

Regarding . . . Street Scene

Following upon the tremendously successful premiere in Germany of the critically acclaimed Houston Grand Opera-Theater im Pfalzbau-Theater des Westens production of *Street Scene*, the Newsletter presents here a collection of documents relating to the history of the opera's reception after its 1947 Broadway run. (The Weill Foundation has recently published a more comprehensive collection of such documents in *Street Scene: A Sourcebook*. See the list of available publications on the back cover of this issue.) The first such document regarding *Street Scene* is a brief essay written by Langston Hughes for inclusion in the program booklet to the 1955 Düsseldorf production (the first in Germany). Hughes's piece was printed in the program in a German translation. It is printed here for the first time in its original English-language version.



My Collaborator: Kurt Weill

by Langston Hughes

Kurt Weill was a great folk artist. I use folk in the sense of meaning one who could capture in his art the least common denominator uniting all humanity. He did it in Germany. He did it in France. And he did it in the United States of America. Kurt Weill was not French. He was not an American, except in the formal sense of naturalization papers. By nature definitely he was not American. But by nature, he was a human being and an artist. Being an artist, in the true sense of the word, he understood all human beings, and all their songs – for good songs are but the dreams, the hopes, and the inner cries deep in the souls of all the peoples of the world. Kurt Weill did not scorn even the least of these songs – for he knew that the least might well be the most. Neither did he scorn their national forms and folk shapes. That is why he could write *The Protagonist* in Germany, *Marie Galante* in France, and *Street Scene* in America, and each rang true.

For example, in preparing a very specific piece of Americana for *Street Scene*, the Negro blues near the beginning of the first act, Kurt Weill went with me to various Harlem cabarets, and listened to numerous blues records – for musical form. The content which I supplied in words, he immediately recognized as a least common denominator for anybody and everybody. The result: "A Marble and a Star," set to music in an American Negro national idiom – but which a German might sing, or anyone else, and without seeming affected or strange. Kurt Weill was an artist of the heart first, but also a great craftsman in order to give form in music to what he as an artist felt.

In preparing the Children's Game at the opening of Act Two of *Street Scene*, that it might be as American as possible in form and content, we watched children at play in the New York streets – hours of watching – for they were not always playing singing games, so we had therefore to wait and watch. We

went to a session of the Folklore Society devoted to children's games and learned a little, too, from what was said there. Elmer Rice, with his keen ear and great feeling for what the common people say and do, helped us with the lyrics of this sequence. And my own knowledge of the relation between the comic books and comic strips in the newspapers and their influence on children's lives in America, supplied some of the links between newspaper fantasy and playing reality – for Harold Teen and Superman of the comic strips have taken the place of Jack and the Beanstalk and the Fairy Princess in the lives of big city children in the United States today. Kurt Weill took the lyrics we produced and made of them a children's game so real that many people thought it was real – and so American that it has become so. That is why I know Kurt Weill was a folk artist – a universal folk artist. Had he immigrated to India instead of the United States of America, I believe he would have written wonderful Indian musical plays, and recreated realistic Indian children's games. Only the universal man and the universal artist could do this.

Some people contend that when Kurt Weill worked in the vein of popular theatre he became "commercial." I contend instead that he became universal. In New York, had Weill written in the strict style and form of traditional opera, he would have had a very small audience – for opera in the United States is still regarded as "European" and has appeal to but a small group of music lovers outside the patrons of the Metropolitan. But by writing a "Broadway opera" such as *Street Scene* in a national idiom understood by the American people, Kurt Weill reached them, and stirred them to compassion, pity, and understanding of themselves as he could not have done had he not written in their own language. The purpose of art, in my opinion, is communication, the wider the better. Kurt Weill was a great musical communicator. He had something to say and he said it in the simplest and most direct terms, in the surface language of each country in which he lived, but in the universal language of that world beyond worlds to which all human souls are related. No man belongs to any one country really. You don't. I don't. Nobody does. And least of all (yet most of all) does the true artist. That is why Germany can claim Kurt Weill as German, France as French, America as American, and I as a Negro.

That I, an American Negro, should be chosen to write the lyrics of *Street Scene* did not seem odd or strange to Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice. They both wanted someone who understood the problems of the common people. Certainly Negroes understand these, for they are almost all common people. They wanted someone who wrote simply. I write simply because I myself am simple, and my people are not yet highly sophisticated nor greatly cultured. The characters in the original dramatic play of *Street Scene* are simple uncultured people. Weill wanted a poet. I am glad he considered

me one. He wanted someone who knew city life. I grew up in Mexico City, Kansas City, Chicago, Cleveland, and New York – all big metropolitan centers. So when Mr. Weill and Mr. Rice asked me to consider doing the lyrics for *Street Scene*, I did not need to ask them why they thought of me for the task. I never did ask them. I knew.

