in 1933. The name has endured. When Greco and Sauvage took up the torch at the beginning of the 1950s, they could not forget the work of their predecessors.

“Le Chaland qui passe,” “Le moulin qui jase,” “A Paris dans chaque faubourg”: the great songs of Lys Gauty’s recitals reflect best the spirit of the period between the wars, a certain joie de vivre, a nonchalance. The songs of Weill enriched her repertoire and expanded her popularity. Her receipt of the Grand Prix du Disque in 1933 for a recording of songs from *L’Opéra de quat’sous* established a little more firmly Weill’s reputation in France. Weill’s French publisher, Heugel, asked him to write a song for her, to be published by its popular-music imprint, Editions Coda. Weill wrote to Universal Edition on May 5 1934:

At the moment I have brought off some small success – limited in volume but which may have important repercussions – with a song “Complainte de la Seine,” which has become the principal number of the new repertoire of Lys Gauty.

The nature of “Complainte” is quite different from that of its companion piece “Je ne t’aime pas,” and it seems somewhat out of character with the personality of its interpreter. Invoking the somber and morbid, like many of the poems of Magre, “Complainte”



Lys Gauty

14 February 1900 - 3 January 1994

belongs more to the tormented world of Oswald. In the recording conducted by Wal-Berg (who, incidentally, was the force behind the popular cabaret, “Le Boeuf sur le toit”), Gauty gives a slightly labored performance, partially upstaged by a brilliant and spectacular orchestra.

“La Fiancée du Pirate” and “J’attends un navire” are much closer to Gauty’s world, to the point where she succeeded in overshadowing Florelle, creator of the role of Marie Galante. She included the two chansons on her program of recitals for l’ABC, la Boîte à matelots, l’Empire, and le Chat noir. In January of 1935, *Femme de France* described her singing “La Fiancée du Pirate”: “Her shoulders relax, her narrow body seems suddenly to elongate immeasurably and become the living image of fate, implacable and serene. With Lys Gauty, the powerful and tragic voice also carries tenderness and an intense and overpowering anguish which cannot, which will not, resign itself to grave misfortune.”

Gauty knew better than any other French Weill interpreter how to capture the spirit of the chanson of the time.

Thanks to her, “J’attends un navire” was taken from the narrow setting of Deval’s *Marie Galante*, purportedly to become a theme song of the French Resistance. Again we hear the clarity of her voice, the precise diction, and the tremolos in her sound. Fortunately, a few existing photos immortalize her slender profile wearing a long white dress, which has since become as famous as her large green eyes. “I love your large eyes because they are a soul,” she sang in 1933.

translated by David Gilbert

For more information on Gauty, see Patrick O’Connor’s tribute in *The Guardian* (8 January 1994). A short biography and extensive discography appears in *Tondokumente der Kleinkunst und ihre Interpreten, 1898-1945*, edited by Berthold Leimbach (Göttingen, 1991). Two recent compact disc reissues of Gauty’s recordings are on Expression, PolyGram Distribution 836 256-2 and Chansophone 106.