

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

Pierre Boulez:

. . . [A] scattered knowledge fires the imagination; it is from such a small nucleus, much as the grain of sand in the oyster nurtures the pearl, that our ideas take shape . . .

Lotte Lenya Remembers Mahagonny:

All of us were fascinated by America, as we knew it from books, movies, popular songs, headlines — this was the America of the garish "twenties," with its Capones, Texas Guinans, Aimée Semple MacPhersons, Ponzis, — the Florida boom and crash, also a disastrous Florida hurricane — a ghastly photograph, reproduced in every German newspaper, of the murderess Ruth Snyder in the electric chair — Hollywood films about the Wild West and the Yukon — Jack London's adventure novels — Tin Pan Alley songs — I think it is not difficult to trace some of this in the make-believe America of Mahagonny.

[Excerpt from "I Remember Mahagonny," Gramophone Record Review (October 1960)]



Gold speculators in Grand Forks celebrate after the winter cleanup. Photo: Clarke and Clarence Kinsey

Scholars are indeed beginning to trace the multitude of cultural reflections found in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* and the 1927 *Songspiel*. Until recently, most research has attempted to untangle the socio-political meaning of "Mahagonny, the city of nets," by citing the authors' writings and the voluminous critical response to answer questions such as: What did the collaborators intend, separately and together? What are the unintentional messages? Is *Mahagonny* a morality play or anti-capitalist diatribe? Is it opera or anti-opera?

A different sort of investigation is broached by studying the work's genesis. Creative artists working in Berlin in the 1920s assimilated, quoted, parodied, borrowed, combined, and reshaped the sounds and images that flooded the city through new modes of communication, often with the goal of commenting upon the problems of society through new forms of expression. In addition to analyzing the obvious borrowings and parodies found in the two Mahagonny works, researchers are now identifying and arguing the textual and cultural sources of inspiration drawn upon by Brecht, Hauptmann, Weill, and Neher. Examples of these include: the 1907 collection of poetry *The Songs of a Sourdough* by Robert W. Service, drawings by Georg Grosz, the 1922 popular song "Komm nach Mahagonne," Charlie Chaplin's 1925 silent film *The Gold Rush*, and Brecht's earlier unfinished projects (for example, "The Flood" and "Decline of the Paradise City Miami" (1926)).

In keeping with the Weimar aesthetic of pastiche, we present here a few more sources to add to the collage — sources related to cultural context, genesis, and reception history. First is Kim H. Kowalke's brief look at the writings of Service and the discovery of the 1910 novel *Trail of Ninety-Eight*, followed by selections from two of Weill's pre-production writings about *Mahagonny* that are no longer readily available in English translation. The section concludes with a selection of largely unpublished correspondence (1927-1946) related to *Mahagonny* between Weill, Universal Edition, Lenya, and Maurice Abravanel, reprinted in the original German with parallel English translations.

Mahagonny and Robert W. Service

by Kim H. Kowalke

Behold yon minstrel of the empty belly,
Who seeks to please the bored and waiting throng,
Outside the Opera with ukelele,
And raucous strains of syncopated song.
His rag-time mocks their eager hearts a-hunger
For golden voices, melody divine:
Yet...throw a penny to the ballad-monger;
Yet...listen idly to this song of mine.

—Robert W. Service, "Prelude to Barroom Ballads"

The British-born journalist, poet, and novelist Robert W. Service (1874-1958) arrived in Canada in 1894, travelled along the Pacific coast, and "took a course in Hard Knocks, graduating without enthusiasm." In 1904, while in the Yukon working at White Horse and Dawson, Service celebrated the lives and adventures of the lumberjacks and miners in the Klondike and Yukon in a collection of poetry published as *Songs of a Sourdough* in 1907. Reprinted thirty-six times within a decade and retitled *The Spell of the Yukon*, the volume sold a half million copies in Canada alone. Although Service aspired to be the Bret Harte of the Northland (another of Brecht's favorites), he was soon dubbed the Canadian Kipling or the Kipling of the Northwest. Because he was deliberately anti-intellectual and melodramatic, critics dismissed him as "naive, banal, facile," the Canadian counterpart to German penny dreadfuls and Kolportage literature, including Karl May. But Service protested: "Verse, not poetry, is what I was after — something the man in the street would take notice of and the sweet old lady would paste in her album; something the schoolboy would spout and the fellow in the pub would quote."

After a second collection of poetry, *Ballad of a Cheechako*, Service retired to a wilderness cabin and wrote his potboiler novel, *The Trail of Ninety-Eight: A Northland Romance*, which chronicles the Gold Rush experiences of a quartet of miners. Like everyone else, each had traded in his real name for a colorful nickname capturing his essence: "Salvation Jim," "the Prodigal," "the Jam-Wagon," and the narrator Athol Meldrum, "Scotty," who falls in love with the Jewish innocent-turned-prostitute Berna, a.k.a. "Madonna." Most of those lucky enough to survive a winter in the Klondike lose their hard-earned money drinking and gambling in Dawson, "a modern Gomorrah where the good old moralities don't apply." "Nowhere in the world could a boxing match have been awaited with greater zest," and no one was feared more than "Black Jack" Locasto. The city was "a giant spider, drawing in its prey":

Dance-halls, saloons, gambling dens, brothels, the heart of the town was a cancer, a hive of iniquity. Here had flocked the most

rapacious of gamblers, the most beautiful and unscrupulous women on the Pacific slope. Here in the gold-born city they waited their prey, the Man with the Poke. Back there in the silent Wild, with pain and bloody sweat, he toiled for them. Sooner or later must he come within reach of their talons to be fleeced, flouted, and despoiled. [p. 359]

Dawson shared Mahagonny's fate:

The gold-born city is doomed. From where I lie, the scene is one long visit of blazing gables, ribs, and rafters hugged by tawny arms of fire. Squat cabins swirling in mad eddies of flame; hotels, dance-halls, brothels swathed and smothered in flame-rent blankets of swirling smoke. There is no hope. . . . The city is doomed It seemed to me like a judgment. [511]

In 1928 the novel was still so popular that MGM (freely) adapted it as a film, *The Trail of '98*, starring Delores Del Rio and Ralph Forbes. The silent film opened in New York in March 1928, as Weill and Brecht were working on the libretto of Mahagonny. In January 1929 it was re-released with a Movietone synchronized score (by David Mendoza and William Axt) and sound effects. Since MGM had a distribution office in Berlin at the time, it's likely that the film was shown in Germany as well.

There is hardly an image in *Mahagonny* concerning the Netzesstadt or the lumberjacks' prehistory that can't also be found in Service's poetry or *The Trail of Ninety-Eight*. Certain poems scan so similarly and are so closely related in content that one is almost tempted to sing them to Weill's music. [See two examples reprinted on the next page.]

Because none of Service's volumes is listed among books in Brecht's library and similar images of the Klondike and Yukon abound in many sources (Lenya always mentioned Jack London and Chaplin's *Gold Rush* in this connection), we can't be sure that Brecht, Hauptmann, or Weill knew Service's work. But it's probably yet another of the unacknowledged sources for *Mahagonny*.

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

The Spell of the Yukon [excerpt]

I wanted the gold, and I sought it;
I scrabbled and mucked like a slave.
Was it famine or scurvy — I fought it;
I hurled my youth into a grave.
I wanted the gold, and I got it —
Came out with a fortune last fall, —
Yet somehow life's not what I thought it,
And somehow the gold isn't all.

.....

The winter! The brightness that blinds you,
The white land locked tight as a drum,
The cold fear that follows and finds you,
The silence that bludgeons you dumb.
The snows that are older than history,
The woods where the weird shadows slant;
The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,
I've bade 'em good-by — but I can't.

The Reckoning

It's fine to have a blow-out in a fancy restaurant,
With terrapin and canvas-back and all the wine you want;
To enjoy the flowers and music, watch the pretty women pass,
Smoke a choice cigar, and sip the wealthy water in your glass.
It's bully in a high-toned joint to eat and drink your fill,
But it's quite another matter when you

Pay the bill.

It's great to go out every night on fun or pleasure bent;
To wear your glad rags always and to never save a cent;
To drift along regardless, have a good time every trip;
To hit the high spots sometimes, and to let your chances slip;
To know you're acting foolish, yet to go on fooling still,
Till Nature calls a show-down, and you

Pay the bill.

Time has got a little bill — get wise while yet you may,
For the debit side's increasing in a most alarming way;
The things you had no right to do, the things you should have done,
They're all put down; it's up to you to pay for every one.
So eat, drink and be merry, have a good time if you will,
But God help you when the time comes, and you

Foot the bill.

[Reprinted from Robert W. Service, *The Spell of the Yukon and Other Verses* (New York: Barse, 1916), pp. 15, 17, 70-71.]



Larry (Ralph Forbes) tells Berna (Dolores Del Rio) that he loves her in the 1928 film *The Trail of '98*.

Photo: Metro-Goldwyn Mayer.



A gambling scene in the film *The Trail of '98*.

Photo: Metro-Goldwyn Mayer.

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

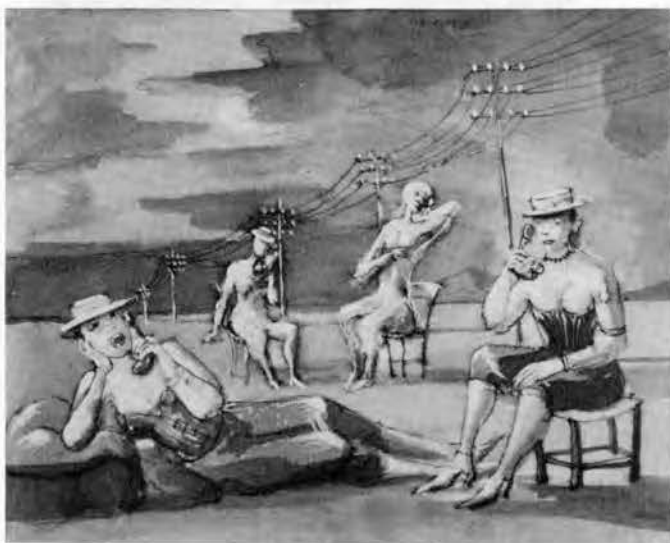
Weill . . . On *Mahagonny*

Prior to the opening of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* at Leipzig's Neues Theater on 9 March 1930, Weill published two articles about the work in which he discusses its genesis, the song form, the plot, the concept of the city as a character in the action, and performance practice.