We worked fourteen months on the show before it was ready for rehearsals. We worked several weeks on it after that, changing, testing, deleting, as we went along. The number that gave us all the most trouble was "Wrapped in a Ribbon and Tied in a Bow." To get this graduation song just right, natural, real, yet in theatrical form, took us a whole summer. Even then it was re-written twice after the show opened in Philadelphia, before it came to Broadway. Kurt Weill was a hardworking artist and a very careful craftsman who did not mind doing and re-doing a musical sequence over until music matched words, and words matched music, and the whole was just what it should be in terms of emotional expressiveness, character-true and situation-true, as well as communicative in theatrical terms. To get the graduation story just right in terms of all these requirements took all of us almost as much time as it did to work out an entire act of the rest of the show.

Two beautiful songs were discarded, "Italy in Technicolor" as Rose imagined that land might be from seeing it in motion pictures, and a "Horoscope Song" for one of the women to sing in her window. Otherwise, the show is intact as performed in New York, U.S.A. It is a very American show. But understood anywhere where ordinary people, like Mrs. Maurrant, can never "believe that life was meant to be all dull and gray," and who "always will believe there'll be a brighter day."

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The collaborative team responsible for *Street Scene*. From left to right: Kurt Weill, Elmer Rice, Langston Hughes.

Circle 5-7930

The Playwrights' Company

MAXWELL ANDERSON • ELMER RICE • ROBERT E. SHERWOOD • KURT WEILL • JOHN F. WHARTON • Directors

VICTOR SAMROCK • Business Manager

WILLIAM FIELDS • Press Representative

630 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK 20

May 22nd, 1947.

Dear Kurt:

I must tell you what happened at the last performances of "Street Scene". The cast must have been giving extraordinary performances in addition to which, of course, many people came. We did \$22,000., which was an advance of \$5,000. over the previous week. Most of the increase occurred during the last four performances. However, the exciting news is that during the last performances the audiences were tremendously thrilled. I spoke to several people who saw the play and they went on for hours and hours, extolling the virtues of "Street Scene".

At the last performance, the excitement generated was something no one had ever seen before in a theatre. At the end of the play Saturday night, the audience got up and cheered for fully ten minutes. They threw their programs in the air, and the orchestra finally struck up "Auld Lang Syne" and the cast, with arms locked, sang the song to the audience. When the cast finished, the audience joined in, and when it was all over, the people in the theatre kept on cheering for another ten minutes. It was a tremendously exciting thing and I think it is something one must remember for the future life of the play.

My best to you, and come back soon,

V. C. Tor

Mr. Kurt Weill,
Naharia, Palestine.

Above is a letter from Victor Samrock, the business manager for the Playwrights' Company, reporting to Weill on the surge of interest that greeted the final performances of *Street Scene*. The excitement generated by *Street Scene* as its Broadway run came to a close foreshadowed the important role the piece would eventually play in introducing the composer's American works to the rest of the world.

Regarding . . . Street Scene

Kurt Weill on behalf of his "American opera"

Weill generally was more interested in his current and future creations than those already completed, but his efforts on behalf of *Street Scene* proved an exception to this rule. Between the end of the Broadway run and his death in 1950, Weill actively sought further productions of his "American opera," especially on European stages. These two pages present a few excerpts from the composer's correspondence illustrating his efforts.



Weill and Lenya in the 1940s

"Chappell's in London is a real European publishing house without any song pluggers! The man for whom I played the *Street Scene* records and who is going to work on it had tears in his eyes when he heard it. He thinks it could be a tremendous success if it is done right and he starts negotiating with one of the modern opera companies. There is also a chance at Covent Garden. So you see already, they have a different approach from Larry Spier [Chappell-New York's song plugger]!"

Weill in Paris to Lotte Lenya in New York, 15 May 1947

"You can imagine what a rush those few days in Paris were. I did more in those three days than a Frenchman does in three years. I was twice at the theatre (an evening of Jouvett plays, and Edwige Feuillère in Cocteau's idiotic play, both evenings terribly old-fashioned, empty and pompous). I saw Marie-Laure [de Noailles] and went to see the Monnet's in the country (he is a Senator now). And I had negotiations for *Lady* and *Street Scene*."

Weill in Geneva to Lotte Lenya in New York, 17 May 1947

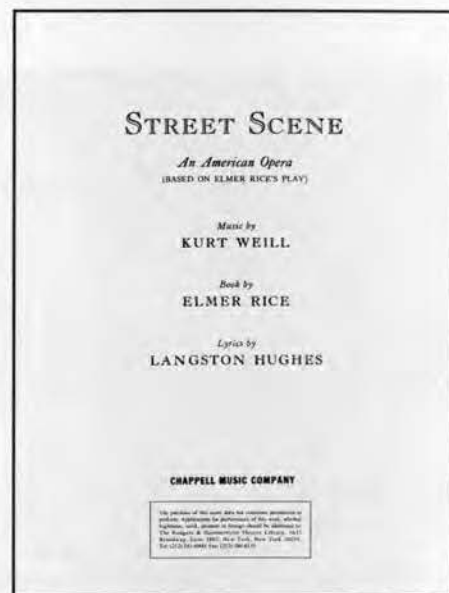
"I understand you are now negotiating with Schirmer's for the English stage rights of the Menotti operas.