The first article appeared in *Die Musik*, a journal about German musical life which flourished under editor Bernhard Schuster from 1901 to 1934. The publication included detailed chronicles of stage and concert performances, and subjects of the general-interest articles extended to the new media of film and recordings, and even to folk music. After Schuster's death in 1934, the journal was taken over by the Nazi propaganda machine. The second essay, Weill's "Foreword to the Production Book of Mahagonny," appeared in *Anbruch*, which, as Universal Edition's house organ, became the leading voice for the German-speaking musical avant-garde between the world wars. It published many excellent articles by and about UE's wide-ranging stable of composers. UE stopped publishing *Anbruch* in 1935.



Scene designs for *Mahagonny* by Caspar Neher.



Notes to my Opera Mahagonny

As early as my first meeting with Brecht in Spring 1927, the word "Mahagonny" emerged in a conception of a "Paradise City." In order to pursue further this idea, which had seized me immediately, and in order to test the musical style that I envisioned for it, I first composed the five Mahagonny-Songs from Brecht's *Die Hauspostille* (Manual of Piety) and linked them into a small dramatic form, a "Songspiel," which was performed in Baden-Baden during the summer of 1927. This Baden-Baden *Mahagonny* is thus nothing more than a stylistic study for the opera, which, once begun, was continued only after the style had been tested. For almost a year Brecht and I worked together on the libretto for the opera. The score was completed in November 1929.

The genre of "Song," which originated in the Baden-Baden piece and was further developed in later works (*Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Das Berliner Requiem*, *Happy End*), was naturally unable to support a full-length opera by itself. Other larger forms had to be added. But the simple ballad-like style always had to be preserved.

[Translation by Kim H. Kowalke. Excerpt reprinted from Kurt Weill, "Anmerkungen zu meiner Oper Mahagonny," *Die Musik* 22, no. 6 (March 1930): 440-41.]

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

Foreword to the Production Book of the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*

The subject matter of the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* made possible an organization according to purely musical precepts. For the form of the chronicle, which could be chosen here, is nothing other than a sequence of situations. Therefore, a new situation in the history of Mahagonny is introduced each time by an inscription, which produces the transition into the new scene in narrative form.

Two men and a woman, in flight from the authorities, break down in a desolate region. They decide to found a city where men who pass through from the Gold Coast would be able to fulfill their needs. In the "Paradise City" that arises here, people lead a contemplative idyllic life. But in the long run, that cannot satisfy the men from the Gold Coast. Discontent reigns. Prices drop. During the night when a typhoon moves toward the city, Jim Mahoney discovers the new law of the city. The law states: "You can do anything." The typhoon curves away. People live on according to the new law. The city flourishes. Demands increase — and prices with them. For people are permitted everything — but only if they can pay for it. When his money runs out, Jim Mahoney himself is condemned to death. His execution is the occasion for a gigantic demonstration against the high cost of living, which announces the end of the city.

That is the history of the city Mahagonny. It is presented in the loose form of a sequence of "morality-pictures of the twentieth century." It is an allegory of contemporary life. The main figure of the play is the city. It arises from the needs of men, and the needs of men are what cause its rise and fall. But we present the particular phases in the history of the city merely in their repercussions on man. For just as the wants of men influence the development of the city, so again the development of the city alters the conduct of men. Therefore, all the songs of this opera are an expression of the masses, even where they are performed by the individual as spokesman of the masses. In the beginning, the group of founders stands in contrast to the group of arrivals. At the end of the first act the group of supporters of the new law struggles against the group of opponents. The fate of the individual is depicted in passing only where it exemplifies the fate of the city.

To seek psychological or topical associations beyond these fundamental thoughts would be spurious. The name "Mahagonny" denotes only the concept of a city. It was chosen on the basis of its sound (phonetic basis). The geographic location of the city is unimportant.

We stress that it is not advisable to shift presentation of the work to the side of the ironic or grotesque. Since the incidents are not symbolic but typical, economy in the scenic means and in the expression of the individual actor commends itself most strongly. The dramatic conduct of the singers, the movement of the chorus, as well as the entire performance style of this opera, are principally defined by the style of the music. At no time is this music illustrative. It endeavors to concretize the behavior of people in the various situations that the rise and fall of the city bring about. This behavior of people is already so determined in the music that a simple, natural interpretation of the music indicates the style of performance. Therefore, the performer can also restrict himself to the simplest and most natural gestures.

In staging the opera, it must be continually taken into consideration that closed musical forms are present here. Therefore, an essential task is to guarantee the purely musical flow and to group the performers so that an almost concertante musical presentation is possible. The style of the work is neither naturalistic nor symbolic. Rather, it can be labeled as "real," for it shows life as it is represented in the sphere of art. Any exaggeration toward the pathetic or toward dance-like stylization is to be avoided.



Scene design for *Mahagonny* by Caspar Neher.

Caspar Neher's projection plates form a component of the production material. (Therefore, they should be sent to theaters along with the production notes.) These slides independently illustrate the scenic events with the means of the painter. They furnish illustrative material for the history of the city; the slides are projected successively on the screen during or between individual scenes. The performers play their scenes in front of this screen, and it suffices completely if only the most necessary requirements of the performers for the elucidation of their acting are employed here. In this opera it is not necessary to utilize complicated stage-machinery. More important are a few good projectors as well as skillful arrangement of the projection

surfaces, making it possible for the pictures as well as the explanatory inscriptions to be recognized clearly from all seats. The stage construction should be so simple that it can be transplanted just as well from the theater to any platform. The soloistic scenes should be played as near as possible to the spectators. Therefore, it is advisable not to deepen the orchestra pit, but to place the orchestra at the level of the first row of seats and to construct a platform from the stage into the orchestra area so that some scenes can be played in the midst of the orchestra.

[Translation by Kim H. Kowalke. Excerpt reprinted from Kurt Weill, "Vorwort zum Regiebuch der Oper *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*," *Anbruch: Monatsschrift für moderne Musik* 12, no. 1 (January 1930): 5-7.]

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

Mahagonny in Letters, 1927-1946

Weill Writes to Universal Edition, Lenya, and Maurice Abravanel

Illustrated with set and costume sketches by Caspar Neher



The following excerpts from letters, most published here for the first time, reveal Weill's deep involvement with *Mahagonny* — from collaborating with Brecht, to working with director Walter Brügmann on the concept of the premiere production, to influencing the casting of later productions. Throughout the writing of *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* Weill keeps his publishers informed of his progress and resists UE's advice to revert to a more traditional operatic style, especially following the commercial success of *Die Dreigroschenoper*. He explains his collaboration with Brecht and argues that his music tells the story of *Mahagonny* as much as the libretto does. The English translations of the Weill-UE correspondence are by Christopher Hailey.

Weill's letters to Lenya appear courtesy of the University of California Press, in advance of the publication of the entire correspondence scheduled for February 1996. *Speak Low (When You Speak Love): The Letters of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya* has been edited, translated, and annotated by Lys Symonette and Kim H. Kowalke.

Photocopies of the original letters from Weill to Maurice Abravanel were acquired in April 1995 by the Weill-Lenya Research Center from the Maurice Abravanel Papers (MS 517), Marriott Library, University of Utah. The English translations are by Lys Symonette.

Kurt Weill in Prerow to Universal Edition in Vienna, 16 August 1927

I have come here for a few days (until the beginning of next week) to continue work on my score in peace and at the same time to rest.

In explanation of yesterday's telegram I would like to add the following: several days ago I entered negotiations for a major stage production of *Mahagonny*. I was evasive since the matter wasn't terribly urgent.

Yesterday I received a similar offer, only in a decidedly more favorable setting. It is likewise a revue, but of a more serious artistic character with outstanding participants and excellent possibilities (a well-known Berlin theater, a famous director and with an extended run, not a one-sided agreement as with Piscator!). I think this would be the only possibility to exploit the Baden-Baden success effectively without hurting the chances of a later, longer *Mahagonny* opera(-etta). On the contrary, I am convinced that incorporating the Baden-Baden piece into this kind of major commercial revue would be excellent preparation for the opera. (In addition, there is the following possibility: after we premiere the large *Mahagonny* opera in a provincial theater, the same theater director would also produce it in a Berlin series performance.) You can easily see the possibilities for music sales ("Alabama Song"!!) with such a revue performance.

Ich bin für ein paar Tage (bis Anfang nächster Woche) hierhergefahren, um in Ruhe an meiner Partitur weiterarbeiten zu können und mich gleichzeitig etwas zu erholen.

Zur Erklärung des gestrigen Telegramms teile ich Ihnen folgendes mit: Schon vor mehreren Tagen hatte man mit mir über Aufführungen von *Mahagonny* im Rahmen einer grossen Ausstattungsrevue verhandelt. Ich hatte mich damals hinhaltend geäussert, zumal die Sache nicht unmittelbar akut war.