As you remember, I had great hesitations to have *Street Scene* published by Chappell's. I wanted to give it to Boosey & Hawkes because with them I would have been sure of the kind of standard exploitation which this score calls for, of an English production (Covent Garden) and of performances in European opera houses. You promised that all these things could be done by Chappell's as well as by any other publisher. But you did not keep your promises.

I am sure you will have all kinds of reasons why you did not keep your promises and why you and your affiliates are more interested in the property of another publisher than in my work which, I am sure, is one of the most important properties in your catalogue. Personally, I don't agree with most of these reasons. All I can see, is the negative result of my association with Chappell's.

I have been faithful to you for twelve years, in spite of many disappointments. But now I am convinced that I cannot continue my present publisher situation without doing serious harm to my work. That's why I have just accepted an offer from Schirmer's to publish a school opera which I have written this summer. And, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, I want you to know that I consider myself completely free with regard to the publication of my next show and any future works."

Weill to Max Dreyfus (Chappell & Co.), 9 October 1947



The title page to the Chappell & Co. edition of *Street Scene*

"These days I'm getting all kinds of news from Germany and an enormous interest in my works, which are being handled by the American Military Agency. *Knickerbocker Holiday* will be done in Berlin with Hans Albers, *Lady in the Dark* in the Kurfürstendamm Theater under Erich Engel, also in Hamburg and Düsseldorf, and now we're negotiating with the Staatsoper about *Street Scene*."

Weill in New York to His Parents in Israel, 22 January 1948

(translated by Lys Symonette)



Weill and his parents looking over the program of the original Broadway production of *Street Scene*

"It is difficult for me to judge, from here, whether a first performance of *Street Scene* in Zürich would be 'sensational' enough, but if a number of German opera houses were to be contracted to do it, the question of who did it first would really not be so important. I have a different problem with regard to this matter, which I have been pondering in recent weeks. The opera was written for a proportionally small orchestra (33 players) with the special requirements of Broadway theaters in mind. I wonder now whether that would be sufficient for larger opera houses. In that it is probably already too late for a performance this season, I would like to consider the possibility of working out a new orchestration for opera houses while at the same time making a few musical alterations (less dialogue, more music). Before I consider such a major task, I would naturally like to know what this opera's possibilities are in terms of German opera companies in order to decide whether the job is worth the effort. It would therefore be a good idea if you could find out just how strong the interest in this opera really is. I will send you a piano-vocal score if you need it for this purpose. Please let me know what you think of this idea."

Weill to Traute von Witt (Universal Edition, Vienna), 11 December 1948

(translated by Edward Harsh)

"It seems to me that it will be much more attractive to present one of my more recent works, than to revive a work like *Mahagonny* which was very much an expression of the decade after the first world war. The most important of my recent works is *Street Scene* because I have attempted a new kind of simplicity and directness of expression in this score. It is an American opera in the true sense of the word, probably the only opera in the vernacular of the large American city. The action (in one decor) takes place in front of an apartment house in a poor district of New York and the characters represent the different nationalities (Irish, Italian, Swedish, Negro, Jewish) who live together in the streets of New York. *Street Scene*, which played for 5 months at the Adelphi Theatre, has been generally recognized as the first significant American opera since Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and, from this standpoint, I think it would be interesting to an European audience.

The printed piano score of *Street Scene* has been airmailed to you yesterday. Since it was printed, I have added a new musical scene in the second act (in place of the dialogue page 192-193) which I would send you if you decide to present this work.

Since the action of this opera is very realistic and some of the scenes are in dialogue, I would prefer if it could be performed in Italian."

Weill to F. Ballo (Festival International die Venezia), 29 December 1948

The following two pages offer a comparison between critical reaction to the 1955 Düsseldorf production of *Street Scene* and the response to the January 1995 opening in Berlin of the Houston-Ludwigshafen-Theater des Westens production. Translations by Edward Harsh and Lys Symonette

The Rise and Fall of Kurt Weill

Kurt Weill has deeply embarrassed his one-time friends. Certainly, those who knew he had become a Broadway success feared the worst. But the facts are painful. Weill died in New York in 1950. The works of his American period had to this point remained completely unknown in Europe. Now comes *Street Scene*, his "American Folk Opera," which Weill himself proclaimed as the best realization of his dreams for a new opera theater.