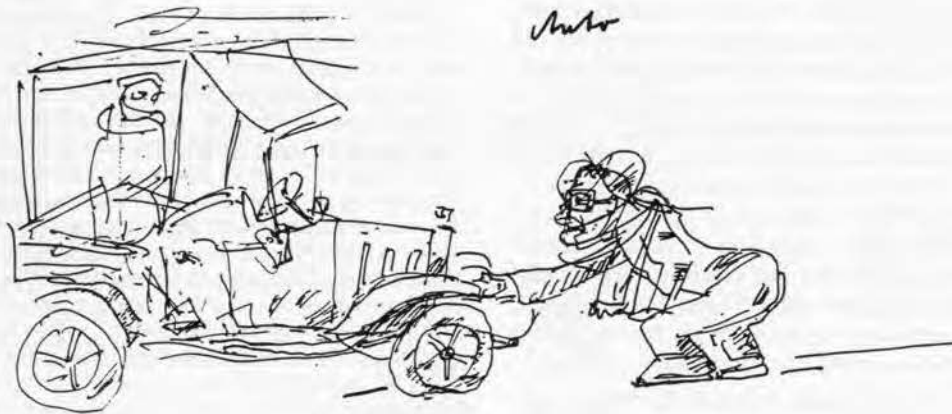
Gestern nun bekam ich ein ähnliches Angebot, nur mit bedeutend günstigeren Begleiterscheinungen. Es handelt sich ebenfalls um eine Revue, aber ernsthaften künstlerischen Charakters, mit hervorragenden Mitarbeitern und glänzenden Möglichkeiten (ein bekanntes Berliner Theater, berühmter Regisseur u.s.w., *Serienaufführung*, keine einseitige Festlegung wie bei Piscator!). Ich würde in einer solchen Aufführung die einzige Möglichkeit sehen, den Baden-Badener Erfolg äusserst wirkungsvoll auszunützen, ohne der Wirkung einer späteren grossen *Mahagonny*-Oper(-ette) Abbruch zu tun. Im Gegenteil bin ich überzeugt, dass eine solche Eingliederung des Baden-Badener Stückes in eine grosse Publikumsrevue die Oper glänzend vorbereiten würde. (Ausserdem ergibt sich folgende Möglichkeit: die gleiche Theaterdirektion würde die grosse *Mahagonny*-Oper, nachdem wir sie an einer Provinzoper zur Uraufführung gebracht haben, für eine Berliner Serienaufführung annehmen). Die Ausnutzungsmöglichkeiten des Notenverkaufs (*Alabama-Song*!!) bei einer solchen Revueaufführung sind ja für Sie klar ersichtlich.

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Universal Edition in Vienna, 25 August 1927

... The reason I am drawn to Brecht is, first of all, the strong interaction of my music with his poetry, which surprised all those in Baden-Baden who were competent to judge. But further I am convinced that the close collaboration of two equally productive individuals can lead to something fundamentally new. There can certainly be no doubt that at present a completely new form of stage work is evolving, one that is directed to a different and much larger audience and whose appeal will be unusually broad. This movement, whose strongest force in the spoken drama is Brecht, hasn't had any effect upon opera to date (except in *Mahagonny*), although music is one of its most essential elements. In long discussions with Brecht I have become convinced that his idea of an operatic text largely coincides with my own. The piece we are going to create won't exploit topical themes, which will be dated in a year, but rather will reflect the true tenor of our times. For that reason it will have an impact far beyond its own age. The task is to create a new genre that gives appropriate expression to the completely transformed manifestation of life in our time. You were able to observe in Baden-Baden that this art, in spite of its novelty, can have a sensational effect. I would be very happy to elaborate these possibilities for you on the basis of our drafts. ...

... Was mich zu Brecht hinzieht, ist zunächst das starke Ineinandergehen meiner Musik mit seiner Dichtung, das in Baden-Baden alle maßgebenden Beurteiler überrascht hat. Dann aber glaube ich bestimmt, daß aus der intensiven Zusammenarbeit zweier gleichermaßen produktiven Leute etwas grundlegend Neues entstehen kann. Es steht doch außer Zweifel, daß gegenwärtig eine völlig neue Art von Bühnenkunstwerk entsteht, das sich an ein anderes und ungleich größeres Publikum wendet, und dessen Wirkung in ganz ungewohnter Weise in die Breite gehen wird. Diese Bewegung, deren stärkster Faktor auf dem Gebiete des Schauspiels Brecht ist, hat bisher nirgends (außer in *Mahagonny*) auf die Oper übergegriffen, obwohl die Musik eines ihrer wesentlichsten Elemente ist. In langen Unterredungen mit Brecht habe ich die Ueberzeugung gewonnen, daß seine Ansichten von einem Operntext mit den meinen weitgehend übereinstimmen. Das Stück, das wir schaffen werden, wird nicht Aktualitäten ausnützen, die nach einem Jahr veraltet sind, sondern es will unsere Zeit in einer endgültigen Form gestalten. Daher wird seine Auswirkung sich weit über seine Entstehungszeit hinaus erstrecken. Es gilt eben das neue Genre zu schaffen, das die völlig veränderten Lebensäußerungen unserer Zeit in einer entsprechenden Form behandelt. Daß von dieser Kunst trotz ihrer Neuartigkeit eine durchschlagende Wirkung ausgeht, haben Sie in Baden-Baden beobachten können. Ich bin gern bereit, Ihnen diese Wirkungsmöglichkeiten an Hand unserer Entwürfe näher zu erläutern....



Kurt Weill in Berlin to Universal Edition in Vienna, 18 November 1927

... I am in the middle of work on *Mahagonny*. I am working with Brecht every day on the libretto, which is being shaped entirely according to my instructions. This kind of collaboration, in which a libretto is actually formed according to purely musical considerations, opens up entirely new prospects. I have already begun the composition. ...

... Ich bin mitten in der Arbeit an *Mahagonny*. Ich arbeite täglich mit Brecht am Textbuch, das vollständig nach meinen Angaben geformt wird. Diese Art der Zusammenarbeit, durch die ein Textbuch tatsächlich nach rein musikalischen Gesichtspunkten gestaltet wird, erschliesst ganz neue Möglichkeiten. Die Komposition ist bereits begonnen. ...

Emil Hertzka (Universal Edition) in Vienna to Kurt Weill in Berlin, 16 December 1927

Having received your letter of the 8th with the synopsis of *Mahagonny* I must candidly confess that I was a little disappointed by this outline. I had believed that it would be possible for you and Mr. Brecht to make the *Mahagonny* theme the basis for a symbolically conceived opera plot. What I see in the synopsis may well be a new opera style, but it is still just a series of scenes, admittedly sometimes very exciting and original, which could be the basis for a certain new kind of "opera revue." No doubt a good and interesting opera revue can be infinitely more worthwhile than a bad opera;

Im Besitze Ihres Schreibens vom 8.d.M. und der Inhaltsangabe von *Mahagonny* gestehe ich Ihnen offen, dass ich von diesem Exposé ein bisschen enttäuscht war. Ich hatte doch geglaubt, dass es Ihnen und Herrn Brecht gelungen sein wird, dem *Mahagonny*-Stoff eine symbolhafte fassbare Opernhandlung zugrunde zu legen. Das, was aber aus dem Exposé hervorgeht, ist ja zwar ein neuer Opernstil, der aber doch immerhin nur aneinandergereihte, allerdings manchmal sehr spannende und originelle Szenen bedeutet und gewissermassen einen neuen Typ "Opern-Revue" bilden kann. Es ist ja kein Zweifel, dass eine gute und interessante Opern-Revue noch immer unendlich viel wertvoller sein kann, als eine schlechte

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

but I believe it would have been possible to shape the Mahagonny theme and idea — which we have discussed often — into a plot that would surely have paved the way for the work without eliminating what you find so lively and attractive. The overly emphasized Wild West realism of this plot should be balanced with a measure of positive human qualities, whether friendship, love, loyalty and the lyrical effect which accompanies such things. Even if you write of a Mahagonny idyll and maybe have planned such a scene, boxing, murder, violence, drunkenness and the like still predominate and that might well prove hard to take for an entire evening. . . . It seems to me that Mahagonny, with its blood-red, rough and ready, but likewise single-thread plot, is the mirror image of [Delius's] pale, colorless and harmless series of scenes [in *Romeo and Julia*]. — I should be back in Berlin during the first half of January and would then very much like to discuss this matter together with you and Mr. Brecht. Naturally I have no desire to influence the two of you in your creative work; if you are both set on writing an opera revue and accept the joys and sorrows of this new genre, without laying particular value on material success, then there isn't much I can add. Of course even in this form I'll accept the work with great interest and will do my best for it. But if you keep in mind that the work must be performed in opera houses by personnel involved with other kinds of works and that you are appealing to an audience which, when it comes to the opera still brings with it certain (shall we say) traditional preconceptions, then all these things must somehow be taken into consideration. You cannot forget that there is a tremendous difference between producing a modern opera and a modern prose stage work. The stages that perform the dramatic works of Brecht, whom I very much admire, not only have actors familiar with and capable of communicating Brecht's radical expressionistic style, but also an audience that has in part been prepared for this style. Moreover, one should note that a theater can, indeed must produce 20 to 30 new works a year, that it is in a position to work without chorus, without orchestra, without conductor, mostly with stylized, inexpensive sets and costumes and, finally, that larger cities with only one opera house have 3 to 5 theaters, indeed very large cities have many, many more, so that such plays can expect far wider distribution than operas of a similar nature.

Since I certainly do not want to upset or insult Mr. Brecht, who made an excellent impression upon me in Baden-Baden, I ask you to tell him as tactfully as you can only so much of the contents of this letter as you consider absolutely essential.

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Universal Edition in Vienna, 27 December 1927

First of all I would like to thank you very much, dear Director Hertzka for your long letter. I, too, would like to postpone a detailed discussion of the questions you touched upon until our personal meeting in January. Today just this much: I never expected that you would find *Mahagonny* even in this form "lacking in action." If you consider that in Baden-Baden I succeeded in holding the audience in rapt attention for 25 minutes without the trace of a plot, I would think that an opera with a plot so logical and direct and with such a wealth of exciting individual incidents would seem enough. If I have worked with Brecht day after day for 3 months on shaping this libretto, then my own (this time very substantial) share of the work was directed almost entirely toward achieving the most logical, straightforward and easily comprehensible plot possible. The comparison with Delius's *Romeo and Julia* somewhat frightened me; the great shortcoming of this opera lies in the fact that it is—forgive the harsh word—boring. And I can tell you this

Oper; ich glaube aber, dass man den Mahagonny-Stoff und die Idee, die wir ja wiederholt besprochen haben — ohne dass das Lebendige, Ihnen so reizvoll Erscheinende hätte wegbleiben müssen, doch auch noch in eine Handlung, die dem Werke sicherlich die Wege ebenen würde, hätte formen können. In dieser Handlung hätte unbedingt als Gegengewicht zu der allzu stark betonten Wildwest-Realistik eine Dosis positiver menschlicher Eigenschaften, ob nun Freundschaft, Liebe, Treue und mit derartigen Dingen zusammenhängende lyrische Auswirkung gehört. Wenn Sie auch von einem Mahagonny-Idyll schreiben und ja vielleicht ein derartiges Bild auch vorgesehen haben, so überwiegt doch Boxkampf, Mord, Totschlag, Trunkenheit und dergl. und das könnte wohl für einen ganzen Abend schwer erträglich werden. . . . Ein Gegenbeispiel zu dieser blassen, farb- und harmlosen Szenenfolge scheint mir Mahagonny zu sein mit seiner immer blutroten und blutrünstigen, leider ebenfalls nur an einem Faden hängenden Handlung. — Ich glaube, in der ersten Jännerhälfte wieder in Berlin zu sein und möchte dann riesig gern mit Ihnen und Herrn Brecht zusammen diese Sache besprechen. Es liegt mir natürlich ganz ferne, Sie beide in Ihrem Schaffen beeinflussen zu wollen; wenn Sie beide eine Opern-Revue schreiben wollen und die Freuden und Leiden dieses neuen Genres auf sich nehmen, ohne auf die materielle Auswirkung besonderen Wert zu legen, dann ist ja von meiner Seite nicht viel hinzuzufügen. Ich akzeptiere das Werk selbstverständlich auch in dieser Form mit freudigem Interesse und werde das Bestmögliche für Sie herausholen. Wenn Sie aber doch daran denken, dass das Werk an Opernbühnen von einem auch in anders gearteten Werken beschäftigten Personal gespielt werden soll und dass Sie auch an ein Publikum appellieren, das, wenn es in ein Opernhaus kommt, doch immerhin gewisse (sagen wir) traditionelle Verstellungen mitbringt, so müssen alle diese Dinge irgendwie berücksichtigt werden. Sie dürfen nicht vergessen, dass zwischen der Herausbringung eines modernen Opernwerkes zwischen der eines modernen Prosa-Bühnenwerkes ein kolossaler Unterschied besteht. Die Bühnen, die die dramatischen Werke des von mir ausserordentlich geschätzten Dichters Brecht aufführen, haben nicht nur ein Schauspiel-Personal, das den radikal-expressionistischen Stil von Brecht versteht und glücklich zum Ausdruck bringen kann, sondern auch ein Publikum, das heute schon zum Teil auf diesen Stil eingestellt ist. Überdies ist zu bemerken, dass eine Schauspielbühne jährlich 20-30 Neuerscheinungen herausbringen kann, ja sogar muss, dass sie in der Lage ist, ohne Chor, ohne Orchester, ohne Dirigenten, meistens mit stilisierten billigen Ausstattungen zu arbeiten und dass schliesslich grössere Städte, die eine Opernbühne haben, 3 bis 5, ja in den ganz grossen Städten auch noch weit mehr, Schauspielbühnen besitzen, sodass derartige Schauspiele eine ganz andere Verbreitung finden können als gleichgeartete Opernwerke.

Da ich Herrn Brecht, der auf mich in Baden-Baden einen ganz ausgezeichneten Eindruck gemacht hat, in keiner Weise verstimmen oder kränken möchte, bitte ich Sie, ihm von dem Inhalt dieses Schreibens nur insoweit und in der allerletzten Form Mitteilung zu machen, als Sie es für unerlässlich erachten.

Ich möchte zunächst Ihnen, sehr geehrter Herr Direktor Hertzka, für Ihr ausführliches Schreiben herzlich danken. Eine nähere Erörterung der darin angeschnittenen Fragen möchte auch ich der mündlichen Besprechung im Januar überlassen. Heute nur soviel: ich hatte nicht erwartet, dass Ihnen Mahagonny auch in dieser Form noch zu "handlungsarm" erscheinen würde. Wenn Sie bedenken, dass es mir in Baden-Baden gelungen ist, den Hörer ohne eine Spur von Handlung 25 Minuten lang in erregtester Spannung zu erhalten, so müsste Ihnen für die Oper eine derartig logisch und gradlinig durchgeführte Handlung und eine solche Fülle spannender Einzelvorgänge doch als ausreichend erscheinen. Wenn ich 3 Monate lang Tag für Tag mit Brecht zusammen an der Gestaltung dieses Librettos gearbeitet habe, so bestand mein eigener diesmal sehr starker Anteil an dieser Arbeit fast ausschliesslich darin, eine möglichst konsequente, gradlinige und leicht verständliche Handlung zu erreichen. Der Vergleich mit Delius' *Romeo und Julia* hat mich ein bisschen erschreckt; denn der grosse Nachteil dieser Oper besteht ja darin, dass sie—entschuldigen Sie das harte Wort—langweilig ist.

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

much already, that there won't be so much as one moment of boredom in *Mahagonny*. However, in the operatic style I am establishing here, music has a much more fundamental role than in the purely story-line opera, since I am replacing the earlier bravura aria with a new kind of popular song. As a result I can completely allay any fears you may have that this work is somehow derived from a spoken play. With great difficulty I have succeeded in getting Brecht to the point where he was actually challenged by the task of writing a text to suit musical requirements, and I have examined every word with an eye to the demands of the opera stage. It is the first libretto in years that is fully dependent upon music, indeed upon my music. — I found it very interesting that you detected a preponderance of raw, grim elements over simpler, human emotions. That gave me pause for thought and I am already busy with a change by which the Jimmy-Jenny love story will be given greater emphasis.

Hans Heinsheimer in Vienna to Kurt Weill in Berlin, 10 October 1929

... The situation in which you currently find yourself is not simple. The style established in *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Happy End* and which is also continued in *Mahagonny* — whose most significant portions stem from the very period in which this style emerged — this style, and we are all in agreement about this, cannot be copied indefinitely. If I assess its place in your development correctly, it is, as it were, the breakthrough to a popular, simple musical style that radically liberated you from the sphere of the style evident in, say, *Frauentanz*. But in the long run this song style can serve only as a springboard for you to find your way back to more profound and substantial musical creations, and I want to say at this point that I received a joyous shock when I played through the new scene from *Mahagonny* [the "Crane Duet"]. Here, dear friend Weill, is what I've been waiting and frequently calling for, namely, the synthesis between the melodic and rhythmic wealth of your fantasy, which was freed by the song technique and made broadly accessible, and the shaping and forming which bear the mark of artistic responsibility on a truly high plane. This is the reason I consider this scene in *Mahagonny* so especially important. Here you are bringing the style of 1928 to a close, here the new sound of the coming years becomes audible, that sound which I believe is created out of a new romanticism, a new longing, a new search for the "unattainable," in short, an emotional domain which must fully embrace the new objectivity in order to overcome it. ...

... You should and must free yourself once and for all from the kind of commercialized artistic activity practiced in Berlin, and now that your latest successes have secured for you not only material but also artistic independence and freedom and now that precisely these successful popular works have freed you from literary and artistic thickets, you must once again create works of lasting value.

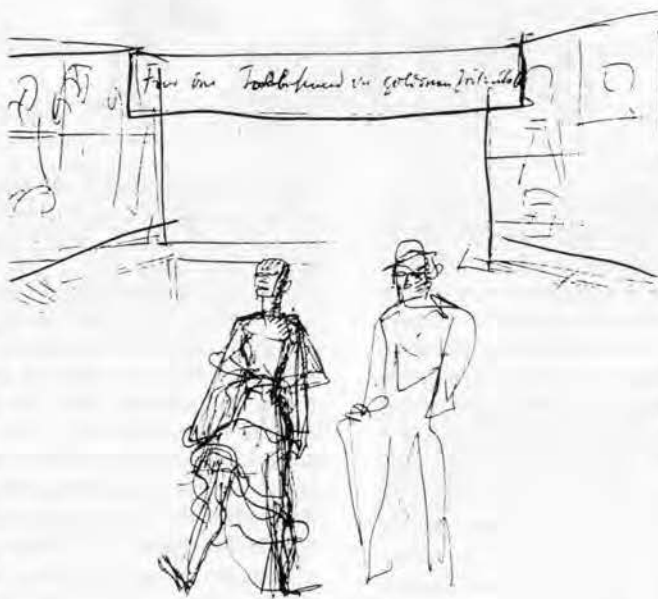
Und soviel kann ich Ihnen schon jetzt versichern, dass in *Mahagonny* auch nicht einen Moment lang Langeweile auftreten wird. Allerdings hat in dem Opernstil, den ich hier begründe, die Musik eine weit wesentlichere Rolle, als in der reinen Handlungsooper, da ich an die Stelle der früheren Bravourarie eine neue Art von Schlager setze. Infolgedessen kann ich Sie auch vollständig beruhigen, wenn Sie befürchten, dass das Stück irgendwie von der Sprechbühne herkomme. Ich habe mit vieler Mühe Brecht so weit gebracht, dass es ihn gerade reizte, einen Text rein für die Bedürfnisse der Musik zu schreiben, und jedes Wort darin ist von mir auf die Erfordernisse der Opernbühne hin geprüft worden. Es ist seit langen Jahren zum erstenmal ein Libretto, das vollkommen auf die Musik, ja sogar auf meine Musik angewiesen ist. — Sehr interessant war für mich, dass Sie ein Überwiegen der rohen, grausamen Elemente gegenüber einfachen menschlichen Regungen feststellen. Das hat mich sehr zum Nachdenken angeregt und ich beschäftige mich bereits mit einer Änderung, durch die die Liebeshandlung Jimmy-Jenny stärker in den Vordergrund rückt.