Weill always needed an outside impulse for his work, but only once did he have such an impulse that really stoked his innermost creative fires. That was in the time of his collaboration with Bert Brecht, in the time of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. Weill's searing talents were focused on the social ills of his time. It is fairly certain that only this Weill, the Weill of the miserly miniature, stingingly sharp forms, will be remembered as the years pass.

Now, the songs are no longer sharp, but sodden. They display occasional moments of inspiration but nothing more. The po-

lemical-critical posture is gone and parody has been overtaken by superficial formalism. That is to say: Weill has surrendered to his public, a public he takes seriously in his tragic claim to the cheapest musical theater. The musico-dramatic ambition which he proclaims for himself shows the depths to which he has sunk in that, when all is said and done, it is no more than an aspiration to Lehár-like operetta.

There are, unfortunately, grounds for Weill's and his collaborators' intention that this be a genuine piece of folk art, understood by the man in the street. One need only explain that here the simple man has been confused with the masses. It is undeniable that what today passes for accessible art is really the standardized mass sentiment of consumable music that ranges from domesticated jazz, to the glamor of the hit parade, to the dramatic counterfeits of late European operetta, up to the sentimental pathos of Puccini.

[Unsigned]
Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger
29 November 1955

The Advance Troops of the Musical

Two days after the premiere [of *Street Scene*] Düsseldorfers opened their morning papers to be told by their critics that they had attended an operatic funeral of the most dramatic kind. Those present at the premiere would hardly have noticed anything like a funereal atmosphere. Instead they applauded after almost every other number of the score and at the end called the members of the cast in front of the curtain some twenty times. . . .

Although none of the critics denied the success with the audience, it didn't prevent one of them from putting two short sentences together: "Reicher Beifall. Wie denn auch nicht!" [Lots of applause. What else would you expect!] Those six words are too beautiful not to tempt one to reflect upon a group of critics who obviously champion progressivism at any price – to whom any genuine public success is suspect from the outset. (This, by the way, would be an excellent topic for Theodor Adorno: "The aging of modern criticism.") But there is not room for that here.

What does demand an answer is a remark by Adorno that elucidates an attitude common in one form or another to most of his colleagues. They all express

unconcealed regret that Weill "became a man of success on Broadway." (As opposed, of course, to choosing the route of a pauper's death in a poor house. What other possibilities were there for a man of the music theater?) Thus, the notion of a Broadway that kills the soul and corrupts every artist has become so common among us that its cultural-political consequences are not foreseeable. (In actuality, the assessments of Kurt Weill's Broadway success vary according to the political viewpoint of the critic or newspaper.) This attitude justifies every critical response, from the unbounded feelings of superiority of tradition-conscious Europeans who nonchalantly look disparagingly upon the American cultural mix, to the regretful *mea culpa*s that it was we ourselves who banished Weill to this wasteland of the "good life." It is therefore only natural that we – or at least our critics – condemn almost everything that carries the stamp of Broadway. (And that goes too for O'Neill and Tennessee Williams who – of course! – only repeat what Hauptmann, Ibsen, and Strindberg did more successfully decades earlier.)

HORST KOEGLER
Der Monat
January 1956

Advance Troops and Avant-garde

During a conversation in Hollywood, my friend Kurt Weill once told me that on Broadway one could do anything as long as one knew how to do it. That is precisely the point. Nobody will deny that – even as an immigrant – Weill knew how to think up suggestive song melodies. But surely, under pressure (direct or indirect) to conform, he could no longer do all that he knew how to do. He had to get rid of exactly those elements of his musical language which at one time created precisely that Weillian atmosphere so lovingly extolled by Koegler in his essay on Lotte Lenya. One need only compare the songs from the old version of *Mahagonny* or from *Die Dreigroschenoper* with those from *Lady in the Dark* and *One Touch of Venus* to hear what Weill had to sacrifice to the slickness of popular music. Aside from a few odd moments – even in *Down in the Valley* – it is difficult to distinguish the American Weill from Cole Porter. Probably this lightweight idiom did not come so easily to him. That would explain why, to his credit, he never spoke the language as fluently as did his models.

"Popular songs" does not mean – as the unsophisticated reader might think – folk songs; it means hits. The substance of the American musical does not stem from the spontaneity of the American people, as it might seem, but from the culture industry. Here popularity is psychologically calculated, down to the last note, to have an effect on the listener. It follows the rules of commercialism, to which disciples cling more anxiously than any twelve-tone composer would hold on to his self-imposed strictures. The "naturalness" of this music is founded upon the spirit of experiments and statistics; it is the product of rational function, the shiny opposite of any spontaneity the deception appears to produce. European intellectuals do occasionally fall for this ruse, but there are plenty of independent Americans who struggle against the machinery with all their strength and courage.