... Die Situation, in der Sie augenblicklich sich befinden ist nicht einfach. Der Stil, der in der *Dreigroschenoper* und in *Happy End* festgelegt war und der auch in *Mahagonny*, dessen wichtigste Teile ja aus der selben Zeit stammen, in der dieser Stil entstanden ist, beibehalten bleibt, dieser Stil ist, darüber sind wir uns ja alle einig, nicht auf die Dauer kopierbar. Er ist, wenn ich ihn in der Entwicklung Ihrer Person richtig beurteile, gleichsam der Durchbruch zu einem populären einfachen Musikstil, der Sie aus dem

Bezirk jenes Darstellungsstiles, der etwa in *Frauentanz* aufscheint, radikal gelöst hat. Auf die Dauer gesehen wird aber dieser Songstil nur die Plattform bilden, auf der Sie nun doch wieder zu tieferen und wesentlicheren musikalischen Schöpfungen zurückfinden und ich habe, dass will ich bei dieser Gelegenheit sagen, mit geradezu freudigem Schreck die neue Szene aus *Mahagonny* durchgespielt ["Kranische Duett"]. Hier, lieber Freund Weill, trifft das ein, was ich immer in der letzten Zeit erwartet und ausgesprochen habe, nämlich die Synthese zwischen dem durch die Songtechnik gelockerten und dem Verständnis der Allgemeinheit erschlossenen melodischen und rhythmischen Gut Ihrer Phantasie und zwischen der Gestaltung und Formung, die das Kennzeichen wirklicher auf hoher Warte stehender künstlerischer Verantwortung trägt. Aus diesem Grunde halte ich diese Szene in *Mahagonny* für so besonders wesentlich. Hier machen Sie mit dem Stil von 1928 Schluss, hier wird der neue Klang der nächsten Jahre hörbar,

jener Klang, den ich mir gebildet denke aus einer neuen Romantik, einer neuen Sehnsucht, einem neuen Suchen nach dem "Unerreichbaren," kurz einer Gefühlswelt, welche die neue Sachlichkeit ganz begreifen musste, um sie nun aber zu überwinden. ...

... Sie sollen und müssen endlich aus der industriellen Kunstbetätigung, die in Berlin geübt wird, wieder loskommen, Sie müssen wieder nachdem Sie durch die Erfolge Ihrer letzten Arbeiten nicht nur materiell, sondern auch künstlerisch sich ganz unabhängig und frei gemacht haben und nachdem Sie sich gerade durch diese erfolgreichen populären Werke aus literarischen und artistischen Gestrüpp ganz befreit haben, wieder Werke schaffen, die wirklich bestehen können, die nicht für den Augenblick als Begleitmusik für Schauspiele gemacht sind, sondern die die grosse Linie wieder einhalten, die ich immer in all Ihren Stücken gesehen habe. ...

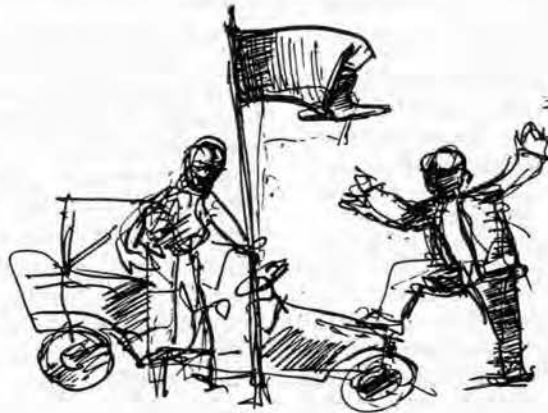


Building the City of ... MAHAGONNY

... I was pleased that you were so accurate in recognizing the essence of the stylistic transformation I'm undergoing. (For there are not many who notice it.) But one must date the beginning of this stylistic transformation much earlier than you do. By far the greater part of *Mahagonny* is already entirely independent of the song style and reveals this new style, which in seriousness, "stature," and expressive power surpasses everything I've written to date. Almost everything that has been added to the Baden-Baden version is written in a completely pure, thoroughly responsible style, which I'm convinced will endure longer than most of what is produced today. *Happy End*, too, has been completely misunderstood in this regard. Pieces like the great "Heilsarmee-marsch" and the "Matrosenlied" go far beyond the song character, and the music as a whole represents a formal, instrumental, and melodic development so far beyond *Die Dreigroschenoper* that only helpless ignoramuses like the German critics could miss it. At issue here is a major evolution which hasn't stood still for one moment and which, as you correctly note, has made another new advance in the new *Mahagonny* scene and in the *Lindberghflug*. We must not be misled into trivializing what was achieved through *Die Dreigroschenoper*—achieved not only for my music, but for musical life in general—just because some of my new works happen to be badly mounted in a bad play. From our standpoint the fact that my *Dreigroschenoper* music has been commercialized doesn't speak against it, but for it, and we would be falling back into our old mistakes if we were to deny certain music its importance and artistic value simply because it found its way to the masses. You are right: I cannot copy this song style indefinitely and with the works since *Mahagonny* I've demonstrated that I have no intention of copying it. But we cannot deny that this style has set a precedent and that today more than half of the young composers of the most diverse backgrounds make their living from it. That's why it's very easy for the general public to overlook the fact that I myself, who defined this style only a year ago, have in the meantime quietly continued on my own path.

On one point, however, I cannot concur with you: ... Do you really believe one can dismiss with the expression "commercialized artistic activity" the achievements which make Berlin today's unrivalled theatrical capital of Europe? And do you really believe one can apply this description to what I do? For years now I have been the only creative musician who has worked consistently and uncompromisingly in the face of opposition from the snobs and aesthetes toward the creation of fundamental forms of a new, simple, popular musical theater. Even the least significant of my music theater works during this time has been written with this sense of responsibility, in a continuing effort to further what I consider the only possible development. Is that commercialized artistic activity? Wouldn't it be much easier (and commercially much more profitable) if, like most of the others, I were to carry on and vary the traditional opera style a little further and adapt myself from the outset to the taste and mentality of the provincial opera-goer? ...

... Ich habe mich vor allem gefreut, dass Sie das Wesen der Stilwandlung, in der ich mich befinde, so richtig erkannt haben. (Es gibt nämlich nicht viel Leute, die das merken). Nur ist der Zeitpunkt dieser Stilwandlung viel früher anzusetzen, als Sie es tun. Schon der weitaus überwiegende Teil von *Mahagonny* ist doch bereits von dem Songstil völlig losgelöst und zeigt schon diesen neuen Stil, der an Ernst, an "Grösse" und an Ausdruckskraft alles übertrifft, was ich bisher gemacht habe. Fast alles was zu der Baden-Badener Fassung neu hinzugekommen ist, ist in einem vollkommen reinen, durchaus verantwortungsbewussten Stil geschrieben, von dem ich fest annehme, dass er länger bestehen wird, als das meiste was heute produziert wird. Auch *Happy End* ist in dieser Beziehung völlig verkannt worden. Stücke wie der grosse Heilsarmee-marsch und das Matrosenlied gehen über den Songcharakter weit hinaus, und die ganze Musik stellt formal, instrumental und melodisch eine so deutliche Weiterführung über die *Dreigroschenoper*



hinaus dar, dass nur so hilflose Ignoranten wie die deutschen Kritiker es übersehen konnte. Es handelt sich hier um eine grosse Entwicklung, die bisher keinen Moment lang stehen geblieben ist, und die, wie Sie richtig erkennen, jetzt in der neuen *Mahagonny*-Szene und im *Lindberghflug* wieder einen neuen Vorstoss gemacht hat. Wir dürfen uns auch nicht dazu verleiten lassen, das was durch die *Dreigroschenoper* nicht nur für meine, sondern für die allgemeine musikalische Situation erreicht worden ist, jetzt zu bagatellisieren, weil meine neuen Arbeiten zufällig einmal in einem schlechten Stück schlecht

eingebaut waren. Dass meine Musik zur *Dreigroschenoper* industrialisiert worden ist, spricht ja nach unserem Standpunkt nicht gegen sondern für sie, und wir würden in unsere alten Fehler zurückfallen, wenn wir einer Musik ihren künstlerischen Wert und ihre Bedeutung absprechen würden, nur weil sie den Weg zur Menge gefunden hat. Sie haben recht: für mich ist dieser Songstil auf die Dauer nicht kopierbar, und ich habe durch meine Arbeiten seit *Mahagonny* bewiesen, dass ich nicht die Absicht habe, ihn zu kopieren. Aber wir können nicht verkennen, dass dieser Stil Schule gemacht hat, und dass heute mehr als die Hälfte der jungen Komponisten der verschiedensten Richtungen davon leben. Daher übersieht die Allgemeinheit sehr leicht, dass ich selbst, der erst vor einem Jahr diesen Stil geprägt hat, unterdessen in aller Ruhe meinen Weg weitergegangen bin. Sie sehen also, dass Ihre Ausführungen sich im Endziel vollkommen mit meinen eigenen Anschauungen decken.