THEODOR W. ADORNO
(reply to Horst Koegler)

1955

The Discovery Begins

Kurt Weill is still identified with *Die Dreigroschenoper* (which, in turn, is identified — even down to the tunes themselves — with Bertolt Brecht). This single, spectacular, even impersonal success has obstructed the view of a richly varied life's work. The obstruction has been troublesome enough for the symphonist disciple of Busoni, and likewise for the composer of the later works of the Weimar period (after separation from Brecht) such as *Die Bürgschaft*. But its most unfortunate consequences have been borne by the "French" and "American" Weills, who since the mid-1930s have remained completely obscure in this country.

Even "obscure" is not a strong enough word; the Weill from "over there" was often actively rejected, the prevailing attitude being that the "Broadway-King" who rose to become the genius of the Popular betrayed his social criticism in favor of shallow acclaim and pure kitsch. The late Weill was worthless: it seemed to be so because it was proclaimed to be so. Adorno and his parrots had a powerful effect. Was this due to European arrogance? Envy of emigrants? Or perhaps an unconfessed wounded national pride? Weill had broken spiritually with Germany and wanted nothing more than to become an American, and an American artist.

In the United States, Weill's legacy continues to have a significant effect. American musicals imported to Germany often show a debt to his works. Now, at long last, the Theater des Westens has brought forth the real thing in its original language. (Weill himself called *Street Scene* his magnum opus.) The piece has been presented on a few stages in German-language versions, but this Berlin performance is the real German premiere. One is introduced here to a classic, a monument to a particular moment in America's social and musical development.

Weill saw in *Street Scene* the opportunity to advance the notion of an American folk opera even over and above Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. . . . A natural attribute of this effort is a purposeful mishmash of music, a

calculated quick alternation between styles and forms. Weill masterfully controls this art in order to make it communicative. He moves freely from melodrama to lively tunes, from operatic arias to full ensembles. He allows reminiscences of Offenbach and, especially, Puccini's *verismo*. (At one point there is an almost note-for-note citation of *Madame Butterfly*.) Whoever would speak of artistic thievery in this context does not understand anything about the art of reference and allusion. Weill's kitsch in *Street Scene* is of the sort and quality of Gustav Mahler's.

HANS-JÖRG VON JENA
Süddeutsche Zeitung
18 January 1995

Remarks on Kurt Weill in America

Kurt Weill was thirty-five years old when he emigrated to America in September 1935. He had fifteen years left to live; fifteen years that would see the completion of ten more works for the theater — operas, musical plays and comedies, etc. These works found no resonance whatsoever in the German theater scene. Europeans resignedly came to the conclusion that the American Weill was without "bite." Weill had sold his soul on Broadway. Weill without Brecht was only half Weill.

Without question, there were decided contradictions between Weill's European and American works. Adorno's disparaging appraisal of the latter quickly spread across Germany and sabotaged an even-handed evaluation of the American Weill in much the same way that the critic's negative perception of Sibelius's oeuvre undermined the reception of that composer's work for years, at least in Germany. As with Sibelius, though, Weill has prevailed against Adorno in the long run, and we in Germany appear to be gradually developing a new attitude toward his American works.

HORST KOEGLER
Opernwelt
February 1995

Tougher than the Ku'damm

Kurt Weill imagined none other than Marlene Dietrich for the title role in his 1942 musical *One Touch of Venus*. But the diva demurred, saying that Weill's music in America no longer possessed the quality of his German theater pieces. In expressing that opinion, Dietrich gave voice to the common perception that there were two Weills: one "authentic" and one that betrayed his artistic ambitions in favor of commercial success. Weill is supposed to have cut short Dietrich's words, telling her to "never mind those old German songs. We're in America now and Broadway is tougher than the Kurfürstendamm."

There are but few composers in this century who considered so intensively the various possibilities for relating stage action and music, or who calculated so carefully the musical requirements of scene and text. Because of this, simple evaluations of Weill's work that focus on his songs are risky. In fact, there was no such thing to Weill as The Stage; there were only various specific stages, all of which brought forth their own unique circumstances and demands: the European opera stages with their long, imposing tradition, the operetta of Johann Strauss, the comedies of the English and French music halls, the American musical and the Broadway show, etc. To compare Kurt Weill's American works with his German music theater pieces is fatal, a comparison of aesthetic apples and oranges.

The prejudice against the former in favor of the latter can, in fact, easily be disputed — if the works themselves are produced for the public to see.

In this regard, the Theater des Westens production of *Street Scene* has an important role to play. This first English-language production of the piece in Germany could contribute to the re-evaluation of the American Weill.