In einem Punkt allerdings kann ich mich Ihrer Meinung nicht anschliessen: ... Glauben Sie wirklich, dass man diese Leistungen, die Berlin heute zur unumstritten ersten Theaterstadt Europas gemacht haben, mit dem Ausdruck industrielle Kunstbetätigung abtun kann? Und glauben Sie wirklich, dass man diesen Ausdruck auf das anwenden kann, was ich mache? Ich arbeite seit Jahren als einziger schaffender Musiker konsequent und konzessionslos, gegen den Widerstand der Snobs und der Aestheten, an der Schaffung von Urformen eines neuen, einfachen, volkstümlichen musikalischen Theaters. Auch die geringfügigste Theaterarbeit, die ich in dieser Zeit gemacht habe, ist unter dem Gefühl dieser Verantwortung entstanden, unter ständigem Bemühen, eine Entwicklung, die mir die einzig mögliche erscheint, weiterzutreiben. Ist das industrielle Kunstbetätigung? Und wäre es nicht viel leichter (und industriell viel einträglicher), wenn ich ebenfalls wie die meisten den überkommenen Opernstil ein wenig weiterführen und variieren und mich von vornherein auf den Geschmack und auf die Geistigkeit eines provinziellen Operanbesuchers einstellen würde? ...

Building the City of ... MAHAGONNY

... Already after *Happy End* my friends pointed out that the use of American names for *Mahagonny* might be dangerous since the Jimmys, Jackys, Bills, etc. have already appeared in many works and might tend to establish a completely false impression of a kind of Americanism, Wild West or the like. I have been worrying for weeks about these old and confusing names, and I am very happy that together with Brecht I've now found a very good solution—and just when Brecht, too, brought this danger to my attention. So in Leipzig and in other cities we will already perform *Mahagonny* with largely German names, and I ask that you paste in a notice with the following text in the piano score (where the orchestra scoring is given), as well as in the librettos:

Since the human pleasures which are to be had for money are everywhere and at all times the same and since the pleasure city Mahagonny is international in the broadest sense, the names of the protagonists can be altered to suit the appropriate locale. It is therefore recommended, for instance, that for the German performances the following names be used:

Instead of Fatty	Willy
" Jim Mahonney	Johann Ackermann (also Hans)
" Jack O'Brien	Jakob Grün
" Bill	Sparbüchsenheinrich (also Heinz)
" Joe	Josef Lettner, called Alaskawolffjo.

... Schon nach *Happy End* machten mich meine Freunde darauf aufmerksam, dass die Verwendung amerikanischer Namen für *Mahagonny* eine Gefahr bedeutet, da unterdessen die Jimmys, Jackys, Bills usw. schon in vielen Stücken vorkamen und die Gefahr einer Festlegung auf völlig falsche Begriffe von Amerikanismus, Wildwest oder dergl. in sich schliessen. Schon seit Wochen haben mich diese abgenützten und missverständlichen Namen mit schwerer Sorge erfüllt, und ich bin sehr froh, dass ich jetzt mit Brecht eine sehr günstige Lösung gefunden habe, und zwar zur gleichen Zeit, als auch Brecht mich auf die gleiche Gefahr aufmerksam machte. Wir werden also bereits in Leipzig und in den anderen Städten *Mahagonny* mit grösstenteils deutschen Namen geben, und ich bitte Sie, in die Klavierauszüge (etwa dort wo die Orchester bestzung steht) sowie in die Textbücher einen Zettel folgenden Wortlauts einzukleben:

Da die menschlichen Vergnügungen, die für Geld zu haben sind, einander immer und überall aufs Haar gleichen, da die Vergnügungsstadt Mahagonny also im weitesten Sinne international ist, können die Namen der Helden in jeweils landesübliche umgeändert werden. Es empfiehlt sich daher, etwa für deutsche Aufführungen folgende Namen zu wählen:

Statt Fatty	Willy
" Jim Mahonney	Johann Ackermann (auch: Hans)
" Jack O'Brien	Jakob Grün
" Bill	Sparbüchsenheinrich (auch Heinz)
" Joe	Josef Lettner, genannt Alaskawolffjo.

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Lotte Lenya in St. Moritz, [31 January 1930]

... I was so busy all the time in Leipzig that I could hardly spend an hour with my parents. We worked only with Brüggmann. At first he seemed really dumb, so that first evening we were quite desperate. Then suddenly he got excited when the word "masks" came up. Finally he saw the light (insofar as he could, being such a jackass). The outcome: we'll play the entire piece with masks, completely rigid ones made to fit the facial form of each performer. Of course, that will be a great advantage. Since we're committed to go through with this, it could actually turn out to be the most modern theatrical performance, because for years everyone has talked about using masks, but nobody has done it. And they will really hamstring those over-emoting singers. I had a marvelous idea right away: in the end, the "Gott in Mahagonny" must tear the masks off the men's faces. After that the revolution starts. (Isn't that beautiful?) By the way, the casting seems to be very good. [Marga] Dannenberg is doing Begbick; she's actually the biggest personality in Leipzig. Jim has also been cast well [Paul Beinert]. The set will look great. ...

... In Leipzig habe ich unausgesetzt zu tun gehabt, sodass ich nur eine knappe Stunde bei meinen Eltern war. Wir haben ausschliesslich mit Brüggmann gearbeitet. Er hat sich zuerst entsetzlich doof angestellt sodass wir am ersten Abend ganz verzweifelt waren. Dann hat er plötzlich Feuer gefangen, als das Wort "Masken" fiel. Da ging ihm (soweit das bei einem solchen Esel überhaupt möglich ist) plötzlich der Knopf aus. Das Ergebnis: wir spielen das ganze Stück in Masken, die genau nach der Gesichtsform der einzelnen Darsteller hergestellt werden, sodass sie keine andere Aufgabe erfüllen, als die, das Gesicht der Darsteller vollkommen unbeweglich zu machen. Das ist natürlich ein Riesengewinn. Da wir es ganz konsequent durchführen wollen, kann es tatsächlich die modernste Theateraufführung werden, denn alle Leute reden seit Jahren von Masken, und niemand hat es gemacht. Und den Spilastikern sind auf die Weise noch mehr die Hände gebunden. Ich habe gleich einen herrliche Einfall gehabt: am Schluss muss der "Gott in Mahagonny" den Männern die Masken vom Gesicht nehmen. Daraufhin bricht der Aufstand aus. (Ist das nicht schön?). Die Besetzung scheint übrigens sehr gut zu sein. Die Begbick macht die Danneberg, das ist tatsächlich die stärkste Persönlichkeit Leipzigs. Auch Jim ist jetzt gut besetzt. Die Bühne wird sehr schön aussehen. ...



Building the City of ... MAHAGONNY

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Maurice Abravanel, 2 February 1930

... Just between the two of us: I am afraid that Geis leans strongly toward the literary aspect of the production. I hope you don't run into the same mistake for which you yourself have blamed the Leipzig performance of *Der Zar*. *Mahagonny* is an opera. An opera for singers. To cast it with actors is absolutely impossible. Only when I specifically have marked it as "spoken" should there be any spoken words and any kind of changes are possible only with my explicit permission. ...

... Unter uns gesagt: ich habe Angst, dass Geis die Aufführung nach der literarischen Seite abbiegen will. Hoffentlich kommt ihr nicht in den Fehler, den du der Leipziger Aufführung des *Zaren* zum Vorwurf machst! *Mahagonny* ist eine Oper, eine Gesangsoper. Eine Besetzung mit Schauspielern ist so gut wie unmöglich. Es darf nur das gesprochen werden, was ich als gesprochen notiert habe, und irgendwelche Änderungen sind nur mit meinem Einverständnis möglich. ...

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Lenya in St. Moritz, 3 February 1930

... Last night I had a date with Hesse and La Hauptmann [Elisabeth Hauptmann], who, for a change, are closely united once more. La H. hasn't taken a bath for at least 3 weeks and looked like puke. We kidded her terribly. I said that all anyone called her in Berlin was Royalty-Sadie, and that whenever she entered a theater, the dramaturgs would yell, "Hurry, put your plays away, La Hauptmann is coming to adapt them." Lipmann laughed himself sick. ...

... Gestern abend war ich mit Hesse und der Hauptmann verabredet, die zur Abwechslung wieder einmal ganz eng liiert sind. Die H. hat sich jetzt mindestens 3 Wochen nicht gewaschen und sah zum Kotzen aus. Wir haben sie furchtbar aufgezo-gen. Ich habe gesagt, man nenne sie in Berlin nur noch die Tantiemensaidie und wenn sie in ein Theater käme, so rufen die Dramaturgen: "Schnell die Stücke weg, die Hauptmann kommt zum Bearbeiten". Lipmann hat sich krummgelacht. ...

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Universal Edition in Vienna, 14 March 1930

... The effect of the *Mahagonny* affair has been enormous. The press is not at all unfavorable. Even in the negative reviews there is a sense of awe for a great theatrical event and a certain fear of being left behind. I am firmly convinced that this 9th of March has finally led to a clear-cut parting of the ways which will set the tone for the musical life of the next few years. The scandal, the attitude of the press, the enthusiastic letters I've received, everything together has finally convinced me that the path I've chosen is correct and that it is out of the question to give up this path just because its beginnings happen to run into a strand of the fiercest cultural reaction and, like all great innovations, encounter violent opposition. ...

... Die Auswirkung der *Mahagonny*-Sache ist enorm. Die Presse ist ja keineswegs ungünstig. Selbst aus den ablehrenden Kritiken spricht noch der Respekt vor einem grossen Theaterereignis und die Angst vor der Blamage. Ich bin fest überzeugt, dass dieser 9. März endlich eine reinliche Scheidung der Geister herbeigeführt hat, die das Musikleben der nächsten Jahre bestimmen wird. Der Skandal, die Einstellung der Presse, die begeisterten Briefe, die ich bekomme, alles zusammen hat mich endgültig überzeugt, dass der von mir eingeschlagene Weg richtig ist, und dass es für mich überhaupt nicht in Frage kommen kann, diesen Weg aufzugeben, weil seine Anfänge zufällig in eine Strähne schwerster Kulturreaktion kommen und daher, wie alle grossen Neuerungen, auf schweren Widerstand stossen. ...