Behind the sounding façade of this "Broadway Opera" stands unmistakably the old Kurt Weill: the acute social commentator, the parodist of old musical forms who always — in the words of Mary McCarthy — keeps a poker face so that neither casual listeners nor connoisseurs are the wiser, the absolute professional musician whose craft can create the suggestion of any atmosphere, and, finally, the master of the no-man's-land between art and kitsch whose aesthetic tightrope walk renders the limits of those very categories absurd. This Kurt Weill turns worn-out musical expressions into a plea for tolerance.

Anyone who experiences this powerful production will know that the American Kurt Weill has nothing to do with Tin Pan Alley, the mythical homeland of hit composers that, contrary to Adorno, exists no more than does Valhalla.

WOLFGANG SANDNER
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
17 January 1995

1995

American Opera Today:

a composer's view

The occasion of *Street Scene*'s 1947 Broadway run inspired a flurry of written commentary on the notion of American opera. Weill himself called the piece the realization of his "dream of an American opera." Olin Downes, writing in the *New York Times*, likewise insisted that it was "the most important step toward significantly American opera that the writer has yet encountered in the musical theatre." With nearly fifty years passed since that event inspired such hope for the future of American opera, the Newsletter staff sought out a personal, composer's-eye view of American opera today. Presented here, in that spirit, is a conversation with composer Anthony Davis, whose first opera, *X*, *The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, garnered critical acclaim and created a stir in the American musical community (see the photo and biographical sketch on the facing page). Mr. Davis spoke in February with editor poet Edward Harsh.

Part I — "Opera" and Influence

- EH: You've written quite a number of music theater works in the last few years. How do those pieces relate to your entire body of work?
- AD: Oh, I think they're at the center of my work, a major focus. Since *X* I've really thought of myself as a music theater composer. And a lot of my other music sort of serves it. I mean, I write orchestral and instrumental music, but a lot of times in the back of my mind I'm always thinking about the next music theater project that I can stick these pieces into.
- EH: How do you feel about the word "opera" itself? Weill preferred the term "musical theater."
- AD: I guess I like the term opera, though I've used the term music theater. Music theater to me means the use of spoken language. I set everything to music.
- EH: That's true of all of your work?
- AD: Yeah, so far. It's more in the tradition of sung-through music and less in the tradition of the musical or even the *Singspiel*. I've always found the transition from spoken to sung awkward.
- EH: Are there any specific pieces that you would say had an influence on your vision of music theater?
- AD: I guess when I was a kid the first music theater I heard was Weill, really, the *Threepenny Opera*. My father loved it. He had the Blitzstein adaptation of it and he played it every Sunday. And it terrified me. I was so frightened of it.
- EH: You were? What terrified you about it?

AD: The black freighter song. That used to scare me so much I would go and hide. Remember, I was five years old at the time. And I had nightmares. I was just very sensitive to it. You know, it's very interesting because I have an intense identification with Weill but also, in a funny way, with Schoenberg too. Two opposites. The energy of his music as opposed to his followers' is really something. When you see *Moses and Aaron*, it's a different experience than seeing some twelve-tone piece by Joe Schmo. For me, it was a great inspiration.

EH: In what way?

AD: It's a kind of pathway back. The sense of the liberation of a people and the implication of human law. It's on all kinds of levels. Then there's Wagner, too.

EH: What do you take from Wagner?

AD: The idea of icons and myth. *X* is not a realistic drama. Opera cannot be realistic.

EH: Isn't that a problem when you're dealing with characters and events from recent history?

AD: It is sometimes hard for critics to understand. They think you're doing realistic, made-for-TV drama. And I'm not. *X* is just as abstract and mythological as *Pelléas* or *Siegfried* or anything else. People just don't want to let go of their pre-conceived notion of Malcolm X and accept the figure on stage. They say "Oh, they made him into a saint." And I say "No, we didn't!"

EH: You've mentioned mostly Germans. Do you find anything of use to you in Italian opera?

AD: I was getting to that. I came around to those fairly late — through my wife, who's an opera singer. I'm actually much more Italian than I am German because I lived in Italy as a kid. Italian opera is beautiful, but there's something so direct and absurdly lyrical about it. I can't quite get to that. It's not available to me in my idiom, so it's less useful to me than other things. I guess that's also because it's so based on song forms. Coming out of the jazz tradition, I used to write songs all the time. I get back to that sometimes, but that's not what I'm trying to write now.