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Maurice Abravanel, 7 May 1930

... People who know only the libretto have spread the rumor that *Mahagonny* could be cast with actors. Of course, that would be absolutely impossible; in any case I want to implore you, in case you discuss this with Rothe, to protest most energetically the kind of casting that would ruin the music for sure. In your own interest see to it that you discuss this with Rothe. Perhaps you can already come to some kind of an agreement with him or at any rate let him know whether and when you would be available.

... Es hat sich hier bei Leuten, die nur das Textbuch kennen, die Ansicht verbreitet, *Mahagonny* könne mit Schauspielern besetzt werden. Das wäre natürlich ganz unmöglich, und ich möchte auch dich bitten, falls du mit Rothe darüber sprichst, dich ganz energisch gegen eine Besetzung auszusprechen, durch die die Musik beeinträchtigt werden würde. Sieh jedenfalls zu (in deinem Interesse), dass du Rothe sprichst. Vielleicht kannst du schon etwas mit ihm vereinbaren oder ihm jedenfalls sagen, ob und wann du frei sein könntest. ...

Kurt Weill in Berlin to Universal Edition in Vienna, 21 October 1930

... The Frankfurt premiere, as you could see from the papers, was a tremendous, unanimous success. Prof. Turnau, the city fathers, and all involved were agreed that there would be a run like the *Land des Lächelns*. The premiere was completely sold out, stalls full of dinner and smoking jackets, one felt how, after only a quarter hour, the resistance, which was artificially fanned, completely disappeared, then there was frequent applause with open curtain — after the first act 12, at the end 23 curtain calls (at the Frankfurt Opera 5-6 curtain calls is already considered a success!). So it has been absolutely proven (namely with the most stolid, old-fashioned opera audience in Germany), that in the present version *Mahagonny* has extraordinary potential for success and can pass

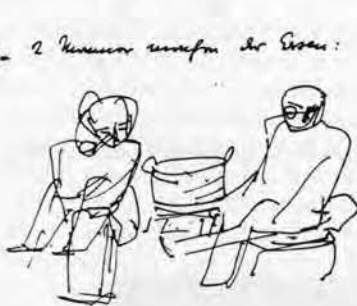
... Die Frankfurter Premiere war, wie Sie ja aus den Zeitungen entnehmen konnten ein einmütiger grosser Erfolg. Prof. Turnau, die städt. Dezerenten und alle Beteiligten waren sich darüber einig, dass es eine Serie wie bei *Land des Lächelns* geben würde. Die Premiere war vollständig ausverkauft, ein Parkett von Fräcken und Smokings, man spürte, wie schon nach einer Viertelstunde der Widerstand, der künstlich geschürt worden war, völlig verschwand, dann gab es mehrfach Applaus bei offener Szene, nach dem 1. Akt 12 und am Schluss 23 Vorhänge (5-6 Vorhänge hält man in der Frankfurter Oper schon für einen Erfolg!). Es ist also eindeutig erwiesen (nämlich an dem stumpfsten und altmodischsten Opernpublikum Deutschlands), dass *Mahagonny* in der vorliegenden Fassung ganz ausserordentliche Erfolgsmöglichkeiten hat und vor jedem Publikum bestehen kann

Building the City of ... MAHAGONNY

the test with any audience (see the *Frankfurter Zeitung*). By the way, this version has great dramaturgic advantages over the earlier version, the whole thing is clearer and more cohesive. However, I don't want there to be any question that the somewhat lessened impact was in any way the result of our arrangement (which in reality is none at all), but rather due to the somewhat apprehensive, indecisive and (between us) not exactly overwhelming performance in Frankfurt. Of special interest are the reviews in the *Frankfurt Zentrum* paper, the *Rhein-Mainische Zeitung* (2 long feuilletons on 18 and 20 October). A Catholic paper here is entirely positive and truly enthusiastic about the work and finds that even, or precisely the Catholic must say yes to the content of *Mahagonny*. This review is very important for the Rheinland, and you should take special advantage of it. I am enclosing it, but ask you please to return it right away.

Naturally it was a real stroke of bad luck that the second performance in Frankfurt was disturbed by the Nazis. This scandal was naturally not in any way directed against the work. . . .

Die 2 Personen umgeben der Essen:



(s.*Frankfurter Zeitung*). Diese Fassung hat übrigens dramaturgisch gegenüber der früheren Fassung grosse Vorteile, das Ganze wirkt klarer und geschlossener. Ich möchte allerdings keinen Zweifel darüber lassen, dass die etwas gemilderte Wirkung keineswegs durch unsere Bearbeitung (die ja in Wirklichkeit gar keine ist) entstanden ist, sondern durch die etwas ängstliche, unentschiedene und (unter uns gesagt) nicht gerade überwältigende Aufführung in Frankfurt. Von ganz besonderem Interesse ist übrigens die Kritik in dem *Frankfurter Zentrumsblatt*, der *Rhein-Mainischen Zeitung* (2 grosse Feuilletons am 18. und 20. Okt). Hier nimmt ein katholisches Blatt in absolut positiver, geradezu begeisterter Form Stellung zu dem Werk und stellt fest, dass auch der katholische Mensch oder gerade er zu dem Inhalt der *Mahagonny*-Oper ja sagen muss. Diese Kritik ist für das Rheinland sehr wichtig und sollte von Ihnen besonders ausgenutzt werden. Ich schicke sie einliegend mit, bitte aber sehr, sie mir sofort zurückzuschicken.

Es ist natürlich ein ausgemachtes Pech, dass die 2. Aufführung in Frankfurt von Nazis gestört wurde. Dieser Skandal richtete sich natürlich in keiner Weise gegen das Werk. . . .



Kurt Weill in Berlin to Universal Edition in Vienna, 25 October 1930

. . . A clipping from the *B.Z.* is also important material for a clarification of the Frankfurt scandal. It becomes apparent what kind of people (butchers and train robbers) will now decide the fate of art works in Germany. The democratic press placidly follows these goings on. They print sensational reports about the scandal, but have no opinion about it. Everyone knows that this situation is intolerable, but no one dares to say anything, let alone write about it. . . .

. . . Ein Ausschnitt aus der *B.Z.* ist ebenfalls wichtiges Material für eine Bereinigung des Frankfurter Skandals. Es zeigt sich hier, welche Leute (Schlächter und Eisenbahndiebe) von jetzt an in Deutschland über das Schicksal von Kunstwerken entscheiden sollen. Die demokratische Presse sieht seelenruhig diesem Treiben zu. Sie bringt den Skandal als Sensationsnachricht, aber sie nimmt nicht Stellung dazu. Jeder weiss, dass diese Zustände unerträglich sind, aber keiner traut es sich zu sagen oder gar zu schreiben.

Hans Heinsheimer (Universal Edition) in Vienna to Kurt Weill in Berlin, 27 October 1930

Many thanks for your letter of 25 October. In the meantime the third performance in Frankfurt took place with no trouble whatsoever and this Wednesday is the fourth performance. In the city parliament there was quite an uproar. However, we are quite convinced that now, right after the election and after their unfortunate debut in Berlin, the Nazis will be distinguishing themselves everywhere and that it won't last long. In this regard our old friend Götze in Oldenburg, to whom I had already sent a report about Frankfurt, writes us today about postponing his performance until January, which I fully support. . . .

Schönsten Dank für Ihren Brief vom 25 Oktober. In Frankfurt hat ja inzwischen die 3. Aufführung vollständig ruhig stattgefunden und diesen Mittwoch ist die 4. Aufführung. Im Stadtparlament hat man energisch den Mund aufgemacht. Wir sind uns doch ganz darüber klar, dass die Herren Nazi's jetzt unmittelbar nach der Wahl und nachdem sie in Berlin wenig glücklich debütiert haben, überall sich hervortun werden und dass das nicht lange dauern wird. In diesem Zusammenhange schreibt uns heute unser Freund Götze in Oldenburg, dem ich schon wegen Frankfurt berichtet hatte, wegen einer Verlegung seiner Aufführung auf Januar, für die ich unbedingt bin. . . .

Alfred Schlee (Universal Edition) to Kurt Weill in New York, 26 September 1946

. . . During the Nazi period some other employees of the Universal Edition . . . were with me, trying very hard to save what was there. Unfortunately we could not prevent the Gestapo from confiscating and taking away some things. To my greatest regret *Mahagonny* was one of those things. Since there would be possible performances for this work right now, especially in the first version, we would like to ask you whether you possess any material. If so, please do send it to us as soon as possible. . . .

. . . Während der Nazizeit waren mit mir noch einige Beamte in der Universal-Edition (insbesondere Frl. Rothe und Herr Decsey), die sich alle Mühe gegeben haben, wenigstens den Bestand zu retten. Leider konnten wir nicht verhindern, dass einiges doch von der Gestapo beschlagnahmt und weggeführt wurde. Dazu gehört zu meinem grossen Bedauern *Mahagonny*. Da für dieses Werk, insbesondere in der ersten Fassung, jetzt wieder Aufführungsmöglichkeiten bestünden, bitte ich Sie um eine nachricht, ob Sie irgendwelches Material davon besitzen. Wenn ja, senden Sie es bitte so bald wie möglich. . . .