Part II — Psychology and Audience Expectations

- EH: Weill said that the age of psychology in drama was over (this was in the 1940s of course) and that now drama should concern itself with representing universal types. How does that relate to your own work?
- AD: Well, I do look at inner torments and conflicts, but not in the didactic or axiomatic way of psychoanalysis or psychology. You know, "he hates his mother." That's kind of boring. Because after everybody's been analyzed there's nothing left to do. What's more interesting to me is the idea of music trying to get inside the conflicts of a person. Also, there's a process of identification that goes on as the composer identifies with the characters.
- EH: Do you identify with all your characters?
- AD: I think to some extent you identify with them. For me it's more a methodology. It's a way of making the music personal. A lot of the metaphor for Malcolm's struggle in identity was also about my struggle for musical identity, confronting European culture, African-American cultural expectations, etc. But it's not a heavy thing. It's playful in the sense that I can play also on things that I know, from my past, like my jazz experience.
- EH: I was going to ask you about how you reconcile the multiple traditions behind your music. For instance, the music in *X* that recalls 1940s jazz is perfect as scenic music, but I get the feeling that it's more than just scenic music. Is that right?

- AD: Part of it has to do with invoking the past. For example, the Street¹ character's music is really a blues. It uses a lot of blues conventions and blues structures as a way to merge with opera structures. A lot of the music actually comes from the big band tradition, but I use voices instead of horn sections.
- EH: Is your use of big band conventions a reflection of *your* tradition or is it both a reflection of the tradition that you're a part of and a reflection of what's happening on stage?
- AD: There are three levels, really. What's happening on stage, my tradition, and also the tradition that shaped Malcolm. In his autobiography there are all these references to music, like when he describes hearing Lionel Hampton's² orchestra. All right, when someone talks about Hampton's orchestra in the late 1940s, I'm remembering that Charles Mingus³ (one of my biggest musical influences, by the way) was the bass player at that time and wrote some of his earliest pieces for Hampton's band. So in my musical imagination I'm hearing.... man, he's dancing to Mingus! So parts of that scene are a little homage to Mingus.
- EH: When you use highly associative music like the blues are you conscious of how an audience will react to that, or is that not such an issue for you?
- AD: Well, which audience? Who's the audience? If it's seventy-year-olds who just go to the opera and nothing else, I'm in trouble. They'll go "What? What is this *Chazz*?" But I do like to play with audience expectations. Like when you get to the ballroom scene in *X*, where you really expect a full flowering of a big band, I didn't do that because I felt the scene was about alienation.
- EH: So, you didn't want a beautiful, realistic scene.
- AD: Absolutely not — not a big dance number like Spike Lee⁴ did. I had a dance number, but I set it metrically in twenty, by four. People jitterbugged, but they were out of phase with the music. It was perfect. As a composer, you create expectations. But if you deliver on the expectation every time, it's boring. Boring, predictable, dull, and also I think pandering in a way.

Part III — Social Commentary and American Culture

- EH: Do you agree with Weill that all opera should be social commentary?
- AD: I think all opera *is* social commentary, whether it's commenting by its vision or lack thereof. I mean, it's a social commentary because, in terms of the class wars, you're the invader in this upper-class realm. So you're the guerrilla. (That's guerrilla, not gorilla.) I don't think your work necessarily has to be overt, though I think most of my work is. I love the political landscape and I love the mythology of politics as well as the symbolism. I'm fascinated with that, so that's always part of me. Also the whole issue of race, I think, is so compelling for me musically, and also in terms of a lot of my subject matter.
- EH: So in that sense you're really the guerrilla given the racial non-mixture of the opera establishment.
- AD: Basically, anything that challenges the primacy of the European tradition is seen as political. And that's exactly what I'm doing. That's why they're so mad at me.
- EH: Do you think just the introduction of the music itself does that? Just the mere fact that the music comes from another tradition?
- AD: For me it also deals with my subject matter. The content of the music relates to a sense of conflict in the subject matter. Now *that's* a war for America's soul. Just like Newt Gingrich⁵ talks about it, I'll talk about it too.
- EH: Do you mean that what is presented in opera houses is European, and not America's soul?

- AD: No. It's not so much that. I'm just saying that the vision of America as what it was in the fifties is not what we are. It never was, really.
- EH: But even if you wrote operas about happy families living in the suburbs, the introduction of music like Mingus's into the opera house is a subversive act, isn't it?
- AD: Yeah. But I'm always thinking about it this way, American culture is born from two holocausts: the holocaust of slavery, and the holocaust of Europe. That's why Kurt Weill was here. That's why the blues and our whole tradition is here. That's why American music is what it is.
- EH: I've never thought of it in quite that way. Do you think the influence of the European holocaust was as great on American culture as slavery was?
- AD: I think the influence of both is profound. I'm not just talking about the holocaust of the Nazis, but hundreds of years of trouble before that, too.

Anthony Davis



*Anthony Davis has emerged as one of the most interesting and engaging American composers active today. Born in 1951, he grew up in New York and studied music as an undergraduate at Yale University. Davis's early career was devoted largely to work in the field of avant garde jazz, but, in the last decade or so, music theater and opera have become the composer's primary focus. His first opera, *X*, The Life and Times of Malcolm X played a sold-out run during its premiere at the New York City Opera in 1986, with a Grammy Award-nominated recording following thereafter. Davis has subsequently completed two further operas, *Under the Double Moon* and *Tania*, and is currently working on another, entitled *Amistad*. Additionally, he composed the music for the critically acclaimed pair of theater pieces, *Angels in America: Part I, Millennium Approaches* and *Part II, Perestroika*.*

Part IV — Opera and Broadway

- EH: So far, your works have been produced mostly by conventional opera houses, right?
- AD: Actually, *X* started at the American Musical Theatre Festival in Philadelphia. My third opera, *Tania*, started down there too. But it's true that I've mostly worked with opera companies. That's not easy, you know. Most of them are way too conservative for my outlook. I know that a lot of pieces have been having a hard time getting produced. The financial burdens bring on a certain dependence on sources that are, well, that may not tolerate my political slant.
- EH: Is the problem your politics or is it just the fact that the music is different from what is normally heard in opera houses?
- AD: I think both have their part in it. Musical style is political too, of course. Because, as we know, we're all involved in the culture wars. So, the idea that my music reflects traditions outside of European culture is a problem.
- EH: Opera houses have taken on a museum-like quality . . .
- AD: Right.
- EH: So is the opera house the ideal place for what you want to do?
- AD: Well, they *are* in terms of the resources they possess: the orchestra, the theater, the pit, the lighting, the crew, all that good stuff. But also the forum. I love the forum of opera. Still, I know that over the long haul there will have to be some alternative ways of producing music theater. That's why I did *Tania*. I wrote it for ten instruments because I wanted to have a piece that might be done in other kinds of venues.
- EH: So one strategy is reducing the forces so at least the financial resources required aren't as daunting.
- AD: Yeah, that's one solution. But I still want to do the big pieces. That's what I really hear. So I have to be true to that, too. It's actually harder for me to write an opera with ten instruments than it is to write one for an orchestra.
- EH: How do you see the current state of American opera? For instance, is the fact that the Met has put on new operas by Corigliano and Glass a sign of anything really happening?

- AD: Well, I do hope there will be more things happening at the Met. The problem is that the audience for regular classical music is dying. I mean, it's literally dying off. In order to bring life into the houses they're going to have to bring younger people in. Some of them will come in anyway, hooked on *Traviata* or whatever. But I think some other people will be brought in by new work. Exciting new things.
- EH: That's a very hopeful, positive attitude.
- AD: It's positive. I'm not sure that a lot of opera people currently share that attitude. But, you know, sometimes there are opportunities in calamity.
- EH: What about the possibilities of opera and mass media like TV. Do you think that's explorable territory?
- AD: I think that's possible, yes. I was hoping to do a TV production of *X* and probably should have when we did it at City Opera. For whatever reasons — political reasons, etc. — it wasn't done at the time. But I think that's very important for the future of works, being available in that way.
- EH: You mean essentially as videotaped stage productions?
- AD: Well, I would love to do a made-for-television production or a movie too. Actually, the director Roland Greenwood once complained to me, he said, "You're thinking of movies. When you write this stuff, you're thinking cinematically." In terms of balance as well as all sorts of other dimensions, there are things that can be done in film that can't be done on stage. Because a lot of times the composer writes music with recordings in mind. And the balance in your mind may not be a realistic balance.
- EH: What other kinds of alternatives can you imagine to the opera house?
- AD: Well, I'm curious about doing pieces that might be done down at the Public Theatre⁶ or eventually even on Broadway.
- EH: Do you see the Broadway legitimate stage as still offering an opportunity for interesting work?
- AD: I don't know. I don't know if they would accept my music. My biggest trouble is dealing with the fact that the music often isn't a priority. We'll deal with that too, I know. The producers there don't think about getting people who can sing the music. You know, that's a pretty basic problem.
- EH: It certainly is.
- AD: If I do something on Broadway, it's got to be my music. I don't want to compromise my musical vision. What I'm talking about is working with singers. Basically they're looking to hire actors who happen to be able to sing. That's partly the legacy of Weill and Brecht, but the American version of it has become so distorted and warped. It's not as if there are a million Lotte Lenyas walking around, you know?



Anthony Davis's opera *X* on compact disc
(Gramavision R2-79470)

Notes

- ¹ The Street character in *X* personifies trickery and seduction.
- ² Lionel Hampton (b. 1909) is a jazz vibraphonist, drummer, and bandleader.
- ³ Charles Mingus (1922-79) was a jazz composer and bass player of great stylistic breadth.
- ⁴ Spike Lee is a young American filmmaker whose credits include a feature based on the life of Malcolm X.
- ⁵ Newt Gingrich is the recently elected Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. He advocates, among other things, the elimination of government funding of the arts, humanities, and public television.
- ⁶ The Public Theatre is a venue founded by Joseph Papp in downtown New York City that is dedicated to innovative productions of both new and classic works.