Building the City of . . . MAHAGONNY

In honor of David Drew's 65th Birthday

No reader of these pages needs to be reminded of the far-reaching effect that World War II had on Weill's life and music. Now, in a different time and from a different perspective, it seems appropriate for the *Kurt Weill Newsletter* to note how the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war was observed in Germany — and in Berlin especially — and to encourage current efforts to reconcile whatever cultural rifts remain.

Weill understood the power of music to create moods, illustrate and comment on political events, and perhaps even cause people to rethink their attitudes. In a similar vein, David Drew analyzes in the following essay how music has served a vital and clarifying role in today's Berlin. [Ed.]



Drawing of David Drew by Milein Cosman, 1993.

SONGS OF HEALING Berlin, 1 January-9 November 1995

by David Drew

The anniversary of V-E Day was not a national holiday in Germany. Nor, indeed, has 8 May ever figured in Germany's official calendar — except in the former GDR, where annual celebrations of Stalin's victory, and the triumphs of democracy and socialism that flowed from it, had been obligatory from 1950 until the collapse of the whole edifice five years ago.

This year, in a united Germany, the media themselves were united by a sense of the anniversary's moral and other connotations. While even the tabloids behaved with proper decorum, the special and searching interest in British responses to the same occasion was sufficient to explain why a sympathetic report in the eminently respectable *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was nevertheless furnished with a provocative front-page announcement: "How the British celebrated their victory over the Germans."

In the light of humanity's incalculable sacrifice during the period 1939-45, the only victories impartially and honorably to be celebrated on all sides this year are surely those defined by Shelley in his "Song of Victory" — not of arms, but of the human spirit. In that universal sense, music — at least since the time of Monteverdi and his *Combattimento* — has understood its special role, while heads of state or their advisors have increasingly insisted upon it. But this year, the singular achievement of Berlin has been the placing of music at the true center of things — which is not, and has never been, close to the nation-state and its particular interests.

While the relevance of Shelley's song could hardly be greater than in today's world, the setting of it by Vaughan Williams has been long

neglected. It is the fourth of six Shelley settings for unison voices with piano or orchestra, originally published by Oxford University Press as *Choral Songs (To be sung in time of war)* but now out of print. Characteristically steadfast though it is, Vaughan Williams's "Song of Victory" was perhaps too responsive to the needs and emergencies of Britain in 1940 for its C major conclusion to convey to present-day listeners — even British ones — anything remotely commensurate with Shelley's complexities of thought and feeling.

Of quite another order is the "Song of Healing" which precedes it. Here, the simple inwardness of the melody and its immaculate A major harmony correspond precisely to Shelley's "patient power in the wise heart," and hence to the understanding — Shelley calls it Love — that may be reached even at the "slippery, steep, and narrow verge of crag-like agony."

In a memorably eloquent speech exactly 10 years ago, Richard von Weizsäcker, then President of the Bundesrepublik, declared that 8 May was a day of remembrance not only for the fallen, but also for the millions upon millions of victims of Nazi tyranny. As such, he concluded, it must also be a day for looking the truth "squarely in the eye."

Since the Wall was toppled in 1989, that particular and widely acknowledged responsibility has been transformed by access to archives previously immured in the former Soviet bloc. Of all the consequent controversies in Germany, none has had a more painful bearing upon this year's anniversary than the recent one concerning the role of the German Army in World War II. The truth that has

already been looked "squarely in the eye" will now be analyzed and further investigated according to the highest principles of scholarship. Meanwhile the long-cherished and in some quarters sacrosanct belief that in World War II the German Army had somehow managed to distance itself from the genocidal and slave-labor programs of the Nazi leadership has at last been recognized as untenable.

So it is from new positions that Germany in this anniversary year has had squarely to face old truths and responsibilities. In Berlin, a gigantic program of cultural, historical, and educational events — sponsored by the Senate and organized by the (now privatized) Berliner Festspiele under its valiant director Dr. Ulrich Eckhardt — was initiated in January, when the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester, under Vladimir Ashkenazy, performed Sir Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* and Karl Amadeus Hartmann's *Concerto funèbre*. The program will close in November — on the 57th anniversary of the so-called "Crystal Night" pogrom — with another concert: the last of the many performances in Germany this year of Britten's *War Requiem*.

Throughout this Berlin year, music is constantly being called upon as prosecutor, mediator, or witness — an indispensable adjunct to the official ceremonies and commemorations, as well as an integral part of the network of films, plays, symposiums, and exhibitions. In the Oranienburgstrasse, the torso of what had once been Berlin's largest synagogue has been restored and was officially opened as the Centrum Hebraicum on the eve of V-E Day — in the presence of two or three thousand guests from Germany and abroad, including Chancellor Kohl, his President, and the Mayor. Before the speeches, members of the Berlin Philharmonic's brass section played an arrangement of the organ prelude Hugo Schwantzer composed in 1866 for the dedication of the original synagogue.

True to the museum-like function of the new center, this particular reminder of Bismarck's time — and of the emancipation of Berlin's then large and confident Jewish community — was consonant with such events as the earlier Mendelssohn-Brahms concert under Kurt Sanderling, and the performance of Ernest Bloch's *Sacred Service* on V-E Day itself. In that sense, however, it was less characteristic of the Berlin program as a whole — past and future — than the remarkable event with which the 8th of May began: the official ground-breaking for a permanent home of "The Topography of Terror."

In 1987 the exhibition "Topographie des Terrors" was commissioned by the West Berlin Senate and organized by the Festspiele under Eckhardt's direction. In due course the exhibition became the property of an international foundation, and for the past five years it has been temporarily housed beneath a devastated and long-deserted site in the East Berlin of old. Bounded by the former Prinz-Albrechtstrasse, the Wilhelmstrasse, and the Anhalterstrasse, this unmarked wasteland was all that remained of the onetime headquarters of the Gestapo, the SS, and Heydrich's Security Service (SD). As Bonn's Minister for Public Works, Klaus Töpfer, vividly reminded another large international audience — assembled in the Berlin Parliament House prior to the unveiling ceremony on the site itself — it was in that unholy triangle that "the office-desk became an instrument of terror," in order that unspeakable atrocities could be minutely planned and efficiently administered.

On entering the Parliament House, every guest had been given a CD of Britten's *War Requiem*. Asked whether music conveyed much or anything to him, Ignatz Bubis — the recently appointed and always outspoken leader of the Council of Jews in Germany — laughed and replied, "unfortunately, nothing." Eloquent and impassioned as the speeches were that morning — not least Bubis's own — everything for which no adequate words could be found was implicit in the four quartet movements that had been chosen to stand, like unannounced messengers, between the principal speak-

ers. Written in 1924 by the Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff, who died in Auschwitz and was then forgotten until Gidon Kremer began performing his music some ten years ago, they are the constituent movements of his first string quartet. Separated as they were on this occasion, they became peculiarly telling; for in this context, the very act of separation heightened the effect of the music's fragmentations and evanescences. Without recourse to sub-Mahlerian nostalgia or opportunistic modernisms, the music spoke lightly of a doomed culture and folklore, and on that Berlin morning, sounded at once premonitory, elegiac, and sanguine.

The choice was inspired — more so, perhaps, than that of Beethoven's undoubtedly inspired Choral Fantasy for the glittering assembly in the Schauspielhaus that evening. A reward to the world's leaders for listening so intently to each others' V-E Day speeches and pretending not to notice the camera crews, the Fantasy did at least have the merit of offering them a familiar tune in unfamiliar form.

Meanwhile a smaller and immeasurably less influential audience was seated in the Philharmonie, listening to something wholly unfamiliar and wholly remarkable. At the precise center of Berlin's ten-month cultural and educational program was placed an Anglo-German concert comprising Karl Amadeus Hartmann's First Symphony ("Attempts at a Requiem") based on Whitman texts, and Vaughan Williams's cantata *Dona nobis pacem*, also based on Whitman, but completed in 1935, ten years earlier than Hartmann's requiem-symphony. The Radio-Symphony Orchestra of Berlin, and its splendid chorus, were finely conducted by Jeffrey Tate; and the three soloists — Rosamarie Lang in the Hartmann, Rosa Mannion and Stephen Roberts in the Vaughan Williams — were outstanding.

"In Germany," as the program annotator glumly remarked, "Vaughan Williams is a largely unknown composer." No longer, one might have retorted after the Berlin audience had heard this German premiere of a work written 60 years ago — not 50, when it would have been inconceivable, nor even 40, when its central setting of Whitman's "Reconciliation" might or might not have encouraged Britten to choose Owen's "Strange Meeting" as the last non-liturgical text in *War Requiem*.

"Reconciliation" was of course Whitman's response to a civil war and Vaughan Williams's to a world war. If civil war is very much a part of today's tragic realities and prospects, while the threat of another world war has seemingly receded, there remains an unresolved tension between those two perceptions. Such tensions — already implicit in the functionally inconclusive prayer of the soprano soloist at the close of *Dona Nobis Pacem* — are fundamental to the entire Berlin program.

In a Potsdam church on the 5 August and in the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche on the next day, Bernhard Klee conducted German and Japanese choirs and the Youth Orchestra of the Federal Republic in Mozart's *Requiem* and Luigi Nono's *Canti di vita e d'amore, Sul Ponte di Hiroshima*. The event was characteristic of what is being achieved in a city where the swarms of school-children visiting the Festspiele's great "Berlin 1945" Exhibition are confronted, upon entry, by vast pictures and precise documentation of the destruction wrought on Warsaw, Rotterdam, London, and Coventry.

Only on such terms and with such an understanding does a city which is now being rebuilt for the second time in half a century propose to assume its true responsibilities as an international rather than a German capital. In the progress thus far, the sympathetic eye and the musical ear may discern at least a particle of that fissile Hope which (to cite Shelley's victory song) "creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates."

© 1995 by David Drew. Reprinted with permission. A slightly shorter version of this essay appeared in *Musical Times* 136, no. 1829 (July 1995): 376-77.